

*The Cadet*  
1871 - 1873  
1890 - 1892  
1907 - 1934  
1994 - 2016  
2021 - Today

# THE



# CADET

*THE KEYDET*  
Oct. 1907

*The VMI Cadet*  
1934 - 1994

*The Independent Voice of the Corps and Alumni since 1871* ©2022 - The Cadet Foundation

*True to the founding principles of the cadets who created it, The Cadet is and remains the independent, cadet controlled, and cadet edited newspaper. Neither VMI nor VMI AA provide support and cadets have total editorial control of the newspaper's contents. See the staff box on page 2*

Volume Number: CXIII

Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, VA, December 16, 2022

Number 6

Donation Req.: \$4.50



*The Sentinel Box in Old Barracks, December 2022*

*- Photo by Cadet Russell Crouch '24*

## The legend of the Sentinel Box - Part 3: Das Tannenbaum es Kaput

**- By The Cadet Staff with input from VMI Alumni from the Classes of '61, '76, '79, '87, '90 - '93, '96, 97 and 2004 - 2008**

The tumultuous events over the past several years at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), initiated in the media and promoted by some political agendas in Richmond, created a climate where almost every facet of VMI, from statutes and plaques to the historical traditions of the institute, are subjected to being “placed in context”. This contextualization either distances these traditions from VMI’s history, or attempts to explain VMI’s rapidly disappearing traditions against often incorrect, but popular, social interpretation by those who do not understand, and in some cases do not want to understand, these traditions or their value. It is, therefore, important to

provide such context to the legend of the sentinel box, and particularly to what over the years has become known as “Tannenbaum es kaput” or “Tannenbaum Jihad”.

In his 1993 Doctoral thesis, *“A wealth of hallowed memories: The development of mission, saga, and distinctiveness at the Virginia Military Institute”*, David Roger Loope (College of William & Mary - School of Education) generally placed the Institute’s history and traditions in context using Robert Penn Warren’s conclusion in his fictional account of Huey P. Long’s rise and fall in the book, *All the King’s Men*, that states: *History, then, becomes a central, dominating theme and component in southern identity. The past as something that has a tangible influence on the present and the future is a fact of life in southern culture. Warren warns the*

*reader that southerners and their institutions may hide from their common past, but they can never hope to escape it completely; to this extent, they are living representations of where they are from and of the history of that place. Whether a blessing or a curse, southerners and southern institutions are forever imbued with their history and with all the baggage, grotesque as well as glorious, that it encompasses.*

For VMI specifically, Loope’s research and analysis concluded, “As a southern college, VMI also must bear the ‘awful responsibility of Time.’ Likewise, as an observer of time in the past tense, the historian must realize that a knowledge of Virginia Military’s past is absolutely necessary for understanding anything and everything that relates to the school today—from court cases to basketball courts.” Thus is the case with the Old Barracks sentinel box and the

Corps’ legendary hijinks throughout VMI’s history.

Although the next article in this series will explore the subject in more detail, the sentinel box holds a unique place in VMI culture and history, as both a physical structure from which Cadets stand guard as well as a powerful symbol of the Brother Rat (BR) spirit. Sentinels guard not only the Institute’s physical structure but, more importantly, their fellow Cadets as they work and sleep.

In Part 1 in this series, *The Cadet* explored various sentinel box legends and stories ranging from the Corps’ fascination with bringing down the sentinel box itself, to the VMI Class of ’79 securing its place in history as finally accomplishing the feat, then paying for its replacement (twice). The Virginia

# The Legend of the Sentinel Box - Part 3:

From A1

Press Association Best Feature Award-winning Part 2 in the series focused on the legendary effort by VMI Class of '56 to completely rebuild rooms in Old Barracks in a single night after "Doc" Hardee, the Class bomb maker, almost turned his room into a "two room suite". In this Part 3, *The Cadet* uses the lenses of both history and VMI's unique "barracks culture" to look back at the origin of bombs in barracks, then "fast forwards" to how the "Barracks Christmas Tree" and sentinel box traditions have effectively ceased.

These traditions, associated legends and associated mysteries began during the Civil War when VMI Cadets were called into service under the laws of Virginia for various military duties including, but not limited to, security at John Brown's hanging, the Battle of New Market, and eventually, the defense of Richmond. After VMI was all but destroyed as a result of Gen. David Hunter's 1864 raid in retaliation for the Corps' victory in the Battle of New Market, the City of Richmond reclaimed The General Hospital, also called the City Home Hospital and the Alms House Hospital for rental to VMI as their temporary location there. With the Union Army advancing to

of those detonating the magazine remained a mystery then, as they do to this day. According to *The City*, "We have not learned the name of the individual who applied the torch." The Shockhoe Hill magazine destruction and the VMI cadets departure that evening would seem merely coincidental save for facts documented by Gleb Taran '79 in his historic research of the Corps in Richmond during the war.

Taran, told *The Cadet*, "Never forget the night of 2 April 1865 when the powder magazine in Richmond (less than 1 block from the Richmond VMI barracks) was blown up about one hour after the Corps was released from duty. Moses Ezekiel [VMI Class of 1866] would have been walking past this location enroute to his home at 12th and Marshall Streets, less than a mile away. There is no indication that Ezekiel was involved in this 'Mother of All Explosions', just that he and some of his BRs walked past this location - very close to [the] time of detonation."

### Coincidence?

After the war, according to research by the VMI Archives, "As a result of the rigors of the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), many cadets during this time

groups and their separate ideologies as going against the VMI ethos that reduces all, regardless of background or social status, to a common level then builds them back into a Class mindful of their obligations to duty, honor, and others, especially their BRs.

According to the Sigma Nu history, distrust of fraternities reached a climax in the early 1880s fed by the continuing antagonism between the Cadets and Washington and Lee (W&L) University students that many in the VMI Family to this day still call "minks". Sigma Nu's history documents, "On one occasion, the cadets charged the W&L students with bayonets and the students retaliated by throwing bricks and stones before retreating."

It was at this time the Molly McGuires 13, named after a group that terrorized the Pennsylvania coal regions in labor disputes following the Civil War, formed as a secret society at VMI and began the practice of detonating small black powdered bombs in the Barracks courtyard for entertainment. The group rebelled against both the fraternities' ideologies and practices as well as against what they viewed as the administrations' attempts to reduce the historical self-governing power of the Corps and the VMI experience. Eventually the conflict between the groups escalated to the point that the VMI Board of Visitors (BOV) came around to the Corps' perspective, and in June 1885 inserted a clause in the matriculation pledge for new students that banned them from joining any secret society.

The Molly Maguires were much more than pranksters though. Their very existence was born from the Corps' frustration with the actions of the administration and these affinity groups it saw as divisive and threatening to VMI's core values. They also rejected what they viewed as over-control and repression of the freedom of expression by the VMI administration. According to Loope's research,

*If nothing else, this organization represented the unwillingness of all the cadets to kowtow to the administration and reveals the existence of a student subculture at VMI that has as its bond violence toward the school rather than strict adherence to its principles. Yet, even the Molly McGuires, in their rebellion against the administration, were concerned with the internal workings of*

*the school. They were not political rebels like the protestors of the 1960's. They were VMI men who expressed their hatred of a system to which they nevertheless clung. There was a reason they never revealed their identities: in the end, staying at the Institute meant more to them than blowing it up.*

The Molly's greatest accomplishment came in 1884 when they blew up the powder magazine at VMI in an eerily similar fashion to the Richmond magazine twenty years earlier in 1864. According to records from the time, Gen. Smith, VMI's Superintendent, could never prove the Molly's involvement because he could never identify the members of the society. Although records show several cadets were expelled for complicity in the incident they were later allowed to re-enter VMI with a "boys-will-be-boys" sign from the commandant." As the Texas A&M Corps student publication *The Battalion* so succinctly puts it, the response by VMI stands in stark contrast to how even minor Cadet pranks are addressed at the Institute today, "...several cadets expelled for complicity were later allowed to re-enter the corps, an indication that college authorities in those days were able to take a calm view of such minor disturbances as the demolition of an entire building."

Many aspects of the destruction of the VMI magazine by the Molly's remained only as a legend until 1962 when, according to Associated Press reporting and *The Battalion*, "Workmen clearing brush on a hillside across from the Virginia Military Institute cadet barracks recently uncovered, a hole in the ground and scattered bricks reminding of a long-ago incident which makes present-day campus pranks seem like child's play." According to the Associated Press, "a VMI spokesman said, when a group of VMI cadets smuggled in several hundred pounds of blasting powder and lit the fuse one night."

Again, according to Loope's research, "This introspection, in which even student rebellion manifests itself internally, was typical at colleges after the Civil War. At VMI, it represented the cadets' decision to look within the Institute itself to find sources for expressing and defining institutional culture..."



Richmond, Va. Stacked and scattered ammunition near the State Arsenal  
- Photo by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

take Richmond, the Corps was released from duty and sent home on April 2, 1865. As Jack Trammell and Guy Terrell recount in *A Short History of Richmond*, "The Main Powder magazine on Shockhoe Hill blew up in the Middle of the night on Monday. Since the structure was situated on the hillside in a ravine, the destruction was limited, though the blast knocked out windows in the nearby Alms House. Cadets from VMI had been stationed there but, luckily, were away, assigned to the front. The reverberations could be heard across the city." According to *The City Magazine* account at the time, "The four walls of the magazine were blown not equally in every direction, but in four volleys towards the four cardinal points of the compass... It is astonishing into what atoms the brickbats and timbers of the building were for the most part blown. They have more the appearance of having been ground in a grist mill or quartz-crusher than blown up."

The first similarity to later events at VMI is that the Shockhoe Hill magazine was similar in construction to the one at VMI. The article also noted the identities

found themselves using anything at their disposal to have fun. However, some of these past times were often costly and mischievous... As a result of the Civil War, many cadets had access to weapons and explosives because of the fear of another attack by the North. "Similarly, although they are not stacking arms or ammunition in response, VMI and its Corps today face pressure from some political and non-political activism clubs, groups, and politicians to discard tradition or contextualize the Institute's history as society evolves. There is increasing pressure and actions inside VMI to produce Cadets that follow the social equity norms currently in favor by "updating" VMI's Honor system, Corps system, and Ratline, while abandoning traditions and ignoring the whole of VMI's history with, as Loope observes, "all the baggage, grotesque as well as glorious, that it encompasses". Tension with such groups is not new to the Corps. As both VMI and Virginia took their place in the post-war United States, the Corps faced similar challenges with the rise of fraternities and secret societies at VMI. Many in the Corps saw these



Members of the secret society, the Molly Maguires at VMI, circa 1890. Includes Frank G. Doggett, Class of 1892; John B. Nicholson, Class of 1893. Part of the VMI Archives Photographs Collection.  
- Photo by VMI Archives

# Das Tannenbaum es Kaput

Loope also documents that whatever freedom of expression the cadets may have lost with the abolition of fraternities, they more than made up for with renewed interest in the saga of VMI that gave them their only common experience. Symbolic of recognition by the entire Institute of its own distinctiveness was the publishing of *The Bomb* in 1885, the first college annual in the South. Prior to creating *The Bomb*, cadets, with alumni support and participation, also started *The Cadet* as a magazine in 1871 that transitioned to its present day newspaper format in 1907. Although *The Cadet* has shut down due to various circumstances over the years, Cadets, with alumni support, resurrected it in 2021. It exists today as one of the oldest independent College newspapers in Virginia. The same cannot be said of *The Bomb* as it is no longer independent, falling under the editorial and other control of the Commandant's office and managed by a "Cadet-in-Charge" selected by the administration.

The VMI administration exercises a large degree of control over all Institute, Cadet class, and Parents' Council social media. This has led to the use of other outlets, namely Jodel, a supposedly anonymous social media application the corps has increasingly turned to in order to express themselves.

As covered in national media and the Commonwealth of Virginia's investigation into allegations resulting from that reporting, Jodel has become a forum for some comedic yet ill-advised posts. Similar to what Loope's research found in other areas, when the Corps lost much of its historic and traditional paths for self-management and self-determination coupled with increasing restrictions on their freedom of expression, Jodel became the outlet for rebellion against the administration. This, again, was not because of hatred for the Institute or their fellow cadets, but out of concern with the internal workings of their school. With the administration and the media now monitoring Cadets' Jodel accounts and other social media, then subsequently taking negative action against selected cadets who have posted there (in the case of the administration), or using a few posts to justify condemning the entire cadet Corps and the Institute (in the case of some in the media and their surrogates), the traditional and modern sources Cadets have for expressing and defining institutional culture are vanishing. Given the Corps history and studies such as Loope's, the pressure and frustration within the Corps will likely continue to build without any true free expression outlets, and could, at the extreme, manifest itself in the Corps abandonment of the VMI experience altogether.

Although the actions by the Molly's are an extreme example of unrest, Loope's comparison between the Molly's and the protestors of the 1960s, and even the social protests of today, is important. Unlike the recent tragic events on college campuses such as University of Virginia, Bridgewater College, and Virginia Tech these corps traditions are not meant to take life, nor were they the acts of disturbed or radical individuals. Unlike the wave of protests and unrest in Minneapolis and other cities in 2021, as well as counter actions by radicals against protestors in Charlottesville, etc. these pranks were never intended to be, nor did they ever descend into violence. Any such comparison is invalid. None of the incidents in these VMI traditions ever

targeted any person or attempted to intentionally kill or maim anyone, Cadets or otherwise. Quite the opposite. The pranks were most often planned and conducted by unified groups of Cadets. Great care and planning went into avoiding harming fellow cadets and others. For example, although officially banned, the tradition of bombs in the courtyard and sentinel box, preceded by the obligatory warning to the Corps in barracks of "bomb in the courtyard!" survived after World War II. The practice was increasing managed by the Corps, who developed strict rules as to the use, location and even size of the bombs allowed to be used for this tradition. The practices, particularly with bombs in the courtyard and, as we will soon see, Tannenbaum Jihad, evolved in various forms throughout the years, all with an eye to ensuring fellow BRs and others were protected from any injurious effects of the pranks.

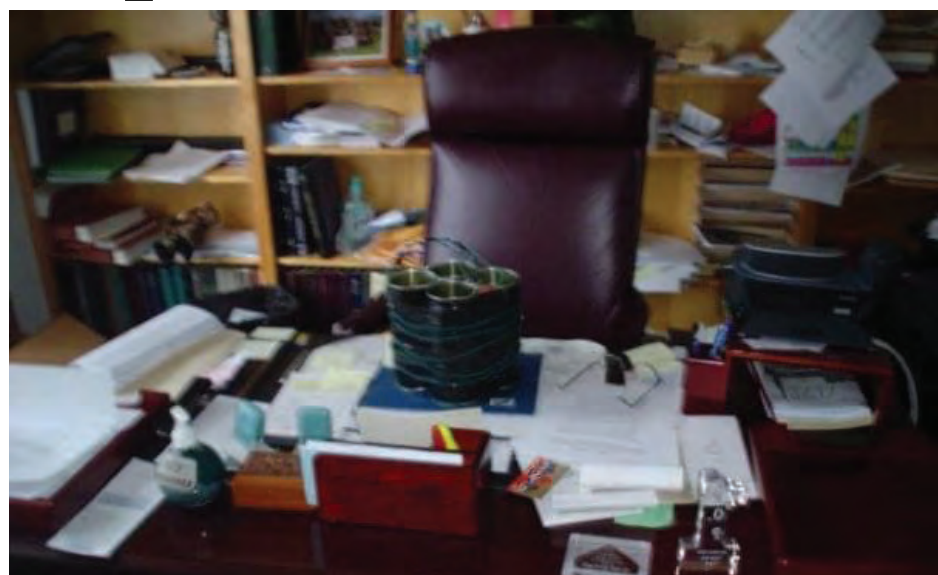
In many ways, the traditions relating to the sentinel box over the years remained manifestations of internal rebellion. In recent years, meetings of the First Class, who've traditionally voted on practices and decisions to run the Corps, were replaced by mandatory assemblies where the Corps was notified by the administration of new changes imposed on the honor system, Corps system, Ratline and other Cadet life areas. In many respects the First Class at VMI no longer controls the traditional "Class privileges," that each lower Class must eventually demonstrate they are worthy to receive and maintain. This authority to assign and revoke many of the traditional Class privileges now principally resides with the Commandant's staff, and not the Corps itself.

As removal of the Corps tradition and powers by the administrations over the years has increased through the years, pranks have increased in response. Some Cadets, alumni and outside observers of VMI believe that the administration and BOV attempts to appease society's changing whims, regardless of its detrimental impact on the Corps and tradition. The observations and conclusions in Loope's research support the need to at least address those concerns.

The sentinel box today seems to be less identified by the Corps and alumni as a symbol of the struggle for the Corps identity against "the powers that be," and a rallying point for the Corps to re-establish itself as the keepers of the three pillars of the VMI experience. Class leadership increasingly addresses the Corps from atop the sentinel box. A high point of alumni reunion classes is to form around the sentinel box and give "old yells" for their class. When Gen. Peay was forced to resign by Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, the Corps assembled in the Old Barracks Courtyard, by their own decision, to pay tribute to him as he left.

Enter the barracks Christmas tree.

It's unclear when exactly the first Corps Christmas tree appeared in Old Barracks. Alumni from the 1970s recall that, at least as far back as 1976, the Corps formed up before Supper Roll Call (SRC) on the Old Barracks stoops where a Christmas tree was set up in one of the 2d or 3rd stoop barracks corners. The Regimental Commander called the Corps to attention and boomed the command "LIGHT THE TREE!," after which the Christmas lights went on and the VMI band played.



Cadet improvised fireworks mortar, Circa 2005

- Photo by VMI Class of 2008

According to one alumnus from '79, at one point during his time as a cadet from '76 to '79, before leaving for Christmas furlough, an anonymous voice boomed out very early one dark morning "LIGHT THE TREE," and the Christmas tree suddenly burst into flames.

Whether to make it more prominent, or to avoid any unfortunate secondary effects of attacks on the foliage, the tree eventually moved to the top of the Old Courtyard sentinel box. Some in the Corps saw this as an act of overreach by the administration against the tradition of the corps decorating their rooms and stoops. As a VMI alumnus, Class of 2008,

told *The Cadet*, "I attended VMI from August 2004 through May 2008. I am a proud VMI graduate. I am happy to share some of the barracks hijinks related to the Sentinel Box. But beforehand, I believe context is necessary."

Before "third barracks" or what we called "baby barracks" was constructed, Old Barracks and New Barracks had two very different cultures. Old Barracks is where the history of VMI really lived and dwelled. New Barracks was more modern, if you can call it that. It had a rubber-like

See A10



Cartoon from the *Cadet* newspaper warning revenge of the Christmas trees by Craig Streeter '91. In addition to being part of pranks against the barracks Christmas Tree during his cadetship, Col. Streeter was the Head of the VMI Naval ROTC Department. After VMI Col. Streeter who went on to become a combat artist in the Marine Corps, although this cartoon remains his favorite.

- Courtest VMI Alumni

# Legend of the Sentinel Box Part 3

*Continued for A8*

floor that Cadets used as a makeshift slip-and-slide. Cadets would dump hays into a pile and jump off the second (or third) stoop for fun. But when we formed up for parades, had old yells, sweat parties, class speeches, rat riots, etc. they occurred in Old Barracks.

I was an Old Barracks Cadet and the object of our frustration, anger, anxiety, and ultimately, joy, was the Sentinel Box. Obviously a neat facet of the post tour, it was also a target of many industrious, but misguided, Cadets.

The S-7, Cadet Life, staff wrote a permit, which was approved, to decorate the barracks for Christmas. It was joyous. I'm sure it still happens today, but Rats used string lights to write mottos and other motivational phrases against their company walls. Thirds would make up acronyms for inside jokes and proudly depict them in lights, or decorate their rooms with "red lights" or other holiday-themed fun. The bugler would start playing Christmas songs after taps. It was a grand time for all. I think the culture changed, the personal touches made the place more livable. But this year someone in the S-7 would ruin it and put a Christmas Tree next to the Sentinel Box. This act broke some unwritten rule. I would say that most mature Cadets ignored it-- typically the hard science or engineer majors-- but some took notice and had an extreme reaction.

I remember watching in the Fall of 2005, a Second Classmen throw an improvised Molotov Cocktail from the bridge on the Second Stoop in what was Jackson Arch (I don't know what it is called now). It looked like a glass tea bottle (Snapple or Ecko) filled with probably Brasso and lighter fluid. It obviously failed to even reach the Sentinel Box, let alone destroy the tree. It fell way short and extinguished itself when it hit the concrete. I think Sgt. Maj. Neel had a Rat clean it up the next day.

After the failed Molotov attack, I believe the S-7 moved the tree to the top of the Sentinel Box for protection. A Cadet obviously looking for a challenge took it upon him or herself to burn it down. A Cadet, had to have been a third or a second even a first to be honest, since they had a cell phone and a bathrobe, walked down to the Old Barracks Courtyard and walked around a bit, either on a real cell phone call or pretending. After a few laps, the Cadet timed his action when the Sentinel was marching back to his post against the Northern wall of Old Barracks. There was a 20 second window for the Cadet to climb the Sentinel Box, dump a curious cocktail of flammable liquids, light an improvised fuse, and run into the darkness of Gold Coast Stairwell to disappear.

The tree ignited slowly at first. The Sentinel didn't react until the tree was well engulfed in flames. We all figured (and debated heavily) the next day at Breakfast Roll Call that whatever liquid was used probably pooled at the base and the flames were hidden by the battlements. But once the plastic pine needles caught, the tree exploded in a burst of flames. Slow moving, tired, and curious Cadets noticed and began raucous cheers, yelling, whistling, and the like. After a few minutes, either the Officer of the Day or the Officer of the Guard walked out with a fire extinguisher and put the tree out. Obviously, it was quite difficult given the angle. You can imagine the jeering that

occurred when they didn't get it put out on the first try.

The guard team turned on all the lights and all that you could see was a heavy smoky fog and whatever was inside the fire extinguisher, I think it's baking soda, it smelled horrible. The fire department swung by and made sure the fire was out and eventually things went back to normal.

"Der Tannenbaum es Kaput" was the headline on the back of the Cadet [newspaper] with a photo of the fully lit tree. The phrase was taken from "Saving Private Ryan" where entrenched Germans were announcing that the "Statue of Liberty is Kaput" and other things. I believe one of the Assistant Editors spoke German and was a big fan of the movie.

After the tree was taken down, the Class system reimbursed the S-7 staff for the cost of the tree and the ornaments. I believe the third class was blamed-- why not right? And the Class President went door-to-door collecting a donation from every room.

They did not put up a Christmas tree in the Sentinel Box for the remaining years that I was a Cadet.

There's another story about the Spring of 2005 the First Class loading the top of the Sentinel Box with Fireworks and setting off a display. There's a group of Seconds that were caught with an improvised firework mortar of sorts that would have sent off more fireworks.

The Corps' pranks targeting the tree continued on-and-off for many years during which, like bombs in the courtyard and attempts to down the sentinel box, cadets used their seemingly boundless collective initiative to develop and execute increasingly elaborate "attacks" against the tree. The belief, at least outside of the VMI administration, is that these were not "acts of terrorism" or radical acts of violence, but rather harmless pranks. Many of these pranks became a light-hearted "catch me if you can" battle between the Commandant's staff and the Corps. The Commandant and Superintendent staffs that appreciated VMI traditions rarely succumbed to "panic in the herd," and normally handled the demise of the Christmas tree like Captain Renault at the end of Casa Blanca when, following Major. Strasser being shot, commanded his gendarmes to "round up the usual suspects".

One alumnus, with first-hand knowledge of the incident, recalls a 1978 plot against the tree during which several cadets availed themselves of their girl friends' dormitory rooms at a local all-women's college in order to develop and test devices intended to bring down the tree with minimal collateral effects. Unfortunately, the "outdoor testing phase" did not go completely as "outdoors," as planned, and someone called campus security to investigate the strange noise in the dorm. According to the local police report at the time:

[R]eceived a call to college that someone had shot off a firecracker in the building on the 6th floor..... Marks on the window seal indicated that it was shot from the inside..... later call was answered by Sgt. [redacted]. Homemade device made by [names redacted] both of VMI.

Both date girls at [redacted] Detectives contacted FBI on this and advised them of these boys making explosives.

Contact [redacted] ATF, and he requested that one of the investigating

officers with all the information contact him.

Needless to say, interviews were conducted, and the Commandant engaged with the Corps leadership to investigate and recommend appropriate action. In a tribute to the high regard a Cadets' "certified" word to the effect that no harm was intended to their fellow Cadets, the Commandant and local law enforcement, together with a rather colorful explanation to the FBI and ATF of the existential threat posed by the Christmas tree, the police report ends by stating:

ATF advised and stated there was no violation of federal law and that they were not getting involved in this.

As far as the [redacted] Police Dept. is concerned, there is no violation of law in this matter.

For their part, the Cadets in question received a stern "A" for initiative and "F" for judgment lecture from the Commandant, and the mantle to "LIGHT THE TREE" was taken over by others that year.

We pause here for a few minutes of silence to honor the recounting of a history of relatively harmless pranks through the years before the traditions and history of VMI's past have been completely "canceled," and, as some modern Cadets opine, "VMI became a place where fun goes to die" to include:

A 1987 graduate, who asked his name not be used due to some question if the Statute of Limitations has run out, told The Cadet,

I will never forget final exams just before Christmas furlough of my Rat year because it was one of the funniest things that I ever experienced at VMI.

During final exams, probably the night before our last exam, the Christmas tree perched on top of the sentinel box was set on fire after lights out with a 1st giving the command "Light.....the tree!!".

The 1sts had rigged up a wire slide from the 2nd stoop down to the top of the sentinel box. Cadets had walked past the sentinel box throughout the evening and had thrown flammable rags on top of the sentinel box. At the command of 'Light the tree!', a 1st set afire a gallon paint can full of flammable liquid that he had hooked onto the guy wire that was connected to the top of the sentinel box and slid it down the wire. When the flaming paint can hit the top of the sentinel box, the entire top of the sentinel box went up in flames along with the Christmas tree.

It was dead silence in barracks except for that one clear, concise command, so it was just odd and we didn't immediately understand why someone would give that command in Old Barracks at that time of the night. Within seconds after the command, our entire room lit up and we all ran out on the stoop to see the Christmas tree up in flames. We had a 5-man rat room and we all had just got in our hays because it was after lights out and we had exams the next morning. Our Rat Room (423) was on the front side of Old Barracks just to the right of Jackson Arch, so we had a great view. Old Barracks was lit up and every cadet in Old Barracks went out on the stoop and celebrated the event and someone started singing "Oh Christmas Tree" followed by other Christmas carols.

A 1990 alumnus recounted to The Cadet the inordinate amount of attention and priority modern cadets, like their predecessors back to the Molly's, placed on ensuring the safety of all concerned in

their pranks. This included engaging STEM cadets for their technological expertise. True to tradition, the pranks remained truly team efforts. As told by the alumnus,

At least in the 1980s tree explosions were normal. The Corps would form up on the stoops before the Corps Christmas dinner and the Reghead [Regimental Commander] would command "Light the Tree" and the stoopies would plug it in and the whole Corps would go "oooooooooh".

Then during exams late at night you would hear a voice cry "Light the tree" and barracks would be treated to a blazing Corps tree.

In December 1988 the tree was destroyed by a large consortium of Cadets, mostly Firsts and some 5 year guys. The group of plotters jokingly called themselves the "Tannenbaum Jihad" given events in the Middle East at the time. Safety for Cadets and especially the guard team on duty was paramount so the planners enlisted a bunch of physics majors who helped set up and test the device's electronics in the physics lab. They played an important part as the unsung heroes that make everything safe and successful but rarely get mentioned.

A device was designed and extensively tested to provide radio command detonation of the device that they were able to place on the tree at the top of the sentinel box by means of overpowering the sentinel that was on duty. This was not particularly difficult as the "guard" was a third sitting in a lawn chair.

It's essential to appreciate how many hours went into this plan with protecting anyone from harm being the the most important consideration. The use of radio command detonation was not to be "cool", but explicitly to protect any cadet (like a sentinel) that might approached the tree from been injured in the blast. Instead the device could be armed and then detonated from a safe distance ensuring nobody was near just like the Old Corps did in the histories The Cadet recounted in your previous stories. If anyone like the guard team got to close the group could always "abort the mission" at the last minute.

This was really a team effort as there were about a dozen people involved in designing and safety testing the device, only one of which was actually a member of the Tannenbaum Jihad. There were probably 20 other persons in various groups, and probably as many more, trying to get the tree through various means. For example, one night would be flaming arrows, another Molotov cocktails, another a German stick grenade. The guard team began emptying the area on top of the Sentinel Box from unexploded ordnance every day and it looked like Baby Mugsy from Buggs Bunny being emptied out.

In a lot of ways it resembled Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner with all these various groups trying more and more elaborate ways to employ their own "Acme Tree destruction kit" to the problem while avoiding the unpleasant consequences the Coyote suffered. The group accomplished its mission through a true team effort by the Corps.

By this time in 1988, responding to contemporary world events including wars in the Middle East, the band of Christmas tree plotters took on the title or Tannenbaum Jihad in a similar manner how the Molly Maguires chose theirs based on the Pennsylvania coal riots in their day.

**See A11**

# The legend of the Sentinel Box Part 3

*Continued from A10*

Richard Copeland '91 posted in response to the question from Hardenbergh '93, that he could neither confirm nor deny reports, "Radio Shack remote control toy, <\$20... Deconstructing and using insides to trigger a "Molotov ornament" - just a little engineering innovation.... Plan fizzled when trying to get the ornament on the tree... would have been epic.... But potentially career limiting... "LIGHT THE TREE"!!!!

The groups of cadets targeting the Christmas tree continued to organize and by 1992 the schemes became even more elaborate. In responding to Hardenbergh '93's challenge, Bryan Frazier '92 recalled two incidents. First, "a jeep running through Jackson arch and around the sentinel post, along the way roping the tree and dragging it back out the arch. The commandant or superintendent may have then received a ransom note for the liberation of the tree." His second experience was more personal.

As Frazier '92 tells the story, "Rat year Dale Bishop and I are walking guard posts around the tree. Between us we have one rifle with no firing pin, two dull bayonets, and a fire extinguisher. Late in the evening, a second stoop door opens and a flaming arrow flies through the air... through the tree...and skips like a stone on a pond off the ground in Washington arch and flies past Washington into the parapet! Everyone acted like nothing had happened. Good times!!"

The 1992 *Bomb* documents proudly recorded the tale of that year's events:

*Tannenbaum Jihad*

*The night was dark, the air was cold. Eleven men entered, or so I'm told, with all the Corps nestled snug in their hays, dreaming of the tree, all set ablaze. The Tannenbaum Jihad was all in their places, with masks on their heads, and grins on their faces. Suddenly, there was an ominous THUD, the sentinel had been hit by a flying UB. When the guard team hurried to see what the heck, Bausch-man and Engstrom threw them to the deck. Next, Lyle and Min- negrode leapt up to the tree to cut at the wires and set the thing free. While Mazzei and Cherry fought off the guard, down came the tree and hit the ground hard. As Hua and Sleestack opened the gate, Bigbird ran in to help with the escape. Running out the arch and shutting the gate, they took the tree to its dubious fate. Throwing it in a car with Weatherman and Ott, they drove the tree off to an undisclosed spot. Then that very next night, for all to see, they gathered at McKethan to LIGHT THE TREE!*

From a 1993 Alumnus,  
*From the years 1989 to 1993, we witnessed at least two destructions of a Christmas tree on the sentinel box. I think that in 1989, the tree was burned. We woke up the next morning and just smelled soot and smoke and saw the charred remnants of the tree. In 1990 Colonel Bissell, who was then commandant, posted an extra guard in*

*the Old Barracks guard post at night to prevent the destruction of the tree. Of course, that plan failed. I remember hearing and feeling a loud explosion well after taps. It was about 1:30 in the morning. There was a huge 'boom' in old barracks and everybody came out on the stoop. Smoke was hanging in the air, and the tree had been blown up. I don't recall how much destruction there was or how much was left. Because of the extra guards that were posted there, I seem to recall that the bomber had to detonate the tree from one of the stoops, maybe the third or fourth, using some kind of fuse, cable, or remote.*

In 1997 there allegedly was another elaborate plot involving "kidnapping" the Christmas tree and the issuance of a ransom note demanding amnesty for the Corps for its return. When the Commandant's staff refused, the group with "Donnie" Haseltine '97, Band Company Commanding Officer, self-proclaimed "Mad Bomber" and member of the "Tannenbaum Gestapo/Jihad 3,2,1" and "Collaborator and Part-time Revolutionary 2,1" per his First Class Bomb bio, blew up the tree.

Over the years, Cadet pranks involving the Christmas tree and sentinel box became less frequent. During his tenure as Commandant from 2007 to 2014, Col. (Ret) Tom Trumps '79 returned to the policy of allowing cadets to decorate their rooms, doors and the barracks stoops so the practice of a central Corps Christmas stopped for the most part. After that time, the administration took more and more autonomy from the Corps and the Institute became increasingly afraid of "what the media might print". This year the administration's reaction to even the suggestion of such pranks was swift and severely dealt with after a Cadet copied a message from a group chat of friends and published it on Jodel, the allegedly anonymous messaging application VMI's administration and Post Police now monitors, stating that this friend would blow up the Sentinel Box in protest if the Cadet in question did not get the position of Regimental Commander.

Unlike how it historically dealt with previous Cadet antics in these areas, or even other Jodel posts more damaging to the Institute's identity, and although the barracks was not evacuated and the post was never placed on lock-down or alert to a potential threat, the reaction by the current VMI administration, many of whom never attended VMI, was swift and severe. Citing influence from the tragic events that resulted from acts by students at other colleges, who were not subject to VMI's traditional culture and the VMI experience itself, VMI's Superintendent issued the following statement to parents, faculty, staff and the Corps in reaction to the posting

*From: VMI-Superintendent  
Date: Tuesday, November 29, 2022 at 4:15 PM  
Subject: Jodel Incident  
On Sunday, Nov. 27, VMI Police*

*responded to a report made on the anonymous social media platform, Jodel, of a pipe bomb in the sentinel box in barracks. Once it was determined that both sentinel boxes did not contain any pipe bombs, investigators obtained information from Jodel that led them to a cadet who was brought in for questioning. It was determined by the VMI Police after searching barracks that there was never any serious threat to the VMI or Lexington-Rockbridge County community. The matter is still under investigation and the Commonwealth Attorney is determining if criminal charges will be filed.*

*Unfortunately, we live in a society where we cannot take our safety for granted - even at a place as special as VMI. I'm sure I don't need to remind anyone of the tragedies that we've seen unfold nearby at the University of Virginia, Bridgewater College, and Virginia Tech. No student, faculty member, parent, or college administrator should have to live through such an experience.*

*As a reminder, any security threat to the VMI post or community - no matter how light-hearted - will be investigated and prosecuted in accordance with state and federal laws as well as in accordance with VMI regulations. VMI is fortunate to have a fully accredited, highly trained law enforcement agency to monitor for and respond to any threats to post. VMI Police have strong working relationships with other regional law enforcement agencies as well as the Commonwealth Attorney's office.*

*However, it is everyone's responsibility to contribute to the safety of the community by reporting anything that they see that is out of the ordinary. VMI Police can be contacted at 540-463-9177 or for emergency situations, dial 911.*

*Major General Cedric T. Wins '85  
U.S. Army (Retired) Superintendent  
Virginia Military Institute*

The cadet in question did avoid suspension through the good graces of the Commandant who imposed instead a #1, resulting in 15 demerits, 6-months confinement to barracks and 60 penalty tours.

According to correspondence from Jared L. Moon, Commonwealth's Attorney Rockbridge County/City of Lexington, "After a review of the evidence and considering the wishes of the alleged victim, however, the decision was made not to proceed with criminal charges." and "the case is closed". *A Christmas miracle.*

It's safe to say that even the talk of traditional pranks at VMI now carries great risk, and that Cadets will think twice now that they know the administration is monitoring their social media accounts, and perhaps other of their communications at VMI as well. Especially now that a very influential second-class Cadet has been stripped of his chance to attain the highest rank in the Corps.

In our next segment of this series *The Cadet* will cover the legend of the sentinel box and the annual "burning of

the woolies," as *The Cadet* continues its exploration of the Corps traditions, history, and authorities. While the Corps has no control of how those outside VMI views its unique culture and actions, Loope's astute conclusions from his research on traditions at VMI provides important lessons in both explaining and, in some ways, defending them:

*Also, at a broader level, historical study gives the scholar the ability to view the arc of where we have been and to make future decisions informed of our common past. More than that, though, history can provide us with a glimpse into human nature, into how human beings react and adapt to different phenomena through time. It is for this reason, if for no other, that history is an art form as well as a science. Art gives us an understanding of our commonalities as well as an appreciation for the idiosyncrasies that symbolize the individuality of the human spirit. "Good" history, then, should strive to acquaint us with the great forces that sweep through the human experience over time as well as striving to disclose individuals and specific social entities in each particular era.*

Or, more succinctly, as the late Col. Murray Vines, once head of VMI's Modern Languages Department would often quote from Albert Camus in addressing the Corps' many pranks during his tenure, "**Je me révolte, donc je suis**" (I rebel, therefore we exist.)

**Do you have stories of your cadetship to share regarding the sentinel box and especially the traditional "burning of the woolies" and related activities? If so, we want to hear from you! Please contact us with your tall tales and any accompanying relevant photos at [info@cadetnewspaper.org](mailto:info@cadetnewspaper.org).**

**Editor's note: The Cadet staff would like to extend its appreciation to Mr. Van Hardenbergh '93. His posting on a VMI-related Facebook site seeking comments from Brother Rats (BR) who can identify the meaning of the phrase "Tannenbaum Jihad" and share any Old Corps stories as to their BR's success in accomplishing missions related to the hijinks to which the term refers. Mr. Hardenbergh's post inspired not only his fellow alumni to come forward with personal accounts of the sentinel box and the barracks Christmas tree, but inspired Part 3 of this series. The Cadet Staff also wishes to thank all those alumni who reached out to provide their personal accounts and assisted in the research for this article. Given their concerns regarding how the administration and some in the media may respond to their accounts, the names for some of those directly involved are omitted, in some cases, at their request. This was truly a "VMI Family" project. Mr. Hardenbergh '93 offered "beers on me the next time you see me at the Palms to the best answer." – The Cadet staff and the alumni contributors hope we win!**



**Merry Christmas**  
**Take this Issue Home!**

