



INSTITUTE REPORT

Volume 54, Number 7, May 2026



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Boxing Team Takes Second in Nationals

By Lt. Col. Michelle Ellwood

The VMI club boxing team, known as the Regulators, headed to Las Vegas for the United States Intercollegiate Boxing Association (USIBA) 2026 National Tournament, held March 26-28. Led by two female coaches, Connie Bechtel and Santy Booth, the team returned with a good amount of new hardware, heading back to VMI with a second place overall trophy. Four cadets earned 1st place championships in their weight: Parker Brown '26, Caiden Cavazos '28, Colton Conn '28, and Christian Pinto '28. Pinto was also named most outstanding fighter of the tournament. Jalen McMillan '28 got second in his weight class.

Soon after returning to post, Boxing in Barracks was held April 9 in New Barracks courtyard, allowing the club team to showcase their hard work in front of the Corps through intra-squad boxing matches. With each event, the club gains experience and confidence fighting in front of large, loud audiences and being officiated by USIBA referees. Seven bouts were held as the group had an upcoming event in mind: The Citadel match-up in late April in South Carolina. Brown was able to practice his coaching skills as he'll be moving from cadet boxer to coach after he graduates.

Bechtel is proud of how the year has wrapped up. "We completed a busy and competitive season across both semesters. A major highlight was facing the Navy for the first time in over a decade, marking the return of a historic rivalry," she shared. "Several fighters stood out for their consistency and workload. Julien Perkins competed in every match this season and added a bout at nationals, while Christian Pinto fought in every match and competed three times at nationals, making them the team's busiest fighters. Amiel Diaz consistently took on more experienced opponents and rose to the challenge each time. At Nationals, the team demonstrated grit and mental toughness. They stayed composed and fought to



Charles Watts '29 throws a punch at Michael Keita '29 during Boxing in Barracks.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

finish second as a team. This says a lot about the character and determination for excellence. Overall, the season reflected the team's resilience, discipline, and continued growth."

Brown agrees it was a great season and the team showed a lot of heart. "Ever since the beginning of the season, something we all kept saying we felt was there is just something different in the air this year with our team," said Brown. "Over the past two years, I have watched this team not only grow into one of the most dominant programs in the country, but also into a tightly knit family that loves and cares for each other. This year has been such a beautiful journey, and although it is bittersweet that this was my last year competing with the team, I couldn't have asked for a better way to finish my collegiate career with the Regulators. Stay tuned, because we're only getting started." ❁



Jay Summerville '27 and Diego Henao Ospina '28 square up for a boxing bout in New Barracks Courtyard.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 congratulates members of the club boxing team after returning from Las Vegas.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

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On the cover: Philip Reese '26 and Jacob Campbell '26 assist in the construction of a pavilion as a Timber Framers project for Project Horizon in Lexington during FTX.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

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Commissioning Cadets Explore la France

By Marianne Hause

A contingent from VMI toured France during spring furlough thanks to the Olmsted Foundation's Undergraduate Program (OFUP). Eight 1st Class commissioning cadets along with their faculty leadership team, Col. Houston Johnson V, professor and head of the Department of History (DOH); Lt. Col. Jochen Arndt, associate professor of history, deputy director of the John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis (Adams Center) and OFUP director; and Col. David Gray, executive director of VMI's Center for Leadership and Ethics (CLE), toured regions throughout the country. The fully funded trip was co-sponsored by VMI's DOH, the Adams Center, and the CLE. Assistance was provided by the Office of Global Education (OGE). Cadets were chosen through a rigorous application process based on their GPA, ROTC ranking, a written essay, and personal interview.

The OFUP offers overseas travel and cultural immersion opportunities to service academy cadets, midshipmen, and ROTC students attending or associated with selected Title 10 senior military colleges. These trips are conducted in non-English speaking countries with exposure to national perspectives and a focus on the role of U.S. policy in those regions.

Arndt reported that to prepare for the trip, cadets hosted a reception for a French military delegation and French exchange students on post; developed their travel itinerary; participated in a reading seminar focused on the French culture, the American Revolution, WWI, WWII, the Cold War, and the period since; researched personal stories of VMI alumni who died during the Battle of Normandy; and attended safety briefings. "Upon arriving in France, our first base of operation was the town of Bayeux in Normandy where the cadets learned the history of the Battle of Normandy by visiting the iconic church in Sainte-Mère-Église, one of the first



Notre-Dame towers behind cadets in Paris.—Photo courtesy of Col. Houston Johnson V.



Cadets gather before going into the Louvre Museum.—Photo courtesy of Col. Houston Johnson V.

towns liberated on D-Day, June 6, 1944, and Pointe du Hoc, where U.S. Army Rangers heroically scaled 100-foot cliffs under enemy fire," he shared.

For Gray, who teaches courses on U.S. military history, a key event for the group was visiting the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, overlooking Omaha Beach. "We spent several hours, allowing for cadets to find the graves of the fallen VMI alumni they had earlier researched, and report their acts of heroism," said Gray.

The second base of operation was the city of Paris where cadets participated in a wide range of activities. Johnson related highlights of their time in the capital city. "We took a gastronomic walking tour of the neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés where cadets learned about the production and cultural importance of food for France. We saw major sites like Notre-Dame, the Eiffel Tower, and the

Champs-Élysées. We also visited Mont Saint-Michel and the Palace of Versailles and its gardens."

Particularly informative for the cadets was dining with Olmsted Scholar, U.S. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Sean Margot, who is currently studying at Sorbonne University, as well as U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Skye Martin and U.S. Army Maj. Calista Stoop, both of whom are currently studying at the French War College, École de Guerre in Paris. While conversing over dinner, cadets learned about the Olmsted Scholar Program, and were inspired by the opportunities available to them as they embark on their military careers in May.

For Samantha Waters '26, a history major who will commission into the Navy, the trip is one she will never forget. She was amazed by

See Cadets Explore la France, page 6

VMI Institute Report

Cadets Honor Fallen Alumni at Normandy

The Battle of Normandy, the Allied operation that launched the successful liberation of German-occupied Western Europe during World War II, began on D-Day, June 6, 1944. United States, British, and Canadian forces landed on five French beaches, marking history's largest amphibious assault. Many U.S. servicemen were killed during the assault, including VMI alumni.

In preparation for the Olmsted Foundation's Undergraduate Program (OFUP) trip, one of the many assignments the cadets were given was to work in pairs and research the personal story of an alumnus who had died during the battle, and is buried at the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, an itinerary stop planned for the group.

Upon arriving, the cadets were to find the gravesite of the alumnus and share that person's story with the group.

James Bangura '26 and Matthew Nordyk '26 worked together researching Capt. Sydney A. Vincent Jr. '40, born May 3, 1919, in Portland, Oregon. He graduated with a degree in civil engineering. His classmates described him as playfully argumentative and full of common sense, drive, originality, and the personality of a leader.

He served in the Army as a cavalry officer in the 803rd Tank Destroyer Battalion and operated a M10 Wolverine tank destroyer. He married Lt. Jane Margaret Byer, a Navy nurse, in 1943. On D-Day, Vincent's unit was attached to the 29th Infantry Division and fought further inland. On July 18, 1944, Vincent fought alongside Maj. Glover S. Johns Jr. '31, who would eventually retire as a colonel. A German observation post proved to be trouble for the Americans approaching Saint-Lô. Vincent was given permission to "take care of it," and moved his M10 into position and fired upon the German emplacement. Tragically, an enemy mortar round landed on the thin-skinned, open-top M10 and fatally wounded Vincent. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star Medal for his gallant actions.

The cadets were unable to access Vincent's headstone due to wet conditions at the cemetery.

Jack Ericsson '26 and Macallister Clark '26 delved into the life of Capt. Harold Sheffey '37 from Marion, Virginia, who studied liberal arts at VMI. In the Army, he served as commander of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 330th Infantry Regiment, 83rd Infantry Division. He took command after landing on the beaches at Normandy, July 8. Eight days later, he was killed leading his men to liberate the town of Remilly-sur-Lozon. Ericsson acknowledged, "Seeing his gravestone was a humbling experience and I think it is important to keep the memories of those men alive." Ericsson

added that Sheffey's sister lived in Marion until her death within the last decade.

Nolan Savard '26 and Liam Smith '26 studied Lt. Benjamin Rives Kearfott '43. Born November 7, 1919, and a native of Martinsville, Virginia, Kearfott played football and basketball in high school. At age 17 he enlisted in the Virginia National Guard. In 1942, he married Mary Jennings of Lynchburg.

On D-Day, he was an infantry platoon leader in the 3rd Platoon, Company A, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division—the unit famously known as the Bedford Boys—tasked with landing on the westernmost sector of Omaha Beach. He was aboard Landing Craft

Assault 1015 with Capt. Taylor Fellers and 30 other soldiers from Company A. While not originally from Bedford, Kearfott was reassigned to the unit due to a chance illness of another officer. Upon landing on Omaha Beach, all men aboard the landing craft were killed instantly by machine gun fire. Their bodies were scattered along the beach. Kearfott was awarded the Purple Heart, which is currently kept at the VMI Museum, along with his casket flag and emblem of the 29th Infantry Division.

Anna Grace Adams '26 and Samantha Waters '26 researched Dan Joseph Morton '41

from Columbus, Georgia, who became an Army cavalry officer and married Bette Wright. As a second lieutenant, Morton participated in Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of French North Africa in November 1942, and Operation Husky, the Allied invasion of Sicily in July 1943. Adams recounted, "By June 1944, the time of the Normandy campaign, he had been promoted to captain and was an experienced and decorated armor officer. He was on the intelligence staff for Combat Command A of the 2nd Armored Division."

Waters described the circumstances of Morton's death. "During Operation Cobra, an offensive which began seven weeks after D-Day, Morton's unit was leading an advance near the village of Villebaudon. They were ambushed by four German tanks. Being on the intelligence staff, he was not required to take the lead in a counterattack, but Morton stepped up and took the initiative to save his unit. His tank was fired upon, and shrapnel hit him in the chest, killing him instantly on July 28." Morton was temporarily buried at Sainte-Mère-Église. By 1948, Bette had remarried, and his father had died, so his mother made the decision to have his remains transferred to the Normandy American Cemetery. He was awarded the Silver Star Medal posthumously.

— Marianne Hause



Cadets share the personal stories of alumni buried at the Normandy American Cemetery.—Photo courtesy of Col. Houston Johnson V.

Cadets Explore la France *continued from page 4*

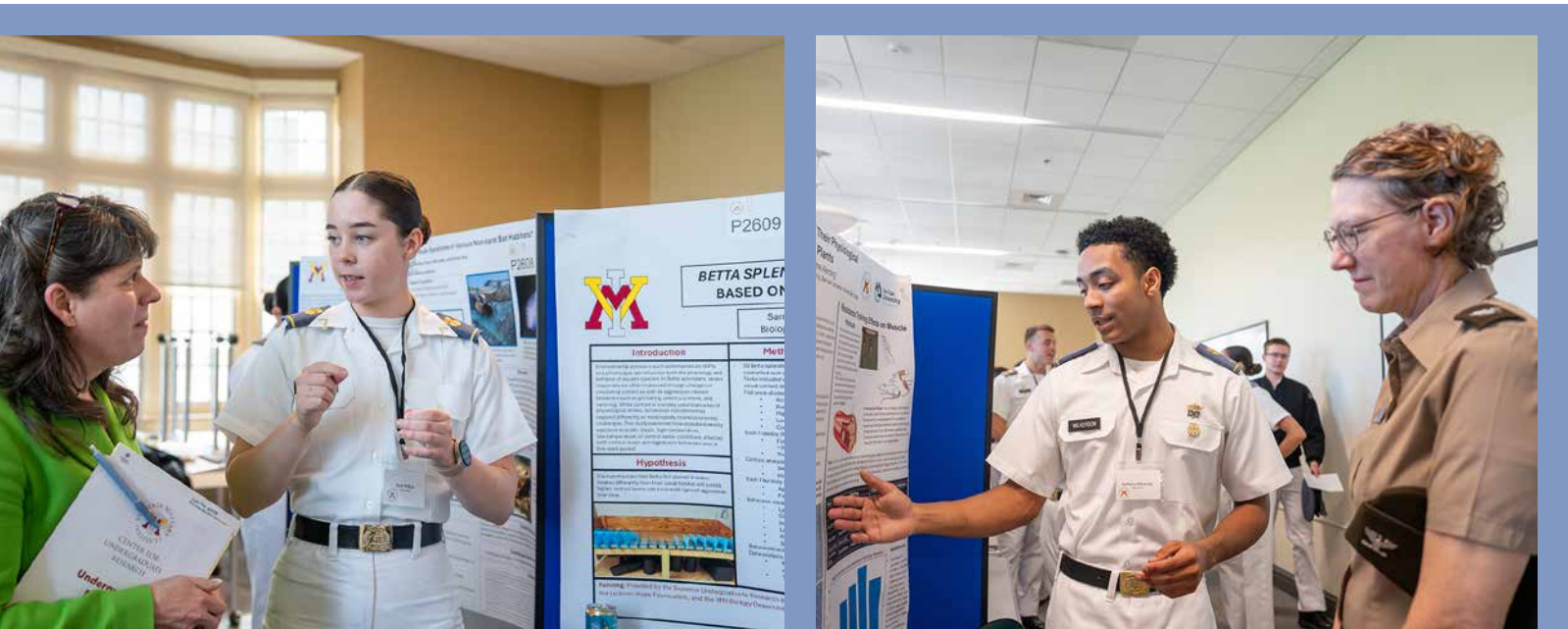
how the people of France remember and respect the German WWII soldiers buried at La Cambe German War Cemetery in Normandy. "They were the enemy, but the French recognize that the average age of those soldiers was 20. They had mothers and fathers who waited for them to return. I think this prepared me more for the military. I'll be faced with making difficult decisions, and risking human life should never be taken lightly."

James Bangura '26, who is majoring in computer science and will commission into the Army, had the unique opportunity of celebrating Eid al-Fitr, an Islamic observance kept worldwide, at the Grand Mosque of Paris. "As a Muslim cadet, this was a significant moment for me. It allowed me to practice my faith while abroad and experience how Islam is observed in a different cultural setting, further reinforcing the importance of religious and cultural understanding."

Both cadets agreed the trip directly contributes to their preparation for military service by reinforcing what they have already learned about American and world history, the importance of working with partner forces; understanding different cultures,

social norms and communication styles; and navigating throughout a foreign country.

VMI Superintendent Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 recently signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Olmsted Foundation, establishing the nation's first Olmsted Intern Program for cadet overseas travel. According to Col. Jeff Kendrick, director of OGE, the MOU expanded and rebranded the undergraduate program that VMI has been running for several years. "VMI is honored to continue the tradition of exposing future military leaders to national perspectives and the role of U.S. policy in those regions that are visited each year. The highly selective program is reserved for top performing cadets, and selection is solely merit-based. Six to eight cadets will be chosen to participate in the program each year, and will receive full funding for one to three weeks of travel. While the new program shares many of the same objectives as the previous one, there is now more of an emphasis on cadet leadership and preparation for possible participation in the Olmsted Scholar Program for junior officers," he said. ✪



Research on Display at URS

Approximately 90 cadets showcased their work at the annual Undergraduate Research Symposium (URS) in Mallory Hall and Preston Library April 20. 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 was Caroline Wojtas '19. During her cadetship, she was captain of the water polo team, president of the Psi Chi Honor Society, a cadet chaplain, and head cadet library assistant. She earned her degree in psychology with a minor in exercise science. Her research, "Life Satisfaction and Ideal Age of Death in Homeless Men in Louisville, Kentucky," received first prize in the social sciences division at the 2019 URS. She is completing her residency at ChristianaCare Health System, where she works with patients diagnosed with heart failure as part of a multidisciplinary team.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



VMI Wins First Place at Cybersecurity Competition

Dominates Other Senior Military Colleges

By Marianne Hause

The VMI team won first place recently at the 2026 Seerist Intellithon in Reston, Virginia. The prestigious competition hosted by Seerist—a company whose mission is to shape the future of risk intelligence by enabling organizations to proactively anticipate, manage, and respond to global cyber threats—brought together top talent from five senior military colleges including The Citadel, Norwich University, the University of North Georgia, Virginia Tech, as well as VMI, to solve real-world open-source intelligence and security challenges.

The cadet team, sponsored by Department of Computer and Information Sciences (CIS) and Cyber Defense Laboratory (CyDef), included Caroline Marini '26, Michael Kelley '27, River Smith '27, and John Stotler '27. Col. Imran Ghani, professor in CIS and director of operations for CyDef, was their coach.

Stotler shared it was an amazing experience. “We utilized tools and skills to collect intelligence and brief highly significant persons on real world activities that were frequently being updated.”

Ghani stated the VMI victory was built on preparation and discipline. “To prepare for the competition, the cadets conducted

multiple rounds of targeted practice using a preemptive, scenario-based approach, which ultimately aligned with the competition. Their commitment, ability to follow structured mentorship, and continuous skill refinement were key factors that led to this success.” 🌟



Intelligence and national security professionals surround Col. Imran Ghani, Michael Kelley '27, John Stotler '27, Caroline Marini '26, and River Smith '27 after their victory at the 2026 Seerist Intellithon.—Photo courtesy of Col. Imran Ghani.

Norton Shares Photo-Documentary

Photographer Anna Gage Norton spoke at an intimate gathering in Pogue Auditorium April 2 about her forthcoming book, “On Nochaway,” a long-term photo-documentary project about her family’s efforts to reestablish the longleaf pine ecosystem on their ancestral farm in South Georgia. She exhibited many of her photographs and read portions from her book which will be published next January and includes a contribution by Col. Rob McDonald, associate dean for academic affairs and director of the Honors Program. Norton’s photographs have been published widely in such major journals as the Oxford American and Southern Cultures. She currently lives in North Carolina where she continues her photography and videography for personal and professional work. The event was sponsored by the Institute Honors Program and the Dean’s Academic Speakers Program.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.



36th Annual Environment Virginia Symposium

By Marianne Hause

Over 570 representatives from state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, higher education, and the private sector converged at VMI for the 36th annual Environment Virginia Symposium March 24–26. The conference was organized and co-hosted by VMI’s Center for Leadership & Ethics (CLE). Col. Dave Gray, executive director of the CLE, served as master of ceremonies.

Superintendent Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 formally welcomed the participants. “This conference is organized to allow leaders to exchange ideas, regulators to converse with those they regulate, and nonprofits to collaborate with businesses and governmental agencies. No person or group has all the right answers or can solve every issue that we are presented with today. Everyone has a vested interest, however, in a great and thriving environment where it affects every citizen of the commonwealth,” he said.

Opening remarks were offered by David Bulova, secretary of Natural and Historic Resources, who brought greetings from Gov. Abigail Spanberger, who was unable to attend. He stated, “We as Virginians are truly blessed. From the Chesapeake Bay to the Piedmont to the Shenandoah, and the great Southwest, the natural beauty that is the commonwealth is truly unsurpassed. These natural resources sustain us. They support millions of jobs, and they give us a special sense of place that is Virginia. It’s a privilege to serve as the secretary of Natural and Historic Resources, as together we protect, conserve, and restore these resources for future generations. Protecting our environment depends on fostering a new generation of leaders who will take up that charge. For all of the young professionals and students who are here with us today, thank you, and for those who have been around here for a while, please take the time to lift up the next generation of leaders. Our planet is depending on it.”

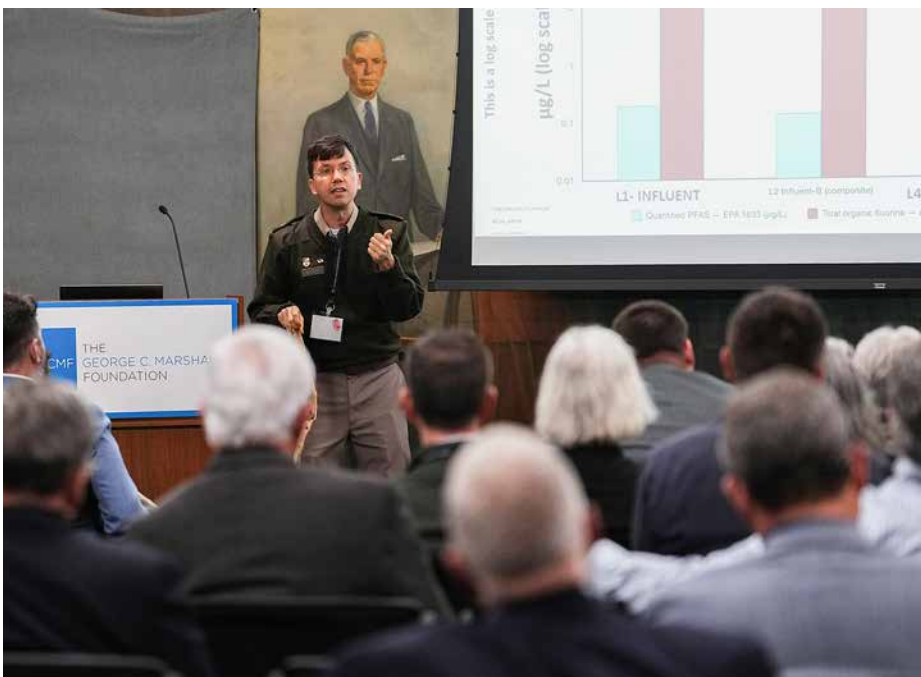


David Bulova offers opening remarks at the symposium.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

A panel discussion featuring the directors of the conference’s five state government co-host agencies was moderated by Tanya Denckla Cobb, director of the University of Virginia’s Institute for Engagement & Negotiation. Held in Gillis Theater, the panel included Ryan Brown, executive director of the Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR); Terry Lasher, state forester and director of the Department of Forestry; Joe Grist, acting commissioner of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission; Mike Rolband, director of the Department of Environmental Quality; and Nikki Rovner, director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation. They talked of budget cuts, grants, and values that guide them

including transparency, collaboration, common sense, the Golden Rule, making good decisions, strong leadership traits, being transformative, and innovation. They also conversed on the use of artificial intelligence (AI), supporting and sustaining the forestry industry, mediating conflicts, and managing public lands and parks.

Breakout educational sessions were offered by experts from all over the commonwealth including Maj. Peter Neofotis, lecturer in VMI’s biology department. Topics of the sessions included achieving the Chesapeake Bay Agreement commitments, water quality, flood resilience, food waste, invasive plants and landscape restoration, freshwater conservation, silt, algae and ecosystems, soil health, the wetlands, solar energy, pollutants, wildlife corridors, urban agriculture, challenges for data centers, a guided flora walk, and more.



Maj. Peter Neofotis discusses his research during a breakout session.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Continued on next page

The plenary speaker was Alejandra Parra-Orlandoni, chief operations officer of Pasteur Labs. Her talk titled, “Neither Savior nor Villain: A Practitioner’s Guide to AI and the Environment,” examined getting better use from AI as a tool. She reminded the audience, “AI is not an oracle. Used without discipline, it’s really a very convincing mirror for your own assumptions, and that’s a very risky prospect. But when used well, AI doesn’t replace your judgment, it amplifies the reach at a scale that’s finally going to match the complexity of the problems that this field is up against.”

This year’s Erchul Environmental Leadership Award, named for the late VMI professor Capt. Ronald A. Erchul, Ph.D., founder of the Environment Virginia Symposium, was presented to Becky Gwynn, executive deputy director of DWR. 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.

Denckla Cobb, who received the award last year, introduced Gwynn. “For nearly 40 years with DWR, Becky has established a reputation for conservation leadership, professional diligence and innovation, and personal integrity. Her career highlights include development of Virginia’s first wildlife action plan, initiating the commonwealth’s first wildlife viewing plan, creation of the Virginia birding and wildlife trail, coordinating land acquisition efforts that have safeguarded and restored habitat for threatened species, as well as providing public access to recreational opportunities for all Virginians. Her leadership enabled Virginia’s largest conservation easement in the coalfields, securing 65,000 acres of recreational access and habitat for Virginia’s only elk herd. Becky was also responsible for a \$44.5 million EPA grant, the largest in the agency’s history to protect and restore coastal wetlands and forests for carbon capture and storage,” said Denckla Cobb.

Gwynn shared that she loves her job and the agency for which she works. “Across the country, state fish and wildlife agencies serve as trustees for the fish and wildlife populations as a public trust resource. I take that responsibility really seriously. It motivates me to get up and go to work every day. When I have opportunities like holding the first nestlings of red cockaded woodpeckers that were born on the Big Woods Wildlife Management Area, that’s a lifetime



Tanya Denckla Cobb moderates the discussion panel as Joe Grist, Nikki Rovner, Ryan Brown, Mike Rolband, and Terry Lasher share thoughts regarding their respective government agencies in Gillis Theater.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

experience I will never have again. The work done by state fish and wildlife agencies is something that we do because we’re passionate about the work.”

Each year, VMI donates \$1,500 to a nonprofit environmental organization of the recipient’s choice in their honor. Gwynn requested the donation go to the Virginia Herpetological Society.

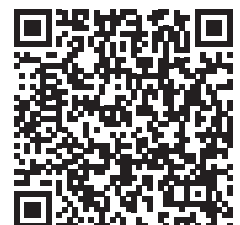
Other awards presented at the symposium are the Governor’s Environmental Excellence Awards, which recognize successful

and innovative efforts that improve Virginia’s environment. Gold, silver, and bronze medal awards, along with the honorable mentions can be found using the QR code.

Next year’s Environment Virginia Symposium is scheduled for March 23–25 at VMI.



Becky Gwynn accepts the Erchul Environmental Leadership Award from Tanya Denckla Cobb and Col. Dave Gray.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.





Spring FTX

Cadets participated in spring field training exercises (FTX) March 27-31. Commissioning-track cadets spent time on and off post with Army ROTC 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 Corps Physical Training Facility. Navy ROTC cadets trained at Smith Mountain Lake and Norfolk, while the Coast Guard AUP traveled to Portsmouth for training.

Non-commissioning cadets participated in community service activities in the Lexington area, including the Project Horizon timber frame build and gravestone cleaning in Oak Grove Cemetery, along with projects at the SPCA, Lime Kiln Theater, and Woods Creek Montessori. Special Olympics hosted games on post where cadets supported registration and events. Additional photos can be found on VMI's Flickr account. -VMI Photos by Kelly Nye, H. Lockwood McLaughlin, Lexie West, and Jake Falcone '27.



Honors Week Celebrated

By Lt. Col. Michelle Ellwood and Marianne Hause

Honors Week, the time 1st Class cadets involved with the Institute Honors Program present their senior theses, was held from March 23 to April 3. Twenty-four outstanding cadets shared their research in Scott Shipp Hall.

One of those presenters was Jai Vijayan '26, an economics and business major with minors in military history and Chinese, who researched military logistics during World War II for his project, "Move and Maintain: American Last-Mile Logistics in the Solomon Islands Campaign, 1942-1944."

Vijayan, who will commission into the U.S. Army as a logistics officer, explained the definition of military logistics as the practice of moving armies, including transporting military forces, keeping them supplied, planning and road building, and the administrative work carrying out those activities. The focus of his thesis was the final, crucial step of the supply chain; moving supplies from friendly, established bases to contested front lines, known as "the last mile," specifically, to the Solomon Islands following the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific in 1941.

The Solomon Islands are a chain of islands in the South Pacific that include Guadalcanal, New Georgia, and Bougainville, all locations of significant WWII battles. The Japanese attacks threatened the American supply lines to Australia and New Zealand. For that reason, the Solomons became decisive in ensuring those supply lines remained open and the Japanese advance was halted. "Guadalcanal is widely regarded as an allied tactical victory, but a logistics disaster. Initially, isolated Marines were forced to subsist on two rations per day and captured Japanese rice. Aircraft sat idle because there was not



Jai Vijayan '26 discusses failures and successes of military logistics in Scott Shipp Hall. —VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

enough fuel. Gradually, the Allied forces were able to sustain their offenses in New Georgia and Bougainville, thanks to the idea of 'island hopping,' taking control of the islands one by one, and turning them into support bases," explained Vijayan.

He went on to report that most historians agree that the U.S. logistics system was a big factor in winning the war for the allies, but they differ on what part of that logistics system was significant. To that end, Vijayan sought to answer the research question, "How and why did last-mile logistics improve past the crises at Guadalcanal?"

To answer his question, Vijayan examined the various logistics methods the military incorporated during the three operations to secure the islands. He discovered the successes, the failures, and how the methods progressively improved throughout the "island hopping." The first, the Battle

of Guadalcanal, codenamed Operation Watchtower, took place from August 1942 to February 1943; followed by the invasion of the New Georgia, codenamed Operation Toenails, from June to October 1943; then the Battle of Bougainville, codenamed Operation Dipper, from November 1943 to May 1944.

He concluded by confirming that circumstances improved with each new operation due to improved access to military facilities, shortened supply lines, absence of time pressure, and diminished enemy capabilities. "It's easy to understand why the last model was much more effective. Improvements helped the allied forces avoid the crises that took place on Guadalcanal. There was better unloading coordination, supply lines were deliberately planned and proactively built inland, and supply dumps were deliberately placed for a more effective system. All these decisions improved last-mile logistics. There was definitely a learning curve that moved past the mistakes at Guadalcanal," closed Vijayan.

Jack Rogers '26, a psychology major, who like Vijayan plans to enter the Army, researched the practice and effects of solitary confinement in his thesis, "Is Solitary Confinement Cruel and Unusual Punishment?"

He analyzed articles and legal cases, learning about what solitary confinement

Continued on next page



Jack Rogers '26 talks about his research on solitary confinement. —VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

looks like and how it can greatly impact one's well-being, especially those already facing serious mental illness.

In defining solitary confinement, he reminded his audience not only of the small space, often the size of a parking space with no social interaction, but also of the unnatural light that could remain on for up to 24 hours a day, which can greatly impact sleep and sanity. Originally designed in the late 18th century to be humane and provoke reflection and repentance, Rogers' research shows the practice of solitary confinement today often lacks oversight and pushes the legal boundaries of medical neglect. One key detail Rogers noted was that prisoners are not normally told the length of time they'd be placed in solitary confinement, basically another "version of torture," he explained.

Many groups have focused on solitary confinement reform, aiming to lessen the cruelty inflicted on inmates. While countries like Norway, Germany, and Turkey have taken strides in this, the United States is behind. Rogers acknowledges that some in decision-making positions identify solitary confinement as something that needs to be reviewed. He also believes many of those decision makers only focus on issues that impact them.

While Rogers determines he's not against solitary confinement as a practice, he does conclude in this thesis that prolonged solitary confinement of those with serious mental illness is cruel and unusual punishment.

Rogers will head to law school in the fall, then on to the Army JAG Corps.

Ben Bowen '26, an English major with writing and rhetoric, philosophy, and literary studies concentrations who will commission into the Marine Corps, introduced his presentation by disclosing it is not intended to prove an esthetic point or make a literary argument. Rather "Writing Happy Endings: Practice and Theory" is a work of literature. "I'm simply trying to write a story and tell you why I wrote it," he stated.

Bowen confessed that because he has a deep love for reading, he did not think creative writing would be hard for him.



Ben Bowen '26 explains the underlying driving principles of two of his favorite authors, Edgar Allen Poe and John Gardner.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

"And then I started writing, and I found it to be extremely difficult and painful. I didn't want to turn in any assignments. I wanted to keep revising." To help overcome his struggles, he sought to discover why people read books, and the elements of a good story. He examined the underlying driving principles of two of his favorite authors: Edgar Allen Poe, who evoked emotion—especially melancholy—to grip



Connor Bott '26 describes the different types of boat anchors and how they are used in his Institute Honors research presentation.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

the reader; and John Gardner, who believed good literature should have a moral aim and should have staying power and keep the reader engaged.

To illustrate the two writers differing points of view, Bowen used examples in his own creative writing. In both his short story, "Starbs Run," and his novella, "Wild Turkey," Bowen applies Poe's principle of using strong emotional language, which he confessed was a great effort to write. He explained the purpose in writing the difficult scenes was to make the story real and not overly sentimental. "Nobody wants to read about a protagonist who is perfect. They want to read about a real person," he explained. Bowen also wanted to genuinely represent trauma in his work, and make the reader question what they would do if placed in the character's position.

Additionally, Bowen applies Gardner's principle of using staying power. "No one is going to read a story for pleasure that doesn't entertain them or isn't interesting. So, I had to constantly think about using devices to keep the reader interested. I was constantly trying to use stories or little side tangents of action or of comedy to keep the reader entertained."

Bowen concluded by sharing with the audience that his novella is not yet complete, and in keeping with the title of his honors presentation, he anticipates a happy ending. "There are a lot of good things coming, like hope and romance."

Connor Bott '26, a mechanical engineering major, has designed a modern adaptation for an ancient devise with his honors senior thesis project, "Design and Analysis of an Electromechanical Marine Wreck Anchor."

From the Eastern Shore town of Exmore, Virginia, Bott's hobbies include fishing, boating, and scuba diving, in which he observed small boat anchors, crucial for positioning the boat as well as for safety, often get stuck and have to be cut loose and abandoned, which inspired him to research better anchor designs.

He began his presentation with explaining how anchors work. "There is a misconception that an anchor is just a big weight that you drop off the side of the boat and then the weight alone holds the boat in place. That's not how they work. To properly

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operate them, you let out enough anchor line, then pull, allowing the anchor arms to burrow into the ground.” He added an important thing to consider when choosing an anchor, is the makeup of the seabed. “On the bottom could be sand, mud, rock, grass, clay, or a combination. If the boat is over a wreck, a reef, rocks, or trees, you might use a grappling hook style anchor, because instead of burrowing, it’s designed to hook onto something underwater.”

Bott explained challenges with grappling hook anchors. “Anchor arms might hook under a rock, a log, or a hard piece of wreckage and get stuck. Unless you have someone who can put on scuba gear and dive down to wedge it free, you will have to cut your anchor line and leave the anchor. That is not a pleasing prospect, since some anchors can cost hundreds of dollars.”

To prevent loss of equipment and money, Bott wanted to construct an electromechanical anchor to drop over shipwrecks for divers who enjoy exploring

wrecks like he does. He designed his anchor to be compact, have the look and feel like a regular grappling hook anchor, be intuitive to operate, use a physical and electrical tether, and realistically manufacturable. He envisioned a seatbelt-style release mechanism, so with a press of a button the anchor arms unfold, and the user can easily pull up the anchor.

After a lot of design and redesign work, much calculation regarding forces, friction, and water pressure, Bott’s design was ready to be tested. He engaged the expertise of engineering department lab technician Michael Cullen, and machinist Marco Floyd, who were instrumental in bringing the anchor to life. “Building this thing was a fun process, because I would take my design down to our machinist, and he would look at it and say, ‘You’re crazy. We can’t make this on our equipment.’ So, we would sit down together, and he would come up with ideas on how we can break up this complex geometry to a bunch of little pieces, so that

one piece became five different pieces that fit together like a little jigsaw puzzle.”

Bott concluded by sharing the next steps for his project are putting the electronics into the housing of the anchor, performing a leak test, and a final load test underwater. “I’m very happy with how far we’ve gotten, and I’m very excited to get this thing in the water and make sure it actually works like we hope.”

Additionally during Honors Week, inductions into several honor societies were conducted.

Other 1st Class cadets who presented research during Honors Week include Anna Grace Adams, Timofey Dovgaltuk, Jack Ericsson, Nicholas Eynon, Nicholas Feher, John Gibson, Jacob Greentree, Andres Hernandez, Matthew Kleinschuster, Katlyn Layman, James McEaney, Kaiden Minter, Jack Myhre, Alden Rhodes, Noah Rinker, Nolan Savard, Liam Smith, Sadie Smith, Amber Strapponi, and Julia Ward. ✨



VMI Community Theatre Presents “1776”

The VMI Community Theatre presented the Tony Award-winning musical, “1776,” April 17-19 in Gillis Theater. The play follows John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, as they attempt to convince the members of the Second Continental Congress to vote for independence from the shackles of the British monarchy by signing the Declaration of Independence.

Included in the cast were Ethan Aldridge '26, John Gorman '26, Nicole Samella '26, Michael Colin '27, Carla Feaster '27, Thomas Sasso '27, George Sullivan '27, Hayden Talbott '27, Sophia Heinlein '28, Aadil Pattada '28, Keye Warren '28, Nicolas Colletti '29, Andrew Kiddie '29, Jamie Pacheco '29, and William Shable '29. Community cast members included Mark Anderson, Emilie Davis, Micah Fishbein, James Heilpern, Jaxon Johnson, Woody Johnson, Dallin Lewis, Peter Lipsett, Rob Mish, and Tom Oxendine.

The play was directed by Tim Price, assisted by Andrew Hartless. Stage crew included Fabiana Sofia Pajaro '26, Laura Canaday '27, Dusand Barrow '28, Tamara Jimenez '29, An Nguyen '29, and William Shable '29. The light and sound booth was run by Timothy Persons '27. Rechnna Sok '26 served as tech director.—VMI Photos by Jake Falcone '27.



POST BRIEFS

Basuchoudhary Edits Book

Col. Atin Basuchoudhary, the John and Jane Roberts Institute Professor in Free Enterprise Business in the Department of Economics and Business, recently co-edited, "The Cambridge Handbook on the Economics of Terrorism." Since the turn of the century, few issues have shaped political debate and policy making more than terrorism. As a result, there has been a huge increase in the amount of academic research devoted to investigating the causes and consequences of terrorism. This book is the first to present a state-of-the-art survey of the economics of terrorism. It adopts a rational-choice perspective according to which terrorists

are viewed as rational economic actors and presents a framework for analyzing the causes and consequences of terrorism. It shines a light on practical counterterrorism policies and their trade-offs. With contributions from many leading figures in this fast-growing and important field, this book offers an accessible yet comprehensive collection of the economic analysis of terror.

Additional information may be found on the Cambridge University Press website.

Rhamey Part of AI Roundtable

Col. J. Patrick Rhamey, professor in the Department of International Studies and Political Science, attended "AlphaPersuade 2.0," a conference on artificial intelligence (AI) at the University of California-Irvine, March 26. He participated in a roundtable discussion regarding AI and national security, focusing on the nature of existing security threats from false information, deep fakes, and economic disorder. "While many focus on

the dangers of AI deception by America's adversaries, the economic havoc AI is likely to create domestically will generate internal threats to order and democracy that are just as, if not more, dangerous than those posed from outside the U.S.," said Rhamey. Matt Jones '06, senior vice president of Blue Mantis, also joined the roundtable.

Barr Breaks Own Record

Two years after he set multiple powerlifting records, Col. Dan Barr '74, professor emeritus of electrical and computer engineering, has once again achieved new heights. In February 2024, he competed in his age bracket at the United States Powerlifting Coalition (USPC) meet held in Cocke Hall. It was there that he set both state and national records in squat with 249.1 pounds, bench press with 238 pounds, and deadlift with 319.6 pounds, for a total of 806.7 pounds.

During the recent 2026 USPC meet, Barr, who is now 73 years old, broke his own record in squat with 275.5 pounds, bench press with 253.5 pounds, and deadlift with 365.9 pounds, for a total of 895 pounds, improving his overall total by 88 pounds.

Additionally, last summer Barr was inducted into the hall of fame at his alma mater, Cabrillo High School in Lompoc, California. He has received training and competition advice from Rebecca Owen, assistant coach with VMI's powerlifting club.

Poet Laureate and Artist Unite to Celebrate Virginia

Two Virginians—one a poet and the other a painter—have united in blending visual and literary art forms to enhance their creative expressions and to celebrate Virginia 250. Mattie Quesenberry Smith, Ph.D., instructor in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies and Virginia's poet laureate, has collaborated with acclaimed artist, Andras Bality, for his exhibition at Longwood Center for the Visual Arts (LCVA) in Farmville. The exhibition titled, "Close to Home: Andras Bality's Virginia," celebrates the breadth and beauty of the Virginia landscape and includes 25 of Bality's paintings.

Smith was commissioned to write a poem in response to Bality's work. The poem, "Twilight in Bath County, Virginia," was written in memory of Alden Smith Shriver and her husband, Beverly R. Shriver, longtime residents of Bath County. Its opening stanza describes the breaking of dawn in Bath County: "Across the oceans, breeze-blown eastern light rises—just like the bright morning sun. It slips across the Atlantic's rankled edge, spills onto the Piedmont's fallow fields, and crests Shenandoah." The entire poem is displayed between two of Bality's paintings; "Rockbridge Longhorns," and "Brownsburg View" at LCVA.

The exhibition opened Feb. 20 and will run through Sept. 6. 🌸

Auxiliary Services Recognized

A spring semester parade was held April 3, with leadership, cadets, and spectators recognizing the work of the dedicated professionals of the Office of Auxiliary Services. From measuring, fitting, tailoring, laundering, and dry-cleaning uniforms, to providing full-service barber and stylist support, these offices ensure every cadet is prepared to represent the Institute with pride. The department also delivers essential weapons support, manages mailroom operations, and oversees the bookstore and dining services contracts.

Joining Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 in taking review of the parade were Robby Agnor, armorer; Glenda Dudley, barbershop manager; Tracy Hiner, resident general manager of Parkhurst Dining; Cindy Hartbarger, tailor shop manager; and Jim Hudson, military store manager.—VMI Photo by Jake Falcone '27.



Alums Return for Medical Rotation

By Marianne Hause

Allen Xu '21 and Thaddeus Wegrzyn '22 returned to the Institute in late March for two weeks as part of their medical education with a family medicine rotation at the VMI Infirmary. Xu and Wegrzyn, who are fourth-year medical students at the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM) in Blacksburg, chose to serve one of their medical rotations alongside Institute physician, Dr. Melissa S. Krawiec '01 and family nurse practitioner, Jenny Crance, DNP, FNP-C.

Medical rotations, also known as clinicals, are required hands-on patient care experiences for medical students, and consist of two years of training under the supervision of a medical professional in various specialties at many medical facilities. Xu and Wegrzyn have completed about 20 clinicals, with VMI being the last for Xu. Wegrzyn has an additional obligation of two weeks of physical medicine and rehabilitation to complete for Carilion Clinic in Radford.

According to Krawiec, this is the first time alumni have returned to VMI for their clinicals. "We were delighted to have Allen and Thad with us for two weeks. They were able to closely relate to the cadets and understand the pressures they are under, because they have been cadets themselves. They have come full circle. I trust it was a rewarding experience for them, and I hope they learned some valuable clinical 'pearls' in our unique environment. We saw some interesting cases over their time with us," she said.

Though they arrived to VMI with no set of expectations on what medical conditions they would see during their visit, Xu and Wegrzyn treated a variety of family practice conditions for the cadets including colds, allergies, rashes, burns, dental pain, soft tissue wounds, and orthopedic injuries. They assessed patients and discussed treatment plans with Krawiec and Crance. They also met with cadets who are considering going to medical school. Wegrzyn stated that cadet outreach is important to them. "There is no formal pre-med program at VMI, but there are many cadets who are interested in going into health care. We had many conversations with them and advised them on their options of making that dream a reality."

Xu, a biology major from Ringoes, New Jersey, began his love for healing as a high school student when he became an emergency medical technician (EMT), a skill he continued at VMI. As EMT chief, he would often deliver cadet patients to the infirmary, but was never able to observe their treatment there. "It's gratifying to see what happens on this side of the infirmary door," he observed.



Jenny Crance, Allen Xu '21, and Thaddeus Wegrzyn '22 observe as Dr. Melissa S. Krawiec '01 examines a cadet in the VMI Infirmary.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Xu's chosen medical field of study is psychiatry. Initially entering medical school, he wanted to go into emergency medicine, but changed his mind after witnessing family members facing emotional trials. He noted that returning to VMI at this stage of his training has given him a different perspective on the environment that helped shape him. "VMI and the military are built on a culture that values discipline, resilience, and composure under pressure. Those are qualities I continue to respect and carry with me. At the same time, my training has reinforced that the reality of life and leadership includes navigating stress, loss, and uncertainty. What I have come to appreciate is that supporting behavioral health does not take away from those core values. If anything, it strengthens them. The ability to reflect, seek support when needed, and maintain personal well-being allows individuals to sustain performance and lead more effectively over time.

"Returning in this role has been especially meaningful, and I hope conversations like these continue to evolve in a way that supports both excellence and well-being." He eventually wants to work with veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma.

Wegrzyn, a biology major with an exercise science minor from Lincoln, Nebraska, served as a cadre member as a cadet. He originally wanted to go into combat in the military. He changed his mind though when he started to enjoy his academic studies at VMI. "It all started to click with me. My advisor was great, and my interest in going into medicine bloomed. I chose primary care medicine as a specialty, so I'd be in a position to teach patients a better understanding of taking care of their bodies. I feel a strong obligation to educate and mentor patients, so they take control of their health and prevent illnesses and accidents."

Continued on next page

The two originally met in a public speaking class when Wegrzyn was a rat. Since both were biology majors, they shared several more classes, and served on the Honor Court together.

Xu confessed VMI prepared them well for medical school. “The resiliency we learned at VMI has paid dividends. Cadets are taught how to find out what needs done and to create a plan. They learn good time management skills. And believe it or not, we get more sleep at VCOM than we ever got at VMI,” he laughed.

Wegrzyn agreed and shared that VMI graduates are highly thought of at VCOM. “VCOM’s mission is to prepare globally-minded, community-focused physicians, which is similar to that of VMI’s mission of producing citizen-soldiers with a high sense of

public service. In fact, there are currently five VMI alumni who are in their first year at VCOM. There is a strong pipeline from VMI to VCOM.” He added there is a chapter of the Student Association of Military Osteopathic Physicians & Surgeons at VCOM in which he served as president and Xu served as vice president last year. This year, the reins of the two leadership positions are held by two other VMI graduates.

Following graduation from medical school in May, Xu and Wegrzyn will begin their residencies. Xu will serve his for four years in psychiatry at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and Wegrzyn, who has commissioned into the Army, will serve his for three years in family medicine at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. ✪



Class of 2029 Visits D-Day Memorial

Fourth Class cadets visited the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Virginia, Saturday, April 11, to learn about the sacrifices made by Allied soldiers during the invasion of Normandy June 6, 1944. While there, they heard the story of the invasion and about the incredible loss of life, which especially impacted the small community of Bedford. Afterward, they participated in a wreath-laying ceremony.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Cadet Uses Disability to Motivate

By Marianne Hause

Lou Ferrigno, bodybuilder and actor known best for his role in “The Incredible Hulk,” has been profoundly deaf most of his life. He once remarked, “I think my hearing loss helped create a determination within me to be all I can be, and gave me a certain strength of character too.”

Determined and strong of character are two descriptors of a successful cadet, so when Andrew Kiddie '29, who was diagnosed with deafness just before his second birthday, chose to come to arguably the hardest senior military college in the country, he, like Ferrigno, used his disability as a motivator.

Kiddie has worn a cochlear implant (CI) for most of his life. It is a small, complex electronic device that helps people who are profoundly deaf perceive sound. The implant consists of an external portion that sits behind the ear and a second portion that is surgically placed under the skin. CI technology has improved since Kiddie was first fitted for one when he was a toddler. The CI he currently wears is sweat proof—crucial for a cadet—and uses Bluetooth technology, which Kiddie controls via an app on his phone. “They are always finding ways to make the design better. With Bluetooth, I can have private phone calls and listen to music on my phone without anyone else hearing it,” he laughed.

Kiddie also knows American Sign Language (ASL) and can masterfully read lips.

When Kiddie began the application process to VMI, the Office of Admissions was cautious. “Before they met me, they were hesitant. They didn’t know if I could handle the Rat Line with all the physical challenges constantly thrown at me.” When Kiddie finally met with members of the admissions office at an open house, they



Andrew Kiddie '29 and other cadets practice their boxing moves with a punching bag workout.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

had him talk with the Institute physician, Dr. Melissa S. Krawiec '01. She learned he successfully participated in JROTC and cross country during high school. She also had a phone conversation with the surgeon who implanted his CI, got a clear medical understanding of his condition, and discussed any reasonable accommodations he might need in order to participate safely and fully in the VMI experience.

“With that information,” explained Krawiec, “I was able to have meaningful discussion with Col. Lawrence Havird '90, commandant, and Col. Jack Johnson Jr., head of the Department of Human

as the first cadet with a cochlear implant.”

Kiddie attended the Summer Transition Program, a curriculum designed to enhance the academic and physical fitness of incoming cadets, then officially matriculated last August. He confessed the most challenging part of VMI life was the Rat Line, not the physicality of it, but determining from which person the commanding voices were originating. “It was hard to figure out who was shouting at me when they were behind my ears. I couldn’t tell if it was the first sergeant, or master sergeant, or who else it might have been, so when I responded, I would usually get it wrong.”

Kiddie is majoring in biology. His academic advisor, Lt. Col. Mary Beth Manjerovic, associate professor of biology, reported he is an excellent student who has never let his deafness define him. “He is a great example of the VMI spirit because he holds himself to the same standards as his brother rats,



Andrew Kiddie '29 waits with his brother rats outside the armory during Matriculation Week.—VMI File Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Continued on next page

meeting every expectation with focus and determination.”

His boxing class coach, Capt. Jim Whitten, instructor in HPW, agrees with Manjerovic. “Andrew’s hearing impairment is not an issue. He gives great effort and is constantly trying to improve.”

Extracurricular activities Kiddie engages in at VMI include the Glee Club, VMI Theatre, and the mixed martial arts club.

Kiddie’s mother, Anzelle Kiddie, shared raising a child who is deaf has been a learning curve filled with tears, laughter, blessings, and grace. “It was very hard in the beginning, but we received assistance from wonderful people—speech therapists, special education teachers, and ASL interpreters—who all helped him become who he is today. We all had to believe, pray, and put in the work.”

A native of Chesterfield, Virginia, Kiddie is an alumnus of Manchester High School in Midlothian. He aspires to be the first deaf cadet to graduate from VMI and to be an inspiration to others with hearing loss. He hopes to commission into the Air Force. If he does not commission, he plans to attend medical school or veterinary school. ❁



Retirement Parade

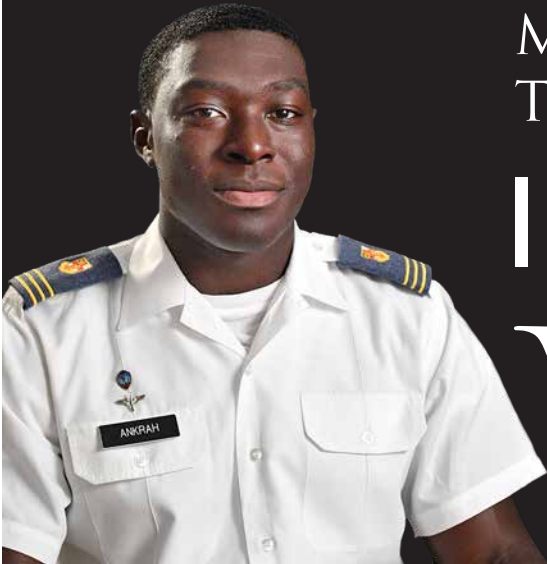
Col. Gary Bissell '89, assistant superintendent for operations and planning; Col. Donald Sunnen, professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures; Capt. Robert McMasters, professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering; Samuel Kessinger, facility maintenance team foreman in facilities management; Terry McGowan, store clerk in the military store; Amy McKemy, executive assistant for finance and support; and David Prasnicky, chief executive officer of Alumni Agencies, joined Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent, to take review of the Corps of Cadets during the retirement parade April 10. The retirees were honored for their more than 250 combined years of distinguished service to the Institute. McGowan was noted as having 50 years of service under six superintendents, 10 commandants, and five directors of auxiliary services.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin, Kelly Nye, and Lexie West.






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MAXIMUS ANKRAH '26
TELLS HIS 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
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