

GENERAL J. H. BINFORD PEAY, III
SUPERINTENDENT
Remarks to the Reunion Class of 1991 (25th Reunion)
28 October 2016

Members of the VMI Class of 1991, spouses, and friends. Good evening -
- the Institute welcomes you back for this special 25th Reunion.

It's been 29 years since 409 of you signed the Matriculation Book and became VMI cadets. The day was the 19th of August 1987 and it marked the beginning of VMI's 148th year. On that day, you started a 5-day "New Cadet Orientation and Training Period," better known as "Cadre." At the end of that strenuous week, the Old Corps returned and you were introduced to the Rat Line by the Rat Disciplinary Committee (RDC). For the rest of the year, you were known to the upper classes as "The Rat Mass." It would be some very long months of testing before you became "The Fourth Class" and the "Class of 1991." The VMI Archives and the CADET Newspapers have numerous articles and facts describing events during your cadetship.

Overseeing your new life was Commandant of Cadets, COL David V. Harbach, Class '61. (I was a Rat when he was a 3rd Class Corporal if that is helpful). Colonel Harbach, the last active duty Commandant at VMI, would remain until the start of your Second Class year, when he was succeeded by COL William H. Dabney, Jr., Class '61. Col. Dabney retired at the end of the year and was succeeded by Col. Mike Bissell, also Class of 1961. The Superintendent when you arrived was GEN Sam S. Walker Class '45, who also remained until your Second Class year, when he was succeeded by MG John W.

Knapp Class '54, who had served as Dean of the Faculty. Three Commandants and two Superintendents during your cadetship!

The experience of your Rat year is probably a blur to many of you. There were Institute directed modifications in the way that your Cadre could perform its duties with new rules governing the Ratline, a revision of the demerit system, and changes to conduct and academic probation. Rats were allowed to wear their hair a little longer than in the past. One notable change that year was the banning of push-ups. To this last change, upperclassmen reacted by letting Rats out of the Ratline, but your class responded by giving yourself a workout and the Ratline was resumed. Your life was filled with: academic classes; a chaotic orientation session at New Market; Rat Training every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon; a run up House Mountain; numerous sweat parties, stoop runs, and rifle runs; Thursday evening Pep Rallies..., athletic events (this was the time of Ramon and Damon Williams and Bobby Garner, who brought excitement to the basketball court); the Corps Trip to the Oyster Bowl, and much more. At the end of the academic year, Joe DiMaggio, the famous New York Yankee baseball player, came to VMI to dedicate the new baseball diamond at Patchin Field.

Even with the changes, your Ratline was difficult for you. Not all who tried made it. By the time of your Breakout, 50 co-matriculants had departed. Finally, on 25 February 1988, you entered a week known as “Resurrection” and then successfully climbed “Breakout Hill” (also known as The Muddy Hill). The rat mass known as “88 plus 3” had become the “Class of 1991.” Later that

semester, your class elected class officers: Daniel S. Joseph, president; Marshall W. Bridges, vice president; and, Robert F. Cole, historian.

The Barracks that you entered was much like today's Barracks, although it consisted only of Old and New Barracks. The large number of cadets in the Corps caused over-crowding in the tight barracks space. This period saw the introduction of new modular furniture in cadet rooms (much to the dislike of many tradition-minded cadets). And, of course, this was the last year for the old "Sinks." One popular denizen of the Barracks, not a cadet but head of the custodial crew known as "The Bears," was Huey Johnson, a friend to all cadets. Across the Parade Ground, work was underway on a new science building. In addition, work was being done on VMI's athletic facilities: renovations to Son Read Memorial Track; the new baseball diamond at Patchin Field; new fields for soccer and lacrosse; a new football dressing room complex, and a new press box. A major change took place in the Commandant's Office and the Guard Room when a computer system was installed to replace the old practice of "signing in and signing out" on sheets of paper. During your First Class year, the Commandant's Office was transferred from Barracks to the upper floor of Lejeune Hall as part of a fundamental administrative re-organization.

It was at this time, also, that VMI was informed that the American Association of University Women was going to investigate VMI's male-only admission policy. The investigation was the beginning of a nearly decade-long battle in the courts to defend and retain the policy. Regarding another long-term policy, the Board of Visitors began to question the Institute's mandatory

commissioning policy. These investigations, as well as changes to other standing practices and policies, led to mounting concern over a perceived decay of traditional values at VMI.

In the nation and in the wider world, great changes were underway that would affect us for years. The 19th of October 1987 was “Black Monday” when stock markets fell around the world. The Soviet Union began a major restructuring... and a gradual collapse. The Russians also began withdrawing from Afghanistan, and the Iran-Iraq War ended. The United States was in the middle of a Presidential election, with Michael Dukakis as the Democratic nominee and George H. W. Bush as the Republican nominee.

At the start of your Third Class year, September 1988, Corps organization and governance and the Ratline continued to fall under scrutiny, as did the mandatory commissioning policy. Important changes were being made in the Corps structure and governance systems, changes that were not universally appreciated by the Corps. A third Battalion was established consisting of Golf, Hotel, and India companies. This was done to facilitate administration, create more responsive command and control within the Corps structure, and to increase leadership positions and opportunities.

Dissatisfaction over changes to the Ratline continued until, on the 16th of November 1988, the first class surprised everyone by announcing that it had “relieved the administration of control of Barracks” by relieving the designated guard team. This action led to several months of meetings and negotiations between class leaders and administration officials. After some time, Corps

leaders and Acting Superintendent MG John Knapp worked out a solution to the dispute and life returned to a semblance of normal. A classmate said: “We spend the first year here trying to learn the system and remaining years trying to interpret and argue the system” – a sentiment that I am sure cadets since 1839 have shared.

Also at the start of your Third Class year, you discovered that VMI had a second Rat Line -- the so-called “Academic Rat Line.” Otherwise, the year was much like most others: Barracks life; military training; parades; physical training; FTX; athletic events; Hops; Zollman’s, and Spanky’s. The excitement of the start of the academic year and the drudgery of the Dark Ages...but, that soon passed and by February the “woolies” were burned and many cadets headed for Spring Break. These were trying times for most of VMI’s athletic teams, but there were some notable victories that brought pride and excitement to the Corps.

On the world stage at the end of 1988, Pan Am Flight 103 was blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland, and the specter of “terrorism” began to infect our everyday lives.

Next door, Washington and Lee University went co-ed, and the VMI Cadet newspaper asked: “Is V.M.I. Next?” In fact, near the end of your third class year, in April of 1989, VMI received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice asking VMI to respond to allegations of sexual discrimination over its male-only

admissions policy. This was the beginning of a long court battle to preserve VMI policy, which was eventually struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court.

This was the time, as well, that the Saturday academic schedule – “Saturday Classes” -- was studied to be replaced with other activities, and...the age-old practice of forming on the bricks and marching to class under control of section marchers was abolished. The question of mandatory commissioning was debated for months. The final decision, which was made in February of 1990, rescinded the mandatory commissioning policy and, thereafter, cadets would be commissioned on a voluntary basis.

September of 1989, the start of your Second Class Year (1989-1990), was especially eventful in the United States and in the wider world. In January, VMI sent a contingent to the Inaugural Parade of President-elect George H. W. Bush. In March, news came of the disastrous Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. In the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev relieved the Old Guard and advocated “Glasnost” and “Perestroika,” which ultimately led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. In China, May of 1989 saw the protests in Tianamen Square. And, with grave consequences for the future, the first Al-Qaeda-related cell in the U.S. began operating in New York City. All harbingers of world-changing events to come.

November of 1989 also featured the celebration of VMI’s Sesquicentennial: 150 Years of producing Citizen-Soldiers. Guests from nearby colleges and a French delegation attended the ceremony, which included

the official dedication of the New Science Building. The other highlight of that weekend was the Keydet victory over the Citadel Bulldogs. Soon after, you celebrated that much-anticipated ceremony, the VMI Ring Figure, an event that ranks in importance with Breakout and Graduation. Each of you received your ring from General Knapp. That evening, the traditional Ring Figure ball was held in Cocke Hall. Meanwhile, half the VMI Regimental Band traveled to Paris to march in the celebration of the French Revolution Bicentennial Celebration.

As you were about to begin your First Class Year, 1990-1991, Iraq invaded Kuwait, leading to the first Gulf War. The Cadet newspaper carried thoughtful reports and opinion columns depicting the advent of significant new warfighting technologies. Yet, this was a time of rudimentary fax, no e-mail, nor GPS on the battlefield...; look at the exponential change our nation has seen in 25 years. Finally, early in 1991, coalition troops entered Kuwait and drove the Iraq Republic Guard out of the country, leading to a cease fire. At VMI, the community mourned the loss of two alumni: Lt. Terry Plunk Class '88 and Maj. Thomas Zeugner Class '76.

Changes in the administration were also occurring with a new Dean and Provost, Brig. Gen. Lee D. Badgett Class '61. On the other hand, Maj. Harold Wilcockson, highly respected Deputy Commandant who had served since 1977, retired.

Life at VMI this Academic Year was fairly quiet, although there continued to be changes in Cadet governance and new guidelines for disciplining Rats,

most of which did not sit well with the Corps. Cadet Captains sought reinstatement of privileges, and there were changes in the role of the General Committee. The Corps also saw the creation of the new S-2 program to support academic pursuits and the academic well-being of cadets. Perhaps the most noteworthy event in the social calendar was the visit by Beat Poet Alan Ginsberg, who gave a reading from the “Howl” and visited English classes.

The brightest spot in athletics was the track team, which won the Southern Conference championship in 1991, and Coach Mike Bozeman was named Southern Conference Coach of the Year. The Keydets also won the McAlister sportsmanship Award again, winning it five times in six years.

Hovering above the seemingly quiet life at VMI, however, was the “stepped-up challenge” to VMI’s male-only admission policy. Now the Department of Justice was threatening a law suit, and in fact made good on its threat. Virginia Governor Doug Wilder came out in favor of changing the admissions policy, and a bill was being prepared in the Virginia General Assembly to force VMI to change its policy. VMI was able to convince the General Assembly to delay acting until the matter went before the courts, the start of a long, slow, expensive process.

At your graduation, there was no traditional outside speaker. Instead, the Valedictory address was given by First Class President Daniel S. Joseph, and remarks (not speeches) were made by General Knapp and President of the Board of Visitors, Joseph Spivey III. Forty-six percent of you received the

bachelor of science in engineering or sciences, and 54 percent received the bachelor of arts degree. In summing up your four years at VMI, your historian wrote as follows: “One of the most valuable benefits obtained from our hardships was the common bond we had all built with mutual respect and understanding of one another.” When you graduated, you felt that you had made solid contributions to the development of VMI, in a time of serious institutional change, and you were ready to make your mark well beyond the limits of the Institute.

Your “early” record -- 25 years -- of service and sacrifice of the Class of 1991 is superb, and this evening the Institute acknowledges your achievements and offers our warmest congratulations.

But, let us not spend our entire evening just looking back. Reunions are also time to “reconnect” with the Institute, learning where VMI is today and where it is heading. Despite the recent economic downturn and other national challenges, I can report that the Institute is flourishing, its reputation is strong, its academic program has never been better, and our facilities across the entire post provide an enhanced environment for learning and leader development.

Vision 2039 continues to be our roadmap. Let’s recall we developed that in 2003..., took it to many locations across the nation..., tested it, received your input and listened to many diverse thoughts for VMI’s future. We organized four large focus groups at the Institute: academic, military, athletics, and the physical and cultural environment... and developed hundreds of initiatives

supporting fourteen operational objectives that would cause the Vision to become a reality with three cross cutting themes: commonality of purpose; synchronization, and integration. The Vision is basically what you and I memorized as Rats as the statement on the parapet... “A crowd of honorable youths pressing up the hill of science with noble emulation... etc.”

The details of these plans and Vision/Mission statements are important, and we constantly review them with the VMI Leadership Team and our Board of Visitors. We continue to adapt... for it has now been, since implementation in 2003, more than a decade. The basic thoughts and objectives remain unchanged...in fact confirmed that we are moving correctly towards 2039 – VMI’s 200th birthday.

I came out of these reviews with a “renewed” confidence that we do have it RIGHT: that we should stay in our niche... and not try to be “all things to all people.” We should understand that our BRAND, long history, fundamentals, uniqueness, traditions, and alumni are important. We should execute with great care, thought, and the best of judgment... and that our values and systems to inculcate them... must be secured despite the many pressures of regulatory, litigation, directives, social, and other attacks we constantly receive. Despite increased tuition and fees, applications are at an all-time high... and in quality. I can only conclude that parents will pay for excellence in education. This is a time for great steadiness and resolve!

As I reflect on our school... here are ten (10) points that I believe we can fairly and objectively say about a VMI education:

1) VMI is an Institute, not a college and not a university.

It is not Hampden-Sydney, a splendid small, private college; it is not JMU, an outstanding large university. It is not a splendid service academy. It is somewhat all of that... it provides a unique academic and leader education centered on a military structure, an adversarial system, and a cadet administered honor system.

2) We talk about the three-legged stool at VMI -- academic, military, and athletics – with academics being “first among equals.” We have a limited (14) number of degree offerings, and they are all challenging. We are, and should remain, wholly undergraduate. Sixty (60) percent of the Corps major in math, science, or engineering. All of our full-time faculty hold the PhD degree, and all of our full time faculty teach. Graduate students do not teach classes. Faculty members grade their own papers and are personally involved with their students. They develop “life-long” relationships with each other. We have small classes – one faculty member for 11.8 students. We have splendid enrichment programs. We have partnerships with the best graduate schools in America. We are nationally ranked and have excellent high tech classrooms and facilities.

3) Our military programs include all the services. Commissioning is optional, nevertheless 50 to 55 percent take a commission at graduation (and, note ... in time of war). There are generous financial opportunities in ROTC in terms of paying for one's college education. ROTC offers leadership opportunities and challenging and interesting military schools.

4) Regarding athletics – we are *one* team. The athletes at VMI “live” among the Corps of Cadets... there are no separate athletic dorms. Athletes are enrolled in the same difficult academic majors as all members of the Corps. Club Sports are enormous at VMI, with greater than 50 percent of the Corps of Cadets playing NCAA and Club Sports. Club Sports are organized, coached, well-resourced and nationally and internationally competitive. We are excited to be back in the Southern Conference with schools generally similar to our academic model, while playing NCAA Division I athletics as one of the smallest schools in the country.

5) Single sanction honor system: we are the *only* truly public single sanction system remaining in the country. A cadet may not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate those who do. The system is cherished by the Corps and our Alumni.

6) 98 percent of our cadets (annually) have jobs at graduation..., a remarkable achievement in these economic times. The VMI network and reputation are strong... and have contributed to this success story.

7) We have the strongest college “class system” in the nation: class bonding; friendships, and spirit last a lifetime.

8) We offer a “Spartan” four-year education. But, our cadets also have fun, and are involved in many of the traditional college experiences. Sometimes they have too much fun!

9) We encourage this path: attend VMI; take ROTC and commission in one of the services... serve a short four years; then move into one of our partnership graduate programs, and then to one’s chosen profession. If not commissioning, work for a great company, then attend one of our graduate- affiliated programs and then to one’s chosen profession. VMI produces leaders for all sectors in our society.

And lastly...

10) VMI delivers a “value-based” education... the very best in America!

I am now into my 14th Academic Year as your Superintendent. VMI has, in that time, changed... yet, we have not changed our fundamentals nor our values. In fact, we have “strengthened” them. Come back and visit the Institute often, and bring your family. Attend the ceremony where the new Rat Mass takes their oath, charges the Hill at New Market and tour the new Virginia Civil War Museum, and the VMI Hall of Valor and Battlefield. Tour the newly acquired Stonewall Jackson’s home. See the expanded VMI Museum in JM Hall... one of the oldest in the nation. Tour new 3rd Barracks and Lejeune Hall and our Marshall Hall, housing VMI’s Center for Leadership and Ethics. Visit Cormack Hall, the new home of the Physical Education Department and the Thunder Dome for NCAA Wrestling, tour a modernized Cocke Hall that supports the Corps and inspect Memorial Gardens. After its completion, very soon, visit the new \$80 million Corps Physical Training Facility, a massive facility on Route 11 that will provide an indoor capability for Corps fitness, drill, confidence courses, high rope courses, rock climbing, endurance training, rappelling, NCAA track, coaches’ offices and locker rooms, and a world class adjustable-banked Olympic indoor track for our NCAA teams. Take a Post tour by one of our cadet guides, see the Daniel’s Courtyard and explore North Post and Leadership Valley... witness the enormous capabilities for developing leaders for the future... and take pride in a parade or the impressive New Market Ceremony.

I hope you have a warm and memorable reunion. Thank you for your loyal support..., and “welcome back” to VMI, the great Class of 1991.