

The Institute During the War Years: A Brief History

by Kathryn A. Wise, Editor, *VMI Alumni Review*

By late 1943 about 66 percent of VMI's 6,200 living alumni were serving in the armed forces, and the ranks of the Corps of Cadets had been depleted severely.

According to the meticulous records begun in Sept. 1939 by Col. William Couper '04, VMI's historiographer, at war's end approximately 4,102 alumni had served on active duty in the armed forces during World War II. These included 3,252 in the U.S. Army; 254 in the U.S. Marine Corps; 531 in the U.S. Navy; 13 in the U.S. Merchant Marine; 23 in the U.S. Coast Guard; 4 in the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (commissioned); and 25 in the Allied Armed Forces (Australia, 1; Britain, 1; Canada, 13; China, 8; Ecuador, 1; and France, 1).

Couper recorded that the oldest alumnus known to be on active duty was Col. William H. Peek, USA, class of 1896, a World War I veteran who died on March 12, 1945. Peek, who was on active duty early in the war, was not on active duty at the time of his death.

The commandant of one year, Col. Henry B. Holmes, Jr. '16, was called to active duty in 1941. He was promoted to brigadier general and named chief of staff, U.S. Army Pacific Ocean Area. He was succeeded as commandant by Col. John M. Fray '08, who served in that position until late 1946.

The wartime superintendent was Lt. Gen. Charles Evans Kilbourne, class of 1894. Kilbourne had seen combat duty in the Spanish-American War and received the Medal of Honor for gallantry in The Philippines in 1899.

In a Sept. 1943 publication to alumni Kilbourne said, "We lost approximately 90 percent of our Corps by call to the Armed Services at the end of the [1942-43 school] year. We anticipated only about 40 old cadets would return.

"In fact, we opened with only four members in the first class with a total of less than 50 old cadets. These took charge

promptly and effectively of the new cadets reporting on June 9th; these numbered about 200. A short time later, 13 of our first class premedicals and some of the second and third class were able to return. The Honor Court and the General Committee were promptly effected..."

In the same Sept. 1943 publication, Cadet Thomas C. Shelton '46 reported that "One of the main differences between the past and the present is the fact that the Corps is very small and out of proportion. The average [pre-war] Corps numbered around 700 men; today there are 250. In a normal year the old cadets outnumbered the Rats at least three to one; now the ratio is reversed and there are three Rats to every old cadet." The average age of those Rats was 16.

When the class of 1944 graduated it had but 18 men; the class of 1945 had three; and the class of 1946, two. The class of 1947 graduated in March 1946 under the Wartime Accelerated Training Program, which was in effect at VMI from June 1943-June 1946. The class of 1947, which matriculated 186 new cadets in 1943, was down to 120 at the beginning of its third class year in 1944, and down to 50 by June 1945. At the beginning of its second class year, it was down to 27, and down to 14 at its end. When the class began its first class year it had but 12 members; eight of them graduated. The road had been rough for those young men: they had completed their degrees in two years, nine months. (Eventually, 59 Brother Rats who began their cadetships as members of the class of 1947 graduated in classes ranging from 1948A through 1951.)

With the advent of the war, military manpower for the nation was trained in part at VMI under the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). Personnel from all over the country were assigned to VMI, lived in the Barracks and, in either



Alumni who died in the armed services during the war are memorialized on two plaques which flank Washington Arch. One of the plaques is shown above.



When World War II veterans returned to VMI to finish their studies, they petitioned the Board of Visitors and were granted permission to attend VMI as civilians. Many were married and lived in town. At the graduation parade on June 11, 1947, 14 civilian students—men who had served as cadets for three years before being called to active duty—stood with 104 graduating cadets and received a review by the Corps of Cadets in their honor. Can anyone identify these 14 men? If so, please send your response to the *Alumni Review*.

12- or 36-week courses, took classes in civil engineering and other college subjects before being assigned to their combat units.

The first group of ASTP students came to VMI in May 1943; the 144 members of this group graduated on July 31. By the fall of that year there were 500 ASTP students on Post. During the duration of the war, 2,148 ASTP soldier-students from 45 states were at VMI, and included among their ranks author Gore Vidal and actor/director Mel Brooks. By the war's end, 298,091 man-hours had been expended at VMI in connection with the ASTP program, for which the Federal government paid VMI \$987,924.

The post-war Corps was led by Lt. Gen. Richard J. Marshall '15, who served as superintendent from 1946-52, and by Col. Oliver B. Bucher '17, who served as commandant from 1946-51.

Both men were veterans of the war: Marshall evacuated with Gen. Douglas MacArthur from Bataan to Australia in 1942, served as deputy chief of staff to MacArthur during the war and became MacArthur's chief of staff in 1945. Bucher, who was promoted to the temporary rank of brigadier general in 1943, was commanding general of the Trinidad Base Command, U.S. Army, from 1944-46.

More than 300 veterans swelled the ranks of the Corps after the war. Enrollment in 1946-47 hit a then-record high of 773. Many of these veterans were former VMI cadets, and in order to accommodate them the Corps was broken down into six classes: 1948A, 1948B, 1949A, 1949B, 1949C, 1950A and 1950B. The class of 1949A was composed of members of no less than eight classes: '43, '44, '45, '46, '47, '48A, '48B and '49A. The class of '49C had members ranging in age from 18 to 27. Graduations were staggered; the class of '49A graduated on June 8, 1948, and the class of '49B graduated on Jan. 29, 1949.

Many returning cadets were married. First classmen who had

married before Sept. 5, 1946, were offered "day student" privileges and were allowed to choose between being uniform-wearing cadets or day students. Those choosing the latter were allowed to live in Lexington with their families but were not allowed to entertain other cadets or visit in the Barracks without special permission, and were governed by rules applying to cadets on furlough. The day students could receive demerits and be dismissed for unworthy conduct, and could not eat in the mess hall or use the VMI laundry.

A provisional company, Company G, was organized for the veterans in Barracks, who were excused from guard duty, and it was only with rare exceptions that they participated in parades or drill. They were, however, subject to all VMI regulations, including those of the Honor Court and the General Committee.

On Oct. 30, 1948, a memorial was dedicated at VMI to alumni who died in the armed services during World War II. The service included the unveiling of two plaques flanking Washington Arch, one of which is pictured opposite, and an address by Maj. Gen. Withers A. Burrell '14, USA, who had been VMI's commandant from 1935-40 and served during the war as the commanding general of the 100th Infantry Division, VII Corps, First Army.

The plaques, which were the creation of sculptor William Carter Wescott, Jr. '22, depict the three Fates from Greek mythology: Clotho, the youngest, who presided at births, holds the distaff and spins the thread of life; Lachesis, who presided over the future and further spun the thread of life; and Atropos, the inflexible goddess whose scissors are shown cutting the thread of life.

Flanking the Fates are replicas of the towers of VMI Barracks, and at the bottom of each is a quotation from the poet Laurence Binyon: "They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn."