



INSTITUTE REPORT

Volume 54, Number 4, December 2025

Ring Figure Class of 2027 page 8

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Bronze Win at Cambrian Patrol page 4

POST BRIEFS

Smith Named One of 100 People to Meet in 2026

Mattie Quesenberry Smith, Ph.D., instructor in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies and Virginia's poet laureate, has been chosen by Virginia Business for their list of "100 People to Meet in 2026" in the Educators category.

Using funds she received from an Academy of American Poets Laureate fellowship, Smith launched "Perseverance and Resilience: Supporting

Veterans through Poetry," a project that supports veterans' health and well-being. The project involves regional workshops throughout Virginia, facilitated by creative writing instructors and contemporary veteran poets. Through the workshops, veterans explore ways they have persevered and found resilience in challenging times.

Professors Featured on Veterans Day Episode

Two professors in the Department of History were featured on "Into the Sun," the Veterans Day episode of the public radio program, "With Good Reason." Lt. Col. Eric Osborne discussed the 1918 Battle of Megiddo, which was the world's last great cavalry charge and a decisive British victory. He says the victory led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and paved the way for the future state of Israel in Palestinian territories. Osborne is the author of "The Battle of Megiddo: Palestine 1918."

Maj. Alex Paul shared how his forthcoming book, "Unwilling Doughboys: The U.S. Army's Foreign-Born Conscripts in World War I," shatters the myth that during WWI most immigrants in the United States submissively complied with the conscription practices of many local draft boards.

"With Good Reason" is sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. The show airs on 136 radio stations in 36 states. 🌿



Thanksgiving Supper

The Corps of Cadets had their annual Thanksgiving supper in Crozet Hall Nov. 18. Parkhurst Dining provided traditional Thanksgiving dishes. Members of administration were invited to attend.—VMI Photos by Jake Falcone '27.



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The Institute Report, VMI's news magazine, publishes eight issues during each academic year. Inquiries, suggestions, news items, and address changes should be directed to Editor, Institute Report, VMI Communications and Marketing, Lexington, VA 24450-0304; 540-464-7207; or VMIRreport@vmi.edu.
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On the cover: Thomas Bell '27 and Paul Belmont '27 admire their new class rings during the Ring Figure ceremony Nov. 21.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

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are available
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VMI Army Cadets Win Bronze in Wales

Second Consecutive Year to Medal

By Marianne Hause

For the second year in a row, the VMI Army ROTC Ranger Challenge team won the bronze medal at Exercise Cambrian Patrol (ECP), the British Army's premier patrolling event held Oct. 3-12 in the Brecon Beacons, a mountain range in Wales in the United Kingdom. Last year was the team's first year to compete, and the first ROTC unit from the United States to participate.

Ranger Challenge is the "varsity sport" of the Army ROTC program, and is made up of eight cadets who tried out for the team last spring. Members include team captain James Aldinger '26, Owen Brunk '26, Gavin Hudson '26, Jackson Karam '26, Colin Russell '26, Bradford Seery '26, Raymond Moffett '27, and David Townsend '27. The team was coached by Sgt. 1st Class Robert Bain, military

science instructor; Capt. Tyler Brians, assistant professor of military science; Capt. Pauline Johnson, assistant professor of military science and officer in charge of Ranger Challenge; and Capt. Christopher Lopez, military science instructor.

ECP is a continuous, 48-hour long-range international military patrol exercise across rough terrain. It originated in 1959 when a group of Welsh Territorial Army (now Army Reserve) soldiers designed a weekend training event which included long distance marching and a shooting competition. ECP is both mentally and physically demanding, and considered to be one of the most difficult and esteemed of military competitions. Participants carry 80-pound rucks, get limited sleep, and have minimal food. It is open to regular military, reserve military, and ROTC units. Units outside the UK must first qualify by winning a similar competition in their home country. This year, over 125 teams from more than 30 countries competed at ECP.

Maj. Alex Paul, assistant professor in the Department of History, knows first-hand the challenging conditions in Brecon from his time serving in the British Army. As a young infantry soldier, he spent several weeks training there. Prior to the VMI team leaving for Wales, Paul met with them to help prepare them for what they could expect. He emphasized how quickly conditions in the area could turn dangerous. "The rain doesn't just fall, it comes sideways.

The cold, the wet, and the wind together are unforgiving. You have to look after yourself and your kit, but more importantly, you have to look after each other." Paul's message to the cadets was clear, "Preparation and vigilance matter, but resilience and camaraderie are what see soldiers through the toughest conditions. Hot drinks, dry socks, and humor will get you through more than you realize." Learning of the teams' success at ECP, Paul shared he is very proud of them.

According to Brians, Cambrian Patrol is an extremely challenging training event that even active duty Army teams would be hard-pressed to perform well. "Many of the tactics and skills that teams are assessed on during the event require specialized training. For

VMI's team to arrive at the exercise with only one month of training and earn bronze is truly exceptional. As a coach, I'm extremely proud of the team and respect their grit to remain focused on the mission even during adverse conditions. Most countries only send their best soldiers, and our ROTC team outperformed many of them."

Hudson, a psychology major from Locust, North Carolina, stated the event was grueling, but he

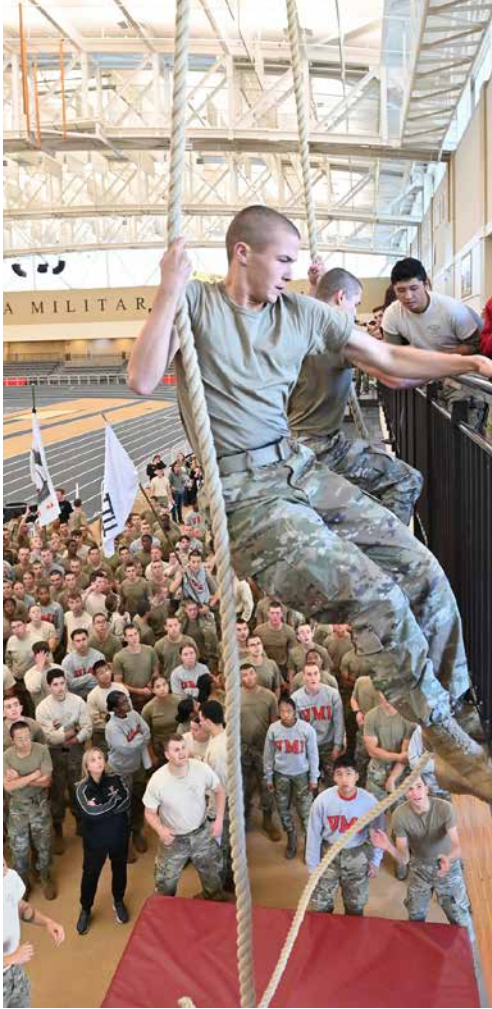
was thankful for the opportunity to participate. "I couldn't ask for a better group of guys to compete with. I have nothing but respect for this team. We all had to lean on each other and use our different skill sets to get the job done. Completing the Cambrian Patrol is an accomplishment in itself, and to be able to earn a medal with these guys is something special."

Seery, an international studies major from Chesapeake, Virginia, also competed in Wales last year. He agreed with Hudson that their accomplishment was very much a team effort. "Each of the eight members of the team did their part and pulled their own weight to help make this year another success. Without the help from all our coaches, and the support from the administration, our success would not have happened."

Tryouts for next year's Ranger Challenge team will be held in the spring. ❧



Members of the VMI Army ROTC Ranger Challenge team display their patriotism at Exercise Cambrian Patrol in the Brecon Beacons, a mountain range in Wales.—Photo courtesy of VMI Army ROTC.



Rat Olympics

Rat Olympics, the spirited culmination of a 10-week physical fitness program known as Rat Challenge, was held the morning the Institute celebrated Founders Day, Nov. 7. Events at Rat Olympics, conducted primarily in the Corps Physical Training Facility, included relays, dodge ball, rope race, rock climbing, and wrapped up with a tug-of-war bracketed championship. Alpha Company was named victor of Rat Olympics for scoring the most points. Charlie Company was awarded the Stockwell Cup for working the hardest and displaying the best attitude. Nicholas Feher '26 was presented with the Col. James Coale Award for the cadre member who demonstrated the spirit, enthusiasm, and vision of Rat Challenge throughout the 10 weeks.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin and Kelly Nye.



The Vanguard—Nat Lavender '26



By Laura Peters Shapiro

Nat Lavender '26 was sitting in class one day writing her sixth page of notes when her hand started to cramp. She only had one thought—she was not meant to be an economics and business major.

"I thought to myself, I could do this, but do I really want to be miserable for the next three years?" she questioned. "I switched my major, and I went to English. It was always my favorite subject and I'd missed it my rat year since I tested out."

The switch created a fire in her. She became passionate about her studies.

"I'm very humanities brained. The creativity and the complexity of connotations and literature and how words shape reality is so fascinating to me, especially because words are such a reflection of ourselves," she said. "You read someone's writing, you're sharing their mind for a few minutes. I think it's beautiful. I think books are by far the most versatile form of entertainment and learning, because you could read the same book five different ways, depending on the layers of symbolism. You can't do that with anything else."

The way Lavender speaks about writing and reading, anyone can see her dedication and desire for it. She explained that the personal experience of reading a book in a completely different way than the person sitting next to her is intriguing.

"We're all just sharing and having a silent conversation," she stated.

Although Lavender doesn't hold rank, she's held a bevy of different jobs on post. For two years, she worked as a history group study session facilitator. Most recently, she's been working as the



Nat Lavender '26

cadet in charge for the Daniel's Library. She also works at the Writing Center, where she serves as a consultant for her peers.

"I love that job," she said of the Writing Center gig. "I'm not a very extroverted person, but I like to pick a couple things I'm passionate about and really commit."

She's currently working on her thesis, which focuses on post-World War I avant-garde art movements of Dadaism and Surrealism in their modern context and conversations and seeing if she can recreate that—if possible. Lavender's goal is to see whether or not the arts can be limited to a time period in its historical context.

Col. Catharine Ingersoll, professor in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies, said Lavender is a bright student who is disciplined and intensely curious.

"If I have a stack of tests or papers to grade, I save hers for last—like a dessert—because she always does such an excellent job on assignments," she admitted.

Ingersoll believes Lavender's project shows great promise and combines her enthusiasm for art history and studio art, full of innovative ideas that reveal how thoroughly she's been thinking of how to convey the theme of her thesis.

Lavender had not always been committed to school, she admits.

"I was not a good student in high school at all," she said. "I did decent on my work, but I'd help my friends with their essays and turn mine in two days late. I was never worried about it. It was kind of a shock coming here."

Coming to VMI has allowed her to grow and discover herself.

"I really thought I knew who I was in high school. I think most people do, and college is a place to grow from the bubble you've grown up in," Lavender explained. "Here it's just the absolute lack of anything that precedes your actual actions, words, and personality. It forces you to know who you are without the clothes or the car

Continued on next page

More Cadet Features

Check out a wide array of feature stories at www.vmi.edu. Recent stories in The Vanguard and Behind the Balance series highlight cadets who exemplify promise, perseverance, and the true spirit of leadership. These stories include the challenges they've faced and overcome, and spotlight their diverse paths to success at the Institute, proving that excellence comes in many forms.



and those kinds of materialistic things. Without the materials, you have to look in the mirror. I'd say I'm much more aware and much better for it. I think the stress of this place really illuminates your flaws, and you've got to say, 'okay, I can't ignore this anymore.'"

At times she has found VMI to be lonely, but with being on the track team and the friendships she's made with her roommates and through her major, she's been able to surround herself with a close group. In addition to being an exceptional student, she has also been an outstanding athlete, competing on VMI's cross country and track and field teams, lettering in all seven seasons.

"I think my roommates are such blessings. I love them so much. I've made so many connections here. I think the biggest thing is just knowing that even when you're feeling lonely, it doesn't mean you're alone," she said.

She's set to graduate early with Institute Honors; majoring in English; minoring in French; and completing concentrations in literary studies, philosophy, rhetoric and writing, and art history



Nat Lavender '26 has been a successful member of the cross country and track and field teams.—Photo courtesy of Nat Lavender '26.

and visual culture. The need to be constantly moving pushed her to add extra classes to her schedule with the intent to drop them. Except, she never dropped them. She's currently applying to graduate programs—most notably to be a Rhodes Scholar. 🌟



Marine Corps 250th Birthday Ball

VMI's Naval ROTC unit celebrated the 250th U.S. Marine Corps birthday Nov. 11 in Marshall Hall. The event included a ceremonial cake cutting, and recognition of the oldest and youngest Marines in attendance, Sgt. Maj. Al Hockaday and Jackson Pelt '26, respectively. Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent, was the guest of honor.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Class of 2027 Celebrates Ring Figure

By Marianne Hause

Though the weather was dreary in Lexington, to the members of the Class of 2027, the atmosphere on post was vibrant throughout the long-awaited Ring Figure events held Nov. 20 and 21, including the presentation of combat rings and class supper Thursday evening, followed by a family brunch, class ring presentation, ring blessing, and Ring Figure ball on Friday.

The first ring was designed by members of the Class of 1848 and was presented to graduates during finals celebrations. The design was simple. The word “Mizpah” was cut in the stone and on the inside of the band was engraved, “1 of 24, July 1848.” The Hebrew word is translated as “the Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.”

The 2nd Class cadets received their combat rings in Memorial Hall, followed by the class supper in Crozet Hall Thursday evening. Kimber Latsha '77, a representative from the class who graduated 50 years before the honored class, offered congratulatory words to the cadets and gifted them a class guidon to carry at their future reunions. The Douglas Carter France III '71 Memorial Award was presented by Warren J. “Buddy” Bryan '71 to Gabriel DuPlessis '27, who received the honor through an election by his peers. Established in 1969 by the Class of 1971 as a tribute to their brother rat who lost his life in an automobile accident, the award is presented each year to the 2nd Class cadet who best emulates the qualities of France: excellent character, selflessness, graciousness, and enthusiasm.

The class nominated Sgt. 1st Class Larry Aviles, Army ROTC military science instructor, to be their honorary brother rat for the



Sgt. 1st Class Larry Aviles reacts to cheers from the 2nd Class cadets at the class supper in Crozet Hall.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

evening. Mutual affection was displayed as the cadets welcomed Aviles to the podium with chants and applause, to which he responded with a lighthearted, “What up, weirdos?” Following the laughter, Aviles thanked the class for the tribute and earnestly challenged them to always remain disciplined, be a service to others, and to remember they chose the hard road. “That road will beat you up, break you down, and make you question why you ever set foot on it. However, it’s also the road that forges warriors, leaders, and people who can carry the weight when no one else can.

Continued on next page



The Class of 2027 form their graduation year of '27 following the Ring Figure ceremony in Cameron Hall Nov. 21.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

You have already proven you can handle more than most ever will. You're not just the Class of 2027, you are the next generation of warriors, and it's time to own that." Despite his plans of retiring soon, Aviles promised to return for the class's graduation in 2027.

Pierson Read '27, vice president of the class, presented Aviles with a signet dinner ring and framed print of "Charge of the VMI Cadets at New Market," by Benjamin West Clinedinst, VMI Class of 1880.

Originally from the Bronx, New York, Aviles enlisted in the Army in 2006. He was deployed multiple times and later assigned to recruiting operations, where he enlisted over 40 future soldiers and participated in countless high school instructions before coming to VMI.

Following Aviles' speech, Matthew Assouad '27, class president, invited his brother rats to put on their combat rings, which they did to boisterous cheers, and ensued in vigorously banging their rings on the chairs and tables, filling the dining hall with a metallic clatter.

On Friday, a family brunch in Crozet Hall preceded the formal ring presentation ceremony where 2nd Class cadets received their individualized rings in Cameron Hall. Mohammad Zanganeh '27, Ring Figure chairman, welcomed guests, offered opening remarks, and introduced the speakers, the first being Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent. Furness shared with the cadets that he remembers being in their shoes 40 years earlier. "I recall being overwhelmed by the accomplishment and the anticipation of getting that ring on my finger. The VMI class ring is a unique symbol among our nation's service academies and senior military colleges, for no two class rings are alike, which makes us different from every other institution. Symbolism is important. It helps connect us to the values and ideals we cherish, and reminds us of them long after our journey at VMI has ended. The acceptance of this ring brings a new journey of great responsibility and portends a life of selfless service ahead. Like your choice of attending VMI, service and sacrifice are truly the path less traveled, and this path is one full of purpose and rewarding life experiences."

Alumnus guest speaker, retired U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Paul Brier '81, addressed the class after Furness. Brier described



Maj. Gen. Paul Brier '81 addresses the 2nd Class cadets during the Ring Figure ceremony.—
VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

the VMI ring as a military totem of the United States, a bond and a heritage. "It is a lifelong reminder that you are never alone. This ring carries a silent but powerful message: that you are a leader, a person of character, and someone who can be trusted to do what is right." He continued by imparting to them the difference between talent and trust. "Talent is important. The military thrives on it, and here at VMI, your talents have already carried you far. But talent alone is never enough. Talent is about the individual. Trust is about the team. When pressure builds—in combat, leadership, and in life—it is trust, not talent, that determines who people will follow. You build bonds forged not by talent, but by trust, and those bonds became the foundation of your class identity, the very strength you celebrate today as you put on that ring. Your ring symbolizes far more than individual achievement. It symbolizes your class. You wear it not just for yourself, but for every brother rat who walked the Rat Line with you, who sweated and suffered beside you, who now stands as part of a great, unbroken chain of trust stretching back generations."

At the conclusion of his speech, the class presented Brier with a first edition of "One Hundred Years at VMI," by William Couper, VMI Class of 1904.

Brier received a Naval ROTC scholarship to attend VMI, where he earned a degree in civil engineering. He also holds a Master of Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College. He is a veteran of the Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars, and retired after 36 years of military service. His awards include the Navy Distinguished Service Medal, Defense Superior Service Medal, and Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V" and gold star.

Later Friday afternoon, the ring blessing service was held in Memorial Hall. Col. John Casper '04, Institute chaplain, shared his message, "The Prize is Worth the Price," a phrase which he confessed helped get him through his cadetship. "It's the idea that the prize of an end goal is worth the price you have to pay to get it. In academics, the prize of a good grade is worth the price of studying. The prize of wearing a ring and saying you go to VMI comes with the price of hard



Col. John Casper '04 offers a prayer during the ring blessing service in Memorial Hall
Nov. 21.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

See Ring Figure, page 10



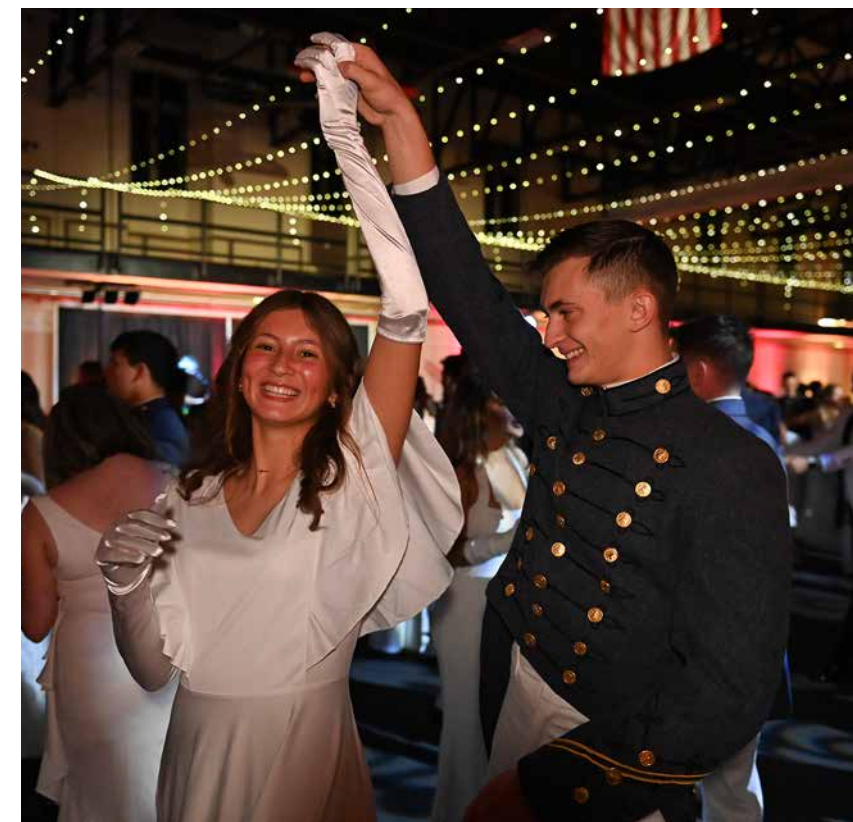
Ring Figure *continued from page 9*

work, suffering, and acknowledging your own weaknesses. The catch is you have to decide in your heart if it's worth the price, and each of you have. You've chosen the road less traveled." Casper encouraged the cadets to not lose sight of the actual prize they are after, their faith. He referenced the biblical passage, I Corinthians 9:24 "Do you know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."

Casper's talk was followed by five cadets who offered prayers, verses, or blessings from their respective faiths of Protestantism, Catholicism, Muslimism, Judaism, and Buddhism. Each faith group then held individual blessings in separate areas of the chapel.

The evening wrapped up with the Ring Figure ball in Cocke Hall.

Enjoy the additional photos from the various events, and see more on the VMI Flickr account. 🌸



Advisors Offer Guidance on Postgraduate Programs

By Marianne Hause

A webpage dedicated to national postgraduate scholarships and pre-professional programs in law and health professions available to cadets, regardless of their commissioning status, was recently unveiled to 1st and 2nd Class Institute Honors cadets by Col. Robert McDonald, associate dean for academic affairs and director of the Honors Program.

A group of faculty advisors have developed expertise for a specific scholarship or program. For over 18 months, the advisors have been collaborating on ways to increase awareness of the scholarships and programs, along with respective requirements for application procedures. Scholarships include the Marshall Scholarship, advised by Lt. Col. Patrick Eichholz; the Rhodes Scholarship, advised by Col. Steven Knepper; the Gates Cambridge Scholarship, advised by Maj. Christopher Blunda; the Fulbright Scholarship, advised by Col. Jeff Kendrick; the Truman Scholarship, advised by Dr. Vera Heuer; and the Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship, advised by Col. David Feinauer. Maj. Alison Burke is the advisor for the Pre-Professional Program in health; and Lt. Col. Tim Passmore is the advisor for the Pre-Professional Program in law. VMI has admissions agreements with leading law and medicine programs, and very recently supported eight



Col. Steven Knepper discusses the requirements and application procedure for the Rhodes Scholarship.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

cadets applying to law schools at the University of Virginia, William & Mary,

Washington and Lee University, and the University of Richmond.

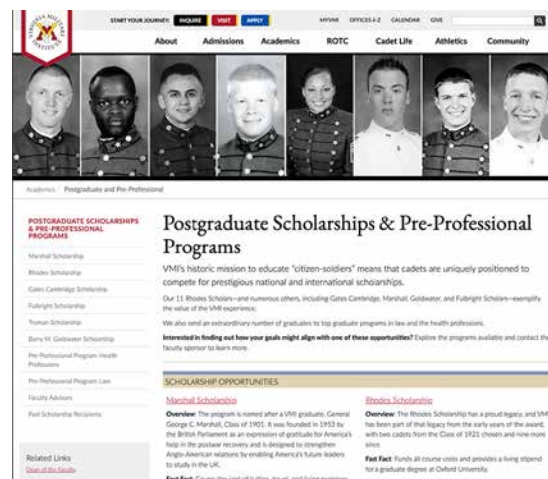
McDonald advised the cadets that the programs are highly competitive, and they should start their application process early. “You all have good grades, but grades aren’t enough. If you are interested in any of these programs, contact the expert advisor. If your resume seems aligned, we will do everything possible to help you shape a viable candidacy for any award you want to pursue. VMI has produced 11 Rhodes Scholars, four Fulbright Fellows, two Fulbright Scholars, two Gates Cambridge Scholars, one Barry M. Goldwater Scholar, one Marshall Scholar, and many other recipients of nationally prestigious awards. For a school our size, those are remarkable statistics, and I believe some of you sitting in this room have the ability to add to that impressive record.”

The presentation will be repeated in February for 3rd Class Institute Honors cadets, then annually thereafter.

For more information on VMI’s postgraduate scholarships and pre-professional programs, go to www.vmi.edu/academics/postgraduate-and-pre-professional. 🌟



Col. Robert McDonald highlights new resources available for the scholarships and pre-professional programs to Institute Honors cadets.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.



The postgraduate scholarships and pre-professional programs webpage as it appears on the VMI website.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Cadets Aim High in Rocket Club

By Marianne Hause

Three of the nine members of the VMI High-Powered Rocket Club recently launched medium-powered rockets at the Valley Aerospace Team (VAST) launch site near Monterey, Virginia.

Michael Trigger '26, a computer science major; Quinlan Johnson '28, a physics major; Yushen Zhu '28, an electrical and computer engineering major; along with Maj. Durig Lewis, instructor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy and club officer in charge, traveled to the site to shoot the rockets built by cadets last academic year.

Trigger reported VAST has an excellent launch site with plenty of open land. "I wish it was a little closer to VMI, but it's hard to find a place with that much



Yushen Zhu '28 offers a lighthearted nod to Asian culture before launching his rocket at the VAST launch site.—Photo courtesy of Maj. Durig Lewis.

undeveloped land and is clear of trees. It was fun watching the rockets take off and realizing the builders' craftsmanship is what keeps them intact as they undergo all the forces needed to fly."

According to Lewis, several members of the club are currently working on their National Association of Rocketry level one certifications. "Certification permits people to purchase and use rocket motors whose physical constraints and performance exceed traditional model rocket boundaries. There must always be someone in the group who is certified to launch one of these rockets." Club members are also building rockets scheduled to launch next semester. 🚀



Public Square Debate on the American Dream

VMI's Civil Discourse Initiative and its local college partners: Washington and Lee University, Southern Virginia University, and Mountain Gateway Community College, hosted a public square debate Dec. 2 in Marshall Hall on the resolution: "The American Dream is Alive and Well." Nearly 120 people attended including students and staff from all four colleges, as well as members from the community. In addition, the Virginia Secretary of Education, Aimee Rogstad Guidera, and the Deputy Secretary of Education, Zach Jacobs were present. Dr. Bryan Paul, curricular fellow for College Debates & Discourse Alliance, served as debate chair.

Public square debates are a collaborative effort between the VA250 commission, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, the Virginia Department of Education, the College Debates and Discourse Alliance, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and Braver Angels. VMI's Civil Discourse Initiative is a partnership between the Center for Leadership and Ethics and the cadet Building BRIDGES program, funded by the Jackson-Hope grant.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.





Veterans Day Parade

VMI contributed significantly to honoring veterans at the Lexington Veterans Day parade and ceremony on an exceptionally cold Nov. 11. Led by Regimental Commander Devin Auzenne '26, a contingent of the Corps of Cadets marched from Oak Grove Cemetery down Main Street to the Old Courthouse to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Veterans Memorial in Courthouse Square. VMI Superintendent Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 was the keynote speaker at the ceremony.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.



Governor Celebrates Birthday at VMI

Gov. Glenn Youngkin was warmly welcomed by the Corps in Cameron Hall Dec. 9, as the Keydets took on the Loyola University Greyhounds. Youngkin, who was celebrating his birthday in Lexington, sat in the stands alongside his wife, Suzanne.

At halftime, he walked onto the court and was serenaded with "Happy Birthday." He addressed the Corps, saying "Every time I am here, I am overwhelmed with pride. I love this place." Acknowledging the approaching end of the semester, he pivoted his narrative, addressing cadet obligations that can be distracting when studying for exams. The Corps, anticipating what was coming next, erupted into ecstatic cheers. "By the power vested in me, as governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia and commander in chief of the Corps of Cadets, I do hereby grant amnesty to those cadets who have unserved duties and commitments." The raucous ovation, jumps of joy, and brother rat hugs continued as the governor was gifted a red VMI cap, which he immediately donned. As he exited the court to return to his seat, he was surrounded by rats imploring him to autograph their Rat Bibles, which he did graciously.

The Keydets finished the game over the Greyhounds, 86-70.

—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Cadets Present Research Projects at SURF

By Marianne Hause

Five cadets, with Dr. Sherif Abdelhamid, assistant professor in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences and outreach liaison officer for VMI's Cyber Defense Laboratory, traveled to Spartanburg, South Carolina, to present research projects at the SoCon Undergraduate Research Forum (SURF), at Wofford College Oct. 24-25. SURF brings together students from across the Southern Conference member institutions to showcase their academic excellence.

Cadets who attended include Benjamin Davis '26, who is double majoring in applied mathematics and computer science; Jackson Pelt '26, a mechanical engineering major; Shahryar Shah '26, a computer science major; Gracie Harlow '27, who is double majoring in history and English; and Jeremiah Woods '27, a history major.

Woods said SURF was a great opportunity to share his first research experience. His project titled, "African Americans at VMI: 1851-1865," explores the contributions of the enslaved and free Black men and women who lived and worked in connection with the Institute during the years leading up to and throughout the Civil War. "It highlights their lives, labor, and legacies, while reflecting on how their presence shaped the foundation of VMI and how their stories can be more fully recognized today," he explained.

In her project titled, "Commemorating Service: Preserving Memory Through Archival Research at the American Battle Monuments Commission," Harlow focuses on U.S. military personnel who died during the Normandy campaign in World War II, and the importance of preserving their stories. Last summer, she presented her research at the Normandy American Cemetery in France. "I am extremely thankful to have had the opportunity



Jeremiah Woods '27 presents his research project at SURF.—Photo courtesy of Dr. Sherif Abdelhamid.

to also present my research at SURF. The feedback from graders who evaluated the presentations, allowed me to move forward and broaden my views," she said.

According to Abdelhamid, attending SURF was an invaluable experience for the cadets. "They not only showcased their research with confidence and professionalism, but also engaged deeply with peers and faculty from across the Southern Conference. SURF provided them with a meaningful platform to exchange ideas, receive constructive feedback, and see firsthand how their academic work connects to larger conversations in their disciplines." ❁



VMI MUSEUMS

LEXINGTON, VA ❖ NEW MARKET, VA

Don't forget to visit the VMI Museum locations!

Hours have been adjusted for the holidays.

VMI Museum, Memorial Hall:

Sunday-Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Closed Dec. 20, 2025 through Jan. 4, 2026

Jackson House Museum, E. Washington Street:

Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Closed Christmas Eve, Christmas Day

Closed throughout the months of January and February

Virginia Museum of the Civil War,

George Collins Parkway, New Market:

Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Closed Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day

Visit the new online store to purchase vintage and museum-inspired apparel and gifts by scanning the QR code.



VMI Celebrates 186th Anniversary

By Marianne Hause

VMI was established Nov. 11, 1839, when 23 young Virginians were mustered into the service of the state and, in falling snow, the first cadet sentry—John B. Strange of Scottsville—took his post. This year, VMI celebrated the 186th anniversary of its founding Friday, Nov. 7.

The Corps of Cadets, along with faculty, staff, alumni, and special guests, convened in Cameron Hall to honor Eugene “Gene” Williams ’74, recipient of the Distinguished Service Award, VMI Foundation’s highest honor. First presented in 1969, the award recognizes alumni and friends whose service to the Institute, dedication to the Foundation’s mission, and career achievements and distinctions are truly exceptional. Gene is the 77th recipient of the award.

Lt. Gen. David Furness ’87, superintendent, stated VMI’s founders set out to create a school deeply entrenched in a strong sense of civic duty and honor. “One of the greatest testaments to the effectiveness of our educational model is our graduates. We have alumni who accomplished great feats in all walks of life. They live influential lives in their communities and have a service mindset. However, they do not do this for recognition, but because it is the right thing to do. Today, we are privileged to bestow one of VMI’s highest service honors, the Distinguished Service Award, on one of our graduates.” Furness then introduced the president of the VMI Foundation, John Williams ’88, who read the citation recognizing the achievements of Gene and his commitment to service, presented him with the award, and invited him to the lectern to address the audience who saluted him with a standing ovation.

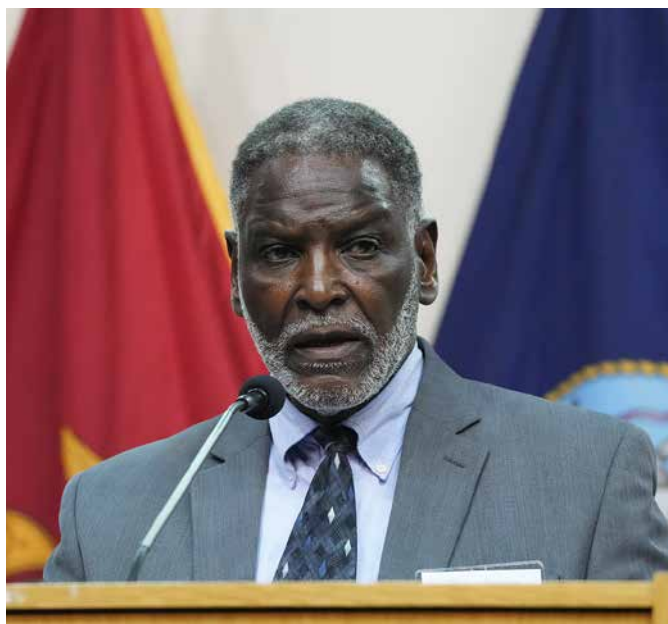
Gene thanked family, friends, and his brother rats who traveled from Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Texas, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and all corners of Virginia to pay homage to their BR. He shared his adoration for VMI. “I love my school in many ways. I’m actually defined by my school. VMI molded



Lt. Gen. David Furness ’87 exhibits the Distinguished Service Award while John Williams ’88 presents the citation recognizing the achievements of Gene Williams ’74.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

my life into something of value.” He cited its principles, ideals, and its contributions to the country and the world. “However, our beloved school is not without blemish. VMI was very late tearing down barriers to racial justice as it was the last public college in Virginia to integrate, and I regret that. I have older relatives who would have benefited greatly from the rigor, the structure, and the character and leadership development that is fundamental to

the VMI system. They would have also brought dignity and quality to this place, as I have tried to do during my cadetship and afterward. That opportunity was simply not permitted here between 1839 and 1968.” He added his words may sound hard, but they are the truth, and the truth must be told. “I am extremely proud that when our school eventually acted, it implemented the integration of the Corps with dignity, fairness, and determination that failure was not an option. No other school in the state of Virginia integrated more smoothly, fairly, and successfully than VMI. It repeated that performance in 1997 with the admission of women. Neither of these transformational events were



Gene Williams ’74 addresses the Corps of Cadets in Cameron Hall Nov. 7.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Continued on next page

flawless, and we are still a work in progress, but we did demonstrate that we could do very well whatever we resolved to do.”

Gene implored the cadets to be truth seekers and oppose what is not honorable and not true, and to help make the world truly great. “I know you cadets have the intellect, the backbone, and the strength of character to do this. It will take tremendous courage and foresight on your part and the support of the leaders here at VMI.”

He continued by affirming he celebrates Founders Day with sincerity and with the acknowledgment of the high ideals of honor, discipline, and courage. “The foundational principles in 1839 are still true today. I celebrate this with the full knowledge that if I were alive in 1839, the best that I could have envisioned was being an enslaved worker here at VMI. I would have not been treated as a man created in the image of God, but as chattel. It would have been a living hell, because I would have longed to be free. I would have fought and died to be free. This is why this recognition today is so meaningful to me. This is also why I remain so hopeful and encouraged about the future.”

He further noted that efforts to sanitize history are wrong, dangerous, and unfair. “Truth has to be acknowledged, and it has to be reconciled. I have great faith that the majority of VMI people will be agents of what is right, just, and honorable. If that is the case, we’re going to be all right.”

He closed by stating despite whatever else has been going on in the affairs of VMI, including many issues that have caused him distress, he has always had confidence that the leaders of VMI were committed to developing healthy and honorable young leaders and having fidelity to the principles of the Institute. “I have faith that this will continue



Gene Williams '74 takes review of the Founders Day parade alongside Lt. Gen. David Furness '87.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

to be the case, and I pledge my support to Gen. Furness and his administration to be an advocate and supporter of VMI.”

Gene is founder and executive director of the College Orientation Workshop, Inc. (COW), a four-week challenging educational enrichment program, held each summer at VMI. Next year marks its 40th year of transforming the lives of promising, male, minority, and at-risk high school students.

He was in the third

class of African American cadets at VMI. He received an athletic scholarship to play football and was dubbed “Mean” Gene on the gridiron. He was selected to play in the All-American Bowl game in 1974 in Tampa, Florida, and sustained a serious injury in that game which ended his football career. That same year he received the Henry Fairfax Ayres Most Valuable Player Award and was inducted into Kappa Alpha Order. Within the Corps of Cadets, he attained the rank of lieutenant in Echo Company.

See 186th Anniversary, page 18



The Cadet Battery fires the howitzers during the Founders Day parade.—VMI Photo by Lockwood McLaughlin.

186th Anniversary *continued from page 17*

In 1978, Gene became the first African American and youngest appointee to the VMI Board of Visitors (BOV). He remained on the BOV for 10 years. He is a past member of the Keydet Club Board of Governors and the VMI Foundation Board of Trustees. He was inducted into the VMI Sports Hall of Fame in 1985.

Following his speech, the Founders Day parade was held in which Gene took review of the parade alongside Furness. The Cadet Battery fired a 15-gun salute from the howitzers. Friday evening, the Institute Society Dinner was held in Marshall Hall where Gene was an honored guest, and Furness was keynote speaker. 🌿



Devin Auzenne '26 leads the 186th Regiment during the Founders Day parade.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Fall Community Theatre Production

The VMI Community Theatre presented the three-act play, "Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency," by Douglas Adams, Nov. 14, 15, and 16 in Gillis Theater. VMI cadets in the cast included Colin Nicassio '26, Nicole Samella '26, Adam Brinkley '27, Carla Feaster '27, John Stotler '27, Hayden Talbott '27, Jesse Vaughn '27, Sophia Heinlein '28, and Keye Warren '28. Community cast members included Liz Clarke, Andrew Hartless, Alice Ingersoll, Nora Ingersoll, David Lusk, and Kristen Pace. The play was directed by Tim Price, assisted by Hartless. Stage crew included Fabiana Sofia Pajaro '26, Laura Canaday '27, Dusand Barrow '28, and Tamara Jimenez '29. The light and sound booth was run by Timothy Persons '27 and Rechnna Sok '26 served as costume designer.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.



Christmas Parade

Due to snowfall and freezing temperatures early Dec. 5, the Lexington Christmas Parade in which the Rat Mass and Regimental Band traditionally march down Main Street to spread holiday cheer, was canceled. The next day however, the Regimental Band and Pipe Band participated in the Dominion Energy Christmas Parade in Richmond, Virginia.—VMI Photos by Jake Falcone '27.



December Snows

The first real snow of the academic year occurred during the early morning of Friday, Dec. 5, dropping 3 to 4 inches of snow on post. Cadets enjoyed snowball fights and building snowmen between classes. Just when the snow on the ground was nearly melted, another few inches fell through the day, Monday, Dec. 8.—VMI Photos by Jake Falcone '27 and Kelly Nye.

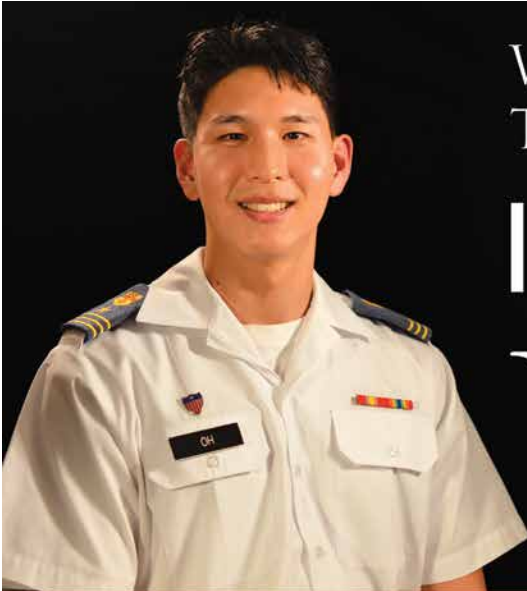




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WOONGCHAN OH '25
TELLS HIS VMI STORY.

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are what define Virginia Military Institute and make it
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