

# THE SENTINEL

## THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE IN THE CIVIL WAR

The American Civil War deeply affected the nation. Whether any other American college had more impact on this war or was affected by it more than the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington, Virginia, is open to debate. The relationship between VMI and the American Civil War is far more than Stonewall Jackson and the Battle of New Market.

To explain that complicated relationship, The MMCWR was visited in November by David J. Sutherland, an attorney from Brownsburg, Indiana. Dave is the Immediate past president of the Indianapolis Civil War Roundtable where he also served as president from 2001 to 2002. He is a 1973 graduate of VMI where he was a history major, and a graduate of the IU School of Law, Indianapolis. He is a member of the Indiana State, Indianapolis and Hendricks County Bar Associations, a colonel (retired) in the US Army Reserve and a volunteer recruiter for VMI in Indiana.

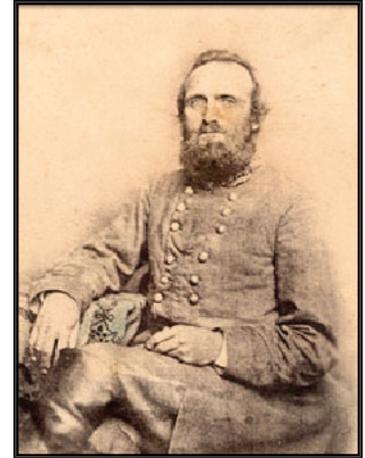
As VMI cadets drilled rebel recruits in 1861, VMI alumni began to profoundly shape the Army of Northern Virginia. No other school provided this famed army more trained officers than the Virginia Military Institute. Douglas Southall Freeman, the foremost historian of both Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, wrote, "I am convinced that the Army of Northern Virginia owed to the Institute such excellence of regimental command as it had . . . I do not believe the campaigns of 1862 could have been successfully fought without the VMI men."

The Patton clan is but one example of an Old Dominion antebellum family's preference for military education. This family, ancestors of the famed World War II general, had four of seven brothers and several warring cousins attend VMI under long standing tradition. During the Civil War, these four Patton brothers and their kin commanded eleven different rebel infantry regiments. One VMI graduate, Colonel George S. Patton, grandfather of the World War II general, was killed leading his regiment at the Third Battle of Winchester.

Robert Krick, author of *Lee's Colonels*, noted the Army of Northern Virginia's clear preference for VMI men for field officer positions. The impact of so many VMI men in key positions is best illustrated by a single division in one day's battle. On the afternoon of July 3, 1863, as Major General

George Pickett's Division charged across the field at Gettysburg, VMI men led thirteen of Pickett's fifteen regiments at some point in that attack. Only two of these thirteen survived unscathed after this heroic but suicidal charge. VMI men also commanded four of the other six rebel brigades advancing with Pickett's three brigades that July 3, 1863.

Upon seeing so many former cadets in his flanking column only hours before launching his famed attack at Chancellorsville, Stonewall Jackson said to Colonel Thomas Munford, "The Institute will be heard from today." They were, most assuredly, heard from when thousands of Union troops reeled from Jackson's greatest attack in the war. Ironically, the Civil War unit with the most VMI men, forty-six in the 43rd Virginia Cavalry, was not led by a VMI man, but by a University of Virginia man, John Singleton Mosby.



*Thomas (Stonewall) Jackson served on the VMI Faculty as Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy & Instructor of Artillery from August 1851 until the beginning of the Civil War in April 1861.*

In May, 1864, at New Market, Virginia, former US Vice-President and then CSA Lieutenant General John C. Breckinridge, desperate for troops in the waning months of the war, committed VMI's young cadet corps to battle as a single military unit. These cadets suffered twenty percent casualties in their famed assault, which included ten who gave



*The Arsenal, where VMI cadets were housed until 1851*

the ultimate sacrifice and are still honored at VMI each May 15 to this day. The next month federal forces torched the Institute, although operations of some sort at VMI never ceased, moving to Richmond for a few years and eventually back to a rebuilt campus in Lexington.

VMI barely survived the American Civil War. Since 1865, VMI's citizen-soldiers have continued their legacy of distinguished national military service. More than two thousand VMI men served in World War I, more than four thousand served in World War II and thousands more from VMI served in Korea, Vietnam and the first and second Gulf Wars. Many thanks go to Dave Sutherland for coming down from the Indy metroplex and sharing this fascinating account with us.

