



INSTITUTE REPORT

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Cadets Learn Equine Body Condition Scoring

Special Guest Provides Hands-on Learning

By Marianne Hause

A furry, long-eared, and somewhat stubborn guest visited VMI's comparative animal nutrition class taught by Maj. Natalie Slone, instructor in the Department of Biology.

Fireball, a five-year-old miniature donkey owned by Slone and her family, was brought to class for a demonstration using the Henneke Body Condition Scoring System (BCS), a method for evaluating equine nutritional status and body fat percentage. According to Slone, cadets in the class have been learning about lipid metabolism and energy storage. "My goal in bringing Fireball to class was to provide application to the nutritional content being discussed in class. The BCS scoring for Fireball was a hands-on activity to aid in making decisions regarding any changes necessary to his

feeding and housing. Even if the cadets don't plan for a career in nutrition, hopefully the next time they see the family dog, they will pause to determine its body conditioning. They now know how to read a dog food label, and can decide if they ought to reconsider what type of food it is being fed based on the ingredients and proximate analysis."

Skyleigh D'Ambrosia '26, a biology major from Athol, Massachusetts, stated Fireball coming to the class provided a practical context to their lesson. "Instead of staring at pictures on a board, we got to touch and examine him ourselves using what we have learned in class. I now understand the detail and work in examining live animals. I left the class in a good mood, much more excited about what I had learned, and

with a better understanding of the class's practical applications."

Jagen Ratlief '27, a biology major from Henrico, Virginia, remarked that it's not every day a donkey visits a class at VMI. "Maj. Slone generously brought in Fireball. She pointed out areas of excess fat deposits and gave us the chance to get comfortable working around the animal."

In addition to VMI, Fireball has made guest appearances at Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the Virginia Tech Honors College. He participates in fundraising activities for various organizations, offers outdoor Christmas photo opportunities, and appears in the annual Blacksburg Christmas parade. ❁



Maj. Natalie Slone instructs her class in animal nutrition, using Fireball as a hands-on teaching example.—Photo courtesy of Maj. Alison Burke.

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On the cover: The full moon, the brightest supermoon of 2025, rises behind barracks Nov. 5.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

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Fall FTX

Cadets participated with their respective ROTC units in fall field training exercises (FTX). Utilizing various locations on post, as well as McKethan Park, cadets learned land navigation skills, participated in team-building exercises, trained in various mission scenarios, and practiced tactical maneuvers. The Office of Career Services offered non-commissioning cadets a chance to hear from recent alumni, while others participated in community service activities including cleaning headstones at Oak Grove Cemetery and improvement projects at a daycare. —VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin and Jake Falcone '27.



Holiday Happenings

As the holiday season approaches, festivities are being planned not only on post, but also at the New Market Battlefield State Historical Park and the Jackson House Museum.

Spirit Night

VMI will welcome visitors to "Carols in the Courtyard" Thursday, Dec. 11, at 7:30 p.m. Members of the community will gather with cadets in the courtyard of barracks to hear carols performed by VMI musicians. The VMI Chaplain's Office will host a candlelight service in Memorial Hall at 8 p.m. following the conclusion of "Carols in the Courtyard."

Parades

Rats will march in the Lexington Christmas parade, held Friday, Dec. 5, at 6 p.m. on Main Street in downtown Lexington. The VMI Regimental Band and Pipe Band will appear in the Dominion Energy Richmond Christmas parade for the 30th time since 1989. That parade will be Saturday, Dec. 6, at 10:15 a.m. on Broad Street.

Jackson House Museum

The Jackson House Museum will host "Christmas at the Jacksons," Friday, Dec. 12 from 6 to 8 p.m. Visitors will step back in time and experience Christmas in 1859 while interacting with costumed interpreters. Those attending will sing carols, churn butter in the kitchen, and help guests from 1859 choose the proper outfit for dinner. The last tour will be at 7:40 p.m. Admission for the event is canned food for humans and/or pets to benefit the Rockbridge Area Relief Association food pantry. For more information on "Christmas at the Jacksons," call 540-464-7704 or visit www.vmi.edu/jhm.

VMI Museum Holiday Open House

The VMI Museum, located in Memorial Hall, will hold its annual holiday open house Friday, Dec. 12. Door prize drawings, special discounts and offers on many items in the store will run throughout the day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Holiday refreshments will be served from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Christmas on the Farm

The New Market Battlefield State Historical Park will be the site for "Christmas on the Farm," to be held Saturday, Dec. 6, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Virginia Museum of the Civil War, located in New Market. Visitors will be able to explore the museum, make crafts, enjoy festive treats, and see a special Christmas film. They will take a step back to 1859 and visit the Bushong family as they cook, sing, and tell stories in anticipation of a special Christmas visitor. Event tickets go on sale at 10 a.m. Dec. 6 and can be purchased at the Virginia Museum of the Civil War. Event prices are \$10 per adult (ages 13 and older), \$6 per youth (ages 6-12), children 5 and under are free. Receive one free admission with the donation of four non-perishable food items. Donations will benefit the local food pantry. For more information call 540-740-3101 or visit www.vmi.edu/newmarket.



Pipe Band Members Compete in Charleston

Not all contests in Charleston happened on the football field Nov. 1. While the Keydets and the Bulldogs contended for the Silver Shako, members of the VMI Pipe Band competed at the 54th Annual Scottish Games and Highland Gathering at Riverfront Park in North Charleston.

Six cadets traveled to the gathering, where five of them participated and triumphed in their individual contests. For grade 5 solo piping, Caleb Swanson '27 received first place. For grade 5 solo snare drumming, Connor Wolfe '26 placed first with an above grade level recommendation. Thomas Sasso '27 placed third and Harrison Sloane '27 placed fourth. Kira Brenaman '26 placed second in bass drumming and third in tenor drumming. Joseph Reynolds '27, a new member of the pipe band, accompanied the competitors to learn and encourage.

Maj. Brian Donaldson, director of the Pipe Band, who usually accompanies the pipers and drummers at competitions, was not present at the event. "They attended the games and performed under their own steam, which is admirable and made me feel very proud indeed," said Donaldson.

According to Wolfe, the cadets had opportunities to network with their counterparts from The Citadel. "We traded advice on performance technique and the future of our respective pipe programs."—Photo courtesy of Connor Wolfe '26.

Cadet Studies Civil War Medical Kit

By Marianne Hause

A cadet is revealing medical mysteries from the 19th century using 21st century technology.

Moriah Delozier '28 majors in chemistry with double minors in history and literary studies. She also works as a cadet curatorial assistant at the VMI Museum. It was there she learned from museum registrar/curator, Cathy DeSilvey, that among the many intriguing artifacts found there is a leather roll-up field medical kit which belonged to Dr. J. A. Bennett, a physician servicing the Union Army in a field hospital during the Civil War.

The kit contains 19 sleeves, each holding a small cylindrical tin vial filled with a compound used for treating illnesses or injuries. Each sleeve is labeled in handwritten ink with the Latin name of the compound stored in the vial. For the safety of the museum staff and patrons, DeSilvey, along with Col. Keith Gibson '77, executive director of the museum, requested the assistance of Lt. Col. Kevin Braun, associate professor in the Department of Chemistry, to safely dispose of the chemical residue in the vials. The request provides a unique opportunity for an independent study project for Delozier, under Braun's supervision.

Delozier's initial tasks were to translate the Latin names into English, learn what each compound consisted of, and ascertain its medical uses. To decipher the ancient words, she used a modern tool. "I Googled them to get the broad overview of what these Latin words mean. Most of them begin with the word 'pulvis,' which means powder in Latin, indicating they were in powder form. Others were originally in pill form." After she translated the names, she went to Preston Library and found books on Civil War pharmaceuticals. "I wanted to see what the Latin words meant from medical historians who had done their research. I also contacted the Society of Civil War Surgeons. They're knowledgeable on Civil War medical procedures, and they were able to send me an exhaustive list of all the medicines and what conditions they treated."

The next step was to confirm identification of the compound assumed to be in each vial. According to Delozier, an easy way to do that is chemical spot testing. "We take a mixture of chemicals to test each compound within the different vials. We're currently testing a tartar compound for the presence of antimony, and we were using a few different chemicals to see if it would form a precipitate. There can either be a color change that indicates the presence of antimony, or the formation of a solid. There also could be the possibility of when the vials are oxidizing, they're also oxidizing on the inside, within the compound. This could be giving evidence of tin or lead."

Braun added that each spot test includes a series of controls. "Those controls look for interfering agents and the presence of



Moriah Delozier '28 and Lt. Col. Kevin Braun discuss the spot test process in identifying the compounds.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

other species of interest. There is also a little bit of troubleshooting associated with each method."

Braun and Delozier are also conducting instrumental testing on the compounds using instruments in the chemistry department. "We're going to try running some of the organic molecules using nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy, known as NMR, similar to an MRI in the medical field. The NMR is a smaller version that allows us to look at the connectivity of carbon-based molecules. The instrument will allow us to identify the carbon-based molecules and their degradation products. The hard thing is that medicine is compounded—multiple things are in it—so that's where the spot

Continued on next page

testing is a nice first layer to figure out if it's roughly what we think it is. Then we can separate the compounds and analyze them further," explained Braun.

Delozier is thrilled to be able to combine her interests of chemistry and history. "I think it's fascinating that this is American history, and being able to see it come to life so many years later, to test something that perhaps somebody was using over 160 years ago. I really love that realistic piece of history."

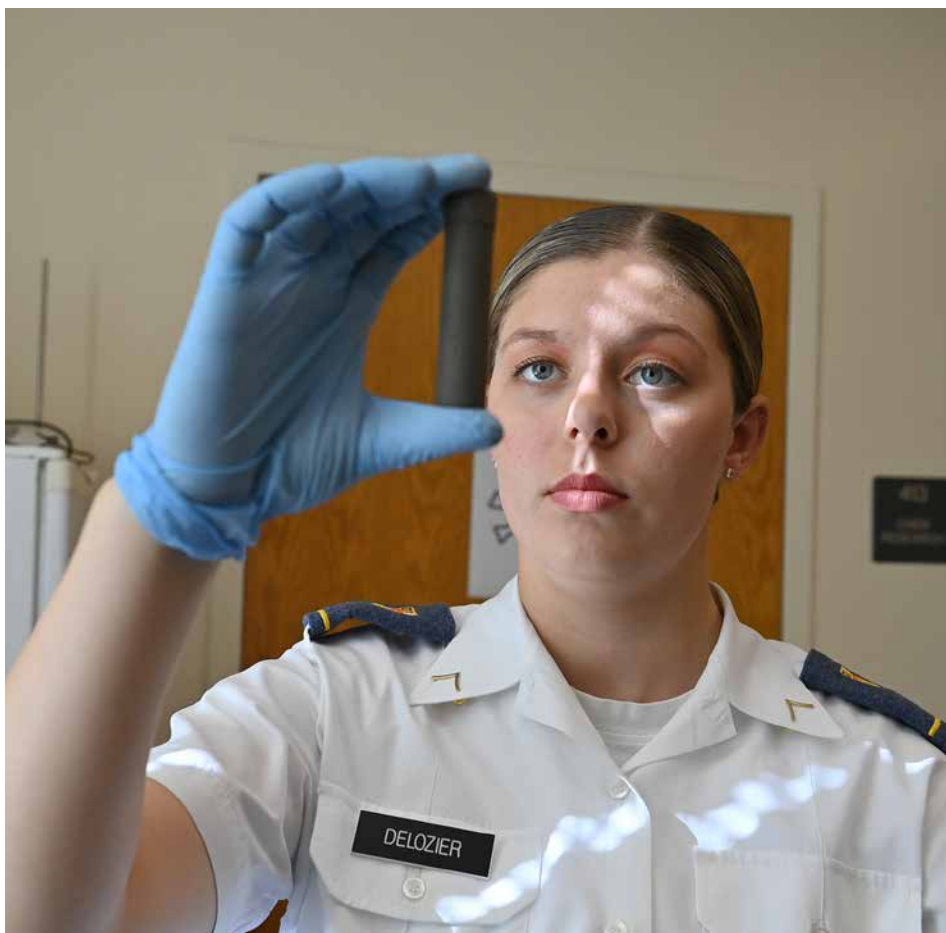
The story behind the acquisition to the museum is almost as intriguing as the kit itself. A year ago, a woman residing in Colorado donated the item which belonged to her father, a retired lawyer and Civil War buff from Florida. Because of the small town nature of his practice, his clients often paid him in goods rather than cash. Through this method of payment, he received the kit from a grateful client.

Also included in the kit was a handwritten letter from Bennett to his wife and baby who waited for him to return home from the war. Among his eloquent and poignant words he wrote, "Oh God of battles, look with mercy upon our distracted country and restore to her, her wanted peace and prosperity. Towns, villages, and cities are laid waste, fields and farmhouses devastated, millions of money wasted, and almost every family north and south are mourning for loved ones lost."

The full analysis of the kit will not be complete by the end of the semester. Delozier, who will be studying abroad during spring semester, hopes to continue her study of the compounds as a Summer Undergraduate Research Institute project. Once complete, the compounds will remain with the chemistry department and made available for others who may be interested in analyzing them. The medical kit itself will return to the VMI Museum for display. 🌿



Sleeves were used to hold the vials filled with compounds in the leather medical kit.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.



Moriah Delozier '28 examines a vial from the medical kit.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

The Vanguard: Matthew Atienza '26



By Laura Peters Shapiro

Coming to VMI wasn't an easy adjustment for Matthew Atienza '26. He was in an unfamiliar place and unsure of it all.

His original intent was to commission into the Air Force and be an international studies major. But that shifted when Atienza realized he wanted to be a teacher. It took one class during the Summer Transition Program (STP) to win him over and switch to be an English major.

"I realized I didn't really enjoy what I was doing," he shared. "I looked back and I have an A in every single English class I'd ever taken, so why not do something I'm not only good at, but passionate about?"

He was inspired by George Abry, instructor in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies (ERHS). Abry said Atienza has a quiet confidence about him, without the need for fanfare or recognition.

Atienza feels like he's evolved, not only as a student, but also as a cadet.

"I came here when I was 17 years old, skinny, not athletic, pretty lazy, grades were terrible, but I had a lot of good people behind me who supported me," he admitted. "I think as a rat or as a 4th Class cadet, I didn't feel like I deserved to be a cadet."

Instead of having doubts overtake him, he was able to pick himself up and take control of his own life. By transferring out of Air Force ROTC and changing his major, he made huge life decisions.

"I really put my career in my own hands. I'm on the dean's list now," he said. "I think as a cadet, I have been very resilient. I faced a lot of hardships here. I am from across the country, so it's lots of financial challenges and managing relationships from so far away."

It took some time, but Atienza can now reflect on his journey of becoming physically and mentally stronger. He remembers from his time on the Rat Line they were learning a drill maneuver called inspection arms, where they'd have to pull the bolt back on a rifle.

"During that time, I was super weak, and I couldn't do it. I was one of the only people who couldn't do it," he explained. "I remember my first sergeant at the end of training said, 'you either need to cut your bolt so it's easier or get stronger.'"

Atienza said for about two to three weeks, he practiced. He got stronger. And made sure it was perfect.

"I remember one day we were supposed to drill outside, but it started raining, and we just did inspection arms for an hour straight, and I executed it perfectly every single time without



Matthew Atienza '26

messing up," he stated. "I didn't get any acknowledgment from it, but I was really proud of myself in that moment. And whenever I think I can't do something, or I'm not strong enough, or I don't have the willpower to do this, I remember back when I was only 17 years old here. It seems so small, but it's very significant."

He also had to learn how to live far away from his family. Originally from California's Bay Area, he said it was a bit of a culture shock when he came to Lexington.

"I lived in a place with different beliefs, different ideologies, and more diverse," he said. "I had a really rough time."

He's fought through some humbling moments at VMI. From what was easy in high school for him was shockingly challenging at the Institute.

"There are levels to education that I was not aware of, and I struggled greatly from my rat year to 3rd Class year. My GPA was below 2.5, my grades were bad. But I learned how to not procrastinate. I taught myself how to study. I think most importantly, I taught myself how to ask for help. That's something I never did. It's something that I was always scared to do."

Last summer, Atienza worked at Breakthrough Silicon Valley, a nonprofit focused on education equity. There he taught students

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from lower-income homes and immigrant backgrounds to close the education gap.

"I was a 9th grade teacher and taught two English classes and one public speaking class," he explained. "Working hands-on with my students opened my eyes to bigger issues in marginalized communities and gave me a new sense of duty. Working at Breakthrough has inspired me to not only continue a career in education, but to also be an active member in my community as an advocate for education equity."

At the end of his internship, he received the Americorps Segal Education Award, a scholarship of about \$1,500.

Col. Emily Miller, professor and department head of ERHS, described Atienza as a conscientious, thoughtful, and reflective student.

"He brings an intellectual curiosity to his classes that makes him a pleasure to have in class. He has a strong commitment to education and a passion to serve others," she said. "He is an attentive listener, reflective reader, and a mature and independent thinker. He is humble but confident. He also has a great sense of humor."

As a 1st Class cadet, Atienza's advice is to not be afraid of asking for help—or asking anything in general.

"Don't be afraid to reach out, in the sense of asking help from your professors. Or reaching out to your brother rat that lives next door to become friends," he said. 🍀



Matthew Atienza '26 and his brother rats attend the Ring Figure ball November 2024.—Photo courtesy of Matthew Atienza '26.

The Vanguard Highlights

Check out a wide array of feature stories at www.vmi.edu. Recent stories in The Vanguard series highlight cadets who exemplify promise, perseverance, and the true spirit of leadership. While they may not be the top-ranking students or those in prestigious positions, their dedication, resilience, and growth embody the essence of being a VMI cadet. By sharing their stories, including the challenges they've faced and overcome, there is a spotlight on the diverse paths to success at the Institute, proving that leadership and excellence come in many forms.





Family Weekend

Friends and family were on post Oct. 17-19 to spend time with cadets. Members of Parents Council attended their fall meeting, and visitors to post had the opportunity to attend multiple performances and athletic events as well as join cadets in class. After a parade, tailgating, and march down, the Keydet football team fought hard against the Samford Bulldogs, but ultimately fell 24-22.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin and Kelly Nye.



Leadership Conference

Draws International Delegations and Inspirational Speakers

By Marianne Hause

The 16th annual Leadership and Ethics Conference hosted by the Center for Leadership and Ethics (CLE) was held Oct. 26-28. This year's theme was "Leading With Integrity," an extension of the CLE's academic year theme of "American Values."

The conference hosted nearly 190 participants, made up of students and staff members from many colleges, universities, and military academies from across the nation. Additionally, the Ludovika University of Public Service in Hungary, the Military University of Land Forces in Poland, and the Philippine Military Academy in the Philippines sent delegations.

Col. Dave Gray, executive director of the CLE, welcomed the assembly and affirmed that leading with integrity is quintessential to the American experience. "In the 18th century, integrity was linked to sacred, personal honor. That means being very trustworthy, candid with your peers, and of sound moral principle. Throughout George Washington's life, despite setbacks that he may have had, he gained that reputation both here in Virginia and among the other



Retired U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Charles Dunlap Jr. offers insight in leadership and honor in war in Gillis Theater.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

colonies, and so he was appointed as the commanding general of the Continental Army." A second example Gray offered as someone who led with integrity is VMI's most famous graduate, Gen. George C. Marshall, VMI Class of 1901. "Because Marshall was a selfless man, a man of integrity, a man of duty, and had served his country well, Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed him as chief of staff of the Army during World War II."

Central to the conference's programming were small group discussions, interactive activities, and speakers focusing on personal ethics, honor, integrity, principled leadership, as well as the cultivation of moral courage.

The first guest speaker was retired U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Charles Dunlap Jr., executive director of the Duke University Center on Law, Ethics, and National Security; and author of the award-winning essay, "The Origins of the Military Coup of 2012," published in 1992. During his talk titled, "Becoming a Leader with Integrity:

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Leadership Conference attendees take a moment to pose for a group photo.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Lessons We Keep Learning,” Dunlap shared that the nature of the nation’s adversaries is now quite different than other times in history. “How can we address that in practical terms?” To answer his question, Dunlap offered several ideas to the future military leaders. “Actions must be thoroughly thought through from different perspectives. Think strategically. Control your emotions and those of your troops. Words matter. Be innovative. Have working knowledge of technology. Demonstrate commitment and resolve. Hold yourself accountable. Aim to be respected, if not popular. Learn from your experiences. Find a mentor or mentors. Embrace feedback. Don’t expect vindication for doing the right thing. Have moral courage. And be a lifelong learner.”

Later, attendees heard the powerful story of Moran Stella Yanai, an Israeli jewelry designer who was held hostage in Gaza by Hamas terrorists after she was kidnapped from the Nova music festival Saturday, Oct. 7, 2023. The moderated interview was led by Gray who posed questions to Yanai, who answered them with courage and candor. Yanai began by confessing she struggled in a life without meaning until she was 36 years old. “But one morning, a voice in my head told me there must be a different way, and from that point, I went on a journey to



Moran Stella Yanai shares her emotional story of being held hostage in Gaza for 54 days.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

discover who I am as a person. Right before October 7, I finally became my best friend. I wanted to help people. I was the most inspired, and at the best point physically and mentally.” Yanai was scheduled to sell her jewelry at the Nova festival, but that morning had second thoughts. Being a

religious person, she didn’t usually work on Fridays and Saturdays. “Now I can say it was God’s plan. I was supposed to be there.” At 6 a.m. when she saw the beautiful sunrise, Yanai was grateful she stayed the entire night. “Everybody was happy.” By 6:29, the happiness ended when rockets started flying.

“I had severe panic attacks one after another, and couldn’t really act.” She and a friend ran for hours, struggling to survive. Finally, Yanai hid in a tree, where she was found by terrorists who pulled her down. “A terrorist dragged me from that tree, then realized I was wearing a lot of jewelry. He ripped it all off, and almost cut off my fingers. He inadvertently carved the first letter of God’s name on my left hand.” Her scar still remains.

“I was counting the miracles that happened to me that day, because I was saved so many times from death. I kept thinking there must be a reason I was surviving.”

Eventually Yanai was taken to a house where she was held with another hostage, an 18-year-old girl. “Since I had to protect her, I also had to protect myself.” Later, the terrorist brought in the girl’s mother, which added one more person for Yanai to care



M. Alejandra Parra-Orlandoni discusses her work in AI in Gillis Theater.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

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for. Her faith in God and her commitment to the other women is what sustained her. “That was the first time in my life that I was proud of myself, that I knew I was doing everything I could to survive.”

On the 49th day of captivity, Yanai was told she would be released. Though the mother and daughter were released, Yanai was brought back to the house. It wasn’t until she actually saw the Red Cross Jeep on the 54th day, that she knew she had been rescued.

Yanai emphasized that she does not harbor ill will, but seeks peace and reconciliation. The audience who had remained silent throughout her heart-wrenching narrative, erupted into an enthusiastic standing ovation.

The second day opened with M. Alejandra Parra-Orlandoni, the Caroline Dawn Wortham ’12 Leadership Speaker. Parra-Orlandoni is the chief operating officer of Pasteur Labs, a simulation intelligence startup, and founder of Spirare Tech. She is a senior fellow at Harvard Kennedy School’s Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, where her work focuses on artificial intelligence (AI) policy. She holds degrees from the U.S. Naval Academy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Harvard Law School. She shared

the ethical responsibilities of developing and working with AI. She first discussed the difference between adaptation and innovation. “When I think of adaptation, I think of stepping into a different situation, and figuring out how you can still succeed. It might require changing one thing here, one thing there. When I think about innovation, I think of a situation where you step into the unknown. There is no charted territory.” An example she offered of innovation was when she worked for Facebook. “A lot of the technologies we were building hadn’t existed for general use. We were sometimes unsure if the new technology was ready to be released. We would agonize over a new product. We’d look at it from all angles.” She stressed that integrity is crucial when assessing new technology.

Another concept Parra-Orlandoni examined in her talk was friction. “Most digital technology is built with this notion of reducing friction, to make everything as easy as possible for the user. Maybe though, sometimes having friction is important.” She also cited incidents of people using AI chatbots—software applications designed to have textual or spoken conversations—that resulted in suicide or attempted suicide. “The chatbots, because they are always

trying to make the user feel good and remove all friction, just kept encouraging these poor people who were crying out for help. But instead of a product that pushed back and said, ‘Hey, maybe it’s time to stop using me and reach out for help from a human,’ they just kept encouraging these users to keep going down this path of self-harm.”

Parra-Orlandoni concluded by sharing a recent study performed at MIT regarding brain activity when using ChatGPT, an AI chatbot. “The experiment was set up such that people had to write a report. One group didn’t use ChatGPT at all. A second group used ChatGPT entirely, and a third group started without ChatGPT, but used it at the end to check their work or improve it. What the study found that the group that didn’t use ChatGPT at all had a lot of brain activity. The group who used ChatGPT entirely, didn’t really learn anything about what they were asked to study, and their brain activity was low. And the third group, who started without ChatGPT then added it at the end, had the highest amount of brain activity. AI is a good tool to use, but we still need to learn the old fashioned way, analog style.”

Next year’s Leadership Conference will be held Oct. 26-27, 2026. ✨



Participants get to know each other during an icebreaker in the Hall of Valor.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Mills Reminds Audience to 'Never Quit'

The keynote and concluding speaker of the Leadership and Ethics Conference was the H.B. Johnson Jr., 1926, Distinguished Lecture Speaker, retired U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Travis Mills of the 82nd Airborne Division, who spoke in Cameron Hall to the entire Corps of Cadets, guests of the conference, and members of the community. Mills was critically injured by an improvised explosive device while on patrol in Afghanistan during his third tour of duty in 2012, losing portions of both legs and both arms. He is one of only five servicemen from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to survive quadruple amputee injuries.

Mills opened his talk with self-deprecating humor to put his audience at ease. "I think jokes really do help to disarm the situation. Knee-slap if you got them. I don't, but if you do, by all means, feel free." After the laughter subsided, Mills' tone turned serious, though still sprinkled with good-natured humor, as he shared his story of being critically injured and his long road to recovery. "On April 10, we strapped our gear on like normal, and we went out on patrol. We had a minesweeper out front who swept the ground, not once, but twice. He told us it was clear. I took my backpack off and put it on the ground. When it hit the ground, it landed on top of a bomb. When that bomb went off, it tore my right arm and right leg off instantly. My right side was completely gone and never found. My left leg was broken at the bone, and muscle and tendon held it on. My left arm was blown off at the wrist, but I could still use my thumb, index, and middle finger. Within seconds, my medic, Dan Bateson, was on my right arm, putting tourniquets on as fast as he could. I looked at Dan and said, 'Hey, you're not going to save me. There are two other guys calling for a medic. Go save my guys.' It wasn't that I wanted to die, but I've seen guys die from less injury. I thought there was no way they would be able to save me. Dan just ignored me and kept working on me."

Mills refused to scream out in pain or show any fear. He didn't want that to be the last memory his men had of him. Within 10 minutes, they had him on a helicopter and flew him to the Kandahar Airfield hospital where nine doctors and seven nurses worked on him for 14 hours. Two nurses took turns pumping air into his lungs for nine hours. They ran out of blood

in the blood bank, so they had to do an emergency call over the entire airfield for A positive and universal blood while the doctors and nurses who were compatible were taking blood from their own veins as they operated. When surgery was over, Mills was a triple amputee. Two days later, the doctors realized Mills' remaining arm had necrotized, and had to cut it off as well.

Later he was flown to a hospital in Germany, where he came out of medical sedation for the first time. Mills struggled with his new reality.

Not ready for the hard conversations, he kept calls with his wife and parents brief. Before hanging up with his mother, she said, "Hey Travis, happy birthday." It was his 25th birthday.

He arrived at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, April 17. It was there where he was able to see his wife, Kelsey, and baby daughter, Chloe. After the initial affectionate greetings, Mills broke down and said to Kelsey, "You don't have to do this. This is not what you signed up for. Take whatever we have, it's yours." Without hesitation, Kelsey told him, "No, we're going to get through this together."

Having Kelsey by his side gave Mills motivation to overcome his obstacles and to keep a positive attitude. Mills worked hard with his physical and occupational therapy, and learned to use his new prosthetic legs and arm in record time. He amazed all his medical providers at the speed of his recovery, his optimism, and his encouragement to other patients going through similar challenges.

Mills is author of two books: "Tough as They Come," a New York Times bestseller; and "Bounce Back: 12 Warrior Principles to Reclaim and

Recalibrate Your Life." Mills is also featured in the award-winning documentary, "Travis: A Soldier's Story." He and Kelsey founded the Travis Mills Foundation, a nonprofit formed to benefit and assist post-9/11 veterans who have been injured in active duty or as a result of their military service. He owns several businesses including the White Duck Pub in Winthrop, Maine. He travels the nation and shares his inspirational message to "Never give up. Never quit."

— By Marianne Hause



Retired U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Travis Mills of the 82nd Airborne Division shares his story in Cameron Hall.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Sgt. 1st Class Thomas E. Atkinson

The superintendent regrets to inform the VMI community of the death of retired Sgt. 1st Class Thomas E. Atkinson, who passed away peacefully Nov. 3, 2025, at the age of 71.

Atkinson enlisted in the U.S. Army at the age of 18 and served for 21 years. His last active-duty assignment was chief of administration in VMI's Army ROTC from 1990 to 1993. Upon retirement from active duty, he continued to serve VMI Army ROTC for more than three decades before retiring in 2023 as the recruiting operations officer. During his time at VMI, he directly supported and helped more than 1,900 cadets earn their commissions as second lieutenants.

Retired Col. Douglas Vincent '93, former professor of military science (PMS), shared Atkinson was "an absolute pillar of the VMI community and one of the finest NCOs I've ever worked with, from my time as a young cadet all the way up through being the PMS at VMI. Sgt. 1st Class Atkinson taught generations of VMI cadets what 'right looked like' and was the embodiment of professionalism and selfless service. He is irreplaceable. RIP my friend. You will be missed."

Kathy Ruffin, administrative assistant for Army ROTC and long-time coworker of Atkinson, said, "He took care of the cadets. He was so organized and put many cadets into the Army. He was simply amazing, always putting others before himself." 🌸



Sgt. 1st Class Thomas E. Atkinson

Ribbon Cutting for New Barbershop

A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new barbershop was held Oct. 17 in Old Barracks. Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent, along with Glenda Dudley, manager of the barber shop, cut the ribbon, officially opening the new space for business. It is twice the size as the old location, and from planning to completion, the project took 18 months. The space was previously used for the cadet coin-operated laundry, which will be relocated to the old barbershop

site and available for use by the start of spring semester. The new shop has a spacious waiting area, eight barber chairs, two shampoo and styling stations in a private area, office space for Dudley, a bathroom and kitchenette for staff members, and windows overlooking North Post. A touch screen eases the check-in and check-out process and allows cadets to monitor their wait time. A large screen TV will also be installed in the waiting area.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.





Trick-or-Treat in Barracks

Cadets welcomed children of faculty and staff to a Harry Potter-themed barracks Oct. 30, since many cadets were headed to Charleston the evening of Halloween for the football game against The Citadel. Cadets, many dressed in costumes, handed out candy to the trick-or-treaters.—VMI
Photos by Kelly Nye.





Military Classic of the South

A pep rally in barracks the evening of Oct. 28 got cadets pumped up for the 2025 Military Classic of the South football game against rival, The Citadel, in Charleston, South Carolina. That Saturday, the VMI football team held a steady lead for much of the game, but The Citadel climbed to the top in the fourth quarter, keeping the Silver Shako trophy for another year. The final score was 35-24. —VMI Photos by Jake Falcone '27.

POST BRIEFS

Building BRIDGES Club Receives Grant for Community Services

The Building BRIDGES Club has been awarded a \$10,000 grant designed to spark and expand service initiatives led by youth on campuses, empowering students to lead meaningful change in their communities. Formed in 2014, the club has assisted organizations in Lexington and Rockbridge County including Project Horizon, Rockbridge Area Habitat

for Humanity, Rockbridge SPCA, Boxerwood Nature Center & Woodland Garden, Timber Framers, Meals on Wheels, the Rockbridge Area Prevention Coalition's youth group, Rockbridge Area Community Services, and the "Be a Santa for a Senior" program.

Soybean Research Gets Published

A scholarly article addressing soybean research spanning seven years was published in the September 2025 issue of *Agrosystems, Geosciences & Environment*, a joint publication of American Society of Agronomy and Crop Science Society of America. The research was completed by Col.

Anne Alerding, professor in the Department of Biology; alumni Angela Mullins '19, Sarah Davis '21, Rachael Dickenson '22, Christopher Kushner '24; Kristen Hoffman, a James Madison University alumna; and Dr. Aryeh Weiss, professor at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

Philippines Officer Discusses Global Security

Capt. James F. Lugtu, naval attaché at the Philippine Embassy in Washington, D.C., participated in a panel discussion in Gillis Theater Oct. 23 on the Philippines' perspective on current global security challenges. Over 300 cadets, faculty members, and staff were in attendance. Lugtu explained his country's assessment of the security challenges in the South China Sea and the wider Indo-Pacific region. He answered questions

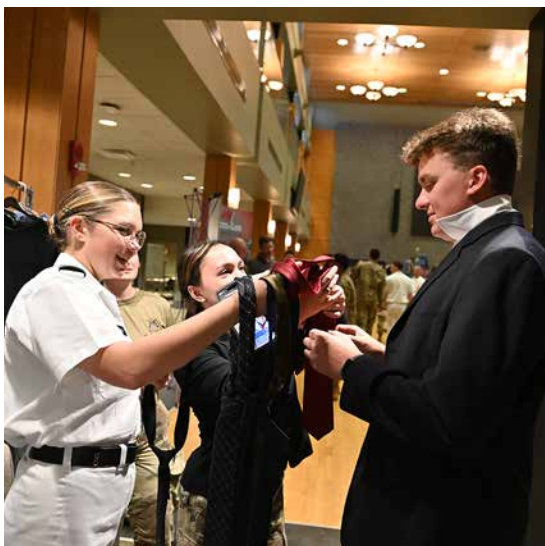
from Col. David Gray, executive director of the Center for Leadership and Ethics, and Col. Spencer Bakich, professor in the Department of International Studies and Political Science, before opening the floor to questions from cadets. The event was sponsored by the John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis. 🇵🇭



Fall Career Fair

The Fall Career and Internship Fair hosted more than 50 employers Oct. 8 in Marshall Hall. New this year, cadets were provided with on-site lunch, alumni were present to review resumes, and a professional photographer offered LinkedIn headshots using attire from the professional closet.

New employers this year included Jacobs, Cvent, Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, Precision Castparts Corp., Integrated Global Services, TowneBank, and SimVentions. Other notable organizations included the FBI, DEA, U.S. Secret Service, Newport News Shipbuilding, BWX Technologies, and Virginia Department of Transportation.—VMI
Photos by Kelly Nye.





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SADIE SMITH '26 TELLS
HER VMI STORY.

I AM
VMI



The cadets, faculty, and staff, both past and present,
are what define Virginia Military Institute and make it
NO ORDINARY COLLEGE.



Scan the QR
Code to watch
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