

Maj. Gen. Marti Bissell
25th Anniversary of Women at VMI
Sept. 9. 2022

Good evening, Gen. and Mrs. Wins, Mr. and Mrs. Watjen, faculty, staff, friends, family, and most importantly everyone here tonight who is celebrating this important anniversary. It's an honor to be a part of this weekend's events.

Kevin [Trujillo], thank you for the kind introduction and the comments about my father-in-law. I doubt you had any idea what impact you would have on VMI's future when you matriculated. I can tell you my father-in-law regularly spoke about what an influential role you played 25 years ago. While you could have done a lot to undermine the process, instead, you embraced the change and worked hard to make VMI's coeducation process successful. Thank you for making the time to be here tonight.

To all of the VMI community, first and foremost, congratulations. I cannot believe it has been 25 years. There were days I didn't think VMI would ever get this far on this journey. I would like to point out that the world didn't end. VMI has survived and the alumni didn't take all of their money and run. Just saying...

While I wasn't on staff that day back in 1997 when the first females gathered the courage to take on this place and sign the matriculation book, it wasn't long before I joined them on the stoops. I have come and gone numerous times since those days, but no matter where I've been, I've kept an eye on VMI's efforts to integrate women into the Corps and continued to advocate, where anyone would let me or bother to listen, on their behalf. I've celebrated graduations, commiserated when the things were unfair, argued against outdated ways of thinking, participated in commissionings and watched as alum, both males and females, came back for reunions. I've taught the dreaded 344 Leadership course with the intent of making the average VMI cadet more aware, more professional, and a better leader of all using many of your experiences as teaching points. More importantly, I've had the privilege to get to know some of you from those early days since you graduated and treasure your friendship.

To all of you who took up this challenge specifically, those young women and the young men who would support their efforts, congratulations. According to my count, between the classes of 2001 and 2022, there have been 1,029 women who chose to matriculate and 658 of those have earned the VMI diploma. They have gone on to do some amazing things and are leaders across our communities: CEOs and colonels, teachers and Ranger School graduates, working for three-letter agencies, and in healthcare. Twenty-five percent of those graduates commissioned and served our nation, while others have gone into public service in other areas, law enforcement, education, you name it. In short, VMI female alumnae have become whatever they resolved to be. That shouldn't be surprising; VMI alumni always have.

Now, I'll also say that I asked Gary [Bissell] for some other statistics. I tried to find out how many A1s? How many PTs were marched? Days spent on confinement? However, we found that those data points were a little more challenging to compile, so let's just say, collectively, just like those that came before,

there were those that spent a lot of time answering specials, marching PTs, and on confinement while others wore AC stars. There were also those who identified more strongly with the 2.0 and go club as well as the square root club. Then there were those who changed policies and were trailblazers, such as the first battalion and regimental commanders, first cadet captains, and the list goes on. Regardless of what your academic and disciplinary records may say, what matters is diplomas were earned and hopefully no one is keeping track of your disciplinary records past the required amount of time.

As I thought about what to say, I found myself thinking about my own VMI journey. Prior to stepping on post in 1988 as a George C. Marshall awardee, the closest I had come to seeing a military school was dropping my brother off at the New Mexico Military Institute back in 1982, which, at that point in my life, was the single greatest day in my short 16-year-old life. Nothing gave me more joy than imagining him locked in behind some stuccoed barracks wall with a bunch of upperclassmen making his life miserable. At that point, I could only imagine what that was like and I have a pretty good imagination. Had I known then what I know now, I would have encouraged him to attend VMI for Hell Night alone.

My first actual look at VMI was in the spring of 1988 when I was selected as a GCM awardee. Prior to that, I had never heard of VMI. I distinctly remember seeing what would be the first of many VMI parades, how impressive the cadets looked in their uniforms, how charming and attentive our cadet escorts were. For me, VMI was a new place to visit, something interesting to tell my dad about, and a fun week where I got to know fellow future lieutenants and question why anyone in their right mind would choose to go to a school like this.

My next time on post was May 1989. You see, I met this guy who happened to be a VMI grad and he wanted to come back for his class graduation. So, I made the trip with him. He was fairly quiet, athletic, a military brat from a large family, and more importantly, as I was one of only two women in my class of 90 aviation officers, treated me as an equal and just accepted that I had joined the Army for the same reason as him. I've learned over the years that when you do something outside the norm, it's rare to find people who just accept you and don't treat you like a ticking time bomb to avoid. If there is one piece of advice I can give those of you who have walked this journey, if there is one thing I have learned from this place, is find and spend time with individuals who get you, who accept you. Don't spend a lot of energy trying to make someone accept you. They are not worth the effort. It's their failing, not yours.

My life continued on. That guy became my husband and VMI continued to be some ever-present weird part of our lives showing up at the most unexpected times. There were the four passed out cadets we found sleeping in a car in Panama City Beach, Florida, that ended up crashing in our hotel room. I had heard of someone falling asleep in a tub, I never thought I would see someone choose to sleep in a bathtub, much less on a kitchen counter. His roommate was our best man and I remember Steve sweating to death in his coatee during our June wedding. Then there was the crazy wife who came running up to my car in the PX parking lot at Fort Riley, asking me, "What class? What class?" By then I knew to just answer '89 and proceed to have some strange conversation about my husband's college experience. Who his BRs were and what VMI grads were on post when neither one of us ever attended VMI. And no, I wasn't his ring figure date. I can tell you, at no point did anyone ever ask me about where I went to school or care that I was an Oregon State Grad. I always found it a little strange to

spend more time talking about my husband's alma mater than my own. But no matter how strange I found it, what was clear to me was that the VMI alumni network is real and far reaching.

Right after we got married in 1990, my father-in-law accepted the job as the first non-active duty commandant of VMI. By that point, it seemed that I was fated to have VMI become a large part of my life.

For these next nine years, it was all parades and parties, the VMI version of rainbows and unicorns, when we managed to make it back here. There were alumni stories where everyone spoke a different language, hays and racks, stick checks, confinement, PTs and running the block. Who got caught or almost got caught with alcohol in barracks. Who lost their rank. Family holidays were a lot of fun. Lexington and VMI are fairly enjoyable when the cadets are gone. There was never an issue getting a table at the Palms. There were family basketball games in Cocke Hall, long walks on post and Thanksgiving and Christmas in the Commandant's Quarters. My son was less than a month old when he went trick or treating for the first time at VMI when we brought him to meet his grandfather. Life happened while VMI popped in and out of our lives on a fairly regular basis.

I don't remember much about the actual court case, I didn't actually follow it. I do remember more about the discussions as VMI was getting ready for the admission of women. My father-in-law, then-Col. Mike Bissell, as most of you know, was in charge of the process and there were numerous conversations around the dinner table about what was the essence of VMI and needed to be preserved versus what needed to change, as well as the challenges I faced as a female aviator in a primarily male environment. What well-intentioned ideas made my job harder and what actions actually undermined my ability to be accepted by my peers. The class system, the regimental and dyke systems were discussed in detail, their makeup, their purpose as well as the Honor Code. The topics were varied, and I learned much about VMI from the conversations. I can tell you, there was never any comments about how women didn't belong or that they wouldn't be successful, only the desire to ensure that VMI would integrate women better than anyone else. Those words, "better than anyone else," would go on to be his charge to all that worked on the coeducation process.

So, how did VMI do it, "better than anyone else?" And for all the challenges, I would offer they did. Now, that's not saying there were not and do not continue to be issues and challenges, only that others made more mistakes and were still struggling 25 years after the integration of women. But, did you ever really think about how much VMI had to change to get to this point?

From formalizing the admission process for female cadets to the establishment of sexual harassment/sexual assault policies, procedures and investigation requirements, the changes were extensive. VMI had to develop "safe" zones and emergency phone locations and medical support for female cadets. Female uniforms had to be designed, tailored, and supported as they would require different cuts of trousers, shirts, and sizing, as well as the development of skirts and other uniform items. Room inspections would have to change. Imagine a bunch of male alumni suddenly determining what female undergarments, dress pumps, and other female items were needed and how they needed to be inspected. The "Blue Book" had to be overhauled, as well as a rewrite of customs and courtesy procedures. Basic common courtesies would now be based on status and rank rather than gender, so

what happens to the tipping of the hat that all of the mothers and grandmothers raved about when they visited post. Do the female cadets tip their hat? What needed to be adjusted with regards to cadet behavior in barracks. The list went on and on. Rat haircuts, just female haircuts in general, doors on latrines, locks on the doors, locker rooms, sports teams, selection processes, everything would be examined.

So just what was the coeducation process? There were four main lines of effort: Learn from others particularly to avoid the mistakes others made; create a committee system to bring together area experts, community representatives, and interested parties; create a feeling of ownership among the Corps of Cadets; and communicate the plan and changes to all involved.

The result was an executive committee and eight sub-committees, representing all the various systems, organizations, and the entire VMI community, BOV, faculty, staff, alumni, consultants, and cadets. Formed in July 1996, the committees had one year to figure it out. At its peak, the committee included 15 Board of Visitors (BOV) members, 20 members of the faculty, 20 administrators, nine alumni, 25 consultants, and approximately 150 cadets. By May 1997, there were over 120 active committee members working on making coeducation a success. If you want to learn how to execute effective organizational change from top to bottom, study the VMI coeducation process. It was inclusive and permeated every aspect of VMI.

As I watched the coeducation process from the family sidelines, everyone had an idea what female cadets needed to do to be successful. Pull-ups were easy. All they need to do is this. Change the VFT, get rid of pull-ups. Cross dyke. Don't cross dyke. Gender norm. Don't gender norm. Don't draw any attention to them, they need to blend. Select them for key positions, drive the integration. Make them wear skirts. Don't issue skirts. They need to look the same. Don't change a thing. Things have to change. This is a great time to bring VMI into the 20th century. You name the topic that two people were discussing and there would be at least three opinions on what the right solution was.

So, in 1999, I joined the staff as an assistant OC (officer in charge). And while I thought I was prepared for the job and the VMI experience, despite numerous conversations with VMI alum, years of study, military experience, and a supportive family, the reality of VMI, in all its variations, as all of you well know, has to be experienced to be believed. And, just for the record, I fully recognize what I experienced was in no way shape or form, anything like what those that matriculated did. Despite all the camaraderie and funny stories, I soon learned there was another side of VMI, one that required a thick skin, if not a Teflon coat of armor, a sense of humor, unshakable belief in oneself, and willingness to keep your eye on the goal, which for me, was just making it thru my shift without embarrassing myself or looking like a dumb female. It wasn't long before I was familiar with events like meet the cadre and sweat parties, rat riots and balling ups. The general theme was "Women wanted the VMI experience, so they got it." The good, the bad, and the ugly.

I worked hard to be credible at my job. And, like each of you, I learned to maneuver through the minefields, stay away from those less than supportive, and take each event, each day, one at a time. I got better at room inspections, learning from the best how to find contraband and that getting a cadet to actually answer a question directly took serious mental thought and deliberate word choice.

By 2000, I was working full-time and before long my duties expanded to include Title IX training and investigations. That's when the real fun really began. The trolls came out from under their bridges and that public facade that was so apparent before seemed as nebulous as an oasis in the desert. It was an interesting time to say the least. Let me tell you, there were days, particularly around graduation that I envied you. At least you could graduate and leave this place behind. I would have a short break between May and August and the fun would begin all over again. So, I watched the years go by over the next ten years and saw many of you come and go. For those of us working hard to make a difference, it became Groundhog Day or maybe Groundhog Year. The same efforts, the same conversations, over and over and over again. You'd just start to think you're making a difference and boom, that class is gone, and you start all over. New leadership, new staff, new faculty, and right back to square one.

That's the most challenging aspect of this VMI journey and the most difficult thing for many to understand. I know it's frustrating to the cadets that followed and wonder why things haven't changed more after 25 years. What I realized is that all the efforts you made the previous year, all the progress, disappear on May 16. And, in mid-August, you start over with new leadership, who were only waiting for the previous class to get out of barracks, so they can do it better and who weren't in those conversations, weren't in those leadership positions the previous year.

If VMI made one major mistake throughout this process is that they called victory too soon. You see, the VMI life cycle is eight years. It takes that long for one class to teach all the habits, norms, and values to its dyke class who then pass it on to their dyke class. It takes eight years to inculcate a change at VMI and for it to become tradition and the way it has always been. Despite VMI's efforts before the first matriculant, VMI declared victory after the first two to three years of women in barracks, disbanded the committees and dissolved the dedicated efforts to integrate women. This gave those who had been waiting on the sidelines, who were never a part of the original efforts, an opportunity to turn it all back around. So, for all the progress made, there was some significant backsliding. So, while the changes and progress were significant in the first few years, since then it is more along the lines of two steps forward, one step back. I look forward to the time when it's not such a big deal when a female is chosen for a particular position; when it becomes just "normal." When everyone understands that every matriculant comes to VMI for the same reason: to live in an environment that believes in honorable behavior, with challenging academics and a unique living environment that challenges you every day.

I think what I realized as I wrote this and as I read the latest "OMG, 'VMI is going to hell' oped email." from some naysayer who once again is standing on some street corner yelling the equivalent of "the end is near," is that VMI is constantly changing, has always changed and will continue to change. Indoor plumbing, not marching to classes, regularly clean uniforms, and no fleas in the hays, actually no hay in the hays. Not to mention, tough and relevant academics, computers, cell phones, the internet, no more community showers, and personally I actually think having to wear swimsuits during rat drown-proofing is a good thing. Change makes VMI better and the integration of women at VMI certainly did. But, for all those changes there are also some things that do not change. Cadets that attend VMI want to challenge themselves, academically, athletically, militarily, and that they will be better leaders, better

individuals because of those experiences. Those who desire to come to VMI want to earn a place in the incredible VMI network because someone in the network made an impression, had some quality that they want to emulate. It's not the number of formations you stand in or the number of parades you march in that is important, it is the relationships you make and more importantly how you grow as an individual. To go to a school with an honor code that forces you to think before you answer a question. To be in a system that not only teaches you formal authority, the regimental system, but also peer leadership, the class system and mentorship, the dyke system all underpinned by a set of values that promote brotherhood and honor. There is not another school in this country that has all of these elements that come together quite the same way

So, in conclusion, despite it all, the trolls, the haters, the doubters, you persevered, and you made such an impression on me that I wrote about the VMI coeducation process as a part of my master's Capstone project and continue to be impressed by your grit, resiliency, and overall success in life. My time here has made me a better leader and more understanding of the individual challenges and obstacles one can face. Each one of you, in your own way, is truly impressive and it has been a privilege to watch you through this journey. I wish you had the opportunity to see your family's faces, as I did, as you marched during a parade or stood silently during Taps. The pride, the sheer love from your parents, grandparents, and family members alike was awesome to witness. Be proud of yourselves. Be proud of the difference you have made on this institution. Don't be hesitant to tell someone you are a VMI grad. You've earned it. By showing up, by staying, you've made VMI better.

VMI continues to move in the right direction. We've had our first regimental commander. I understand we now have female cadets on the Honor Court. I hope we will not have to wait another 25 years before we see our first female class president or female Honor Court president. Regardless, the path may have been rocky but damn it, you all conquered it, and it has truly been my honor to see you go through this journey. Good luck and I look forward to seeing you again the next time you are on post.