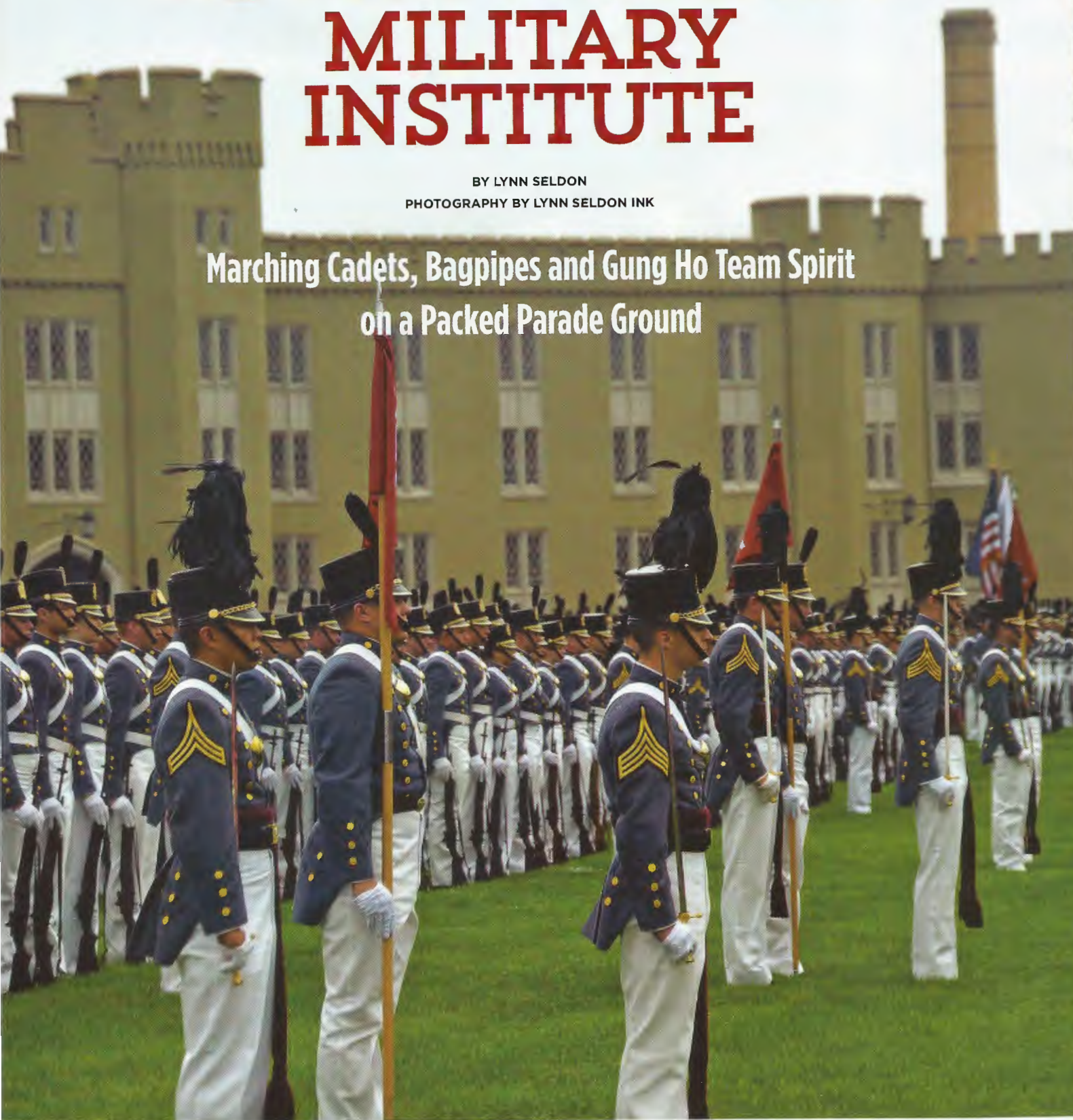


# TAILGATING AT THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE

BY LYNN SELDON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNN SELDON INK

Marching Cadets, Bagpipes and Gung Ho Team Spirit  
on a Packed Parade Ground









I'm a proud 1983 Virginia Military Institute graduate and return as often as possible. That's especially true come fall, when VMI is a hotspot for some of the most uncommon tailgating in the country.

The uniqueness starts with the location. Well before sunrise, hundreds of vehicles begin lining up down the hill from Post and VMI's iconic 11-acre Parade Ground—where they'll park on freshly-mowed grass and get the bacon frying as quickly as possible. By 8am (better make that 0800 at VMI)—more than five hours before the typical 1:30pm (1330) kickoff—VMI tailgating is in full swing. All decked out in VMI's team colors of red, white and yellow, returning alumni, spouses, parents of cadets and other members of the loyal "VMI Family" reunite across the Parade Ground amidst flags, banners and lots of typical tailgating gear.

#### A BRIEF VMI PRIMER

Situated in the idyllic Shenandoah Valley town of Lexington in the shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Virginia Military Institute was founded in 1839 to produce citizen-soldiers. As the only college body

in American history to engage in pitched battle, VMI cadets fought in the Civil War's battle of New Market in 1864, when ten cadets died. George C. Marshall (VMI Class of 1901), father of the famed Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe after World War II, is perhaps VMI's most famous alum—though some might say that honor now goes to the actor, Dabney Coleman (Class of 1953), who is a long-time supporter of VMI athletics.

First-year freshman are called Rats, and they all undergo a months-long physically- and mentally-challenging system called the Ratline that molds them into Fourth Class cadets and—as importantly—into a class of "Brother Rats." My class started with more than 400 Rats in the blistering 1979 August sun, and we would graduate less than 200 on a spring 1983 May day. Between those two dates, I marched in dozens of parades—including many on game day mornings.

The 'dyke' system is an important part of Rat year. This is a mentor-like relationship

between a Rat and a First Class senior, who helps the Rat navigate VMI's at-times difficult waters.

Cadets in their sophomore years are called Third Classmen and they enjoy the return of seemingly basic privileges that they didn't have during their Rat/Fourth Class year. Back in the early-80s, this meant we could have a radio in our spartan Barracks room—which we shared with anywhere from two to four classmates and slept in fold-up bunks. Thirds are thus "Rats with Radios."

Second Class cadets in their junior years at VMI look forward to November, because they receive their iconic VMI rings during Ring Figure weekend, which is often held in conjunction with a football game. I still remember that we beat Virginia Tech 6-0 during our Ring Figure weekend. Yes, little 'ol VMI beat the big bad Hokies. VMI rings are said to be larger than any other college rings in the nation.







Cadets in their senior years are called First Classmen and are focused on graduation. Many will go on to serve our country in the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines, as well as distinguished civilian careers. Many will also return to VMI as often as possible—especially when it's tailgating time!

#### TIME TO TAILGATE

When I attended VMI, football game days typically meant Saturday morning classes (yep, we had classes on Saturdays), a pre-game parade, and—if I was lucky—a hamburger at the wood-paneled station wagon of a classmate's parents. Then, we'd march down to the football stadium, form up in straight lines centered on the 50-yard-line, and cheer the team onto the field before heading to the stands to sit together as a Corps of Cadets of about 1,250. Game day "march on" is still one of many cherished VMI rituals.

As a Rat, we were required to stand throughout the game. If the team won, cadets (depending on your class) were typically granted special privileges for the rest of the weekend—like getting to stay off Post later than normal for a Saturday night. Today, I no longer stand throughout the game, but I have been known to sit with the Corps like I once did long ago.

Today's Parade Ground tailgating is beyond anything I could have imagined more than 30 years ago. That's especially true for the traditional Class of '83 tailgate, where we typically take up a perfect position that will overlook the Pipes and Drums (as in bagpipes) once they've marched onto the field with the rest of the Corps. "We have the location," says Scott Belliveau, a 1983 graduate and the director of communications for the VMI Foundation. "We have front-row seats for the parade and a great view of Barracks. We start early and we stay late."

Our class's tailgating tradition really kicked into gear when classmate Cal Murray's son Carter reported to VMI back in 2005. Cal and his wife Jeannie wanted to create a tailgate setup where Carter, his roommates, other classmates and cadets, and our class and other alumni and VMI family could commiserate and share experiences and memories before and after football games. Cal recalls, "We had participated in previous one-off tailgates during earlier years, but this was a commitment to tailgate at all home games. We had to step up our game even more when our son Cam reported to VMI in 2008. What has been amazing is the beast that we dreamed it could be is exactly what it is ten years later." For years, Cal also provided color commentary for the radio broadcast during the games with classmate Wade Branner, long-time "Voice of the Keydets."

Today, anywhere from 10 to 20 classmates, plus family, friends, other alumni and lots



of current cadets, are typically in attendance at '83 tailgates. Along with appropriate VMI décor, everyone also takes great pride in the food—including themed cuisine like Brunswick stew, Oktoberfest brats, tacos and Chesapeake Bay oysters—as well as regular menu items like burgers, dogs, traditional and nontraditional sides (like popular grilled jalapeño poppers), and crunchy fried chicken from a beloved local Lexington joint called Kenney's. "What other tailgate gives you a parade, a shared sense of hardship from everyone in attendance, football and food?" asks my classmate Skip Goodwillie.

As the Corps marches out of Barracks under huge United States and Virginia flags led by the Color Guard and in step to the drums and music from the Regimental Band, the pomp- and circumstance-filled parade is definitely a highlight and one of the things that makes VMI tailgating so special. The history of VMI parades and VMI in general is related over the PA system and the Corps of Cadets performs a number of precision maneuvers with their rifles—including "fix bayonets," which I never completely mastered. The band and bagpipes then serenade the marching Corps



back to Barracks and I never fail to shed a tear if they play my personal favorite, "Oh Shenandoah."

After the parade—when the only time we are quiet is while the national anthem plays to crisp salutes from the veterans among us and hands over hearts for all others—the cadets change out of their parade uniforms and head out to the bustling tailgates. We'll serve any cadets who head our way, including several sons and daughters of '83 alums who have also attended VMI over the years. The Class of 2012 held five sons of my classmates and I was privileged to share the Ratline, Ring Figure and graduation—plus many tailgates—with these fine young men and their parents. As I write this, I can think of at least a dozen classmates who have a child currently attending VMI.

The military influences don't stop with the parade, thanks to a traditional "march on" that sees the Corps of Cadets still marching down the hill from Barracks and into Stadium, forming as a unit at midfield and cheering the football team onto the field. By then, I've typically taken up a position on a hill overlooking the field, where another tailgate actually awaits.



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**"COLLEGE FOOTBALL SATURDAYS ARE A BIG DEAL ACROSS THIS COUNTRY, AND IT IS A BIG DEAL AT VMI, AS IT ALLOWS US TO BRING BACK HUGE NUMBERS OF ALUMNI, PARENTS AND FRIENDS WHO BELIEVE IN ALL THAT THE INSTITUTE STANDS FOR AND THE WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY OUR CADETS HAVE TO EARN A WORLD-CLASS EDUCATION."**

—GREG CAVALLARO, CLASS OF 1984 AND LONG-TIME CEO OF VMI'S KEYDET CLUB

This well-situated and lively tailgate is hosted by VMI's Keydet Club, the school's private athletic fund-raising organization whose CEO, Greg Cavallaro graduated from VMI a year after me. Ironically, Greg attended a VMI dance as a cadet long ago with a childhood friend and James Madison University student named Cele who would become my wife many years later. "Regardless of how the team may be doing, we have wonderful turnouts for home games," says Cavallaro, who estimates he has attended more than 250 VMI football games.

Just before kickoff, we head into the 10,000-seat stadium, where many classmates, family and friends await with the Corps of Cadets. Though we're not talking

SEC-caliber crowds by the numbers, we are most definitely talking well-known VMI spirit from kickoff until game's end—win or lose. And, win or lose, the Regimental Band will play "Doxology," a post-game song played after VMI football and basketball games that evokes school spirit through lyrics like:

*Red, white, and yellow floats on high  
The Institute shall never die  
So, now Keydets with one voice cry  
God bless our team and...VMI!*

Back up on the Parade Ground, the tailgating and camaraderie continues. For most of us, that means something sweet to eat—often including tasty cupcakes with

red, white and yellow icing. However, for always-hungry cadets, post-game tailgating typically means leftovers to be inhaled immediately or back in Barracks. As the sun sets over nearby House Mountain, we reluctantly break down our setups until the next time we'll all converge on Lexington for some very special tailgating.

Long-time freelance travel journalist Lynn Seldon ([lynnseeldon.com](http://lynnseeldon.com)) is the author of more than 1,000 feature articles, eight non-fiction travel books, and a recent novel, *Virginia's Ring*, which takes place at VMI and includes a tailgating scene.

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