



# INSTITUTE REPORT

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## 'An Amazing Representative for VMI' Marine Corps ROTC Cadet Honored for National Achievement

By Mary Price

For the fourth time in the past six years, a Marine Corps ROTC cadet from VMI has been recognized for exceptional performance at summer training for future officers.

Alex Dragan '20 was recognized Saturday, Sept. 29, during halftime of the home football game against Mercer University for finishing first in his class of 85 at Platoon Leaders Course (PLC) for the



Maj. Gen. James Bierman '87 presents Alex Dragan '20 with the Marine Corps Commandant's Trophy during halftime of the Sept. 29 football game at Foster Stadium.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Marines this summer. In recognition of this achievement, he was presented with the highly prestigious Marine Corps Commandant's Trophy by Maj. Gen. James "Chip" Bierman '87, commanding general of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command at Quantico, Virginia.

"[Dragan] is an impressive young man," said Col. Craig Streeter '91, commanding officer of VMI's Naval ROTC.

See Commandant's Trophy, page 16

## Rat Triathlete Turns in Strong Performance Down Under

By Mary Price

For most rats, just getting through the Rat Line is hard enough. But Matthew Stann '22 had an additional challenge when he matriculated to VMI in August—preparing for the International Triathlon Union world championships, scheduled for Sept. 12-16 in Australia.

A triathlete since the age of 10, Matthew Stann had found his way into the sport, which involves running, biking, and swimming, through his father, John Stann

'95, who's also an avid triathlon contender. For the Stanns, who currently make their home in Reston, Virginia, triathlon is a family sport, with four of the family's eight children having some triathlon experience.

Matthew Stann qualified for the world championships thanks to a strong performance at the national level in 2017. Coming to VMI, though, he wasn't sure that the Rat Line would allow him the time

and flexibility for the type of ultra-intense physical conditioning needed to stay at the top of his game for triathlon.

He found, though, that just the opposite was true—the Rat Line was a source of physical and mental discipline that kept him honed for the approaching competition. "In many ways, life at VMI is an intensified version of a triathlete's routine,

See Triathlete, page 7

# Every Cadet an Athlete

By Mary Price

They run, swim, lift, and play nearly every sport imaginable—yet their accomplishments won't be touted on the sports pages of newspapers, and their competitions are often off post, which gives them even less visibility.

But fans of VMI club sports are noting club athletes' successes. Dozens of club sport teams are succeeding in competitions across the region, and those hosting events on post, including rugby and powerlifting, are drawing crowds.

VMI's club athletes are the majority of the Corps, numbering over 1,100, and NCAA athletes, numbering over 400, make up most of the remainder.

"Those two numbers together are almost the whole Corps," said Command Sgt. Maj. Suzanne Rubenstein, director of activities in the commandant's office.

As of mid-October, many sports were getting into the swing of the season, with meets and tournaments scheduled for most weekends.

Traditionally a spring sport, club lacrosse plays in the fall as well, although games played before the official start of the season in mid-February don't count toward team rankings.

Earlier this fall, the club lacrosse team traveled to the University of Maryland, where they won one game and lost two. "We lost to the University of Maryland, which is a really big school," said Lt. Col. Kevin Faust '96, who is in his second year as the team's coach. This past spring, Faust was honored as best first-year coach after leading his team to the National College Lacrosse League championships.

This year, Faust is rebuilding his team after losing approximately a dozen cadets to graduation in May. About five rats have been playing once a week with the team—the maximum they're allowed to practice while still in the Rat Line—and Faust sees potential in the newcomers.

"There's a number of rats that look pretty good," he noted, adding that the popularity of lacrosse among middle and high school students makes for seasoned players at the college level.

"Some of these kids bring a lot of experience," said Faust.

While many club athletes have experience competing in their sports, others are developing an aptitude for sports they hadn't played in the past.

"You can identify kids who come here and didn't know they had that talent," said Rubenstein.

The running club, led by head coach Col. L.E. Hurlbut, has a membership of about 60 cadets and welcomes cadet runners of all experience levels. Cadet runners are likewise off to a strong start this academic year, competing in races ranging from 5Ks to ultramarathons.

With so many athletes in the club, Hurlbut has help keeping them on track to meet their individual goals. Assistant running club

coaches Sean Cook and Maj. John Robertson IV aid Hurlbut in making sure each cadet gets the individual attention he or she needs.

Club sports athletes have time set aside for practice three times a week, and Running Club cadets, in addition to participating in Tuesday and Thursday afternoon practices, hit the track every Wednesday morning before sunrise.

"John just takes them down to the track and runs the snot out of them, and they love it," said Hurlbut.

All that practice is paying off, with VMI

runners traveling throughout the state this fall and taking part in several races, including the Hokie Half Marathon in Blacksburg, the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C., and the Chessie Trail races held just downriver from post.

Since cadet runners—like many club sports athletes—compete in events open to the general public, they also serve as ambassadors for the Institute, often interacting with and competing against VMI alumni.

"It's just awesome to be out there representing the Institute at all of these athletic events," said Hurlbut.

The triathlon club is also off to a good start this year, according to Sue Hilss, now in her fifth year as coach. The collegiate triathlon season runs primarily in September and October, she explained, with collegiate nationals taking place in the spring. But because triathlon is an endurance sport, consisting of running, biking, and swimming, club members practice year-round. The club has 20 members this year, up from 14 last year.

The highlight of the fall season for VMI's triathletes was the championship competition for the Mid-Atlantic Collegiate Triathlon



John Dickenson '20 powers towards the finish line at the Hokie Half Marathon in Blacksburg.—Photo courtesy of RunAbout Sports.

*Continued on next page*



# INSTITUTE REPORT

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**Header photo on page 1 by**  
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Conference, held Oct. 20 at Smith Mountain Lake. Hilss explained that this event attracts some big schools, among them the U.S. Naval Academy, Virginia Tech, Liberty University, and more—but as of mid-October, she had high hopes for her racers, among them Chris Lloyd '20, who's now ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the conference.

Hilss is also excited to see a number of rats interested in triathlon this year. "I think they all have prior triathlon experience, which is great for us, because normally 95 percent have no experience coming in," she commented.

Hilss is likewise pleased to have four women practicing with the triathlon club this year. "That's the highest number we've ever had," she said.

The Institute placed in the top 50 for male triathletes at the national championships in the spring.

This year, collegiate nationals will be held at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona—and despite the distance and cost, Hilss has high hopes that the Institute will be represented there. 🌿



VMI Powerlifting hosts a meet in Cocke Hall Oct. 13.—VMI Photo by Stephen Hanes.

## EMS Team Collaborates with Virginia Tech

Members of VMI's Emergency Medical Services team visit Virginia Tech Saturday, Sept. 8, to learn about Virginia Tech Rescue and the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets EMT program. While in Blacksburg, the VMI contingent attended a Virginia Tech home football game and worked alongside EMTs from Virginia Tech Rescue to treat patients attending the game at Lane Stadium. Those attending were Cadets Josh Arthur '20, David White '20, and John David Hatgas '19 along with Donnie McBrayer, VMI EMS adviser, and Col. L.E. Hurlbut, deputy commandant for support.—Photo Courtesy of Col. L.E. Hurlbut.



# 'My Fine Young Cadets'

## Mattis Explains Power of Intimidation, Inspiration to Corps of Cadets

By Ashlie Walter

Exuberantly received by the VMI Corps of Cadets, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis detailed the challenges cadets will soon face in a military—and a society—that needs leadership, allies, and modernization. He is the third secretary of defense to speak at the Institute this century and spoke to cadets, faculty, and staff Sept. 25 in Cameron Hall.

Mattis, who enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1969 and has played a leadership role in multiple wars, defined the primary powers of American influence in the world—those of inspiration and intimidation.

To illustrate that power of inspiration, Mattis shared a story about one of the men who had failed to kill him over the years—an enemy engineer who was captured attempting to lay an improvised explosive device on the road Mattis was taking to a remote base overseas. Following the engineer's capture, Mattis spoke with him.

"I want you all, especially you young people, to listen to me here. He said 'General, do you think if I'm a model prisoner, could I one day immigrate to America?' Think about that.



Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis receives a token of appreciation from Cadet William Reeves '19.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

"The hatred he felt was so much that he would go out and put a bomb in the road to kill us, but the example of America was so strong that if he could be sitting where you are today or have his son or daughter in that audience, he'd have given his eyeteeth," said Mattis. "It wasn't just because we caught him. This was deeper."

Mattis reminded cadets that each of them is part of that legacy of inspiration and they must fight to defend it.

"You give up that moral and ethical high ground, that historic legacy that we carry with us, at our nation's peril," said Mattis. "So you hold that close. You take care of each other."

He described the U.S.

military as the first line of effort to keep the American experiment alive. Its purpose, he said, is to intimidate adversaries. It does that by being ready and willing to engage in the difficult, often vicious, aspects of war when called upon.

"Anytime a military loses sight of its purpose, it gets beaten. ... We need very high levels of readiness," Mattis said.

A second line of effort Mattis highlighted is maintaining and strengthening alliances.

"Anyone who reads history knows that nations with allies thrive, but nations without allies basically wither away," he said. Mattis praised George Marshall, VMI class of 1901, for creating a plan to unite broken countries on both sides of the conflict following World War II.

"He extended a hand to our allies flattened in the war... but he also went to adversaries. Think of how vicious [the fighting] was," he said. "Then he turns around and helps set up a plan to draw these nations back together into this community of nations."

After rebuilding Europe, Marshall was also instrumental in establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), something an Australian ambassador told Mattis was the "most sacrificial act in world history."

However, he also noted that the U.S. is no longer in the post-World War II era when a devastated Europe was rebuilding. Mattis emphasized that those same countries now have substantial resources and should not rely on the U.S. to "carry the full burden."

Mattis went on to say the U.S., as a nation, is still working on building something better.

"We're still building a nation; it's hard work but noble work. Don't ever think we are done. We are not perfect, but we will

### Romanian Land Forces Academy

Representatives from the Romanian Land Forces Academy, including Maria Patesan, dean of the military sciences faculty, and Lt. Col. Adrian Teodorescu, advanced training (tactics) instructor, sign a Memorandum of Agreement with Brig. Gen. Bob Moreschi. This is the first MOA between VMI and any Eastern European military academy.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.





always strive to be better,” said Mattis. “We are stronger when we are together.”

In terms of building a better nation, VMI serves as the model for the skills U.S. society needs, including leadership and maintaining a “fighting stance,” Mattis said.

In addition to elaborating on policy and strategy details, Mattis drew a personal connection with members of the Corps, referring to them throughout the address as, “my fine young cadets,” and offering advice on how to engage with their subordinates after commissioning.



Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis addresses the Corps of Cadets in Cameron Hall Sept. 25.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

During a question and answer session, cadets asked questions on topics including the role of women in combat, vulnerabilities in cybersecurity, the U.S. military as a global police force, and the need for a more physically fit society.

“There are a lot of badass women here,” said Logan Amico ’20, “some more physically fit than I am and smarter than I am,” in asking whether females in combat roles make U.S. fighting forces more effective.

“Because so few women have signed up along these lines, we don’t even have data that I can answer your question,” said Mattis “There are a few stalwart young ladies who are charging into this, but they are too few. Right now it’s not even dozens. It’s that few. The jury’s still out on it, but what we’re trying to do is give it every opportunity to succeed.”

Mattis encouraged cadets to take individual initiative to contribute to a stronger nation.

“We need some of you to be the Spartans at the gate because we’re not going to hang onto these freedoms because our grandfathers fought,” said Mattis of the current state of physical fitness in the nation.

“Every generation is going to have to fight to keep this experiment alive,” he continued. “Take the fitness that you’re expected to

maintain here into every walk of life—not just your family, but your parish, your school district, your local community. Get out there and start working with the kids when they’re young.”

Mattis also spoke about the evolving nature of strategic challenges.

“How we protect the country was brought into stark relief on 9/11 ... everyone in a uniform knew we had let down America on 9/11,” he said, emphasizing that U.S. defenses must remain adaptable to current threats.

Regarding cyber threats, Mattis proposed that a plan down the road might be offering government-backed cybersecurity solutions to private businesses.

Before leaving the stage to a standing ovation, Mattis gave the Corps a few final words to remember.

“Every one of you could have picked an easier school to go to. Here are three words I leave with you to keep you from laying on a shrink’s couch at 45 wondering ‘Where did my life go?’” said Mattis. “Put others first.” ❀



## Key African-American Alumni Honored

In recognition of their leadership and role in the racial integration of the Institute, Gen. J.H. Binford Peay III ’62, superintendent, honored four alumni at the Sept. 29 football game. Joining him on Alumni Memorial Field are (left to right) Darren McDew ’82, the first African-American regimental commander; Eugene Williams ’74, who was recognized for his 30-year mission of working with at-risk students to help them reach their college goals; Anthony Hamilton ’79, the first African-American general committee president; and John C. Gregory ’89, the first African-American honor court president.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.



# 'Fighting for a Strategic Relationship'

## Vietnam Conference Explores Impact of America's Most Controversial War

By Mary Price

Perhaps the most controversial war the United States has ever fought, the Vietnam War, claimed a still-uncertain number of American lives and left the country unsure of itself militarily for a decade afterward. Time, though, allows a greater sense of perspective, and with this year's observance of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tet Offensive, which marked a watershed in the ground war, veterans and scholars of the war joined current cadets to learn more about it Sept. 24 at the Center for Leadership and Ethics.

A symposium titled "The Vietnam War at 50: Critical Reappraisals" attracted 350 cadets and nearly 200 outside attendees. The one-day gathering featured speeches from Vietnam veteran, author, and former U.S. Senator Jim Webb and Dr. Hal Kushner, a physician who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam from 1967 to 1973. Panelists included authors of books on the war and journalists who'd reported from Vietnam during the war years.

Even after a half-century has passed, the Vietnam War still reverberates today, said Col. Dave Gray, director of the Center for Leadership and Ethics. Gray referred to the long conflict as the "most controversial and consequential conflict in the post-World War II era ... controversies over the proper strategy and tactics to pursue, the quality

of leadership and discipline [in] fighting units, and the media's impact on popular support for the war, and mistreatment of American prisoners of war raged then and continues even now."

The symposium kicked off Monday morning with Webb, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate who served as secretary of the Navy in the 1980s, explaining that the fall of China to communist leadership in 1949, plus the post-World War II departure of colonial powers from Asia, set the stage for U.S. involvement in Vietnam as fears of communist domination mounted.

"If you take a look at this region, the Southeast Asia region, it's the most dynamic region in the world at the end of World War II," said Webb. "Because of a number of factors, there were economic and political vacuums throughout this region. ... All of this region was in flux."

He added that at least 30 percent of the world's trade passes through Southeast Asia, making the area critical to the global economy.

Webb stressed that the war was not lost due to lack of effort, either on the part of enlisted soldiers or their leadership. "These were very good soldiers," he commented. "The U.S. military leadership was the finest leadership, in depth, in the history of the U.S. military."

Yet the war in Vietnam, which was dramatically unpopular for so many



Former U.S. Senator Jim Webb shares his experiences in Vietnam during the Vietnam conference in Gillis Theater, Sept. 24.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

segments of American society, was different from its predecessors in so many ways. "The length and intensity was almost unparalleled in American history," Webb stated.

The Vietnam War, Webb stated, was really three different wars: a war of terror made up of assassinations of South Vietnamese leaders, a guerrilla war, and a traditional, classic war, all of which had to be fought at once. Webb argued that the United States failed to realize the tripartite nature of the Vietnam conflict, and that was one of the strategic shortcomings which ultimately led to defeat.

Webb also noted that most histories of the war end with the April 30, 1975, fall of Saigon—yet a look at what happened after that date is critical to understanding its full effects. Thousands of Vietnamese attempted to leave via the South China Sea, and some, including Webb's future wife, were plucked from the ocean and brought to live in the United States. Their rescue, the speaker noted, "is a great reminder of what we were trying to do [in Vietnam]."

While the war looked ostensibly lost for a long while, with the Soviet Union imposing what Webb called a "bamboo curtain," supporting the Vietnamese government and enjoying long-denied warm-water port access to the Pacific Ocean, the crumbling of the Soviet government in the early



Dr. Hal Kushner talks about his time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam from 1967 to 1973 during the Vietnam conference in Gillis Theater, Sept. 24.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.



1990s marked a turning point. The United States and Vietnam formally reestablished relations in 1995, and since that time, the relationship has continued to warm.

"We're seeing more openness, more trade, more friendship," Webb stated.

That rapprochement is what the United States was seeking all along, the former senator believes. "What we were really fighting for was a strategic relationship, a harmonious relationship with one of the four or five most important countries in Southeast Asia," said Webb. "The people who went to Vietnam deserve a lot more respect than they've received."

Panelists Phil Goia '67 and Ron Milam, author of *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War*, were interviewed on the topic, "Courage and Loyalty: Leading Citizen-Soldiers in Combat."

Goia, who appears in the Ken Burns/Lynn Novick PBS documentary, *The Vietnam War*, said that for him, military service was seen as an obligation. "The Army, in my family, was kind of a family business," he stated. "I always wanted to lead American soldiers."

After graduating from VMI, Goia went on to serve two tours in Vietnam—and several objects he brought back with him are now

on display as part of the VMI Museum's new exhibit, "Heroism, Resilience, Sacrifice: Vietnam at 50." Items Goia donated include a Vietnamese eating bowl, a North Vietnamese hammock, and a North Vietnamese mess kit.

Goia stressed that VMI gave him excellent preparation for his service in Vietnam.

"Somebody mentions that [Officer Candidate School] puts you under a lot of stress," Goia observed, to chuckles from the alumni in the audience. "They do here. I had four years of it. ... VMI does give you something that's different from a lot of the other ROTC schools and full military colleges." ❄

## Triathlete *continued from page 1*

and it only took one month of the Rat Line to make me faster at the world championships," Stann noted.

Stann also had help from Capt. Corey Bachman, assistant commandant for support and his company's tactical officer. Recognizing that Stann needed more time to prepare for the upcoming competition, Bachman helped him get a permit allowing him to miss required evening rat activities the week before the competition. Stann used those freed-up hours to train with the VMI triathlon team.



Matthew Stann '22 and his father, John Stann '95, both traveled to Australia to compete in the International Triathlon Union world championships.—Photo courtesy of Matthew Stann '22.

"The time spent training with them helped me recover and recondition for the race," said Stann. "If that had not happened, there's no way I would have been able to do as well as I could have."

That extra training time paid off. When the competition was over, Stann had set a new personal record of 2:13:22, shaving 11 minutes off his previous best time. "The race itself [was].... definitely the most competitive race I've ever been in," Stann commented. "You're taking the best in the world and throwing them into one place."

While he was giving it his all physically, Stann was still trying to keep up with his studies as well. He did some academic work each night in Australia so he wouldn't be as behind when he returned to VMI.

"I definitely struggled a little bit in terms of academics over that time," he said. "My grades kind of dipped a little bit just because I had twice as much work to pull ahead and



Matthew Stann '22 sets a new personal record at the International Triathlon Union world championships.—Photo courtesy of Matthew Stann '22.

when I got back I had twice as much work to get caught back up."

Now, though, Stann's grades have rebounded. "[Professors] were very understanding," Stann commented. "As of now I'm not doing too shabby."

He's also cherishing memories of the people he met in Australia, which was the site of his first international competition. He and his father, who also competed in his own age group, chatted with fellow triathletes from England, New Zealand, Australia,

and even Germany, as John Stann speaks German fluently.

"Some of the most obscure countries were there—some that I'd never heard of," Matthew Stann said. "It's as if you can go to one part of the world and experience it all at the same time, because everybody's there."

Stann hopes to continue competing internationally at the upcoming world championships in Lausanne, Switzerland. ❄

# Heroism, Resilience, and Sacrifice on Display

By Maj. John Robertson IV

A new exhibit in the VMI Museum tells the remarkable stories of VMI alumni who fought in Vietnam through the objects they brought out of the jungle, including an American flag improvised at the Hanoi Hilton, a handmade Viet Cong rifle, and an X-ray of a 40mm grenade lodged in a man's back.

More than 3,800 VMI alumni served in Vietnam, and a handful of those alumni entrusted the VMI museum with objects that tell their story.

Perhaps the most meaningful artifact in the exhibit came from James Berger '61, who was imprisoned in North Vietnam from 1966 to 1974. With a red polo shirt, a white handkerchief, and a scrap of a blue sweater, Berger created a symbolic American flag that could be assembled and disassembled to prevent its discovery.

"This is one of the most incredible artifacts in our collection of 30,000 pieces," said Col. Keith Gibson '77, director of the VMI Museum System. "Every morning, when he assembled those objects, he would recite the pledge of allegiance and think of his wife and everything he left back home."

Berger's flag rests among other objects he made during his long imprisonment—and among objects issued by his captors.

"I was sorting through these with Jim Berger before he died two years ago, and I asked him, 'Well, I see on here it says *tù* 4518. What does *tù* mean?' He looked at me and said, '*tù* means prisoner.' Well, that's the whole story—*tù* means prisoner," said Gibson. The Vietnamese term for prisoner of war is *tù binh*.

While many objects in the exhibit reflect the stories of VMI alumni who graduated in the early 1960s, others were brought home by an older generation—soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines who had already fought two wars by the time the Vietnam War began.

Among those alumni was Air Force physician James Humphreys '35, who came across a Vietnamese civilian with a 40mm grenade lodged in his back. While other surgeons were unwilling to operate because of the risk of the grenade exploding, Humphrey constructed a sandbag bunker around the patient and removed the grenade.

Newsreel footage of the surgery plays on a screen and complements artifacts from the incident, including an X-ray of the civilian's back and Humphrey's Air Force fatigue jacket.

Those screens also show the 1<sup>st</sup> Class portraits of VMI alumni featured throughout the exhibit.

"Here's the important thing: That's Dr. Humphreys not as Maj. Gen. Humphreys, but as 1<sup>st</sup> Class Cadet Humphreys. You see that's the connection with today's Corps of Cadets," said Gibson.

Other objects, like the flight helmet worn by Mike Bissell '61, reflect extraordinary acts of courage.



The pieces of cloth Jim Berger '61 used to assemble an American flag are on display in the VMI museum, along with other items from his imprisonment in North Vietnam.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Three times Bissell flew his Huey into heavy fire to rescue a severely wounded American military adviser. Bissell was hit in the neck and his crew chief killed, but they lifted off from the third attempt, crash landed at the nearest medevac pad, and saved the adviser's life.

"He is awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, which is second only to the Medal of Honor," said Gibson. "This helmet was a participant in that moment of Mike Bissell's life."

Another corner of the exhibit showcases weaponry used by both sides in the conflict. A profoundly rustic jungle-made Viet Cong rifle stands in stark contrast near an M16.

"It says something about the resources available to them, but also their resourcefulness," said Gibson. "They were a very determined people to have been fashioning things like that to go up against an M16."

Many other unique objects with their own stories round out the exhibit—a NVA Boonie hat captured by then 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Jim Joyner '67, boots still covered in the dust of the combat zone brought back by Russell Proctor III '65, a model of Philip Gioia '67 wearing tiger stripe jungle fatigues, and a Virginia flag that George Barton IV '66 carried with him through three campaigns—all fragments of alumni experiences in the war.

The exhibit is the product of weeks of sustained work by Gibson and his staff, including cadet assistants Zachary Shaffer '20 and Patrick Layman '19.

"These are all Vietnam artifacts that alumni picked up off the ground and brought back—sandals and Viet Cong gear," said Layman. "It really allows you to go back in history and touch the past."

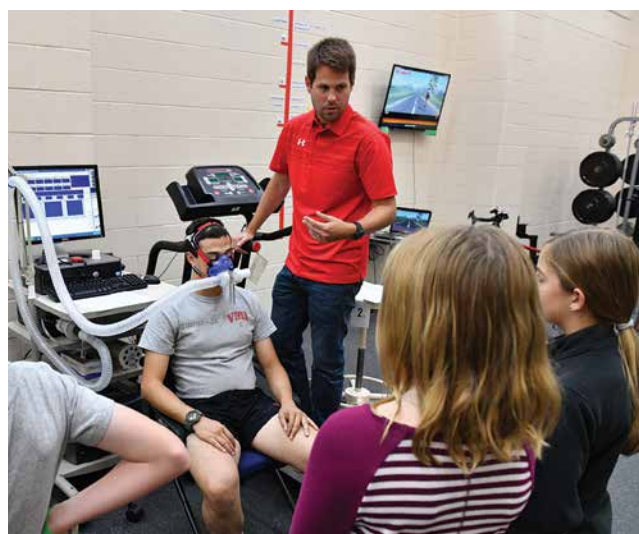


The exhibit's opening coincided with the Center for Leadership and Ethics' symposium, "The Vietnam War at 50: Critical Reappraisals." The stories that the exhibit tells offer an opportunity for participants—several of whom served in the war—to explore the history more deeply.

"We always enjoy the ability to collaborate across post with other departments and greatly appreciate Col. Gibson's ability to showcase VMI with such a timely exhibit," said Maj. Kim Connolly, assistant director for conferences and programs at the CLE. "During our conferences, we specifically build into our programming time for participants to hear about or visit locations on post so that their experience with us is that much more memorable." ❄



The helmet Mike Bissell '61 wore during his service in Vietnam is on display in the VMI museum.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.



## Science Fair

VMI employees, volunteers, and cadets demonstrate aspects of exercise physiology during the Lexington Science Festival and Maker Fair Oct. 14 in Cormack Hall. Participants learned how human characteristics of athleticism compare to other animals and how to measure VO<sub>2</sub> max and caloric intake. Other stops during the festival included Lexington Presbyterian Church and Lexington Collaboratory, where participants experienced virtual reality, made slime, and simulated earthquakes.—VMI Photos by Stephen Hanes.



## Foreign Service Officer Discusses Language Learning

U.S. State Department foreign service officer Kevin Vogel speaks with cadets Oct. 18 about the benefits of foreign language proficiency for internationally oriented careers. After graduating from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, Vogel served as a youth development volunteer in Morocco. An avid proponent of foreign language proficiency, he speaks French, Spanish, German, and Moroccan Arabic and has taught both English and French in France, Morocco, Texas, and Georgia. His State Department postings have included the Ivory Coast, Peru, Morocco, and Washington, D.C.—Photo courtesy of Maj. Abbey Carrico.





# Cadets Learn Leadership, Military Skills at Fall FTX

By Ashlie Walter



Army ROTC cadets train at McKethan Park during fall FTX Oct. 6.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

Fall Field Training Exercises are a chance for cadets to spend extra time on military training as well as experience an immersive leadership challenge. More than 1,000 cadets spread out over post and at McKethan Park Oct. 5-7 to hone their tactical skills and even to play some paintball.

Navy cadets practiced anti-terrorism drills in Kilbourne Hall and joined with the Lexington Fire Department to learn damage control and firefighting techniques. They also climbed the ropes and rock wall in the Corps Physical Training Facility and practiced a

downed-pilot scenario on North Post combined with a paintball battle, according to Lt. Adam Carlson, senior naval instructor for Naval ROTC.

Meanwhile, the Marine Corps trained in infantry tactics on North Post. Joining them were 11 ROTC cadets from the University of Virginia.

“This was our best FTX yet, mainly due to the involvement of the midshipmen that helped plan and execute all of the events,” Carlson said.

For many cadet leaders, this is the first time they planned the training instead of being trained.

Isela Vazquez '19 said she had some experience planning FTX from a platoon leader's perspective last year, but this was her first time planning on a company level for Army ROTC at Lackey Park. She

added that much of the planning was new to her, but she learned a lot from organizing operation orders for the first time.

Colton Curry '19 said planning FTX requires a close attention to many seemingly small details.

“It's pretty challenging for all of us. It takes a lot of time and coordination for an OPORD. Those details, it's crazy how much that matters. We don't think about it going through our days. You think about planning an operation like you plan your day: the weather is this, what can I wear. ... These are all aspects to plan,” Curry said.

He added that for spring FTX he would prefer to start planning earlier versus the fall. This semester he started planning the last week in August, which he found was not enough time to finalize details.

“It's good practice for when we get into the Army. I think this is the most pertinent



Naval ROTC cadets learn firefighting techniques from members of the Lexington Fire Department on Fiorini Field Oct. 6.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



training at VMI to what I will actually do in the Army. You will be writing OPODs and leading soldiers,” Vazquez said.

Most of her company was made up of rats who had little experience in Army training unless they participated in the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps in high school.

“Many hadn’t done a ruck march before or slept outside. We taught them basic soldier tasks: how to read a map, land navigation, introduce communications,” she said.

Curry’s company had mostly 3<sup>rd</sup> Class cadets who used the skills they learned as rats but now were asked to use them for a grade during training at McKethan Park.

“I think it was a lot of information. The great thing about FTX is you have all this time. During control time, it’s condensed; with FTX, we have full two-hour blocks to show them everything. To instruct them and then have them do a practical exercise really makes a difference,” Vazquez said.

Steele Lamade ’19 ran the training for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Cadets at Goshen and echoed Vazquez and Curry by saying the planning required numerous details and little intricacies he was unaware of before.

Col. Steve Biggs, commander of the Air Force ROTC, said more than 200 cadets started their training

exercises with drills on the Parade Ground followed by rounds of paintball at McKethan Park to learn tactical training. They wrapped up the day with company sports back on the Parade Ground. ❧



Naval ROTC cadets climb the high ropes course in the Corps Physical Training Facility during fall FTX.—VMI Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

## Cadet Participates in Navy Project at Johns Hopkins

By Ashlie Walter

For Demetra Protogyrou ’19, the skills she learned in VMI’s applied mathematics department allowed her to pursue a summer internship with Johns Hopkins University’s Applied Physics Laboratory.

Her work, which started July and ended right before the fall semester, involved analyzing missile targets and how far apart missiles could be from each other.

“I learned that school and industry are two different things. You learn to program the basics, and in industry, they use every shortcut possible. Especially when I was reading code, and I realized it was already in the program. It was different in a sense,” she said.

Protogyrou was introduced to the internship after attending an alumni meet and greet last year on post where she met Jack Keene ’81, who works with the physics lab and was looking for interns.

The internship helped her learn that research was a field she wanted to pursue as a career.



Demetra Protogyrou ’19

“It made me realize how much I like research. My biggest thing is operational research; just the idea of maximizing and minimizing, essentially how to maximize profit,” she said.

For example, if a company wants to start a new line of cookies, it first has to look at the cost of supplies versus the perceived profit and if it is worth the investment, Protogyrou said.

Many of the classes she’s taken at VMI, such as linear programming and operational research, helped prepare her for the work she did at Johns Hopkins.

While working at the physics lab, Protogyrou connected with two VMI alumni, Paige Nardazzo ’14 and Graham Martin ’16, who showed her different

career paths into research.

Nardazzo attended graduate school before working at the physics lab, while Martin went to work at the lab right after graduation.

“They taught me a lot about life coming from VMI and the preparation we have. They were different majors but awesome to be around that you don’t necessarily get every day here,” Protogyrou said. ❧

# Historian Explores the Stories of Jackson's Slaves

By Kelly Nye

While the lives of Civil War icons such as Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and their families have been documented and debated over the years, history has had little to say about the individuals whom they owned. An exhibit currently under construction at the Stonewall Jackson House, backed up by the research of historian Larry Spurgeon, will help change that.

For the past year, Spurgeon and Maj. Grace Abele, site director of the Stonewall Jackson House, have done everything they can to find out what happened to the six people Jackson and his wife, Mary Anna, owned as slaves prior to the Civil War.

"Their presence is very important. There were more slaves in the house than Jacksons," explained Abele.

Amy, Emma, Hetty, George, and Cyrus all lived on the property with the Jacksons. Albert was also owned by the Jacksons and rented out to VMI, the Lexington Hotel, and the Rockbridge Alum Springs as a butler. Amy served as the Jackson's cook. Emma, who was only 4 at the time the Jacksons bought her, was a handmaid-in-training. Hetty served as Anna's housekeeper and handmaid. Hetty and her teenage sons, George and Cyrus, joined the household as part of Anna's wedding dowry. George

and Cyrus most likely worked the garden and did the heavy lifting on the farm.

"What we knew before was minimum. Some of it came from Jackson's widow, Anna, some of it came from Jackson's sister-in-law, Maggie Preston, and even some letters from Jackson's wife and Jackson's sister, Laura," said Spurgeon.

"We knew literally almost nothing about them after 1864," continued Spurgeon.

There are no photos of them, nothing written in their hand, no evidence of their existence other than census records and slave deeds.

"What spurred my research was Grace mentioning maybe they took the name Jackson," said Spurgeon, noting that after the war it was common for slaves to take the last name of their owner.

Sure enough, after deep digging on *ancestry.com* and *newspapers.com*, Spurgeon found marriage and death certificates confirming that George, Hetty, and Emma had moved to North



Laura Jackson Arnold, Jackson's sister, was a Union supporter.—Photo courtesy of VMI Archives.

Carolina with Anna and stayed within a mile or two of her family after the war. Little is known, however, of what happened to Cyrus, Amy, and Albert.

Hetty left Anna Jackson after she was freed and lived well into her 90s. George founded Gold Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Lincoln County, North Carolina, and Emma married and had her own family.

Spurgeon and Abele traveled to North Carolina last December and found the church George started. After talking to the current pastor, they realized that his wife is a descendant of George's. The couple had no idea her forefather was one of Jackson's slaves.

"When we were standing over George's grave—I'm thinking, 'This is George,'" said Spurgeon. "This is the first time people from Lexington even knew that he ended up down here. And he died a 74-year-old man with a big family, well respected."

George's accomplishments were due in part to Jackson, who was a proponent of education for African-Americans. Jackson



Larry Spurgeon receives an award from Brig. Gen. Dallas Clark '99 for his research at the Stonewall Jackson House.—VMI File Photo by Kelly Nye.



taught him and his brother how to read, leaving them better equipped to succeed than most slaves after the war.

Spurgeon presented his research in a paper this June at the 17<sup>th</sup> biennial Stonewall Jackson Symposium. The general public will soon have a chance to learn more about the other Jacksons, as an exhibit dedicated to Jackson's slaves is under construction at the Davidson-Tucker House, now under renovation.

"They are an important part of the house and it fills in some gaps," said Abele. "It helps us populate the house with all the people who lived here."

Spurgeon's next project is researching Jackson's sister, Laura Jackson Arnold, and her family. Arnold and Jackson were the only remaining members of their immediate family, and they were very close, frequently writing letters to each other. Arnold remained in West Virginia, serving as a nurse during the war, and became a Union sympathizer. Spurgeon hopes to uncover what became of their

**George Jackson, colored, age 75 years, died last week at his home in East Lincoln. He was one of the few remaining ex-slaves of this section. He was proud to tell that he had been the servant of Stonewall Jackson.**

George Jackson's obituary identifies him as one of Stonewall Jackson's slaves.—Photo courtesy of Maj. Grace Abele.

relationship, as well as Arnold's relationship with Anna Jackson after Stonewall Jackson's death. ✱

## Bedford Visit

Rats visit the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford Sept. 30 to learn about the sacrifices made at Normandy during World War II. After rotating through the stations and meeting veterans, the cadets joined the commandant of cadets, Col. Bill Wanovich '87, in placing a wreath at the memorial to honor the fallen. The annual trip teaches new cadets about the sacrifices made in service to the country.—VMI Photos by Ashlie Walter.



# Cadets See Latest Tech, Meet Vice President

By Ashlie Walter

For about 20 VMI Air Force ROTC cadets, attending the Air Force Association Air, Space, and Cyber Conference last month was not just an opportunity to learn and see what new technologies they may use in the field, but also a chance to meet Vice President Mike Pence.

The cadets attended the conference in National Harbor, Maryland, on Sept. 18, which was the 71<sup>st</sup> birthday of the U.S. Air Force.

The conference featured officials from all ranks in the Air Force, as well as contractors showing off their newest technology, including new applications of virtual reality.

"I am still blown away by the number of important people, the type of jobs; they were all there. I was first drawn to the tech demo," said Charles Remig '19, who attended the conference. "I want to be a drone pilot, and I got to talk to so many people about what they do."

Being a technophile, Andrew Rundquist '19 said it was "mind-boggling" to see all the newest technology available to the Air Force.

The main goal of the technology was training—how to train faster and as efficiently as possible, Remig said.

"You didn't use to have this. Before, you could be in a plane spending who knows how much on gas and time. Now, you can do everything from a computer," he said.

Rundquist added that he was impressed by the variety of features with the virtual reality headsets, including hand tracking software and detailed cockpit designs. Even Bohemia Interactive, a video game developer, was at the conference showing off new designs for training simulations.

Both cadets own a few of Bohemia's video games, which is why they recognized the name.

"We are living in a tiny golden age of computing power and that is translating into training opportunities. What tech can do when we shove more power into it," Rundquist said.

Meanwhile, Rundquist said he had another goal in mind: meeting Pence, who was a special guest at the conference.

Col. Steven Biggs, commander of VMI Air Force ROTC, said many conference officials knew Pence would attend but none of the participants knew.

Seeing that Pence was following a distinct route, Rundquist said he told everyone to stand at a specific booth that looked like it would put them in Pence's line of sight. The plan worked.

"He definitely had an agenda. To see him break out and shake our hands, take a photo. He shook my hand and said 'We need you boys. We will need you in the fight.' It was a surreal experience, especially since that is the No. 2 man," Rundquist said.

Remig said it was amazing to him that Pence knew who they were, and that shows the reach of VMI.

Another factor that impressed the cadets was the number of attendees in addition to Pence who recognized the VMI uniform. In past years they wore winter greys, which meant they were often mistaken for cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. This year they wore class dyke, which got more recognition.

Other attendees recognized the white uniforms because they had worn the same uniform before. Remig noted they met numerous alumni from many different ranks.

One alumnus they met was Derek Rankin '05, who is a drone operator, the same field Remig wants to go into when he commissions.

"VMI is its own little bubble. Sometimes [civilians] will see the ring and recognize. For alums to say 'Hey, we got your back.' They are willing to throw their emails at you because they look after their own," Remig said.

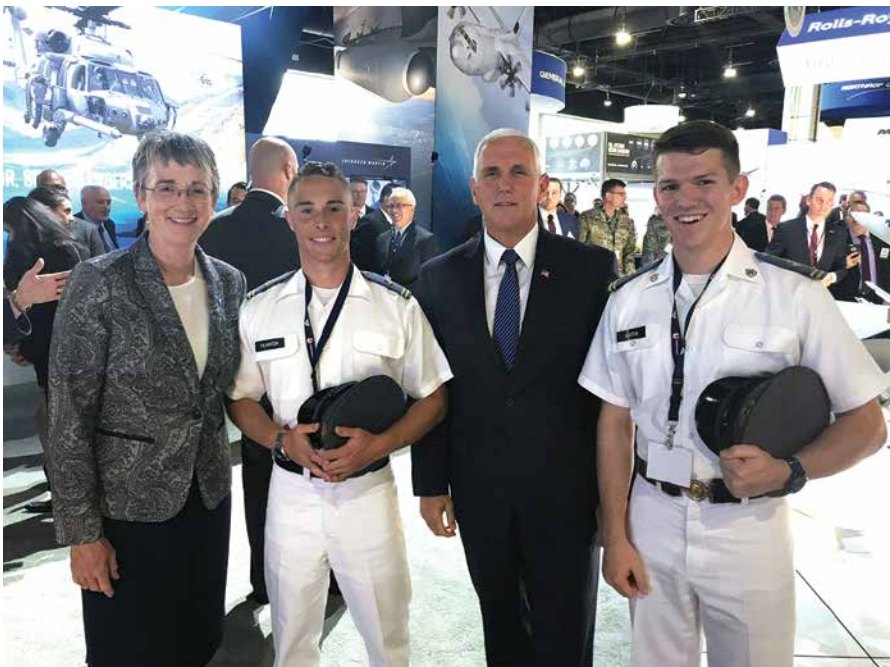
Rundquist echoed the statement by saying that on post, cadets hear a lot about VMI's alumni network but it's hard to put that into something relatable until they go out into the outside world.

Biggs said he hopes in the future to be able to reserve buses for Air Force cadets to attend the conference, which could allow more cadets to experience it.

The conference did get off to a bumpy start for the cadets, before even leaving the Lexington area. The group rented two passenger vans and just a few miles off post, a tire exploded on one van.

Everyone jumped into action to help and after switching out vans back on post, the cadets arrived at the conference just after missing Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson's opening speech.

Despite that beginning and after seeing the technology and meeting everyone, Rundquist said he remembered turning to Remig at the conference and asking, "Can we commission today?" 🌸



John Pilkinton '20 and Stirling Martin '20 pose with Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence during the Air Force Association Air, Space, and Cyber Conference Sept. 18 in National Harbor, Maryland.—Photo courtesy of Col. Steven Biggs.



# Summer Study Abroad to Focus on European Union

## Economics and Business, International Studies Faculty Will Lead New Trip

By Mary Price

Next summer, there will be a new opportunity for cadets interested in study abroad—and a cross-departmental one at that.

“The Economics and Politics of the European Union,” to be held June 1-22, 2019, will take cadets through Slovenia, Germany, and Belgium. Leading the trip will be Lt. Col. Valentina Dimitrova-Grajzl, associate professor of economics and business; Col. Tinni Sen, professor of economics and business; and Col. Howard Sanborn, professor of international studies and political science.

The new trip, which the organizers hope will attract 13 to 15 cadets, is designed to complement the Institute’s existing summer study abroad options. For many years, VMI has offered summer language study in Europe—and there’s also a yearly trip to Germany for cadets majoring in engineering, along with a program focusing on Central Europe.

“[This program is] really going to be focusing on the concept of the European Union,” said Dimitrova-Grajzl.

She explained that the impetus for the new program came from a conversation with Col. Dave Hall, director of international programs. “He indicated that he would like to have more programs ... a bigger variety of programs for cadets, and so we thought of putting this program together, since [there’s been] no program focusing on economics and international relations,” she said.

While in Europe, cadets will have the chance to take two out of three offered classes and earn six credits in the process.

Dimitrova-Grajzl will teach “The Economics of Transition and Institutional Development of the New EU Member States.” A native of Bulgaria, she has personal ties to the region, first-hand experience of the transition from socialism to capitalism in two countries—Bulgaria and Slovenia—and professional experience as a professor at the Central European University in Hungary.

Sen will teach “Understanding International Finance through the Lens of the European Union.” Sanborn’s course will be “Public Opinion Research in Europe.”

Sanborn typically teaches courses having to do with Asia, but he jumped at the chance to teach in—and about—a different region of the world. “A lot of my research ends up being quantitative,” he noted. “Thinking about some of these issues in Asia, it’s readily applied to places like Europe.”

With only 21 days on the ground, the group will move quickly. In Slovenia, one of the newest members of the EU, cadets will study the history of the region and its transition from socialism to capitalism. From there,

they’ll travel to Munich, Germany, and visit the nearby Dachau concentration camp, where over 200,000 Jews were imprisoned during World War II and nearly 32,000 died.

The professors stressed that the trip to Dachau isn’t just a history lesson—it’s intimately connected to the ongoing European refugee crisis.

“We thought [the trip to Dachau] would be in the context of what’s going on with migration,” said Dimitrova-Grajzl. “Since the second World War, this is the largest migration of refugees [into Europe],” added Sen.

From Munich, cadets and professors will travel to Frankfurt, Germany, site of the European Central Bank. While in Frankfurt, they’ll also visit an organization with ties to Gen. George C. Marshall, VMI Class of 1901. The Marshall European Center for Security Studies is a German-American partnership designed to promote peaceful solutions to transnational and regional security challenges.

From Frankfurt, the group will head to Brussels, Belgium, where they’ll tour the European Parliament and NATO headquarters.

Throughout the trip, cadets will learn not only from the three professors, but also European academics and policy makers. Among the line-up of guest speakers are a former finance minister of Slovenia, an official with the World Bank, and a former member of the European Parliament.

“The students are going to get exposed to learning in a whole lot of different ways,” said Dimitrova-Grajzl. “Some of it will be lectures, some of it will be discussion, some of it will be experiences, some of it will be interacting with people on the street.”

Sen also stressed the interdisciplinary nature of the trip.

“What’s most attractive about this program to me is that it’s across departments,” she said. “That’s part of the idea of a liberal arts edu-

cation. You’re looking at an idea and you’re looking at the politics of it, you’re looking at the economics of it .... Howard’s going to be talking about research with data.”

And, of course, there’s the countries themselves, lending a breadth and depth that the standard classroom experience never could. Said Sen, “You’re immersed in this place and you see it as a cohesive whole, rather than two different classes that [cadets] could take.” ❧



Col. Howard Sanborn, professor of international studies, talks with a cadet during the study abroad fair Sept. 20.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

## Commandant's Trophy *continued from page 1*

"He kind of has it all: he's physically strong, he's doing really well academically, he's got leadership potential, and he's active in the Corps of Cadets. He's just an amazing representative for VMI."

Streeter explained that Dragan was one of seven Marine Corps officer candidates nationwide honored with the commandant's trophy this year—five from classes of the Platoon Leaders Course and two from classes of Officer Candidate School (OCS). Both PLC and OCS prepare future officers in what

Streeter called "the ultimate job interview for the Marine Corps"; the only difference is that PLC is for candidates who do not have Marine Corps scholarships and OCS is for those who do.

"To graduate number one is amazing," Streeter commented. "It's an extremely competitive field."

When Dragan left for the six-week long PLC, it wasn't with the expectation of turning in an amazing performance. He recalled having an attitude of just trying to do his best. "Whenever I go into anything, I tell myself, 'I'm just going to get through this,' but once I start, then I start making goals once I'm doing it," he explained.

In the end, Dragan finished the course with an 88.7 grade point average in academics, an 89.3 in leadership, and a 98.9 in physical



Alex Dragan '20 receives the Commandant's Trophy to a round of applause from the crowd in Foster Stadium Sept. 29.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

fitness. He also scored a perfect 300 on the Marine Corps physical fitness test.

Dragan's accomplishments would be commendable in their own right, but they're even more so given the harsh reality of PLC. Dragan explained that the day began with a 4:30 a.m. wake-up call, immediately followed by one to two hours of intense physical training.

After showers and breakfast, the day was filled with academic classes on Marine Corps culture, traditions, and rank structure, along with the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which is a federal law setting forth the legal system for all who serve in the military.

At the end of the day, there were drills, weapons cleaning, and squad bay clean-up—plus physical and mental check-ups to ensure

### Veteran Alumnus Speaks on Poetry's Role In Healing

Virginia National Guard veteran Maj. J. Scott Price '92 demonstrates how writing has shaped his life after a 24-year career as an infantryman in operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Price is a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts and an active volunteer serving disabled American veterans. He speaks often about the role poetry plays in healing. He visited four rhetoric and composition classes in October, supporting instructor Mattie Smith's integrative classroom model for cadet engagement that allows them to experience where writing takes graduates of the Institute.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.





no candidate had untreated issues that would hinder performance. Bedtime was supposed to be 9 p.m., but most attendees—Dragan included—wound up staying up another hour or two to prepare for the next day's classes.

Each week, a list would be posted, giving attendees' scores so far in the course. When Dragan saw his number near the top, week after week, he recalled thinking, "wow, I'm actually doing pretty good."

"I was kind of surprised, honestly," said Dragan of the moment when he found out he was the top finisher. "I feel like I was just doing a job, and I happened to do it well, so they gave me the award. But it's not about the award for me."

Dragan is the first to acknowledge that without his instruction at VMI, he'd have never done so well. Naval ROTC classes in Kilbourne Hall had already exposed him to much of the material that was reinforced at PLC. Complementing his classroom work, the Naval ROTC's "bulldog" program had strengthened him both mentally and physically.

"They make it a similar environment to OCS," said Dragan of the bulldog program, which is an intense physical training regimen designed to prepare cadets for the rigors of OCS.

"It's very physically demanding," said Dragan. "Everything you do has to be intense, or you kind of get punished for it. Bulldog really helped me as far as my confidence."

That's precisely why VMI has run the bulldog program for so many years, said Streeter, who went through it himself as a cadet. "The goal of bulldog is to physically and mentally prepare these young men and women ... [so] that they are able to show up at PLC or OCS and be ready to go," Streeter commented.

The multiple award winners over many years bear testament to the success of the bulldog program—and the commitment that VMI's Naval ROTC makes to cadets.

"We have a very strong NROTC program," said Streeter. "We think we prepare our young men and women for OCS and PLC better than anyone in the country. People that show up at OCS from VMI are expected to do very well and always do. They finish near the top of their class."

As for Dragan, Naval ROTC has been a path to a lifetime dream. The son of a Marine Corps officer and the brother of an enlisted Marine, Dragan had always known the Marine Corps was for him. He began looking at military schools during his junior year in high school, and a couple of visits to post was all it took to convince him that VMI was the school for him.

"VMI was kind of my one and only choice," said Dragan, a psychology major and assistant prosecutor on the Honor Court.

Now, he can't imagine what his life would now be like without the Institute. "I'm very happy I made the decision to come here," Dragan noted. "I don't know what kind of man I'd be today if I hadn't." ❁



## Cadets Stage Ghostly Tales

VMI Theatre presented "Things That Go 'Bump' in the Night" over Family Weekend, Oct. 19-21. The presentation included three short plays—"The Mummy," by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; "A Ghost of a Chance," by O Henry; and "Ghosts in the Armoire," by Anthony Neal '85. Approximately 18 cadets participated in staging the production, which was directed by Joellen Bland.—VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



# 'From Cadets to Diplomats'

## Cadet Facilitators Share Perspectives on Leadership Conference

By Mary Price

At the end of October, VMI's Center for Leadership and Ethics hosted its 2018 leadership conference, "Grit and the American Character." The annual event attracted approximately 200 people to post—and it wouldn't have been a success without the 25 cadet facilitators, each of whom led the discussion for those seated at their table.

Cadet facilitators were selected by their department heads as being the "best and brightest" to represent VMI, noted Col. Patrick "Pat" Looney, deputy director of the Center for Leadership and Ethics. An additional 120 cadets attended the conference as participants.

"I've been on both sides of the table," said Corris "Corey" Atkins '19, explaining that he's been both a participant and a facilitator at past conferences.

Atkins, a civil engineering major, said that he enjoys the stimulation of meeting new people and helping strangers coalesce into a working unit. "There'll be people at my table I won't meet until the morning of [the conference] and then I'm with them for two days straight," he said at a preparatory meeting in mid-October. "You've got to find their weaknesses and strengths and bring the whole group together."



Col. Pat Looney and Derek Pinkham instruct cadet facilitators in the Corps Physical Training Facility prior to the Leadership Conference.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

Atkins said he was particularly looking forward to meeting cadets from other military schools, among them Texas A&M, the Citadel, and the Coast Guard Academy. Other attendees included students from

Virginia's military high schools, such as Hargrave Military Academy and Massanutten Military Academy.

"People come to VMI for a reason from the outside," Atkins commented. "I like to get to know why people are coming to VMI to learn about us and the way we do things around here."

Preparing for the conference, Atkins was cognizant of the fact that a predominantly military background for most attendees will bring a unique set of challenges. "There's a lot of Type A personalities, so it's going to be a little tough," said Atkins. "But it should be a good experience."

Like Atkins, Ola Ekundayo '19 has been a leadership conference facilitator before. "We're actually engaging in challenging conversations," she noted. "It's not just a discussion about whether we think this process or this rule is fine. It's questions about society, thinking critically and getting to share our perspectives."

Ekundayo said she'd be inviting the attendees seated at her table to discuss several aspects of grit, which for the purposes of the leadership conference was an acronym



Emory Lieber '19 uses his phone's GPS coordinates to locate an item in the scavenger hunt in Marshall Hall, an activity the cadets facilitated during the Leadership Conference.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.



standing for growth, resolve, integrity, and tenacity. Among the aspects she planned to bring up were the definition of grit, how that definition is manifested in an individual's daily life, how an individual can develop grit, and whether the military is the only place that requires grit.

"I'm the facilitator, so I get to learn more, probably, than anyone at the table," she noted.

In the past, Ekundayo relished getting to interact with people from all walks of life at

the leadership conference—and that's one of the reasons she keeps coming back.

"I've talked to people from cadets to diplomats," she noted.

A computer science major, Ekundayo has also enjoyed the chance to meet others whose academic backgrounds are very different from hers.

"That's one thing I love about VMI," she said. "There's so many opportunities to get outside of your major, and they actually encourage you [to do so]. I think for my

major, or anything technical or STEM, you have to know the broader impact of what you're doing."

In addition to leading table discussions, the Leadership Conference's cadet facilitators also led their groups through a series of training exercises in the Corps Physical Training Facility that included obstacle courses as well as climbing the cargo net and the rock wall, with the goal of helping attendees develop their own perspective on grit. 🌟

## Cadet, Faculty Member Investigate Use of AI

By Mary Price

"If I like something, I just make time for it."

That's what Robert DuPont '20 has to say about why he keeps writing computer code—even when there's no class assignment or academic credit on the line.

Thanks to work they did together over the summer, DuPont and Dr. Ramoni Lasisi, assistant professor of computer and information sciences, recently learned that a paper they co-authored, "Augmenting Stochastic

Local Search with Heuristics," has been accepted for presentation at the 9<sup>th</sup> IEEE Annual Ubiquitous Computing, Electronics, and Mobile Communication Conference, to be held Nov. 8-10 at Columbia University in New York City. Both DuPont and Lasisi plan to attend the conference, where DuPont will demonstrate simulations of the code he's written and Lasisi will present the paper.

Another paper that the two wrote together, also over the summer, "Team Exploration of Environments Using Stochastic Local Search," has been accepted for publication as a book chapter.

Although he's now only in the fall of his 2<sup>nd</sup> Class year at VMI, DuPont caught Lasisi's attention early in his cadetship because of his intense interest in and talent for programming. By his 3<sup>rd</sup> Class year, DuPont was enrolled in Lasisi's data structures and algorithms class, one that Lasisi described as "the most challenging programming course" at VMI.

"It was an easy class for him," said Lasisi.

That was in the fall of 2017. By the time the spring semester rolled around, DuPont had signed up for an independent study with Lasisi—one having to do with the real-world problem of



Dr. Ramoni Lasisi and Robert DuPont '20 review the paper they co-authored on computer programming. —VMI Photo by Mary Price.

gerrymandering. "Manipulation of District-based Elections: Algorithms and Experiments" is currently under review for publication.

When summer came, DuPont was looking for a new project. He already had an internship having to do with machine learning lined up at West Point, but he was looking for an even bigger challenge. That's when he decided to keep working with Lasisi on another project, one having to do with using artificial intelligence—Lasisi's research specialty—to enhance searching capacity through minefields or areas in which an airplane might have crashed.

"Search is a huge problem in computer science, especially in the area of AI, artificial intelligence," said Lasisi. "We need to find out a systematic way, an intelligent way, of [searching] without wasting time or resources. ... We have to devise some systematic way of navigation in that environment so we can get the result on time."

Attempting to do this, DuPont designed an environment in which large areas are marked off in small squares, like a sheet of graph paper. Each small block of nine squares, a 3x3 area similar to a tic-tac-toe grid, is marked off and defined as a state, while the 3x3 grids nearby are defined as neighborhoods.

Rather than jumping randomly among the states, the agent or seeker in DuPont's program uses heuristics, which DuPont defined as "exploiting some information about the environment to guide the agent toward the goal." This, he noted, makes for an orderly and faster search.

Lasisi noted that DuPont's project carried no academic credit whatsoever—it was undertaken for the joy of learning and nothing else. "He's been doing something way beyond his mates," said Lasisi. "This is not homework stuff. We don't know the solution." 🌟



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## VMI Faces the Citadel on Family Weekend

Family and friends filled Foster Stadium on Family Weekend game day Oct. 20. With over 7,000 in attendance, the Keydets faced off against the Citadel. VMI came up short 32-34, despite a fourth quarter rally that earned the Keydets 12 points.—  
*VMI Photos by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.*

