



# INSTITUTE REPORT

Volume 53, Number 7, May 2025

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# Two VMI Teams Take Top Paper Awards at IEEE Conference

By Marianne Hause

Two teams from VMI took top honors recently at the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Computing and Communication Workshop and Conference at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

The first team included Dr. Mohamed Azab, associate professor in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences (CIS) and Dr. Efat Fathalla, assistant professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE), along with Sean Harvey '27 and Michael Jorgensen '27. They earned the Best Paper Award for their entry, "Towards a Quantum-Resistant HashBlock Signature Scheme for Secure IoT Application" in the Cryptography and Applied Mathematics category. Harvey and Jorgensen, who presented the paper, won the Best Presentation Award in the Security, Trust, and Privacy session. The second team, Dr. Sherif Abdelhamid, assistant professor in the Department of CIS and outreach liaison officer for the Cyber Defense Laboratory at VMI, along with Benjamin Davis '26 and Dang Khoa Le '25 earned the Best Paper Award for their



Sean Harvey '27, Dr. Efat Fathalla, Dr. Mohamed Azab, and Michael Jorgensen '27 pause before presenting their paper at the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual IEEE Computing and Communication Workshop and Conference at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.—Photo courtesy of Dr. Mohamed Azab.

submission, "GPT-4 Meets TF-IDF: A Hybrid Approach for Detecting Spam Emails Using Machine Learning," in the Sensor Networks and Embedded Systems category.

According to Azab, the first team's paper focuses on strengthening online security for the future. "Many current digital

and medical sensors, which connect to the internet. Our solution helps ensure that data shared through these devices remains safe and private, even in the face of future cybersecurity challenges."

According to Abdelhamid, the second team's paper explains a novel approach in using large language models like ChatGPT, machine learning, and natural language processing techniques to detect spam and phishing emails. "The platform was able to reach 99% accuracy in detecting unsolicited and fraudulent emails."

The project is funded by the Commonwealth Cyber Initiative and involves collaboration between VMI and George Mason University. 🦾



Benjamin Davis '26, Dang Khoa Le '25, and Dr. Sherif Abdelhamid display their Best Paper Award at the 15<sup>th</sup> IEEE Computing and Communication Workshop and Conference.—Photo courtesy of Dr. Sherif Abdelhamid.

# INSTITUTE REPORT

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On the cover: The VMI contingent visits the Parthenon in Athens, Greece.—*Photo courtesy of Col. Houston Johnson V.*

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Additional photos are available on Flickr.

# VMI Hosts 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Environment Virginia

By Marianne Hause

The 35<sup>th</sup> annual Environment Virginia Symposium at VMI was held April 8–10. The unseasonably chilly weather did not deter nearly 500 representatives from state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, higher education, and the private sector from attending nor did it stifle their enthusiasm. The conference was organized and co-hosted by the Center for Leadership & Ethics (CLE). Col. Dave Gray, executive director of the CLE, served as master of ceremonies.

Opening remarks were offered by Matthew Lohr, secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry, and Stefanie Taillon, acting secretary of the Department of Natural and Historic Resources.

Breakout session topics included conserving Virginia's natural diversity, water quality in the Chesapeake Bay, resilient coasts and wetlands, data tools, solar power, parks and recreation, composting, conservation, forest regeneration, stormwater management, beneficial use of dredge material, flood risk management, offshore wind projects, oyster resources, clean



Matthew Wells answers a question during the agency directors panel in Gillis Theater as Rob Farrell, Ryan Brown, Jamie Green, and Mike Rolband listen.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

the Department of Wildlife Resources; Rob Farrell, director of the Department of Forestry; Jamie Green, commissioner of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission; Mike Rolband, director of the Department of Environmental Quality; and Matthew Wells, director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation.



Ben Byboth discusses fusion power and the plant being built in Chesterfield County to a large assembly in Gillis Theater.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

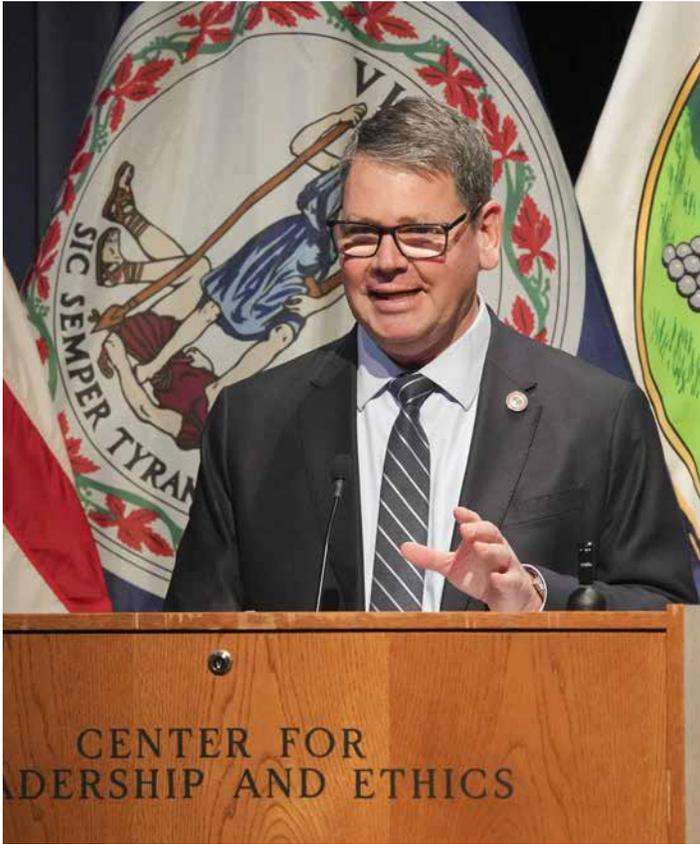
water, and more.

The agency directors panel was moderated by Margaret L. “Peggy” Sanner, former executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. It featured five state government officials from the conference's co-hosting agencies: Ryan Brown, executive director of

The plenary speaker was Ben Byboth, who leads commercial strategy and business development at Commonwealth Fusion Systems (CFS), the world's largest and leading commercial fusion company, headquartered in Devens, Massachusetts. Byboth discussed fusion power, a subject he is extremely passionate about,

*Continued on next page*

VMI Institute Report



Matthew Lohr and Stefanie Taillon offer opening remarks in Gillis Theater on the first day of the symposium.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

and CFS's multi-billion dollar investment to build, own, and operate the world's first grid-scale commercial fusion power plant, at the James River Industrial Center in Chesterfield County, Virginia. The power plant, called ARC, will produce about 400 megawatts of clean, zero-carbon power that will help meet the commonwealth's growing demand for electricity. CFS expects to start generating power with ARC in the early 2030s.

Byboth explained that fusion is the most common reaction in the universe. "Over 99.99% of all energy comes from fusion, in the form of what happens in the stars. Hot plasmas are confined by gravity to make and fuse particles together to make energy, and in the process releasing enough energy to power our solar systems." He stated that fusion is the opposite process of fission, which takes big, heavy particles and breaks them apart, releasing energy.

"Fusion combines the most abundant and lightest isotopes to make heavier ones, and in the process, releases about four times more energy than a fission reaction, and about several 100 million times more than just burning something."

Byboth reported that fusion has many positive attributes.

"It's clean, helium is the only real byproduct of the reaction. It's safe, not subject to runaways or meltdowns. There's no long-lived nuclear waste, and there's no significant health or safety impacts to the environment. It is available on demand and can be ramped up if you need more, or ramped down if you need less. It can be integrated with renewables. It can be deployed around the world and is very scalable. It is a fundamental shift from the way we currently think about energy, which is the hunting and gathering resources, the scavenging of things, digging up things and burning

them. It is moving away from those to energy as a technology, and breaking the tether from these other resources."

He stated that research with fusion has been going on since the 1950s.

"We've been making progress toward a goal where the fusion reaction actually produces more energy than it takes to run the reaction. It takes a lot of work to cultivate the environment, to keep a little bit of a star comfortable in a bottle."

Before joining CFS, Byboth held leadership roles at Eversource, Entergy, and NextEra, where he launched new energy businesses, led modernization of the grid, and developed new and innovative regulatory strategies. A U.S. Navy veteran and former nuclear plant operator, his career spans legacy nuclear fission, renewables, storage, and grid modernization. He holds an MBA from Tulane University and a bachelor's degree in nuclear engineering technologies. More about CFS and the ARC power plant can be found at [cfs.energy](https://cfs.energy).

A meaningful part of the annual symposium is the announcement of the winner of the Erchul Environmental Leadership Award. This year's winner was Tanya Denckla Cobb, director of the University of Virginia's Institute for Engagement & Negotiation (IEN). The award recognizes a Virginian who has made significant individual efforts to improve the environment. Members of Virginia's environmental community nominate candidates who are judged based on their vision, expertise, commitment, integrity, communication skills, accomplishments, and diplomacy. The award is named for the late

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# Cannon Brings Leadership Lessons to VMI

By Marianne Hause

Former AMB Sports and Entertainment CEO, Steve Cannon, spoke in Gillis Theater April 1 as part of the Center for Leadership and Ethics' (CLE) Courageous Leadership speaker series, "Paradigm Shifts."

After being introduced as the second speaker in this year's series by Col. David Gray, executive director of the CLE, Cannon seated himself comfortably on a stool on the stage to have a relaxed conversation about leadership with his audience comprised of cadets, faculty, staff, and community members.

Cannon, who graduated from West Point and served as an Army airborne ranger, noted that he had been to VMI once before when he was still a cadet. He had attended a leadership conference in 1986, where he met Forrest Pogue, the official biographer of Gen. George C. Marshall Jr., VMI Class of 1901. "I still have a signed three-volume set that sits in my library as a reminder of that trip."

In the Army, he was stationed in Germany, as part of a border patrol unit during the fall of the Berlin Wall. After five years of service, he decided to leave the military and serve in a different way. "I've changed uniforms, but I've never stopped serving. Every place I've gone, I've found ways to use that platform to give back to the communities I serve, and to honor the military."

His first job out of the Army was chief of staff for the president and CEO of Mercedes-Benz. Nearly 20 years later, Cannon assumed the job of president and CEO for Mercedes-Benz of North America.

The national headquarters was moved from New Jersey to Atlanta where Cannon met Arthur Blank, owner of the NFL team, the Falcons, who was looking for a CEO to run his portfolio company, AMB Sports and Entertainment. For 10 years, Cannon ran the portfolio which included the Falcons; the professional soccer club, Atlanta United FC; the Mercedes-Benz Stadium, home arena for both teams; and the PGA TOUR Superstore.

Cannon shared with his audience 15 leadership lessons that have guided him in his journey starting as a West Point cadet and throughout his military and civilian careers.

The first lesson he shared was, "Create a Compelling Vision." "If you don't have vision as a leader, how are you supposed to inspire those around you to do things that they don't believe they can

accomplish?" he asked. His vision for the Mercedes-Benz Stadium was to build the greatest sports and entertainment venue in the world. "We wanted it to be like the Ritz-Carlton, attractive and delivering a high level of hospitality and care to everyone who walks through the door. A compelling vision inspires people and gives them purpose. Whatever you are leading; a squad, platoon, department, or company, articulate your vision for the group."

Lesson two was, "Listen More Than You Speak." "There's a real reason why we've got two of these and only one of these," he quipped as he pointed to his ears, then to his mouth. "The only time you're



Steve Cannon shares leadership lessons in Gillis Theater April 1.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

learning is when your mouth is closed and your ears are open. Many leaders mistakenly believe they need to show how smart they are. But good leaders understand that their job is not to be the smartest person in the room, but to extract all the smarts from everyone else in the room."

In correlation to the second lesson, the third lesson Cannon shared was, "Ask 1,000 Questions." "Wherever I go, I ask questions. I listen to people, and I hear their points of view. It's helped me to understand organizations in ways I never would if I hadn't asked those questions." He clarified the point with an example of when he first joined Mercedes-Benz and discovered a toxic culture there. "Leadership was disconnected. Employees didn't trust their leadership, and they performed at an abysmal level." Cannon launched a company-wide employee satisfaction survey.

*Continued on next page*

“We got brutalized by our associates telling awful things about what leadership and their jobs meant to them.” Cannon used that information, came up with a plan to transform the culture, shared the plan with the associates, and challenged them to hold leadership accountable. In a short time, the company was transformed to one of Fortune magazine’s most respected companies in the United States. “You’ve got to build trust, and that’s what you are able to do by asking 1,000 questions.”

Lesson four—one VMI cadets are intimately familiar with—was, “Set Ridiculously High Standards.” Cannon stated that whether you work in the military or as a civilian, your job as a leader is to set standards within your organization. “I found that people want to be part of organizations that set ridiculously high standards. Associates will naturally gravitate to the standards leaders set. If you set low standards, don’t be surprised if you get a low performance. If I shoot for the stars and I land on the moon, that’s still a pretty good outcome. Setting high standards is a vote of confidence in your team. It tells them you trust and believe in them.”

Lesson five was, “Be Visible.” Nobody wants to follow a leader they never see or can’t interact with or relate to. In the military, it’s called ‘battlefield circulation.’ In the civilian world, it is ‘management by walking around.’ Cannon illustrated by sharing his habit of arriving three hours early to every event at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium for the first several years of its opening. “I would get there when the ticket-takers, the hospitality providers, the guest service and relations folks arrived, which often totaled 4,000 people. My ritual was to start at the top and walk the stadium. I’d walk every single concourse along the way. I would greet and hug people, have conversations, and join team huddles. I would walk five miles per event, and that was my way of being a visible leader. People will go the extra mile when they know that their leaders are going the extra mile.”

One of Cannon’s favorite lessons, and one he credited to management consultant and author, Peter Drucker, was number six, “Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast.” Cannon pulled his iPhone out of his pocket to use as an analogy to explain the meaning. “This is our single most indispensable device. It’s easy to use, and with a couple of touches, you can answer any question. The operating system is what transforms this inanimate object made of metal and glass into a magical device. Think of culture as the operating system that governs how an organization functions, and the master coder for the operating system is the leadership. Leaders manage rituals and conversations. They can celebrate employees and recognize great performances. Culture is perhaps the most important thing, and if you pay attention to culture, the outcomes will follow. If you pay attention to the outcomes, bad things will happen.” By example, Cannon reminded his listeners of the Volkswagen emissions scandal in 2015, when a software engineer rewrote a program for EPA testing that essentially told the engine to behave differently when it was being tested, and to give a false signal of efficiency. The company was caught cheating and it cost them billions of dollars in lost trust. “That is what happens when you chase an outcome. If you create a place where people love what they do, and feel connected to your vision, you will create a culture that will unleash power and propel your organization to new levels.”

“Be Nice,” was Cannon’s seventh lesson. “When I went around that stadium, I was nice to everybody. Does that mean I’m a pushover?”

No! I’ve learned how to give hard feedback in a way that doesn’t blow a person up. I’ve seen people get blown up publicly by their leaders. I don’t believe that humiliation and lack of respect will make anyone a better performer. You can lead well, challenge people, and set ridiculously high standards, all with human kindness that makes people say, ‘I’ll do anything for that person.’” For further insight, Cannon recommended the book, “Leading With Kindness” by William Baker, Ph.D. and Michael O’Malley, Ph.D.

The eighth lesson was, “Make Sure Your Words and Actions Align.” Cannon stated that leaders are constantly watched by their followers to ensure that what they do and say are in harmony. “The minute you say something that differs from your behavior, you’ve lost credibility. You’re never allowed to have a bad day as a leader. You are on stage and being observed, so if you must let off steam, go where you will not be noticed.”

“The Best Feedback is Fast Feedback,” was Cannon’s ninth lesson. He referred to athletic coaches as examples. “The coach’s only job is to bring the best out of the people they lead. Something coaches do better than everybody is providing immediate feedback. A coach will either pat a player on the back for a good play, or kick him in the butt if he performed poorly. As leaders, we have to be feedback machines. Unfortunately in the corporate world, we’ve gotten lazy. We hide behind HR-related things like quarterly or annual performance reviews. If you’re only giving feedback on a quarterly basis, you’re failing as a leader. Good leaders give feedback all the time, so their people know how to improve.”

Number 10 was, “Appreciation is Your Most Powerful Leadership Tool.” Cannon recommended that leaders show their appreciation frequently and generously. As an example, he displayed a photo of the 60-foot-high “Heroes of Hospitality Wall” placed prominently in the stadium. “We even created a little ceremony recognizing the people being inducted. We invited their families, and the people who mattered most to them. There was so much pride and emotion. It cost us very little, but appreciation is like rocket fuel. The more fuel you put in an engine, the further it’s able to go. If you use your position to recognize people, that’s going to go a long way.”

Cannon warned of a red line never to cross in lesson 11, “Never Undermine a Person’s Dignity.” “There is no scenario by which you can humiliate someone either publicly or privately. I’ve seen leaders humiliate people in public, and it made my skin crawl. I tell every one of my leaders that if I ever see them undermining someone’s dignity, I will walk them immediately to the door, take their key card and block them from our system. I can’t emphasize it enough. When you’re nice to people, you’re going to get more results.”

The 12<sup>th</sup> lesson, which applies to all relationships, was, “Be Present or Don’t Show Up.” Give your all to whatever it is you’re doing. If I’m at a meeting, I’m fully engaged at that meeting. I’ve seen people in meetings texting or checking emails. My personal rule is I never bring my device into an important meeting, because, unfortunately, all of us have been conditioned to reach for our phone the minute we hear a buzz. That’s why I keep mine out of reach. I’ve seen couples on dates at restaurants and they’re both on their phones. Leave your phone, and enjoy quality time with your friends and family.”

“Connect The Dots,” was the 13<sup>th</sup> lesson. “In the absence of information, people will connect the dots in all the wrong ways, so

*See Leadership Lessons, page 11*

# Honors Cadets Present Thesis Research

By Marianne Hause

The Institute Honors Program enriches the academic experience through activities that encourage intellectual inquiry and develop the capacity for sophisticated engagement of issues and problems. The 1<sup>st</sup> Class honors cadets presented their thesis research March 19-28 in Scott Shipp Hall auditorium, four of which are highlighted in this article.

Twenty-five years ago, Col. James Squire, professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, was faced with a serious issue. His oldest son was born and diagnosed with a hearing disorder. Thankfully, it was a misdiagnosis, but it inspired Squire to begin research to help young parents of children with hearing loss. Work on the project has spanned over nine years and began with Will Flathers '09, and continued with Binh Tran '23. Cole Bowyer '25 took up the mantle as the third honors student to work on the endeavor, and placed the capstone on the project, "Audiogram Emulator," a free app available to parents that allows them to hear as their child hears.

Bowyer explained that roughly 9,000 children are born each year in the U.S. with

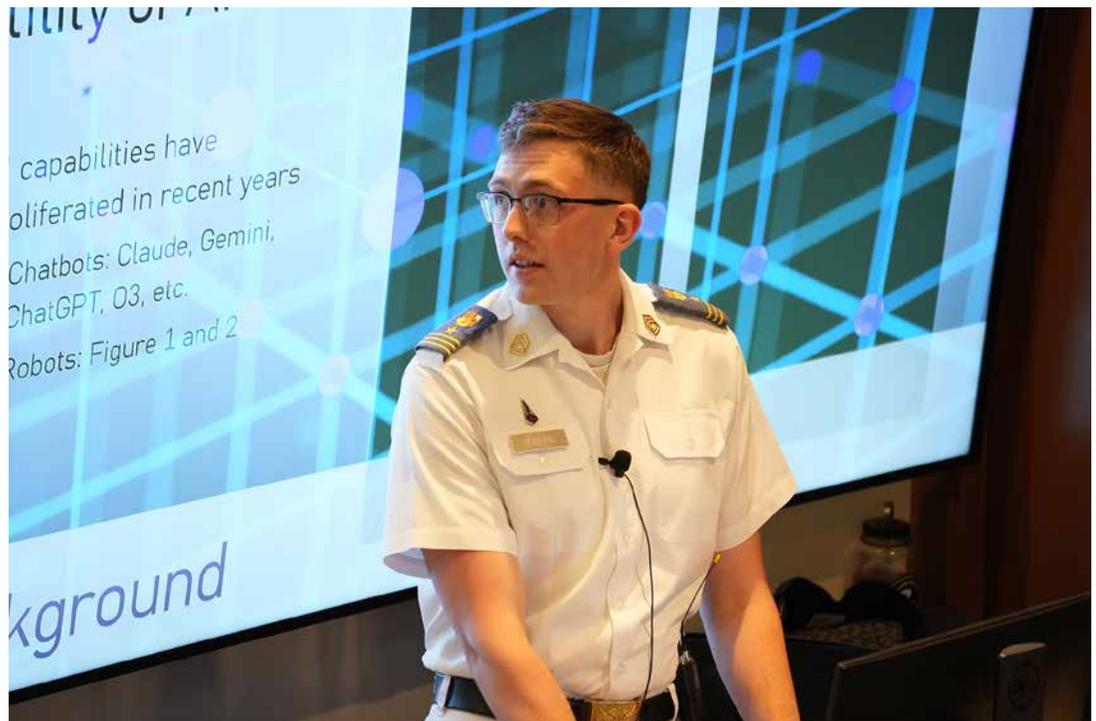


Cole Bowyer '25 describes the "Audiogram Emulator," a free app he worked on for parents of children with hearing loss.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

some type of hearing impairment, and only half of those children receive treatment. "If a child does not receive any treatment before the age of 1, it's shown to significantly hurt his ability to learn in the education system and keep up with his peers," he said.

Why do parents not seek treatment? Bowyer believes there are several reasons. "For one, parents do not want a label attached to their child. Second, often the child can hear sounds and react, so his parents think he is hearing properly, but he's not. Since his hearing is impaired, he is not receiving a true understanding of what

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Jude Roberts '25 discusses the use of AI for his honors presentation in Scott Shipp Hall auditorium.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

is being said. And third, parents may not understand hearing loss and its ramifications.”

In his research, Bowyer consulted with many professionals in their respective fields including Lindsey Richard, Au.D., CCC-A, educational audiologist at The Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind in Staunton.

The app can be downloaded from [www.jimsquire.com/research/audiology/audiology.htm](http://www.jimsquire.com/research/audiology/audiology.htm). Bowyer’s hope in the future is that the app will be commonly used by audiologists and other medical professionals.

Bowyer is an electrical and computer engineering major from Daleville, Virginia, where he attended Lord Botetourt High School. He is the son of Tara Tice and Sheldon Bowyer. Following graduation, he will work for AECOM in Roanoke.

Another honors cadet from Daleville, who also graduated from Lord Botetourt High School, is Jude Roberts ’25. He sought to discover if artificial intelligence (AI) is as reliable and accurate as humans in his project, “Assessing the Efficacy of an LLM for Resumé Selection and Human Talent Management.”

Roberts conducted an experiment looking at business hiring processes using the AI program, ChatGPT. He explained that people generally believe that time efficiency and lower costs are a huge upside to automation. “If a company doesn’t have to pay an employee to look through a lot of resumé’s, it frees their staff’s time to focus on more high-level strategic tasks. Sometimes ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs)—software designed to generate human-like, conversational language—provides completely nonsensical, out of context, or just wrong information, known as hallucinations, which is problematic.” Roberts continued to point out that because there is no human interaction to evaluate a potential employee’s interpersonal and character traits, AI may show a bias based solely on particular words appearing on a resumé. “Some of us very soon will be applying for our first jobs and we want a fair shot at the hiring process. What I’m examining here is whether AI is consistently capable of selecting the best applicants for jobs,” he explained.

Roberts took 1,000 resumé’s and instructed ChatGPT that it was taking on the role of a hiring manager, and it was to consider the applicants’ skills, experiences, and qualifications, and choose the applicant that best fills the job role. Categories included data science,

arts, web design, and engineering. An additional category, not applicable (N/A), was designated for any resumé data that contained nonsensical or misleading information or that did not match any of the categories.

He found that AI was less accurate and less reliable than a human hiring manager in finding the best candidate, and he determined that the LLM was vulnerable to malicious interference and bias propagation.

Roberts, who is minoring in applied mathematics and philosophy, is the son of Kevin and Lori Roberts. Following graduation, he will commission into the U.S. Space Force where he hopes to do work in cybersecurity or electromagnetic warfare.

Delilah Martindale ’25 examined the value of celebrity endorsements in mental health care in her honors thesis,



Delilah Martindale ’25 speaks about suicide prevention in Scott Shipp Hall auditorium.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

“Preventing Suicide: The Effect of Visibility on Mental Health Infrastructure.”

Martindale’s research question asks, “What effect does visibility have on mental health infrastructure?” She defined mental health infrastructure (MHI) as the physical and organizational structures, facilities, and systems that collectively support the delivery of mental health care services. She hypothesized that the more visibility a campaign can create, the higher the rate of increasing MHI, and if a campaign can obtain a celebrity endorsement, it will enhance its visibility and therefore positively impact MHI.

She tested her hypothesis by examining five case studies: The Trevor Project, a leading suicide prevention/crisis intervention nonprofit for young people ages 13 to 24 of the LGBTQ+ community; The Jed Foundation, an organization established by a couple

# First Ordained Alumna Speaks at Spring Retreat

By Marianne Hause

Rev. Jessica Fulton Lee '06, the first female graduate from VMI to enter the clergy, was guest speaker at the chaplain's spring retreat for cadets held recently at Eagle Eyrie Baptist Conference Center near Lynchburg.

Lee, who was an accomplished ROTC cadet in high school, won a merit scholarship to come to VMI. She was a biology major, and planned to commission and make a career as a biologist in the Air Force. But those plans drastically changed at the end of her 2<sup>nd</sup> Class year. "Even though the Corps and VMI meant the world to me, I was not a good cadet, and I was having a rough year. I had had two failed relationships, and since I was on conduct probation, I was in danger of not getting a rat the following year. It was at the point where all my plans were in shambles. So, one evening I went to the chaplain's office to talk to Chaplain James Park, who was Institute chaplain at the time. The office door was unlocked, so I went in, but he was not there. I looked around and saw beautiful paintings of Jesus and immediately

was convicted that I had not been living the life I knew God wanted me to live. I picked up a brochure that caught my eye titled, 'How to Know if You're a Christian' and started reading. It was about a man who visited a chaplain on a college campus to talk about faith. In that moment I heard a voice—not an audible one—but a voice

clearly from outside myself that said, 'You're to be a minister.' I was stunned. I had the resumé of a research biologist, and I didn't think much of pastors. I thought I was too smart and talented to ever be a pastor. But in that moment, I was happy God was talking to me,

and I gave my life to Christ. That day I started down the path that would eventually lead to my ordination. Before I left his office, I left a note for Chaplain Park that said something to the effect of, 'Hey, I was in your office looking for you—met with God—called to be a pastor—I'll see you in the morning,'" she laughed.

Lee felt blessed and honored to be invited to speak at the retreat. The message she brought to cadets was the story of Joseph from the Biblical book of Genesis. "I'm a narrative preacher, and I like stories. The story of Joseph is one of the longest, single continuous narratives in the Old Testament. Joseph was a young man for a lot of that story, and he dealt with a lot of the same issues cadets may be dealing with. Nobody comes to VMI from perfect homes. They all come bearing baggage and burdens, and a lot of times, unfortunately, there is compounded trauma because of challenges and rejection experienced on post. That strikes a harmony with the Joseph narrative and the importance of reconciliation. No matter how difficult life gets, you need to heal, forgive, and move forward."

Lee experienced first-hand difficulties at VMI as a cadet. She faced rejection and injustice. "My rat year had been difficult. I stopped

moving toward the Corps relationally, because I had experienced rejection. I didn't bond with my brother rats, and it left me feeling inadequate as a cadet. Not all my experiences here were bad, and I



Rev. Jessica Fulton Lee '06 chats with a cadet in Moody Hall before leaving for the spring retreat. —VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

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did have friends here, and I did do well. But I don't think my story is unique, many people experienced similar things. And just like Joseph said to his brothers, 'What you meant for evil, God used for good,' I can look at my story and say the same. God used that incredible hardship to bring me to him. He has healed me and allowed me to forgive. I love the Corps, and my brother rats."

Col. John P. Casper '04, Institute chaplain, shared that Lee challenged and encouraged the cadets in their faith during the retreat. "She was thoughtful, well prepared, and naturally connected with the cadets. That is the reason I invited Jessica. We knew each other as cadets, so I remember the adversity she had to overcome and the power of her story of being called to ministry. As the first and only female ordained minister, she



Participants of the chaplain's spring retreat enjoy the view and camaraderie at Eagle Eyrie Baptist Conference Center near Lynchburg.—Photo courtesy of the Chaplain's Office.

was able to connect with cadets in a unique way. She is remarkable! Our office is thankful for Jessica and her husband, Evan, in taking time to minister to our cadets. It was a life-changing weekend!"

Parker Belle Fogle '28, a cadet who attended the retreat, said, "The spring retreat was amazing! It was a great place to connect with fellow cadets and expand your love of God."

Lee received a Master of Divinity degree from Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. She is a priest in the Anglican Church of North America's Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic and is currently serving as an associate Rector at Beach Church, Virginia Beach. She is currently working on a doctorate in theology and ministry in romantic theology at Northwind Theological Seminary, where she studies the works of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, among others. She is married to Evan Lee. They have one adult daughter, two dogs, and a cat. 🐾

## Leadership Lessons *continued from page 7*

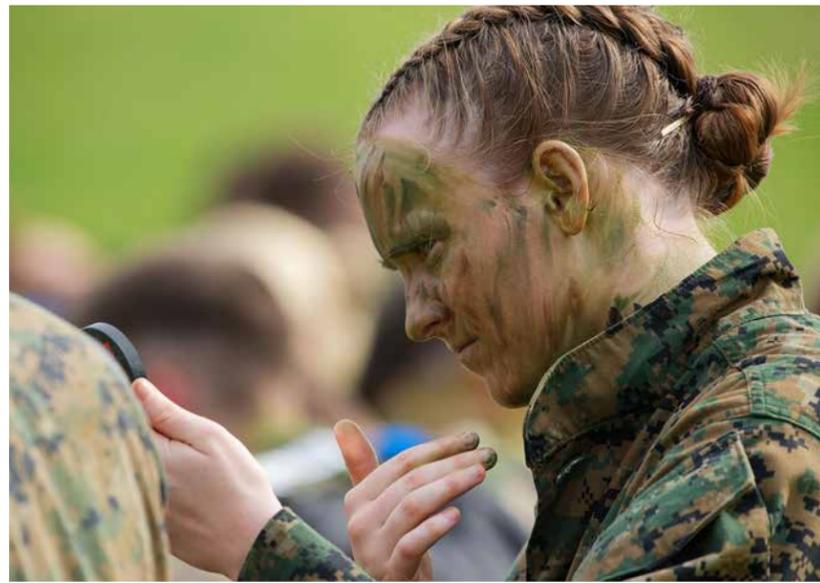
it's our job as leaders to connect the dots and provide context." To illustrate, Cannon showed a video of one of the most painful days of his entire career, Feb. 5, 2017. The Falcons were leading the Patriots 28 to 3 at Super Bowl LI. But the Patriots made one of the greatest comebacks in sports and won 34-28 in overtime. "It was a painful loss to our fan base, our organization, and our players. Everybody was devastated. It was my job as the leader to provide context, both to our fans and our employees. So, we produced this video and shared its message that there are going to be times your team wins, and times your team loses. But as upsetting as the loss was, we communicated that we would learn from it and apply the lessons to future endeavors."

A lesson Cannon learned while traveling through Silicon Valley, was 14, "Failure is Data." Cannon shared that many organizations view failure as the Boogeyman. "If you do that, everyone will be

so afraid of failure they will avoid it at all costs. They won't stretch or innovate. But, if you view failure as data, and say, 'This doesn't work, let's go in a different direction,' as an organization you'll be able to be flexible and pivot. No one will get it right 100% of the time."

The last lesson was, "The Glass is Always Half Full." Cannon said he is naturally optimistic. "Our job as leaders is to bring the best out of people, and have them achieve things they may not believe they can. Recognize failure, learn the lesson, and move on to the next task."

Cannon concluded his talk stating what he learned at West Point, "It all comes down to servant-leadership. The most important aspect of leadership in my job is to humbly serve the organization. My only job when I walked those five miles every game was to fire up our team to serve them, and to help make them better." 🐾



### Spring FTX

Cadets participated in spring field training exercises (FTX) April 4-8. Commissioning-track cadets spent time on and off post. Army ROTC spent the weekend training at the Goshen Boy Scout Camp, while Naval ROTC Marines stayed at Sadler Farm in Rockbridge County for training. Air Force ROTC invited other schools to join them in utilizing VMI's obstacle courses and the Leadership Reaction Course. Navy ROTC cadets trained at Smith Mountain Lake, while the Coast Guard AUP traveled to Maryland for training. Non-commissioning cadets participated in community service activities with organizations in the Lexington area, including the Community Table for the Rockbridge Area, the SPCA, and Lime Kiln Theater. Special Olympics events were hosted on post and cadets also assisted in a Timber Framers pavilion project in Glasgow.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin and Jake Falcone '27.



VMI professor Capt. Ronald A. Erchul, founder of the Environment Virginia Symposium.

According to Sanner, who received the award last year, Cobb has served as the director of IEN since 2015. Her work involves overseeing the facilitation and mediation of a broad range of community and environmental issues, as well as a wide range of training in conflict management and negotiations.

“Tanya and her staff continue to develop new approaches to old issues and new challenges, developing creative, innovative and effective ways of engaging people and solving problems. Over the years, Tanya has worked with communities across the commonwealth, as well as numerous industry, governmental, indigenous and nonprofit organizations. She’s well known in Virginia’s environmental community, highly regarded and well liked. Tanya is very deserving of the Erchul Environmental Leadership Award for her commitment to Virginia’s environment, its communities, and its citizens.”

Cobb stated she was honored to receive the award. She told the assembly, “You all in this room are on the front line in conserving our forest lands, cleaning up our waterways, creating corridors and habitats for our wildlife. You are the wheels helping to create sustainable pathways forward, and me and my small but very mighty team at IEN, I’ve always thought of as the grease in those wheels. Through facilitation and consensus building and training, we are the grease trying to help you find that common ground, and create the pathways forward. In my mind, I thought, ‘What the heck, I’ve heard of bicycles getting awards, but when does grease ever get an award?’” she quipped. She shared with her peers that they too, can be the grease in the wheel of their organizations and their interpersonal relationships. “You can do something radical. You can reach out to someone. Maybe it is someone sitting on the sideline not participating. Maybe it’s someone on the opposite side of the issue

from you. Have the courage and the intention to suspend judgment, use your compassion and caring to extend grace, listen more deeply, bring curiosity, ask only questions of the other. Most of all, reach out sooner than later. It is often hard, but it is rewarding, and it works.”

Each year, VMI donates \$1,500 to a nonprofit environmental organization of the recipient’s choice in their honor. Cobb has requested this donation be made to the Virginia Natural Resources Leadership Institute.

Other awards presented at the symposium are the Governor’s Environmental Excellence Awards, which recognize successful

and innovative efforts that improve Virginia’s environment. This year’s gold medal winners were: Department of Defense—Chesapeake Bay Program: The Department of Defense (DoD) was one of the first federal departments to be formally involved in Chesapeake Bay watershed restoration efforts. Through efforts such as designing living shorelines, designating Sentinel Landscapes and installing agricultural best management practices on federal properties, the DoD has advanced the



Margaret L. “Peggy” Sanner and Col. Dave Gray congratulate Tanya Denckla Cobb (center), recipient of the Erchul Environmental Leadership Award.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

goals and outcomes of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement in Virginia. Their efforts not only sustain but improve the health of the bay and the welfare of the Commonwealth’s residents; Hampton Roads Sanitation District—James River Land Improvements—Trails Phase I: Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD), in partnership with the City of Newport News, developed a mile of new trails around Riverview Farm Park as part of the Sustainable Water Initiative for Tomorrow program. Located near its James River Treatment Plant, HRSD completed the first phase of trail upgrades to Riverview Farm Park including a new trail system with boardwalks along Flax Mill Creek, Deep Creek, and the James River; and Naval Weapons Station Yorktown—Penniman Spit Living Shoreline

*Continued on next page*

Project—Installation Resilience and Ecosystem Enhancement: The U.S. Navy partnered with Virginia Institute for Marine Science to design and permit a living shoreline restoration project. Through this project, Naval Weapons Station Yorktown reduced erosion along three miles of shoreline, fortified federal Superfund sites, protected military training grounds, complied with the Sikes Act for natural resource protection and supported the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Agreement’s environmental objectives—all preserving the unique ecosystem of the York River.

Silver medal winners were: Giles County—Trail Center at Mountain Lake Lodge; Arlington County Department of Environmental Services—Ballston Wetland Park; Historic Germanna—Siegen Forest Tract & Germanna Ford Boat Launch; Department of Corrections—State Farm Correctional Complex—State Farm Conservation Project—James River Subwatershed

Restoration; and The Mariners’ Museum and Park—Mariners’ Environmental Initiative.

Bronze medal awards were: Arlington County Solid Waste Bureau—On-street Food Scraps Collection for Multi-family Building Residents; Fairfax County Park Authority Farmers Market Program—Food Scrap Collection at the Farmers Markets; and Marstel-Day with Partners New River Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy—Eastern Divide Conservation Plan and Partnership.

Receiving honorable mention were: Henrico Department of Public Works—Environmental Services Division—Vector Surveillance & Control; Rappahannock Regional Solid Waste Management Board—Compost Outreach Program; and What About the Turtles—Tanya’s Turtle Project.

Next year’s Environment Virginia Symposium is scheduled for March 31–April 2 at VMI. ❁



## Norwegian Foot March

Just shy of 250 participants took on the challenge of the Norwegian Foot March, or Marsjmerket, Sunday, April 13 on the Chessie Nature Trail. A total of 177 reached the goal that day, including VMI cadets, visiting cadets, and even members of VMI faculty and staff. This march is a physical challenge to ruck 18 miles with at least 25 pounds in their pack. Upon completion within the time standards based on age, participants earn the Norwegian Proficiency Badge. A bronze badge is presented for the first completion of the event, and 21 individuals earned a silver for their second successful completion of the march.—VMI  
*Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.*



following the suicide of their son; Active Minds, a program launched by the sister of a man who committed suicide; Hope for the Day, a prominent nonprofit movement in Chicago that influences proactive suicide prevention and mental health education; and Project Semicolon, an organization founded by a woman whose father took his own life, and in which Selena Gomez, a very prominent A-list celebrity is involved as executive producer. Martindale assigned each case study a score based on their facilities, services, resources, education, and patient interaction compared to their social media presence, celebrity endorsement, news coverage, advertising, and published literature.

She concluded that the first part of her hypothesis, “The more visibility a campaign can create, the higher the rate of increasing MHI,” is correct most of the time. The second part of the hypothesis, “If a campaign can obtain a celebrity endorsement, it will enhance its visibility, and therefore positively impact MHI,” was inconclusive.

Martindale is from San Bruno, California, where she attended Capuchino High School. She is the daughter of Mary Lefevre and Dave Martindale. In addition to minoring in psychology, she also minors in Spanish and leadership studies. After graduation, she plans to commission into the Army.

Brooks Freeman '25, an English major, sought a common core between the philosophies of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Middle Eastern Sufi mystic and poet, and Søren Kierkegaard, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher, theologian, and poet, in his honors presentation, “Varieties of Mystical Experience: Encountering the Absolute in Rūmī and Kierkegaard.”

Freeman found inspiration for his research after traveling to England and Morocco in the summer of 2023. In England, he studied existential philosophy and comparative religion. “In the existential philosophy class, I became interested in Kierkegaard’s ideas. In my comparative religion class, I learned about Sufism and Christian mysticism, and found those to be interesting,” shared Freeman.

Freeman cited Pseudo-Dionysius, an ancient Greek theologian, for his definition of mysticism. “‘The experiential encounter with the utterly transcendental reality that God is.’ Basically, a meeting with God.”

He described some differences between Christian mysticism and Sufism. “The first and most obvious difference would be their foundations; Sufism founded from Islam, and Christian mysticism



Brooks Freeman '25 compares the philosophies of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Søren Kierkegaard during his honors presentation.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

from Christianity. They also have different end goals. Christian mysticism is about union with God while keeping one’s individual characteristics, and Sufism is about annihilation of oneself to form a kind of oneness with God.” Similarities he listed between the two philosophies include the individual taking an internal journey toward divine union, poetry rich in symbolism, and teaching and guidance. “Then the final thing is this idea of the absurd that you can see in Kierkegaard’s writing. It has to do with something that cannot be comprehended logically, but is believed through faith, which Kierkegaard wrote is extremely difficult. It is something that is present in Rūmī’s writing as well,” Freeman explained.

Freeman concluded that the paths of Kierkegaard and Rūmī are similar, but warned that the commonalities are steeped in their respective traditions, so context must be appreciated. Studying them in conjunction displays that mystical experiences can at once be common and contextualist.

Freeman is from Noblesville, Indiana, and minoring in Arabic. He is an alumnus of Culver Academies and the son of Lee and Rose Freeman. He plans to attend law school following graduation.

Other Class of 2025 honors cadets include Benjamin Bierstine, Knight Bowles, James Boynewicz, Dylan Colbert, Audrey Davis, Cate Dowden, Earl Filgo, Jonah Jurack, John Kennedy, Patrick Kiernan, Suzanne Leaptrot, Riley Malone, Simon Moore, Courtney Novotny, Gretal Shank, Brian Tavenner, Whitney Tracy, Ethan Webster, Gabriel Williams, Harrison Williams, and Anya Yemelianova. More about the Honors Program may be found at [www.vmi.edu/academics/honors](http://www.vmi.edu/academics/honors). ❁

# Pistol Club Places Seventh in National Championship

By Marianne Hause

The pistol club finished in seventh place at the National Collegiate Pistol Championship held mid-March in Anniston and Talladega, Alabama. The VMI contingent consisted of eight shooters including Chris Olsen '25, Chase Boucher '27, Jamie Palacio '27, and Kate Patrick '27, who competed as a four-person team; and Bill Gray '27, Sofia Flemming '28, Andrei Hipol '28, and Tiffany Rock '28 who competed as individuals. The club held a national rank of 10<sup>th</sup> place going into the competition.

There are normally three events in the competition: air pistol, sport pistol, and standard pistol. However, due to inclement weather the standard pistol competition was canceled. VMI placed sixth in sport pistol and 11<sup>th</sup> in air pistol with the combined scores putting them in seventh place. This is the highest ranking VMI has ever achieved, and only the second time VMI has held a national ranking in pistol.

Boucher, who led the team in scoring and is currently ranked 37<sup>th</sup> nationally, confessed that his scores shooting as an individual were

unexpected. "I improved my sport pistol record by nearly 70 points. As a team, I know we all did well."

This was the third and final year for Olsen—who graduates in May—to compete with the team. He shared that it has been a privilege being part of the program. "We secured VMI's first ever invitation to collegiate nationals in 2022, to being invited each year since. I am extremely proud that this year we managed to achieve a ranking of seventh overall with three top-50 individual placements. For myself, I'm happy to have achieved two top-50 rankings and holding VMI's highest ever individual collegiate rankings for two consecutive years: 2023 and 2024."

Eighteen colleges were represented at the championship, with 93 shooters competing. The Ohio State University was first place winner, followed by the U.S. Naval Academy in second, and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in third.

The club was coached by Reese McCormick, assisted this year by Robert Coleman, Norman Claytor, and Jan Downs. ❁



Pistol club members Tiffany Rock '28, Sofia Fleming '28, Kate Patrick '27, Chris Olsen '25, Bill Gray '27, Jamie Palacio '27, Chase Boucher '27, and assistant coach Jan Downs celebrate their achievement.—Photo courtesy of Kate Patrick '27.

# VMI Recognizes Two Retiring Staff Members

By Marianne Hause

Each spring, retiring faculty and staff who have worked 20 years or more have the opportunity to be honored guests at the retirement parade and join the superintendent in taking review of the Corps of Cadets. This year, inclement weather forced the cancellation of the parade, however a recognition ceremony was held April 11 in Memorial Hall, where two employees were acknowledged for their combined 73 years of loyal service to the Institute.

Chris Clark, who retired from the Office of Communications and Marketing in February after 52 years of service, and Marsha Mayhew, payroll manager in the Office of Finance & Budget, who retires May 31 after 21 years, were honored at the ceremony. For each, a proclamation was read resolving that the superintendent and the Board of Visitors recognize her for her tireless devotion and outstanding contributions to VMI, and wishing her the best in her well-earned retirement. Maj. Gen. Cedric T. Wins '85 offered a few congratulatory words and presented each with a superintendent's challenge coin.

Mayhew, who grew up in Galax, Virginia, and graduated from Radford University, came to VMI in 2004 as a payroll accountant. She became a supervisor in 2007, then later was promoted to payroll manager. During her time in the payroll office, VMI successfully underwent annual state audits and two comprehensive IRS audits. "I am exceptionally proud of that achievement, and give much of the credit to my staff," she said humbly. Mayhew has thoroughly enjoyed her time at VMI, and gains satisfaction in helping others. "I've worked with and formed friendships with remarkable people, not only in my office, but all across post."



Chris Clark and Marsha Mayhew proudly display their proclamations of appreciation in Memorial Hall.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Mayhew's supervisor, Jeffrey Lawhorne, director of the Office of Finance and Budget, stated she has been a trusted resource for many years. "Marsha is always willing to go out of her way to assist

employees with compensation-related questions. She is known for her kindness, generosity, and desire to help others," he said.

Mayhew's retirement plans include a trip to Pennsylvania with friends, followed by a cruise from Boston to Canada with family later in the year. She enjoys reading, watching sports, and volunteering. She is an active member of New Monmouth Presbyterian Church where she sings in the choir and has served as trustee and a Sunday school and vacation Bible school teacher. She resides in Rockbridge County and hopes to renovate portions of her home. She has two daughters, one who lives in Rockbridge County, the other in Stephens City.



Maj. Gen. Cedric T. Wins '85 presents Marsha Mayhew with her proclamation and a coin.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

*Continued on next page*

Clark described retirement as bittersweet. “VMI has been my life since high school, but it’s time to start this new chapter, and hopefully it’ll be as good to me as VMI has been. I’ve met so many people who have become my friends.”

Former director of C&M, Stewart MacInnis, often relied on Clark for her insight into the VMI environment. “She had so much more experience here than the rest of us. Also, she spent more time in the basement of Smith Hall than most VMI employees spent in the workforce over their entire careers,” he joked.

Her retirement plans include learning to quilt, working the polls on election day, and volunteer work. She is a member of Lauderdale Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Lexington where she is a member of the women’s ministry, and chairman of the Janet White/Willing Workers circle. ✪



Brig. Gen. Robert and Linda Moreschi congratulate Chris Clark, as Marsha Mayhew receives a warm embrace from Cassandra Wins.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

## Research on Display at URS

Approximately 70 cadets showcased their work at the annual Undergraduate Research Symposium (URS) in Mallory Hall and Preston Library March 31. Brig. Gen. Robert “Bob” Moreschi, dean of faculty and deputy superintendent for academics, offered opening remarks before cadets across all majors presented research through oral presentations and a poster session, with their faculty mentors often by their side. The keynote speaker for the event was Salmaan Khawaja ’02, the medical director of the Neuropsychology and Psychology Service Line at Bon Secours Mercy Health. He also works with the NFL and other professional sports organizations in their concussion protocols. Additionally, Khawaja is the owner of a private forensic consulting firm, evaluating individuals involved in criminal and civil matters and testifies as an expert witness in trials involving murder, traumatic brain injury, domestic violence, child abuse, dementia, serial killers, school shooters, and other similar issues. He graduated from VMI with a degree in biology and won a prize in the first-ever URS, which was held in 2002.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



# History Department Welcomes Federal Judges

By Marianne Hause

The Department of History (DOH) welcomed two federal judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. Albert Diaz and A. Marvin Quattlebaum Jr. visited several sections of the U.S. Constitutional History class (HI-300) March 17 and spoke with cadets regarding their work, the shape of the federal judiciary, the function of the Fourth Circuit, and their individual career paths.

The visit culminated in a panel discussion in Moody Hall moderated by Maj. Bryant Etheridge, assistant professor in the DOH. According to Etheridge, the panel addressed a range of issues. “The judges

spoke on the importance of the rule of law, how courts and judges remain apolitical and respectful in a time of increased political division, and why and how judges’ responsibilities are very different from politics and the duties of politicians. Judge Diaz is a Marine and was a military lawyer and judge, while Judge Quattlebaum spent most of his career in private practice in South Carolina. They each shared how their backgrounds guide their current work. Finally, they talked about the role of ordinary citizens in restoring faith and trust in courts and the rule of law,” stated Etheridge.

According to Lt. Col. Mark Boonshoft, associate professor in the DOH and holder of Conrad M. Hall ’65 Chair in American Constitutional History, each semester cadets enrolled in HI-300 take a field trip to Richmond to watch oral arguments at the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. “This visit arose from conversations begun with the judges during one of those trips,” he said.

The judges’ visit to VMI was sponsored by the DOH and the American Constitutional History program, and underwritten by the Conrad M. Hall ’65 Chair in American Constitutional History fund. ❁



Albert Diaz speaks to cadets in a U.S. Constitutional History class as A. Marvin Quattlebaum Jr. looks on.—Photo courtesy of Lt. Col. Mark Boonshoft.

# Alumnus Returns as Assistant Director of Global Education

By Marianne Hause

Capt. Nolan Lipscomb '19 has been named assistant director of the Office of Global Education (OGE), assuming the position held for nearly 25 years by Lt. Col. Patricia Hardin.

Lipscomb graduated from VMI with a degree in modern languages and cultures, with a concentration in French. During his time as a cadet, he tutored French, was a member of the boxing club team, and was a corporal as a 3<sup>rd</sup> Class cadet. He spent the 2017 spring semester and a portion of the 2018 summer studying in Paris, France, and reflects on his time overseas as an aspect of the adversarial system that characterizes VMI's approach to education. "Studying abroad is where I truly found my passion for language learning and cultural exchange. I am glad I took that leap of faith, left the safety of my home country, and struggled but grew with the French language through the study abroad program. I am now a big advocate for international education," said Lipscomb.

Col. Jeff Kendrick, director of OGE, remarked that Lipscomb's enthusiasm for education abroad and knowledge of how the process works from the cadet perspective, enhances his contributions to the office. "In his capacity as assistant director, Captain Lipscomb will serve a critical role, coordinating and expanding opportunities, both here and abroad, so cadets have the international leadership and educational experiences necessary to become global leaders. Many of our alumni regard their time abroad as key to their success post-graduation, whether in the military or civilian life."

Lipscomb shared that he is thrilled to be back at VMI. "Walking around post, memories of my time as a cadet come flooding

back. While at the time life seemed unbearable, hard, and unfair, I now see what a blessing it was to be a part of something so unique and powerful. I'm more than excited to give back to the place that gave me so much."

VMI emphasizes global outreach in many ways: study tours, cultural exchanges with foreign military academies and civilian universities, international internships, and study abroad programs.

Over 10% of the Corps of Cadets take advantage of global education every year. VMI offers semester study abroad programs with approved third-party providers, exchange programs at military academies, and direct enrollments at universities abroad, as well as summer study abroad opportunities both through VMI faculty-led summer programs and through approved third-party providers.

Cadets are permitted to study abroad after their first year at VMI, and may study abroad one regular semester—spring or fall—and as many summers as they like.

The Institute has several scholarship funds to aid cadets who want to go abroad. The OGE assists cadets with applications for national scholarships, including the Gilman, Gilman-McCain, Critical Language Scholarship, Olmsted, Fulbright, and Boren Scholarships and all aspects of planning study abroad programs. 🌍



Capt. Nolan Lipscomb '19

# English Professor Wins Poetry Contests

By Marianne Hause

Col. Steven Knepper, professor and Bruce C. Gottwald Jr. '81 Chair for Academic Excellence in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies, recently won first place in three endowed categories of the Poetry Society of Virginia's (PSV) annual contest: the Sarah Lockwood Memorial for sonnets; the Bess Gresham Memorial for poems on friendship; and the Carleton Drewry Memorial for poems about farm life or working the earth.

It has been a goal of Knepper's for the past few years to place in the Sarah Lockwood Memorial, so he was particularly pleased that his sonnet, "Interstate 81 Near Harrisonburg," won first place. Though the poem was inspired by the mundane activity of interstate travel and being stuck in traffic, Knepper was able to weave splendor into the mundane. In the closing lines of the sonnet, a cloud of starlings "slice a fin / through the sky sea, swirl back, emerge / above the smoking, stalled debris." The poem invited the reader to pause and appreciate wonder and beauty amid unpleasant circumstances.

Dr. Mattie Quesenberry Smith, poet laureate for the Commonwealth of Virginia and a colleague of Knepper's at VMI, is not surprised he received the PSV awards. "He is an engaging storyteller who uses relatable, formal structures to

house vivid, real-life experiences powered by emotion yet shaped by reason. His tightly woven narratives are inseparable from their concrete imagery and action-packed diction. Readers delight in the formal sonic richness of Steve's poems as much as they delight in his narratives," she said.

All three of Knepper's winning poems will be published in the contest anthology, and he will read them at the award ceremony in Richmond June 1.

Knepper maintains an online poetry journal called *New Verse Review: A Journal of Lyric and Narrative Poetry*, which American poet and literary critic, Dana Gioia, recently called "an important new critical forum for American poetry." In addition to the journal website, there is also a weekly newsletter that runs reviews, essays, and interviews.

The PSV is a dedicated nonprofit organization advancing poetry across the Commonwealth of Virginia and beyond. Its mission is to cultivate the writing and enjoyment of poetry through a wide range of literary programs, events, and resources. 🌍



Col. Steven Knepper

# Commissioning Cadets Experience Ancient Greece

By Marianne Hause

Eight 1<sup>st</sup> Class commissioning cadets, along with their faculty leadership team, Col. Houston Johnson V, professor and head of the Department of History; Maj. Zachary Deibel, assistant professor of history; and Col. David Gray, executive director of the Center for Leadership and Ethics (CLE), toured the island country of Greece during spring furlough as part of the Olmsted Foundation's Undergraduate Program (OFUP). The fully funded trip was co-sponsored by VMI's Department of History, the John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History & Strategic Analysis, and the CLE. Assistance was provided by the Office of Global Education. Cadets were chosen through a rigorous application process based on their GPA, ROTC ranking, a written essay, and personal interview.

According to Johnson, the OFUP's central mission is to offer commissioning cadets the opportunity to immerse themselves in a foreign culture to help prepare them for deployment abroad during their military service. "We focus on the history of American engagement with our destination while ensuring that participants experience the best of the history and culture of that country or region. This year, cadets conducted a series of pre-trip readings that focus on the classical era of Greece and the birth of Greek Democracy, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek Revolution, Greece's role in the early Cold War and the origins of the containment policy, and contemporary challenges in the form of the Greek economic crisis and recent influx of refugees," he said.

The group traveled to many towns in Greece including Delphi, where they toured the ruins of the Temple of Apollo, which dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the ancient theatre situated within the temple, and the stadium used to host the Pythian and PanHellenic games. The following day

they visited Thermopylae, which derives its name from its hot sulfur springs. There they visited a memorial to the King Leonidas, a Spartan king who led a battle against the invading Persian army at the narrow pass of Thermopylae, and engaged in a discussion about the ancient battle.

From there, the party went to Meteora, a rock formation that rises from the plains of

the trip was an incredible opportunity to explore the historical and cultural foundations of modern leadership and strategy. "Visiting ancient places like Corinth, Olympia, Delphi, and Meteora helped me better understand how geography, tradition, and history influence decision-making. These insights will stay with me as I continue my military career,"



Cadets enjoy the spectacular view atop the Meteora rock formation and monasteries.—Photo courtesy of Col. Houston Johnson V.

Thessaly, which houses the most important monastic communities of Greece. They visited one of the monasteries where they learned the history of Christianity in Greece and the Greek Orthodox church.

On their last day in Greece, the group traveled to Vergina to visit the tomb of King Philip II of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great, then on to Thessaloniki, where they explored the Ottoman city walls and viewed the famous White Tower. They also learned about the Greek health care system and discussed Greece's experience during the 2011 economic crisis.

Rachel Roberson '25, a psychology major from Stevensville, Maryland, thought

she said.

Audrey Davis '25, an international studies major from Austin, Texas, agreed. "Not only was this an incredible culturally immersive experience, but it also provided us with historical precedence of excellent military leaders such as Philip and Alexander the Great. We were able to see the most important historical sites across Greece, and also explore the cities at night to truly absorb the culture. I will remember this trip forever as a highlight of my time at VMI, and I will always be grateful to have had this opportunity."

Planning for next year's trip is underway. ✨



## Community Theatre Presents "Murder on the Nile"

The VMI Community Theatre presented "Murder on the Nile" March 28–30 in Gillis Theater. The three-act play was written by Agatha Christie, based on her 1937 novel, "Death on the Nile." The idyllic surroundings of a Nile cruise are shattered by a shocking and brutal murder. Under scrutiny is a multitude of memorable passengers, all with a reason to kill. The tension and claustrophobia builds, as a shocking and audacious conspiracy is laid bare. The cast included cadets *Tori Wright '24* as Jacqueline de Severac, *Nicole Samella '26* as Kay Mostyn, *Carla Feaster '27* as Christina Grant, *John Stotler '27* as first beadseller and *McNaught*, *Sophia Heinlein '28* as Louise, *Aadil Pattada '28* as Simon Mostyn, and *Keye Warren '28* as Smith. Community members in the cast included *Emma Hawes* as Miss ffoliot-foulkes, *Andrew Hartless* as steward and police official, *Tom Oxendine* as Canon Pennefather, *Kristen Pace* as Dr. Bessner, and *Tim Price* as second beadseller.

The play was directed by *Price*, assisted by *Hartless*. Serving as stage crew were *Laura Canaday '27* and *Dusand Barrow '28*, and *Rechnna Sok '26* served as costume manager.—*VMI Photos by Lockwood McLaughlin.*





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## Superintendent's Annual Leadership Dinner

The Superintendent's Annual Leadership Dinner, held March 26 in Marshall Hall, celebrated VMI's rising regimental leaders, as well as the departing cadet leaders who served well. The approximately 160 guests included Maj. Gen. Cedric T. Wins '85 and his wife; the superintendent's cabinet members and their spouses; invited members of the faculty, staff, and administration; and cadets, including the current and rising regimental commanders, Brian Pritchard '25 and Devin Auzenne '26.

The speaker for the evening was Amber Smith, the General J. H. Binford Peay III '62 Leader in Residence for the academic year, who highlighted her experience persevering in times of uncertainty. She was a U.S. Army helicopter pilot and is the author of "Danger Close: My Epic Journey as a Combat Helicopter Pilot in Iraq and Afghanistan."—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

