



Class of 2026 Graduates

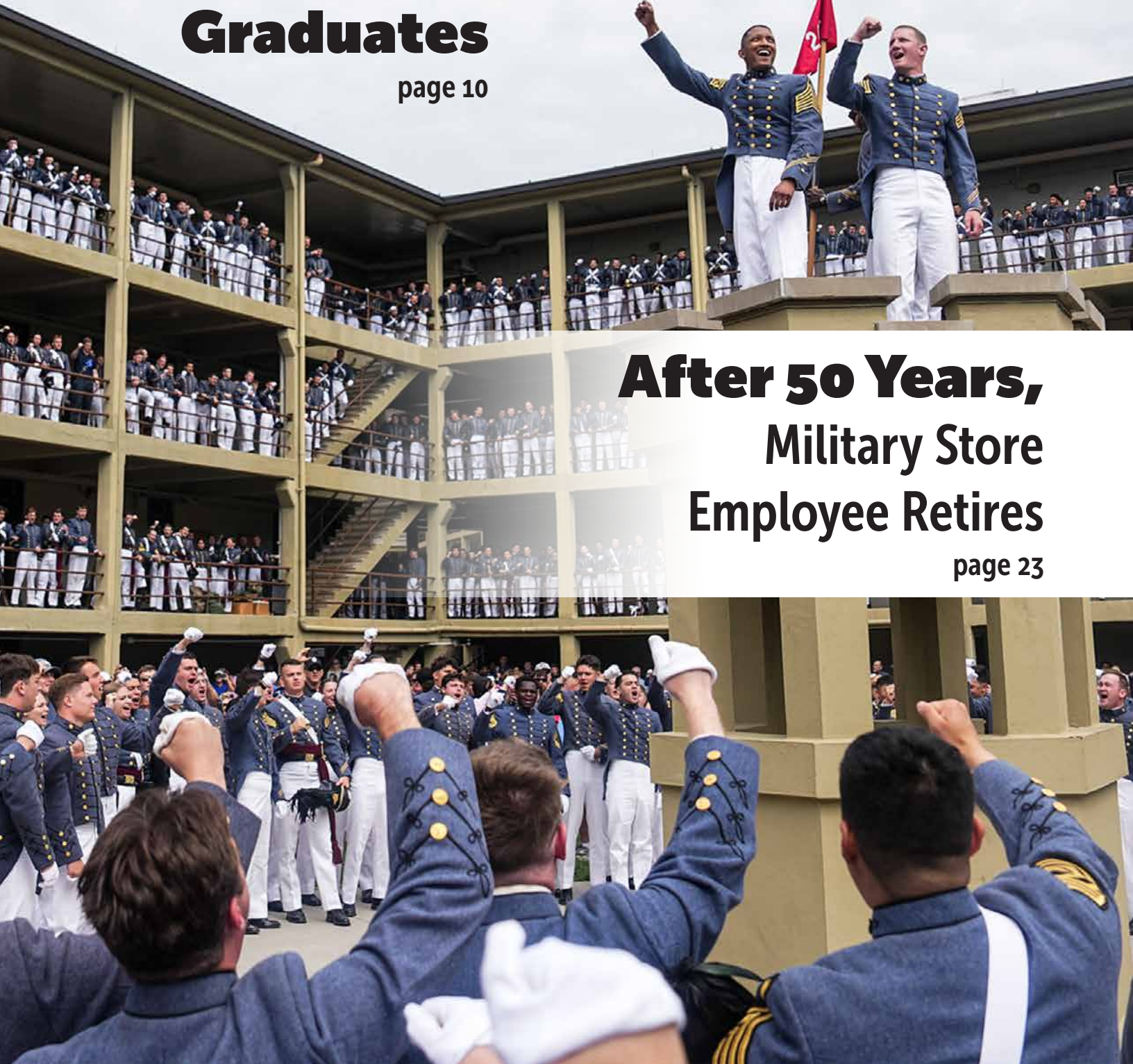
page 10

Meet the 2027 Captains

page 4

After 50 Years, Military Store Employee Retires

page 23



Kendal Residents Help Psych Majors with Research

By Marianne Hause

Col. Sara Whipple, professor in the Department of Psychology, recently accompanied cadets in her Developmental Psychology course to Kendal at Lexington, a retirement community, to interview older adults and complete a paper about the experience. This is the second year Whipple has collaborated with Kendal on the project.

Whipple explained, “The primary purpose of this project was to provide opportunities for these 12 cadets, all majoring in psychology, to put into practice what they have learned in class regarding qualitative research techniques, specifically interviews, while simultaneously applying theories of older adulthood.” Over the course of two lab periods, pairs of cadets interviewed Kendal residents using a set of questions addressing significant personal events and accomplishments, cultural changes, historical events, and problems around the world. “The questions I prepared were intended to provide structure and standardization to the interviews. However, with the goal of having meaningful conversation and to get to know each other, both cadets and Kendal residents were free to ‘go off script’ and ask follow-up questions or curiosities of their own,” said Whipple.

Dianne Herrick, a Kendal board member and resident of 13 years, helped recruit the adult volunteers for the project. Herrick,



Heaven Hall '26 and Benjamin Fong '27 listen intently as Kendal residents share their life stories.—Photo courtesy Col. Sara Whipple.

like Whipple, strongly believes in the value of intergenerational communication and face-to-face dialogue. “Sitting down for a few hours chatting with cadets has been very popular among Kendal residents. It was a good contemplative exercise for both seniors reflecting on their lives, and cadets looking forward to the start of their careers.”

Cameron Jones '27 said it was an honor and privilege to speak to the Kendal residents. “I found each conversation incredibly

meaningful. I think this is something that all VMI cadets would enjoy and benefit from. I would like to go back to Kendal, even on my own, prior to graduation next spring. I felt the residents enjoyed our visits as much as we did.”

Olivia Hurd '27 is thankful she was involved with the project. “Getting the opportunity to dive deep into what has shaped a person’s life is something I will never forget. The residents were kind and caring, and were happy to talk with us about their lives. In addition to conversation, they also gave advice and perspectives on things I never thought about before.”

With all the positive feedback Whipple received from cadets and residents, she plans to continue the project during the next academic year. 🌟



Cameron Jones '27 and Daniel Moon '27 enjoy chatting over lunch with Kendal residents, Marise Craig and Paul Cormier.—Photo courtesy of Dianne Herrick.

INSTITUTE REPORT

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Director Lt. Col. Sherry Wallace
Editor Lt. Col. Michelle Ellwood
Assistant Editor Kelly Nye
Designer Robbin Youngblood
Institute Report Staff
Jake Falcone '27
Marianne Hause
H. Lockwood McLaughlin
Lexie West
Back Cover Photo
Kelly Nye

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Contents

Kendal Residents Help Psych Majors with Research	2
Meet the 187 th Regimental Leadership	4
Chinese Language Teachers Gather at VMI	7
Civil Discourse Initiative Expands	8
Poetry Night	9
Commencement for the Class of 2026	10
Change of Command	13
Graduation Week	14
End-of-Year Cadet Activities	16
Post Briefs	17
Memorial Parade	17
ECE Cadets Aid Disabled Veteran with Capstone Project	18
Retrospective of German Program Held	19
Something for Everyone: Career Services Expands Resources	20
Pipe Band Takes Honors in Savannah	21
Cadets Present Research at NCUR	22
McGowan Retires after 50 Years	23
50 th Reunion Gift	23
VMI Commissions Military Officers	24
Employee Recognition	27

On the cover: Devin Auzenne '26, Grant Rose '26, and Maximus Ankrah '26 lead the Corps of Cadets in an Old Yell for the Class of 2026 following the change of command parade.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

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Meet the 187th Regimental Leadership

By Marianne Hause

The Class of 2027 leaders of the 187th Regiment for the 2026-27 academic year were announced in March.

Kimlong Nguyen, a computer science major from Chantilly, Virginia, was named first captain and regimental commander.

He aims to foster a culture of disciplined excellence and mutual accountability. “My experience balancing the rigorous demands of Division I swimming with the daily challenges of the VMI system has instilled in me the resilience and time management necessary to lead at the highest level. I intend to bridge the gap between our athletic and military commitments, ensuring every cadet understands how their individual conduct strengthens our collective reputation as citizen-soldiers.” Previous positions he has held include cadre corporal and operations sergeant for Alpha Company.

Upon graduation, Nguyen plans to commission in the Marine Corps.

The new regimental executive officer (XO) is River Smith, a computer science major from Salem, Virginia. Smith chose to come to VMI to pursue opportunities different from the average college experience, and to prepare for a life of service and leadership. He applied for XO because he wanted to meaningfully contribute to shaping the Rat Line experience. Past positions he held are India Company cadre corporal during his 3rd Class year, and first sergeant during his 2nd Class year. He is a member of the Cyber Captains Program in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences and has competed with the Jiu-Jitsu club.

His most memorable experience at VMI was when he ran 100 miles around the Parade Ground in 22 hours to raise money for Operation Enduring Warrior. He will commission in the Marine Corps.



Kimlong Nguyen '27 celebrates with Devin Auzenne '26 after Auzenne places his name plate on the first captain plaque in barracks.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Chauhdury, an electrical and computer engineering major from Woodbridge, Virginia. VMI was the only college to which he applied. “My high school calculus teacher, Stuart Payne, graduated from VMI in 2002. I admired him for his focused and disciplined classroom environment, so I decided to come to VMI.”

As a 3rd Class cadet, he was an S3 corporal, and as a 2nd Class cadet, he was an S3 operations sergeant. He is an Institute Honors Scholar,

Continued on next page

Gabriel Du Plessis was named the regimental chief of staff (COS). Originally from Johannesburg, South Africa, he now calls Northern Virginia home. His desire to serve in the military as well as his affinity for the Institute's structure and prestige is what brought him to VMI. Past positions he held include India Company corporal and 3rd Battalion sergeant major. As COS he wants to serve the Corps in as many ways as possible. He has also been involved with Navy Special Warfare Prep, the Jiu Jitsu club, and mixed martial arts. He is a member of the Honor Court where he served as assistant prosecutor and will serve as vice president for investigations.

Following graduation, he plans to commission in the Navy.

The 1st Battalion commander (CO) is Abduhu



Gabriel Du Plessis '27 rises to receive the Douglas Carter France III '71 Memorial Award at the Ring Figure class supper last November.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Cameron Jones '27 greets spectators during a women's soccer game. —Photo courtesy of VMI Athletics.

and a member of the Cyber Captains Program. He is treasurer for VMI's chapter of IEEE Eta Kappa Nu, and vice president for Tau Beta Pi, the engineering honors society. His honors thesis research project is developing an autonomous driving vehicle.

Following graduation, he will commission in the Army, and hopes to work in cybersecurity and electrical and computer engineering.

Caleb Chandler, from Chesapeake, Virginia, was named 2nd Battalion CO. He chose VMI not only because he was recruited to wrestle, but also he valued the different avenues to commission VMI offers, as well as the expansive, tight-knit alumni network. He thrives in the regimental system. "Throughout my 2nd Class year, I had the opportunity to 'peek behind the curtain' into major Corps operations, and was able to help in the success of the mission. In this new role, I want to continue helping 2nd Battalion reach their goals of academic, military, and athletic success, while developing underclass cadets so they are adequately prepared to take the reins

of VMI after the Class of 2027 departs." During his 3rd Class year, Chandler served as a cadre corporal. He is co-captain of the rugby team, a peer tutor, and group study sessions facilitator for Arabic. He is also class historian.

The new 3rd Battalion CO is Katelyn Redlinger from Downingtown, Pennsylvania.



Caleb Chandler '27.

She came to VMI to develop the self-discipline for a life grounded in integrity and honor. "I want to be held accountable for both the successes and the setbacks. This position will challenge me to grow not only as a leader, but also as a person. I want to be a role model and inspire cadets to become the best version of themselves, so VMI can continue to produce honorable men and women." Past positions she held include Golf Company corporal, S2 sergeant, and company rep. Additionally, she is a cyber captain, the cyber club chair of activities, and is a defender on the women's soccer team.

After graduation, she plans to commission in the Army as a cyber officer, then pursue a master's degree in

computer science.

Cameron Jones will serve as the Alpha Company CO. She crossed the country from Ridgefield, Washington, to have the opportunity to play Division I soccer, earn a degree, and commission in the military.

She applied for the CO position after serving as Alpha Company cadre corporal as a 3rd Class cadet and 1st platoon sergeant as

a 2nd Class cadet. "It will be an honor to lead my brother rats in our final year at VMI, and a privilege to have a central role in the development of the cadets. My goals for this role are to conduct a professional Rat Line, enforce standards in the Old Corps, boost morale and well-being, and overall, make Alpha Company the exemplary company at VMI."

After successful completion of Officer Candidate School, she plans to commission in the Marine Corps following graduation.

The new Bravo Company CO is Aiden Psczulkoski from Arcanum, Ohio. He visited post when he was just a freshman in high school. "My grandpa, as well as two

See Regimental Leadership, page 6

alumni, brought me to see the Institute and I just knew that this was the place I was meant to go.”

He applied for the CO position to serve the people whom he has lived with and mentored throughout his time at VMI. “I feel like this is a great opportunity to give back to those who have supported me, and to serve those I am entrusted with.” Previous regimental positions he has held include corporal and operations sergeant. Additionally, he is in the Honors Program, the rising president of the Honor Court, a member of Sigma Pi Sigma and Omicron Delta Kappa, and served on his class’s Ring Figure committee.

After graduation, Psczulkoski plans to commission in the Air Force and pursue a career as a physicist.

Jacob DeMarco has been named Charlie Company CO. He is from Chesapeake, Virginia. “When I attended an open house and saw the brotherhood among the cadets and the way they carried themselves in leadership roles, I was truly inspired. I knew it was the place that would challenge me and prepare me to serve,” he stated.

His goals as CO are to hold all Charlie Company cadets to the highest standard and build a culture of accountability and pride, and to earn the Garnett Andrews Cup, which is a recognition of the company scoring highest in drills, ceremonies, and general efficiency as a unit. Past positions he held include corporal and first sergeant.

Leading Delta Company is Connor Roche from Springfield, Pennsylvania. He came to VMI to play lacrosse and to be able to commission in the Marine Corps. He is the first of his family to attend college.

He wanted the responsibility to lead at a high level but remain close enough to form personal relationships with those in his company. His goal is to bring a sense of company pride by winning the Garnett Andrews Cup. Past positions he held are cadre corporal and first sergeant. He served on the class’ Ring Figure committee, is in the Honors Program, sits on the Cadet Superintendent Advisory Board, and plays club lacrosse.

His most memorable VMI experience was celebrating Ring Figure with his brother rats.

Trygve Bloom is the new Echo Company CO. He is from Villa Grove, Illinois.

He chose VMI to become an Army officer and to experience real leadership during college. He applied to be CO for the opportunity to do something special for Echo Company. “My primary goal is to make the members of the Old Corps more involved, and I want to bring company pride, even for the privates.” His previous positions include cadre corporal during his 3rd Class year, and operations sergeant during his 2nd Class year. Additionally, he has been involved with New Cadet Military Training and the Underwater Torpedo League club.

Bloom’s favorite VMI experience was the first time he left post to go home. “I realized that I secretly missed this place, mainly my BRs. I might not like the life here sometimes, but I love my BRs.”

Leading Foxtrot Company as CO is Daniel Duke, from West Point, Virginia.

He applied for CO because he enjoys being part of the regimental system, and wants to continue the good work already established in the company. He served as cadre corporal during his 3rd Class year, and first sergeant during his 2nd Class year. He is also a member of the powerlifting club team.

Following graduation, Duke plans to commission in the Army and serve at least eight years.

Nathan Brinker is the new CO for Golf Company.

He transferred from George Mason University to VMI because he wanted a challenging program that would mold him into a leader and help him form strong relationships. He aims to be a guiding influence in the company that has helped him thrive. “My goal as CO is to foster a culture of empathy and perseverance, creating future leaders who are closely bonded,” said Brinker. His past positions include 2nd squad corporal during his 3rd Class year, and company master sergeant during his 2nd Class year. He is also a member of the trap and skeet club.

Upon graduating, Brinker plans to commission in the Army as an armor officer.

Leading Hotel Company as CO will be Brentton Fentress, from Chesapeake, Virginia.

He applied so he could make an impact and improve the company. His past positions include company corporal his 3rd Class year, and first sergeant his 2nd Class year. He also plays for the lacrosse club.

A memorable VMI experience for Fentress was during his rat year, when he underwent the Pearl Harbor workout, a high-intensity workout designed to honor the 1941 attack, featuring themes based on the date 12/7/41.

Continued on next page



Jackson McDonald '27 plays saxophone with The Commanders.—VMI Photo by Jake Falcone '27.

After graduation, Fentress plans to commission in the Navy and become an aviator.

Lucas Cosby was named India Company CO. He is from Midlothian, Virginia. He chose VMI because he wanted a challenging experience uniquely different than most colleges. His past regimental positions include corporal as a 3rd Class cadet and master sergeant as a 2nd Class cadet. He hopes to continue the good work of those who came before him, and to leave his own mark on India Company.

His most memorable VMI experience was the 9/11 stair climb his rat year. "Watching

the whole Corps put everything else aside to honor those who lost their lives was a powerful experience and the first time I really understood what VMI represents," he said.

After graduating, he will commission in the Navy and hopes to become an aviator.

The new Band Company CO is Jackson McDonald, a native of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

McDonald chose VMI in part because of his father being an alumnus. "But additionally," he explained, "I thought it had a strict military system that was well organized and would keep me on

track to succeed not only at the Institute, but beyond."

He held the rank of corporal his 3rd Class year, and operations sergeant his 2nd Class year, and applied for CO because he likes to lead and to work with people. McDonald plays alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, and baritone saxophone, and performs with the VMI jazz band, The Commanders. His favorite VMI experiences are traveling and performing with The Commanders. He will commission in the Marine Corps. ✪

Chinese Language Teachers Gather at VMI

By Marianne Hause

VMI hosted the spring 2026 Workshop of the Chinese Language Teachers Association of Virginia (CLTA-VA) April 11.

CLTA-VA is one of 22 regional affiliates of the national CLTA, dedicated to advancing the teaching of Chinese language and culture. Its mission is to promote quality teaching and learning at all levels, to support the professional growth and career development of Chinese language teachers, and to encourage collaboration and exchange among educators. Each year, the organization holds two workshops that bring together teachers who instruct kindergarten through a four-year bachelor's degree (K-16).

Dr. Laura Xie, associate professor of Chinese in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures (DoMC) and organizer of the workshop hosted at VMI, said, "We welcomed 18 K-16 Chinese language teachers from across Virginia and Washington, D.C. We had instructors from the University of Virginia, Washington and Lee University, the International Center for Language Studies, and several college preparatory and high schools. Three speakers led sessions on topics such as artificial intelligence in language teaching, digital tools for interactive learning, communicative language pedagogy, and innovative curriculum design. In addition to the sessions and workshops, our cadets played a big role in



Cadets guide the CLTA-VA workshop participants on a tour of post.—Photo courtesy of Dr. Laura Xie.

making the day run smoothly. They helped with logistics, greeted guests, and represented VMI well. We also had the chance to take our visitors on a tour of the post. Many of them found the tour especially memorable."

Col. Abbey Carrico, professor and head of DoMC, stated the department was happy to host the conference at VMI for the first time. "This group of Chinese educators shared teaching strategies and built connections across schools. Dr. Xie did a fabulous job coordinating this event and showcasing VMI's dedication to language and cultural development in cadets."

VMI offers both a major and minor in Chinese through DoMC. There were 10 cadets majoring and eight minoring in the language during the 2025-26 academic year. ✪

Civil Discourse Initiative Expands

By Lt. Col. Kim Connolly

As the nation approaches its 250th anniversary, VMI's Civil Discourse Initiative (CDI) embodies the idea that a healthy democracy necessitates dialogue, compromise, and trust. The Center for Leadership and Ethics (CLE) started holding debates in 2021, and then partnered with the Building BRIDGES club in 2022 to grow the opportunities and audiences for the debates. CDI, the name for the program since last year, now offers year-round programming.

The expanding initiative provides a variety of forums for engagement and discussion by using light parliamentary-style Braver Angels debates and A Braver Campus Dialogue (ABCD) workshops to foster a culture of civil discourse and constructive community conversations on important and sometimes controversial topics. These activities encourage listening and public speaking skills and give students more opportunities for rigorous examination of topics through open dialogue. All of these skills align with the mission of VMI to develop leaders and citizen-soldiers. "Good leaders welcome a variety of viewpoints to help them with decision making," noted Col. David Gray, executive director of the CLE. "These viewpoints help stress-test and strengthen decisions and strategies. Good leaders are also good listeners and engage effectively with their teams."

Led by three faculty fellows, Col. Valentina Dimitrova-Grajzl, professor of economics; Col. Sara Whipple, professor of psychology; and Lt. Col. Kim Connolly, assistant director for programs and conferences at the CLE, CDI began the 2025-26 academic year with the support of the Jackson-Hope Fund via a five-year grant



Isaiah Glover '27 shares his thoughts during a Braver Angels debate. —VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

to advance VMI's emphasis on citizenship and leadership through normalizing and internalizing civil discourse. Four cadet fellows, Katy Layman '26, Zach Denton '27, Josiah Farrell '28, and Zach Richardson '28, helped develop, organize, and promote the events to cadets and recruit opening speakers. In addition, four cadet ambassadors helped publicize events.

Activities this past year included the introduction of the solutions-based ABCD workshop to both local intercollegiate partners, Washington & Lee, Southern Virginia University (SVU), and Mountain Gateway Community College; and the local community. CDI hosted a workshop in September titled, "How Can We Improve Our Local Economy?" that drew 150 participants and introduced local business owners, economic development officials, and concerned citizens to this civil discourse tool. It also facilitated a meaningful intergenerational exchange of ideas and viewpoints.

In December, VMI hosted a public square debate, 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. It was part of the commission's Education Steering Committee's programs for K-12 and college students to make history come alive, spark a civics renaissance, and celebrate democracy. Select students who participated in the debate will be invited to participate in a debate at the State Capitol in October.

A February debate at VMI focused on honor, integrity, and compliance. Additionally, throughout the academic year cadets traveled to related events at the University of Virginia and SVU.

"This year has been great for CDI, as we have continued to expand the program and connect with even more people," said Farrell. "The opportunity to engage with students from other colleges at the Democracy360 conference at University of Virginia in a civil discourse setting was a great way to expand my views on issues like voter ID and identity politics. Making connections and conversing with students from other backgrounds has allowed me

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to take a step back and evaluate my own opinions and ideals.”

The initiative’s efforts to fold civil discourse into the everyday culture of VMI took another step forward when VMI’s committee on academic technology collaborated with CDI to host an ABCD workshop on AI, creativity, and critical thinking. This was attended by a cross-disciplinary group of staff and faculty and included two cadet representatives from the Honor Court.

Smaller monthly “Food for Thought” conversations covered a variety of topics in an informal setting during the lunch period, allowing for more engagement between cadets, faculty, and staff. In addition, a half-day workshop titled, “Cultivating Curious Individuals, Teams, and Organizations,” was offered in March by Dr. Todd Kashdan, author and founder of the Well-Being Lab at George Mason University.

Looking at the next academic year, the initiative has expanded to formally include

interdisciplinary faculty and staff partners who have supported and participated in programs over the years. They will receive training to become debate moderators and to incorporate debates and ABCD workshops into the curriculum and other programming.

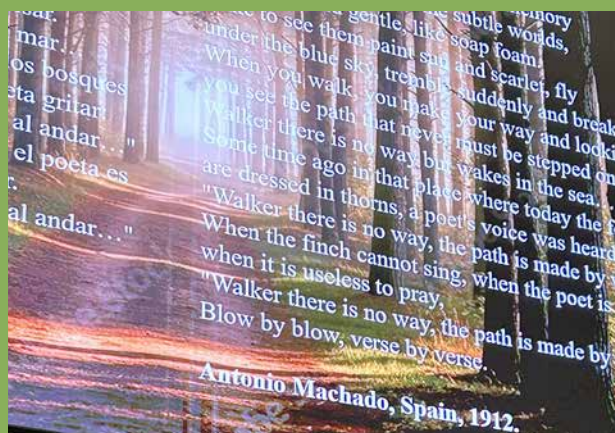
Cadet ambassador Bianca Marlang ’27 reflected on the impact the program has

had on her this past year. “I have learned to keep my bearing amidst hearing views that are the complete opposite from mine... I have since learned to listen for genuine understanding and not listen to respond. It seems small, but I’m very proud of it.”

A complete listing of all CDI activities from this past academic year can be found on the CLE’s website. 🌿



Lt. Col. Kim Connolly leads discussion during an ABCD workshop.—Photo courtesy of Lt. Col. Kim Connolly.



Poetry Night

The Department of Modern Languages and Cultures hosted “Poetry and Performance Night” April 27 in the Hall of Valor. Formerly known as “Poetry Night,” the event was renamed beginning last year to encourage a wider range of artistic and cultural performances. This year’s program featured 73 performances in five languages and drew more than 160 cadets and faculty participants and audience members. The event showcased poetry recitations, singing, prayer, rap, and shadow puppetry. Cadets performed in multiple languages studied within the department, highlighting both their linguistic abilities and their engagement with global cultures. Col. Abbey Carrico, department head, emphasized, “This event is a highlight of the academic year and our department. We always discover hidden talents of cadets who compose their own poetry or have strong performance skills.”—Photos Courtesy of the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures.



Commencement for the Class of 2026

Celebrating 25 Years of Female Graduates

By Marianne Hause

VMI held its commencement ceremony in Cameron Hall and conferred degrees on the Class of 2026 May 17. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the first female cadets graduating from the Institute in 2001. Appropriately, the commencement speaker was Gov. Abigail Spanberger, who herself graduated in 2001 from the University of Virginia, and is the first female governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The Regimental Band played “Pomp and Circumstance” as nearly 260 cadets marched into the arena with a commanding albeit joyful spring in their stride. Family members, friends, and supporters greeted the graduates with a standing ovation, heartening cheers, jubilant shouts, and a few emotional tears.

In his commencement address following his first academic year as VMI superintendent, Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 welcomed the governor, the Board of Visitors, faculty, staff, cadets, alumni, friends and families. He thanked those in the audience who encouraged and sustained the cadets during their time at VMI, and recognized veterans and current military members. To the graduates, he reminded them of the lessons and training they underwent at VMI, as well as the times they were the ones mentoring other cadets, including the Class of 2029. He commended them on leaving the Corps in good hands, and with heartfelt emotion said, “You will forever be my first class of graduates as superintendent. I could not have asked for a better group of young men and women to lead the Corps this year. There were many distractions, but you overcame those obstacles and stayed focused on maintaining your honor and integrity while pursuing your degrees. I am proud of you and what you have accomplished.”

Furness closed by noting that through the VMI Alumni Association’s Pass in Review program, the Class of 1976 forged a meaningful relationship with the Class of 2026 and gifted the graduates a commemorative coin designed collaboratively by both classes to serve as a proud symbol of their bond. He then introduced the peer-elected valedictorian, Lukas Maurer '26.

Maurer, a civil engineering major from Lebanon, Pennsylvania, used the metaphor of sword forging to describe the VMI cadet experience, and quoted from the valedictorian speech of Jonathan



Lukas Maurer '26 offers the valedictorian speech in Cameron Hall. –VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Daniels '61, the alumnus Episcopal seminarian who sacrificed his own life to protect that of another. “We have been blasted by the fire in order to be tempered in mind and spirit.” Maurer compared a young matriculant to a rough, sharp-edged block of steel immediately thrown into a world of controlled chaos, confusion, and stress. “Before you know it, you are bald and wondering if you’ve made the right decision coming to this place. But you persevere and rely on the people to your left and right and choose not to quit for them.” He stated that by the time a rat has completed the first milestone of Matriculation Week, the heated block of steel is taken out of the fire, but the hammer strikes hard with the stresses of classes, Rat Line duties, and physical training. With the much-needed rest of the first furlough, the battered block of steel is plunged into the quench to cool. “But the process is far from over. You return to VMI and are immediately thrown into the fire again,” he said, noting the process continues through many milestones like Breakout, the completion of the first academic year, and new responsibilities as a 3rd Class cadet. “Now, that block of steel is beginning to take the shape of a dull blade. However, the blade is far from ready. You hit the ground running, with increased responsibility as a corporal, now helping facilitate the forging process of incoming rats, all while still being forged yourself.” By the time a cadet reaches the 2nd Class year, with more responsibilities and academic demands, the blade is placed against

Continued on next page

the grinder. “The general shape has formed over the past two years, but now the excess impurities of dull steel are ground away through the grit of hard work and relentless discipline.” By 1st Class year, he stated, “Again you are heated up and tested in ways you didn’t think possible. However, this is necessary, because the remaining impurities are being removed. The final quenching has occurred, and the blade is sharpened and adorned with a beautiful handle and pommel. You finish your last final exam, and successfully hand off any remaining responsibilities, and savor those final lasting memories with your BRs.”

He concluded, “Today, my friends, you have made it! You are fully adorned VMI-hardened blades prepared for duty in the military, academia, or in the civilian world. I am convinced you have made it through the most difficult college in the country. Regardless of the path we have chosen, we have all gone through the VMI forge together; symbolized by the numbers 2026 on our rings. Take pride in this brotherhood, and the fact that you have excelled through this forging process together.”

Maurer served as cadre corporal and first sergeant for Echo Company. He was a member of the Honor Court and was inducted into the Omicron Delta Kappa and Tau Beta Pi honor societies. He commissioned in the Army as an aviation officer.

Maximus Ankrah '26, president of the class who commissioned in the Air Force, also shared farewell remarks to his brother rats. He pointed out that throughout their cadetship there have been two VMI superintendents, two commandants, two governors of Virginia, and two presidents of the United States. “No matter who’s at the top, no matter who’s calling the shots, no matter the circumstance, we’re able to maintain our integrity and brotherhood as a class, bringing us closer and stronger together.”

He talked of multiple events the class experienced over their four years together that created the strong bond of brotherhood, including the recent Virginia General Assembly action effecting VMI. “Toward the end of February, when legislative bills threatened our school, arguably one of the most unifying memories of our cadetship, it was the leaders of this class, and the support of this class, that changed the trajectory in a positive way.”

Ankrah reminded the graduates that through all the successes and challenges of being VMI cadets, they have truly mastered the system and are more than ready to graduate. “If you can make it through the toughest, hardest, grittiest military school in our nation, you can make it through anything. I have no doubt that you’ll find yourself to be more than worthy contributors to VMI’s rich legacy of honor and service. As long as you remember the credo that has been instilled in us since we were rats, ‘Everything’s earned, not given,’ and you always justify the space you occupy,

you will no longer succeed within the walls of barracks, you will succeed within the limitless horizons that the world has to offer.” Ankrah then introduced Spanberger who was warmly welcomed to the lectern.

Spanberger thanked VMI for the honor of being the commencement speaker, and expressed gratitude to the cadets for participating in her inauguration parade in January. “You might remember me as the person expressively trying to tell you something as you marched by, keeping straight faces, as you realized that my microphone wasn’t working, as I was desperately trying to grant amnesty,” she quipped.

The governor read aloud VMI’s mission, “‘Virginia Military Institute believes that the measure of a college lies in the quality and performance of its graduates and their contributions to society.



Maximus Ankrah '26 presents a saber to Gov. Abigail Spanberger following her speech at VMI’s commencement May 17.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Therefore, it is the mission of Virginia Military Institute to produce educated, honorable men and women prepared for the varied work of civil life, imbued with love of learning, confident in the functions and attitudes of leadership, possessing a high sense of public service, advocates of the American Democracy and free enterprise system, and ready as citizen-soldiers to defend their country in times of national peril.’ That is what makes this place special. That is your charge, Class of 2026, to set forth on a path wherein you will make contributions to our society.”

She described her own career path and admitted that it did not proceed exactly how she had planned. “No path is a straight line. Sometimes the windings of paths will get you exactly where you are supposed to be.” She offered an example of successfully following a blind path during a training exercise she went through early in her career with the CIA. She and her colleagues were tasked to get from point A to point B alone, but all at once in the dark of night, in

See Commencement, page 12

a wooded area, using only a compass. She set her compass bearing, not knowing where she was going, or what she would walk through. She found herself trudging through a swamp, but instead of turning back, she kept going and finally arrived at her destination. “The point of that exercise wasn’t the destination, it

was proving to ourselves that we could do hard, strange, sometimes confusing things, that when the path got genuinely difficult, we wouldn’t turn back. You all have many stories of perseverance to choose from, and on your hardest days, you will be able to draw on the memories of what you have achieved, survived, and been through.”

She acknowledged that the cadets are entering a world with significant challenges. “You’re the products of an academic institution that has been preparing leaders for more than 180 years. I have every confidence that you will leave Lexington, not just ready to adapt to the world as you find it, but ready to use your talents to do your part to make it better.”

She concluded enthusiastically with, “I do have one last order of business to attend to, and thankfully the microphone is working this time.” She then



Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 presents Macallister Clark '26 with the First Jackson-Hope Medal.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

granted amnesty to those cadets with unserved penalty tours and confinement, to which the Corps, mostly the 4th Class cadets in attendance, broke out in raucous cheers.

Three awards are traditionally given at the May commencement exercises. The First Jackson-Hope Medal for highest attainment in scholarship, accompanied by The Commander Harry Millard Mason Academic Proficiency Award, went to Macallister Jennings Clark '26.

Receiving the Second Jackson-Hope Medal, for second highest attainment in scholarship, accompanied by The Colonel Sterling Murray

Heflin 1916 Academic Proficiency Award, was Sebastien Patrick Chicas '26.

Nolan James Savard '26 received The Society of the Cincinnati Medal, for efficiency of service and excellence of character, accompanied by The Richard J. Marshall and Sumter L. Lowry Awards.



Sebastien Chicas '26 receives the Second Jackson-Hope Medal from Lt. Gen. David Furness '87.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

The presentation of candidates for degrees was delivered by Brig. Gen. Robert W. Moreschi, dean of the faculty and deputy superintendent for academics, followed by the conferring of degrees by Furness, then a benediction was offered by Col. John P. Casper '04, Institute chaplain.

Kimlong Nguyen '27, the new regimental commander, relieved the Class of 2026 of their duties as they cheered and engaged in the

Continued on next page

time-honored tossing of their gloves followed by an Old Yell and singing of "The Spirit."

Sarah Woosley '26, a graduate who served as 2nd Battalion commander over the past academic year, shared when she first chose to attend VMI, she was a little intimidated by the male to female ratio. "However, during my first few weeks as a rat, I quickly realized ...I was surrounded by strong female leaders. I looked up to women and have worked to become the kind of leader that someone else can look up to. The women before me deserve credit for my success because their courage and perseverance paved the way for me to succeed. To downplay being a female at VMI is to overlook the

accomplishments and sacrifices of the women who fought to earn their place at VMI."

One of those women who came before Woosley is Institute physician, Dr. Melissa S. Krawiec '01. In recalling her own commencement, Krawiec stated she is fiercely proud to be a member of the first graduating class of female cadets from VMI. "As a class, we overcame some significant obstacles and certainly our story is one of survival, but also of thriving. For me, graduating from VMI meant that I had accomplished the biggest goal I'd ever set for myself in my life. I will tell anyone who asks that VMI was a difficult place to be, but a fantastic place to be from." ❁



Change of Command

The 187th regiment of cadet leadership, including Kimlong Nguyen '27, the new regimental commander, took command of the Corps of Cadets at the change of command parade May 16. Following the parade, the Corps gathered for an Old Yell in barracks and Devin Auzenne '26 placed his name plate on the first captain plaque in barracks. —VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin and Kelly Nye.





Graduation Week

Graduation week events included a parade for the regimental change of command, commissioning, the Memorial Parade, Baccalaureate, Institute and commandant award ceremonies, concerts, and commencement. -VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin, Kelly Nye, Lexie West, and Jake Falcone '27.

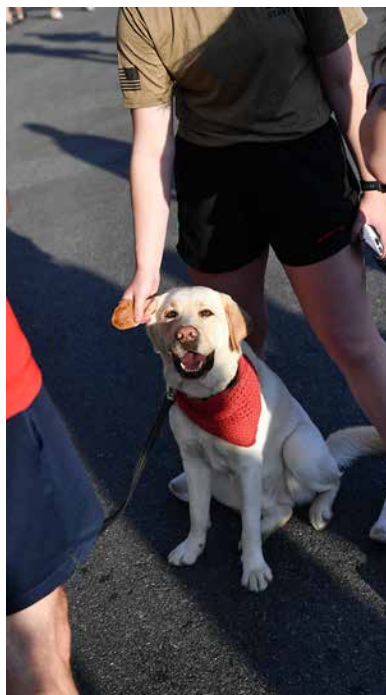
More photos from the week of events can be found at www.flickr.com/photos/vmiphotos/albums.





End-of-Year Cadet Activities

As final exams, parades, and graduation celebrations approached, cadets had several opportunities to relax and enjoy the company of their brother rats before summer. A Corps supper was held at a baseball game the evening of April 28 in which the Keydets beat the Longwood Lancers 3-0. The next week, cadets participated in a field day with games like dodgeball, basketball, tug-of-war, and competitions using the obstacles in the Corps Physical Training Facility and on North Post. The weather was perfect for a picnic on the bricks in front of barracks May 5.—VMI Photos by Jake Falcone '27.



POST BRIEFS

Deibel Selected as NAEd/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellow

The National Academy of Education (NAEd), an honorary educational society, has selected Maj. Zachary Deibel, assistant professor in the Department of History, as a 2026 NAEd/Spencer postdoctoral fellow. Deibel was one of 25 selected from a competitive pool of nearly 500 scholars, and will receive a fellowship award of \$70,000 intended to assist with his salary replacement and research expenses for the fellowship period.

Deibel, who specializes in early American history, will be investigating the revolutionary origins of civic education in America for his project

titled, "Liberty's Lessons: The Educational Politics of the American Revolution," and is excited to be participating in the fellowship. "It is an amazing opportunity to learn from and alongside some incredible scholars. I am also thrilled to be able to bring all that I learn back to VMI. The workshops, mentorship program, and collaborative learning offered by the fellowship will help me bring new approaches and research to my classes at the Institute."

Abdelhamid Selected as Nielsen Center Fellow

Sherif Abdelhamid, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences and team member of the Cyber Defense Lab, has been selected as a 2026-27 Nielsen Center fellow, a prestigious national fellowship awarded by the Nielsen Center for the Liberal Arts at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Nielsen fellows are chosen for their demonstrated strong commitment to teaching excellence and their potential to contribute meaningfully to national conversations about liberal arts education. The year-long

fellowship includes three seminar-based workshop sessions held at Eckerd College, focused on faculty self-understanding, pedagogical innovation, and interdisciplinary connection in small liberal arts college contexts.

Abdelhamid, whose goal is to create learning environments where students feel motivated to explore, collaborate, and think creatively, said he is grateful for the opportunity to engage with faculty from a wide range of disciplines and institutions. ✨



Memorial Parade

The Memorial Parade was held May 15, commemorating the bravery and sacrifice of all alumni who died on the field of honor including the Mexican-American War, the American Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, the Marine Barracks in Lebanon, the Persian Gulf War, and the Global War on Terrorism. The large garrison flags were flown at half-staff, by order of the governor, in memory and respect of Peace Officers' Memorial Day, a fitting backdrop as all 591 alumni names were read by Stone Gardner '28, Sophia Lurey '28, Garrett Maye '28, and Jamie Rodriguez '28. A wreath was laid at the foot of the monument, "Virginia Mourning Her Dead," as well as at the three barracks arches. A prayer led by Col. John P. Casper '04, Institute chaplain, was followed by the firing of a three-volley salute. An echo rendition of "Taps" was played by Louis Marangoni '27 and resonated by Khaidan Piedmonte '28, followed by the Pipe Band leading the Regimental Band in an emotional delivery of "Amazing Grace." Col. Lawrence "Ley" Havird '90, commandant, was joined by Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent in taking review of the Corps.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Retrospective of German Program Held

Sunnen's Retirement Celebrated

By Marianne Hause

The Department of Modern Languages and Cultures (DoMC) announced the suspension of the German program with the retirement of Col. Donald Sunnen, professor of German. A gathering of department members, both past and present, was held recently to observe the ending of the program and reminisce about the professors who taught German at the Institute since J.T.L. Preston in 1839. Though there was a hiatus of more than 30 years, German returned to the curriculum in 1873 and had been taught nearly continuously since.

At the event, memories were shared by Col. Travis Homiak '95, VMI's chief of staff, who, as a cadet, double majored in German and international studies; Maj. Charles Range '10, who double majored in German and history; Patricia Hardin, former adjunct professor; Dr. Martin Nassua of Helmut-Schmidt-Universität in Hamburg; and Sunnen, who taught at VMI for 36 years. "I have always tried to make language real. Language opens doors and it has been my task as a teacher to encourage my students even when they make mistakes," Sunnen shared.

Col. Abbey Carrico, professor and head of DoMC, stated, "While we do not know the future of German at VMI, we have taken time to remember its past. Through this retrospective, we have shared stories and memories about the faculty and cadets who made this program what it was. We honored Col. Sunnen's impact



Col. Donald Sunnen discusses the history of the VMI German program.—VMI Photo by Jake Falcone '27.

and influence at VMI and thanked him for his service to the department and German program."

Homiak enjoyed seeing how many alumni were touched by the German program. "We all had an affinity for the language and the culture that initially brought us to the program, but the most impactful thing for me was seeing the connection between students across the years who shared professors like Col. Sunnen and the late Col. Siegfried Weing, who taught me and pushed me to excel and expand my horizons. When I think about the professors who made a difference for me at VMI, I think of him most of all. Aside from commissioning as a Marine officer, the German program was the high point of my education at VMI."

Colin Nicassio '26 was the last cadet to graduate with a minor in German. "Col. Sunnen was a fantastic professor, and there is a close-knit group of German speakers at VMI. The curriculum may not be here next year, but I know that German will always be spoken on post," he said. 🌿



Col. Travis Homiak '95 congratulates Col. Donald Sunnen on his retirement.—VMI Photo by Jake Falcone '27.

Something for Everyone: Career Services Expands Resources

By Lt. Col. Michelle Ellwood

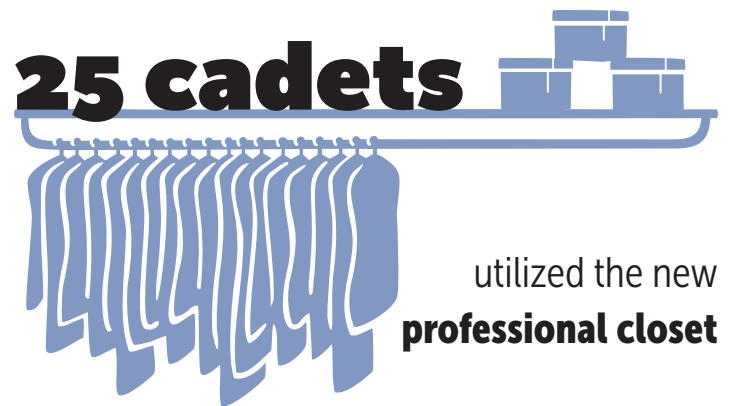
The concept and offerings of career services at a traditional college are well known, but VMI isn't a traditional college. For families with a commissioning-track cadet, the idea of a career services department is often forgotten. But the Office of Career Services at VMI, made up of four staff members, offers services and resources for every cadet, regardless of their class, hometown, previous experiences, or post-graduation path.

Some highlights of the 2025-26 academic year include a fall and spring career fair, each hosting more than 50 employers with plenty of opportunities for full-time employment and summer internships.



These fairs had record-breaking cadet attendance.

A newly developed professional closet supplies interview-appropriate attire for cadets to borrow, much of it donated by faculty and staff. Twenty-five cadets took advantage of the wardrobe options. "The career services professional closet was extremely beneficial to me," said Srijon Bose '27. "I came in on the day of a conference requiring business attire, and despite the time constraint, the staff was very helpful in finding an outfit that fit and



looked good. I would wholeheartedly recommend the professional closet to cadets."

In addition to the attire, interview preparation is critical as cadets are applying for very competitive jobs and internships. There were more than 225 individual cadet appointments for resume review, job search strategies, interview preparation, and general career planning. Some of these cadets also used an updated conference room for virtual interviews so they would have a professional and quiet space.

The staff continues to work on reaching cadets early in their cadetship, ensuring they know what is available to them. They are going directly to the cadets. Six workshops were held with athletic teams in locker rooms or training areas to promote that early engagement. Employers are also attending leadership courses to share best practices and career opportunities. During fall field

Continued on next page



164

employers attended a recruiting event on post

training exercises (FTX), career development panels were held with topics like, “Inside Government Careers” and “Networking Challenge.” During spring FTX, non-commissioning cadets went on interactive employer staff rides to organizations across Virginia, like the U.S. Secret Service, McKee Foods in Stuarts Draft, InBio in Charlottesville, and several employers in Richmond.

There are also partnerships with VMI Alumni Agencies, supporting events like the VMIAA Cadet Networking Forum.

From 4th Class year until graduation, cadets can benefit from the Office of Career Services in numerous ways. The numbers speak for themselves: More than 97% of VMI graduates are employed or in graduate/professional schools within five months of graduation. ✪

Pipe Band Takes Honors in Savannah

By Marianne Hause



Members of the VMI Pipe Band celebrate after winning first place at the Savannah Scottish Games and Celtic Festival. —Photo courtesy of Kira Brenaman '26.

The VMI Pipe Band won first place at the 48th annual Savannah Scottish Games and Celtic Festival, a celebration of Scottish heritage in Savannah, Georgia, May 2.

Chuck Bohannon, director of piping & drumming at the Savannah Scottish Games, reported two pipe bands competed against VMI. Charleston Pipe Band from Charleston, South Carolina, won second place; and the Savannah Pipes and Drums took third place.

In addition, there were individual competitions in which VMI cadets were victorious. For solo piping grade 5 march A competition, Ben Bowen '26 won first place; Byron Rivey '26, second place; David Cooper '28, third place; and Roy Fuller '29, fourth place. For solo piping grade 5 march B competition, Alden Rhodes '26 won first place; Xinwen Mai '29, second place; Thor Alewine '26, third place; and Julia Ward '26, fourth place. For solo piping grade 4, William Bolay '26 received fourth place. For solo snare drumming grade 5 competition,

Khang Lai '29 won first place; Thomas Sasso '27, second place; and Harrison Sloane '27, fourth place. For solo snare drumming grade 4, Connor Wolfe '26 won first place. For solo tenor drumming grade 5 competition, Kira Brenaman '26 won first place; and Sloan Roberts '29, second place. For solo bass drum grade 5, Brenaman won first place; Erick Rymer '28, third place; and Stephen Underwood '29, fourth place.

Maj. Brian Donaldson, director of the VMI Pipe Band, was justifiably pleased with the band's performance. "There is an appropriate Gaelic word to use when describing the Pipe Band's accomplishments in Savannah. It's 'ceannas,' which means to dominate. The band played extremely well, and all cadets performed their best, both in the band competition and in the solos. They all flew the flag high for VMI and proudly recited the Old Yell when the results of the competitions were announced," he shared.

Brenaman, a 1st Class cadet, came to VMI with no musical experience and is grateful to have had the opportunity to be a member of the Pipe Band. "I learned to play the bass drum and the Scottish tenor drum, as the Pipe Band had not had a tenor drummer in over five years. We now have a growing tenor group and have had numerous opportunities to compete and perform across the East Coast. The pipe band community is truly like no other."

Lai, a 4th Class cadet, has been drumming for nearly 10 years, and has played in a marching band and jazz band, but this is the first year he has played in a pipe band. "As a 4th Class cadet, winning 1st place in the competition is a great feeling. Everyone in the Pipe Band has a great work ethic. Maj. Donaldson makes a great effort to push us beyond our limits and is very inspiring," he said. ✪

Cadets Present Research at NCUR

By Marianne Hause

Eighteen cadets joined approximately 5,000 participants at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) held at the Greater Richmond Convention Center April 13-15. NCUR is an organization dedicated to promoting undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activity in all fields of study. It offers a unique environment for the celebration and promotion of undergraduate student achievement, as well as student career readiness development. The location for the conference changes each year, in various places across the country. In 2005, it was held at VMI and Washington and Lee University.

Lt. Col. Molly Kent, director of the VMI Center for Undergraduate Research (VCUR) and associate professor in the Department of Biology, also attended the conference. She said this year's group of cadets who applied and were accepted to present their work at NCUR was the largest since she assumed the role of VCUR director in 2024. "We were pleased that the close proximity of this year's conference allowed so many cadets to attend, and VCUR was able to fully fund the trip. Our cadets showcased the full breadth of the



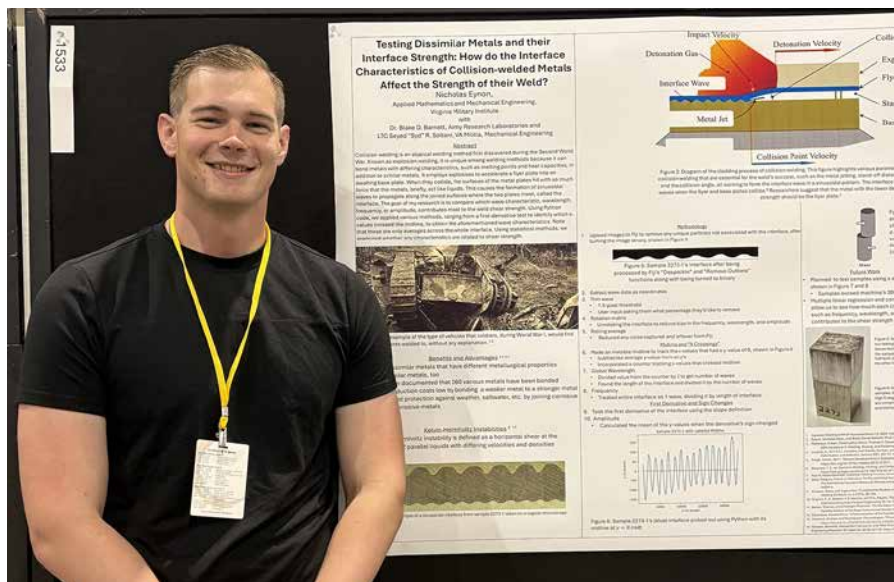
Cadets gather in the Greater Richmond Convention Center lobby before the start of NCUR.—Photo courtesy of Lt. Col. Molly Kent.

Institute's academic excellence—from the arts and humanities to cutting-edge engineering—through research conducted by cadets, alongside dedicated faculty mentors."

Nicholas Eynon '26, an applied mathematics major minoring in philosophy, presented a poster based on his honors thesis, "Testing Dissimilar Metals and their Interface Strength: How do the Interface Characteristics of

Collision-welded Metals Affect the Shear Strength of their Weld?" Eynon admitted he had fun at NCUR. "It was very enjoyable to present my work, not only as a reward, but to share the name and vision of VMI to other college students, show them the hard work I put into my research, and show them the same respect. It was interesting to hear about other students' research, and in some instances, we discussed how our topics overlapped and could be used in tandem. Overall, I am very grateful for my time with NCUR." Eynon commissioned in the U.S. Army.

Nickole Chávez '26, an English major minoring in Spanish, presented her project, "Bridging the Confidence Gap: ELL Mentorships and Narrative Exploration of the Mexican- American Student Experience." Her research involved an independent study working with an English Language Learner (ELL) student in Lexington, which led her to write a narrative of her own education using reflexive thematic analysis. Chávez explained she corroborated her experience working in the school with her memories growing up in a failing education system. She also read articles about the lack of resources for bilingual and immigrant students. Chávez presented her findings in a crowded room, which she admitted was a little nerve wracking. "NCUR was an amazing experience. I was able to share a personal project that I worked on for two semesters. Sharing my story and experiences with a room full of students and professors from other schools was something I never thought I would do." Chávez hopes to work for the Department of Homeland Security. 🌟



Nicholas Eynon '26 presents his poster at NCUR in Richmond.—Photo courtesy of Lt. Col. Molly Kent.

McGowan Retires after 50 Years

By Marianne Hause

“Time just flew by,” was the honest reply Terry McGowan gave when asked why he remained at one job for so long. After 50 years of faithful service working in the Military Store, McGowan has retired.

A lifelong resident of Rockbridge County, McGowan grew up in a blended family and attended Natural Bridge High School. He began work at VMI in 1976 when he was 17 years old. His neighbor at the time worked in the Military Store, which is the department that provides all uniform items to cadets and uniformed staff, and falls under the domain of the Office of Auxiliary Services (AS). He suggested to young McGowan that he apply for a job in the department as there was need for part-time summer help. He was quickly hired, and because of his strong work ethic and good attitude, later became a full-time classified employee.

Throughout his half-century tenure at the Institute, McGowan has served under seven superintendents, 10 commandants, and five AS directors. He has witnessed many changes at VMI including the admission of women, and helped develop fitting and uniform requirements for them. Lee Clark '93, the current AS director, originally encountered McGowan when getting his own uniforms as a rat in 1989, and values McGowan's longevity. “Terry has been a quiet but important presence in the Military Store for many years. He is a skilled uniform fitter who could be counted on for his professionalism, and

he has always been a positive force in auxiliary services and the VMI community,” said Clark.

A favorite of his co-workers, McGowan was primarily tasked with fitting cadets for all of their different uniforms. “Chatting with the cadets, and getting to know them when they come in to be measured and fitted, was always a joy and one of the best parts of this job. Some would come back to get refitted as they lost weight or gained

muscle, and it was nice to learn of their progress,” he shared.

Though he has no specific plans, McGowan looks forward to tinkering around his house and spending time with his older brother, Donald, who worked for VMI until retiring several years ago. Additionally, he enjoys camping, watching NASCAR, and keeping up with his preferred football team, the Dallas Cowboys. He is a fan of classic television and wants to catch up on movies he has put

off watching. When asked about a pencil jar in the shape of Darth Vader placed on his desk, McGowan confessed with a boyish smile that he has never seen a “Star Wars” movie, but intends to marathon watch them all.

A retirement parade was held April 10. McGowan, along with six others, joined Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent, in taking review of the Corps of Cadets during the parade, and was presented with a meritorious service award in recognition of his many years of service. 🌟



Terry McGowan sorts through cadet summer class dyke trousers in the Military Store during his last week of work.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

50th Reunion Gift

The Class of 1976 presented its 50th reunion gift of \$12,101,019.76 to the Institute during the reunion parade April 25. Accepting the check are Crissy Elliott, VMI Alumni Agencies interim chief executive officer, and Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent. In the center, representing the class, are Bill Bhatta '76, class agent; Ray Ramos '76, Reunion Gift Committee chair; and Dexter Gilliam '76, class president.—Photo courtesy of VMI Alumni Agencies.



VMI Commissions Military Officers

By Marianne Hause

VMI commissioned nearly 140 cadets into the armed services at the annual ROTC joint commissioning ceremony May 15 in Cameron Hall.

Gen. Christopher J. Mahoney, 13th vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's second highest-ranking military officer, who arrived to post by helicopter, offered the commissioning officer remarks and administered the oath of office to the cadets beginning their journey of military service as second lieutenants in the U.S. Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps, and as ensigns in the Coast Guard and Navy.

Lt. Gen. David Furness '87, superintendent, thanked the ROTC officers, cadre, and staff who were instrumental in teaching and mentoring the young officers, and acknowledged all the veterans and current military members in the audience. "We appreciate the sacrifices you have made and the leadership you have shown. These cadets are following in your footsteps because of the examples you have set," he said.

Furness reminded the commissioning cadets that VMI has prepared them to face any challenge or adversary, and how honor, courage, and commitment have



Gen. Christopher J. Mahoney addresses the commissioning cadets during the ROTC joint commissioning ceremony.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

been instilled in them. "These fundamentals will serve you well for the rest of your life. The time has come for you to take the next step in your careers and serve our great nation."

He shared three habits he was advised to adhere to when he was a young officer. "First, embrace lifelong learning. You must continually increase your knowledge through practice and self-study. Second, stay physically fit. You will find that when stress arrives, you will be better disciplined to persevere when you are fit, and always remember that a strong mind never grows in a weak body. Last, but most importantly, you must take care of those you lead. Whether in the military, the civilian sector, or your family, people will depend on you to be an ethical and reliable source of strength, to teach, coach, and mentor those you are responsible for." He congratulated the cadets on attaining a commission, voiced his pride of them, thanked them for making the decision to serve in the military, and wished them Godspeed.

Furness then introduced Mahoney as a great friend and noted their paths crossed many times throughout their careers. Mahoney graduated from the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, with a bachelor's degree in economics, and commissioned in the Marine Corps. He served as a pilot with the Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron VMFA-224, known as the "Bengals," as well as the fighter squadrons VMFA-122 and the VMFA-242, known as the "Bats." He held command at the squadron, group, and wing levels. He is a graduate of the Weapons



Commissioning cadets take their oath of office in Cameron Hall May 15.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Continued on next page



Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 congratulates Devin Auzenne '26 on becoming a new Marine Corps officer.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.



Nicole Samella '26 renders her first salute as a Navy ensign.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

and Tactics Instructor Course, the Marine Division Tactics Course, and the Navy Fighter Weapons School commonly known as TOPGUN. He holds two master's degrees: One from the University of Canberra in Australia, and one from Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, both with the highest academic distinction.

Mahoney shared he was honored and humbled to speak at VMI, which he described as hallowed ground. To the commissionees, he stated that the era of America's uncontested dominance is over. "The adversaries you face are capable. They are hungry, and they're watching you. You're about to be handed the greatest responsibility the nation can bestow." He told them they will be tested. "The enemy will jam your communications. Your screens will go black. You will not be able to call higher headquarters for permission. You will not be able to call in a medical evacuation. Will you freeze? Will you wait for perfect information? What will you do? Answering that question will require everything you have. It will require the lessons of this great institution that is built on unrivaled tradition, and these traditions over time have become legend." Mahoney then cited legendary VMI alumni like Lt. Gen. Chesty Puller, VMI Class of 1921; Lt. Gen. Charles Kilbourne, VMI Class of 1894; Maj.

Gen. William Upshur, VMI Class of 1902; and Gen. Lemuel Shepherd, VMI Class of 1917; who all faced dire situations in battle, but instead of hesitating or panicking, they relied on the steel VMI put in their spines. "They did not shrink from violence. They stepped into the breach." He warned the new officers that because these VMI legends set such a high standard, the military has high expectations of VMI graduates. "When a commander sees a VMI ring on a finger, they don't see a recent college graduate, they see the ghosts of VMI. They expect you to be unbreakable, they expect you to lead from the front, and they expect you to navigate chaos without losing your bearing. Virginia Military Institute has given you the discipline and uncompromised standard. The rest is up to you. The ghosts of VMI are watching you. Our adversaries are preparing for you. What will you do?"



Matthew Kleinschuster '26 receives his rank pins from his parents, Dan and Dana Kleinschuster.—VMI Photo by Marianne Hause.

He then asked the commissioning cadets to stand as he administered the oath of office. Afterward, the brother rats gave each other congratulatory hugs as the audience applauded and cheered.

Following the ceremony, the separate military branches conducted individual pin-on ceremonies at various locations on post. It was there that the newly commissioned officers followed a tradition of presenting a silver dollar to the

See Commissioning, page 26

active service member or veteran from whom they received their first salute.

According to Capt. Megan Taylor, assistant professor of military science for the Army ROTC George C. Marshall Battalion—formerly known as the Blue Ridge Battalion—at VMI, many cadets were exemplary, but two were prominent: James Aldinger, an international studies major from Arlington, Virginia, and Matthew Kleinschuster, an applied mathematics major from Richmond, Virginia. “Aldinger served as the Ranger Challenge platoon leader responsible for the training and preparation of the Ranger Challenge team. Under his leadership, the team successfully competed at Exercise Cambrian Patrol in Wales in the United Kingdom; at the 4th Brigade Ranger Challenge at Fort Pickett, Virginia; and at the Sandhurst Military Skills Competition at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His ability to coordinate training, planning, and logistics for local, national, and international competitions far exceeded the traditional cadet experience. He ranked within the top 1% of cadets nationwide and is branching in the infantry. Kleinschuster served as battalion commander and was responsible for the oversight, accountability, and training of four companies. He had the single greatest impact on the Army ROTC mission and overall success of the battalion over the past year. Through his leadership, work ethic, and very impressive GPA, Kleinschuster earned the distinction of being ranked the No. 8 cadet in the nation and was selected to branch in explosive ordnance disposal,” Taylor said.

Lt. Cmdr. Tom Campbell, naval science instructor for Naval ROTC, designated



Hannah Buttner '26 recites the oath of office to become a second lieutenant in the Air Force.—VMI Photo by Jake Falcone '27.

two cadets who commissioned in the Navy and two who commissioned in the Marine Corps as truly outstanding. Macallister Clark, a mechanical engineering major from Saint Michael, Minnesota, was a four-year national scholarship recipient, and retained a 4.0 four-year GPA. He was selected to be commissioned as a Naval reactors engineer (NRE), an elite technical officer who manages the lifecycle of Navy nuclear propulsion plants. The last year a VMI cadet commissioned as NRE was 2017.

Nicole Samella, an electrical and computer engineering major from Virginia Beach, Virginia, was a four-year national scholarship recipient, maintained a superior GPA and high physical fitness scores, and served as the NROTC battalion

commander. As the top ranked surface warfare officer in the nation, she was handpicked to transfer into the Navy Engineering Duty Officer program.

Kern Aughinbaugh, a biology major from San Marcos, California, served as the Marine Company commanding officer and advisor for the NROTC Bulldog Program, helping prepare candidates for the physical requirements of the Marine Officer Candidate School. Moreover, he served the Corps as Golf Company commander in the regiment. Devin Auzenne, a history major from Opelousas, Louisiana, was a four-year national scholarship recipient. In addition to serving the Corps as regimental commanding officer,

he also was an advisor for the NROTC Bulldog Program. Both Aughinbaugh and Auzenne will go to The Basic School in Quantico, Virginia.

Col. Eric Steele, commander of Air Force ROTC, cited two cadets as exceptional. Reese Lassiter, a mechanical engineering and physics double major from Louisa, Virginia, has



Sgt. Maj. Jonathan Faff receives a coin from Shane McKenna '26 after rendering his first salute as a Coast Guard officer.—VMI Photo by Marianne Hause.

Continued on next page

earned the coveted Distinguished Graduate award—established to recognize the top 10% of commissioning cadets—from AFROTC. “He’s been a standout cadet his entire time in our program, winning national awards and earning recognition through several highly competitive military training courses. He will be attending undergraduate pilot training at Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi after commissioning,” said Steele.

Hannah Buttner, an international studies major from Williamsburg, Virginia, successfully completed a leadership tour as Cadet Wing commander last fall. “Competing through a highly rigorous process at the national level, she was also selected to attend Green Flag-West at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada,

and at Fort Irwin, California, where she gained broad exposure to Air Force and Army joint air-to-ground operations in a real-world training environment. She is this year’s recipient of the Captain John W. Kennedy ’69 Award for sustained excellence throughout her time as a cadet. She will attend intelligence officer training at Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, Texas,” Steele explained.

According to Command Sgt. Maj. Suzanne Rubenstein, director of cadet activities and VMI liaison for the Coast Guard Auxiliary University Program, one cadet commissioned in the Coast Guard. Shane McKenna, an international studies major from Salt Point, New York, served as commander for the AUP and was Foxtrot Company executive officer. ✪



Employee Recognition


Lt. Gen. David Furness ’87, superintendent, recognized VMI staff during the employee breakfast May 12 in Crozet Hall and VMI Family Day May 22 in Cocke Hall. During the employee breakfast, he administered awards for years of service to classified employees, including Jason Davis, Terry Manuel, and Donna Potter, all with 25 years of service; Robert Branch with 35 years; David Prasnicky with 40 years; and Melinda Jones with 45 years of service. Certificates of recognition and gratitude were handed out during Family Day for exemplary work performances over the past year. Lunch was provided and activities were available for all ages, including board games, bingo, cornhole, and bounce houses.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.






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MICHAEL FERRARA '26
TELLS HIS VMI STORY.

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