

GENERAL J. H. BINFORD PEAY, III
SUPERINTENDENT

REMARKS AT FOUNDERS DAY CONVOCATION
11 November 2015

Mr. Rogers, Lieutenant Governor Northam, General Knapp, Mayor Fraim, Mr. Ramsey, members of the VMI Board of Visitors, Mr. Fain, VMI Foundation trustees, members of the Academic Board, faculty and staff, ladies and gentlemen of the Corps of Cadets, and guests. Welcome to this afternoon's Convocation marking the 176th anniversary of the founding of the Virginia Military Institute..... Mr. Rogers, in a few moments the VMI Foundation will present you with its highest award, the Distinguished Service Award. And, on behalf of the entire Institute community, I congratulate you on the high honor you are about to receive and thank you for your devotion and service to the Institute.

Before we begin these award proceedings, I would like to say a few words relevant to this day in the history of VMI and to its visionary Founders: Preston; Crozet, and Smith. When we think of the Founders, we tend to think of them as historical figures, living long ago, in a world far different from our own. Although they had no automobiles, planes, telephones, computers, or the other marvels of the modern age, their world was being transformed by the new technologies of their day: steam engines; the telegraph; high-speed printing presses, and railroads, to name a few. As is the case for us, they too had to adjust their thinking, behavior, and outlook to a rapidly changing world. In that sense, therefore, we can say that they are not simply historical figures, but modern men facing a modern world.

Being modern men, one wonders what they would say about the world we live in and, more specifically, about VMI if they were to reappear among us today. It is an interesting question, but it is not very unusual. It is probably the standard question posed by speakers at typical anniversary ceremonies at many other colleges and universities about their founders. And the standard answer, no doubt is: "Our founders would be filled with amazement and wonder by the changes." The same answer certainly can be assumed of our own founders, although because they were "forward-looking", innovative, and scientific-minded men, their sense of surprise probably would not be complete. Yet, it has been over 100 years since they passed from the scene, and almost everything has changed.

Let me bring this question forward a bit. What if graduates ***of only 50 years ago ...or when Mr. Rogers was completing his 3rd Class***

Year....suddenly awakened from a long Rip van Winkle-like sleep and saw the Institute as it is today. What would their reaction be to VMI today – *only 50 years after they received their diplomas?* That is not a long period of time, but I think they, too, would be filled with a sense of amazement and wonder at what they would see around them.

The Corps numbered only about 1000 cadets fifty years ago, living in Old and New Barracks, with rooms furnished with green tables and other items that dated from the **1890s**. The Corps was single-sex and had not yet enrolled its first African-Americans. Many of the professors were veterans of WWII, and a fair number were VMI graduates. Church attendance was mandatory, as was commissioning of all Cadets. Under Section Marcher control, Cadets formed outside their class's academic building and marched to each class. Cadets attended Saturday classes from 0800 until noon. Church call was also mandatory with cadets in church formations under the ranking cadet marching throughout Lexington to their respective place of worship. Most cadets carried slide rules on their belts, the only computational device available. If information was needed, they consulted a myriad of encyclopedias in Preston Library..., a source of information which was probably out-of-date the moment it was published. Fifty years ago, there was one incredibly large, second-hand IBM mainframe computer on post, and it was used "principally" for administration and to teach the rudimentary art of programming.

Barracks and the other buildings on Post were heated by coal-fed steam boilers. Buildings were not air-conditioned, which meant that everyone had to suffer through seasons of severe heat..., and with open windows, during exam week, listening to the W&L parties next door as we studied for final exams. There was one television with three channels and an antenna for reception in a special PX room for all cadets to watch. Cadets were virtually isolated most of the time as there were only a few pay phones in the Concourse near the arms room, for which cadets waited in long lines to use. In town, there was a Western Union office that enabled people to send telegrams. Free time uptown was confined to Wednesday afternoons and weekends, after football games...dining in the Southern Inn and normally ordering their superb meatloaf...; there was really very little to do in Lexington. Few cadets had cars, and then only during the last semester of the First Class year. A train continued to arrive in Lexington until Hurricane Camille four years later washed out the railroad bridge over the Maury River.

Think of what someone from **that time** – only fifty years ago – who regained consciousness today, would see and experience! What would have been his reaction to the news that man had walked on the moon, that space probes have gone to Mars and Pluto, to name just a few of the amazing

achievements of science; and, that our country won a “cold war”, fought in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and the broader Middle East... and Korea still remains divided and dangerous. There are many more examples, but let us “only” consider what a cadet then....would see at VMI.

Cadets still live in the Barracks, they still wear the historic uniform, they are still governed by traditional cadet organizations and systems, and they still adhere to a strong Honor System. On the other hand, the entire make-up of the Corps of Cadets has changed. The Corps of Cadets is now a diverse body of nearly 1700 cadets from all over our nation, including not only women and African-Americans but cadets from foreign countries living in three barracks. The faculty is equally diverse, drawn from national and international locations, mostly Ph.D., terribly qualified...and the Institute is nationally ranked..., highly ranked..., by almost all periodicals. Our science and engineering laboratories, in many respects, are state of the art; our liberal arts team is one of the best in America, and cadets are engaged not only in classroom learning but in research with their professors. Cadets are learning Arabic and Chinese. The ROTC program has expanded from two departments – Army and Air Force – to Naval and Marine ROTC. And, although some of the academic program familiar to cadets fifty years ago remains, there has been a steady “remodeling”, updating, and realigning of the curriculum, including the addition of new majors...Mechanical Engineering, Psychology, International Studies, Economics and Business, and Computer and Information Science. The Post has physically changed with a new North and South Post; major modernization of all facilities on Letcher Avenue – Academic Row, the addition of 200 acres and McKethan Farm for ROTC training; a Physical Plant at Lackey Park, and the addition of Stonewall Jackson’s home and the New Market Battlefield...among others.

The most notable change that would be seen by our visitors from fifty years ago, however, would be in **technology and communication**. Computers, the Internet, cell phones, and other devices have changed how we go about almost everything we do at the Institute. Through personal computers, a high tech post, and now smart phones..., cadets with a hand held device, have a “window” connected to the world; information is available at the touch of a button, and it is real-time and unlimited. Cadets have a library – larger than the Library of Congress many times over – in their pocket.

That yesterday was “stunningly different” in many ways from today.

And what of fifty years from now? What will the Institute be like? The solid core and core values of the Institute will remain, but the thought behind science, humanities, and society will continue to evolve and change so that if

we were to wake up in fifty years from today, we would probably share the amazement and wonder that those of fifty years ago would feel today. Unfortunately, the possibility of war and aggression clouds much of this today...the threat to our way of living, and thus the impact on the Institute. ***Yet, in this, we are like the Founders themselves...facing very difficult challenges on this Founders Day and Veterans Day.***

Fortunately, you, our Corps of Cadets, will not be asleep for the next fifty years. You will be part of the exciting changes and important developments that will take place... **and so will the Institute.** For....I know, that you will learn and demonstrate as all those who came before...of the power of living lives that recognize responsibility for others. You are trusted. You hone your sharpness through a rigorous military system, strong academics, and a robust physical program. The VMI experience prepares you for the life ahead: a life of strength and honor. And on this anniversary...the VMI Spirit – that combination of purposefulness, loyalty, integrity, and perseverance – is the “common bond” of true citizen-soldiers, who in military or civilian roles, will serve the nation so superbly in times of peace and deepest peril. As such, in 2039, our 200th Anniversary, you will be leading and creating positive change for society and the world that we can only contemplate this afternoon. I have the greatest confidence and absolutely no doubt in your national and community participation and leadership. ***The Institute will “continue” to be heard from today!***

Now it is my distinct pleasure to introduce Mr. Hugh Fain, VMI Class of 1980, who will introduce today’s honoree.

Mr. Fain is the President of the VMI Foundation, which sponsors today’s prestigious award. A graduate of the Class of 1980, he was vice-president of his Class and a prosecutor on the Honor Court. After graduating with distinction with a BA degree in Economics, he attended the University of Virginia Law School where he earned his JD degree in 1983. He is now the managing director / partner of Spotts-Fain, a law firm in Richmond. He was named by his peers in Chambers USA Best Lawyers in American in four categories; he has been named Virginia Business Magazine’s Legal Elite each year since 2003, and in the Virginia Super Lawyers list each year since its inception. He is past president of the Richmond Bar Association and immediate past president of the Virginia Bar Association.

Mr. Fain, in addition to a superb professional career, has remained loyal to VMI, serving the Institute in many important posts, including past president of the VMI Club of Richmond, and past president of the VMI Alumni Association. Please welcome Mr. Hugh Fain, VMI Class 1980.