

“Fully the Equal of the Best”

**George C. Marshall and the
Virginia Military Institute**



A GEORGE C. MARSHALL FOUNDATION PUBLICATION

DEMOBILIZATION of the vast war machine that he had worked so hard to assemble, arm, and train was well underway by November 1945, and George C. Marshall, who had been Army Chief of Staff for sixty-two months (longer than anyone before or since), thought he deserved a leisurely retirement devoted to his family and to tending his gardens in Leesburg, Virginia. But the world was too undone for the quick return of normalcy, and the nation's leaders repeatedly, insistently requested his services: as special ambassador to China in 1946, as Secretary of State in 1947 and 1948, and as Secretary of Defense in 1950 and 1951. At every turn of his career after 1939, the President needed him. Others had need of him, too; he spent a year traveling the country as chairman of the American National Red Cross (1949-50).

Why did he accept these and other demands when he had already served his country for nearly forty-five years? Speaking to a national radio audience on November 11, 1940, the anniversary of the founding of his alma mater, the Virginia Military Institute, Marshall explained his VMI-inspired worldview:

Our graduates seldom amass great wealth, but just as seldom do they display weakness or indifference to their duties as citizens. They are trained to be soldiers, if there be need for soldiers . . . ; but what is far more important, they are trained to be good citizens, strong and of the type so urgently needed to promote the welfare of this country of ours in its democratic progress.

No man has ever come closer to exemplifying VMI's citizen-soldier ideal than George C. Marshall. The Institute's most famous graduate, he was also one of its most devoted sons—a strong statement given the regiments of enthusiastic, active alumni that the school generates. Marshall's file in the Alumni Office is one of the largest. In his own correspondence file at the Marshall Library, the VMI portion is exceeded in size only by the folders labeled "President," "Secretary of War," "Eisenhower," and "MacArthur." Despite the pull of demands from other directions after World War II, Marshall made frequent appearances at VMI functions nationwide. Many influential alumni hoped to entice him into becoming superintendent after World War II, but he declined. In 1946, he became a member of the Board of Visitors and the Board of Directors of the VMI Foundation. This essay explores the relationship between Marshall and the VMI, particularly in the days prior to his emergence in 1940 as a figure of international importance.

Getting to VMI

George Marshall's matriculation in the Virginia Military Institute was neither accidental nor inevitable. Although he was born and reared near Pittsburgh in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, his family had deep Kentucky and Virginia roots. George was a distant relative (first cousin thrice removed) of Chief Justice John Marshall. One of his father's other distant cousins, Colonel Charles Marshall, had been Robert E. Lee's aide in the Civil War. George later credited him with persuading his father of VMI's virtues. In September 1890, when George was but nine years old, his elder brother, Stuart, entered the Institute with the Class of 1894 as a student of chemistry.*

As he approached college age, such considerations as the family's financial position, George's own intellectual abilities, and his own preference had to be weighed.** His father had severely damaged the family's financial foundation by land speculation in Luray, Virginia, during the Shenandoah Valley land boom before its 1890-91 collapse.

One of the few places a boy could get a free education was the United States Military Academy, and Marshall seemed to have felt some pull toward a military career, although in



*Stuart and George
Marshall, 1884*

later life he could never remember precisely when he had decided upon that course. Commissions in the small U.S. Army were difficult to obtain; the surest way was via West Point.

There were three obstacles to Marshall's attending the Military Academy. First, admission was by political appointment, and his father was known as a staunch Democrat in a Republican-controlled state. But as the local GOP congressman appointed men by competitive examination, this was of minor importance. The second obstacle was Marshall's weak academic credentials. He had been rather casually educated at a succession of private academies in Uniontown, and sixty years later he still recalled the humiliation he endured when he demonstrated deficiencies in everything but history. "I was very much ashamed of it, but I did nothing about it. My

* The Class of '94 included two other men well known to the Institute who later became Marshall's friends: William H. Cocks (Superintendent, 1924-29), and Charles E. Kilbourne (Superintendent, 1937-46).

** Attending college was not a common experience prior to World War II. In the 1890s only about 4 percent of the college-age population attended; in the 1990s the level was ten times that.

father was very impatient about it; my brother was very impatient about it because he was an excellent student.”

Finally, it was not likely that Marshall could have passed the physical examination for West Point. “I was athletically inclined in my teens, but not talented,” Marshall recalled. “I couldn’t play baseball because I had a defective [right] arm of which the tendons had been pulled and had gotten out of the main [elbow] joint. . . . My arm was very sensitive. I never could strike out straight with it. I couldn’t throw. I had to bowl.”

George Marshall never applied for West Point, and he never felt that this inhibited his career.* Other factors in the unfolding of his career were of far greater importance than membership in the “Long Gray Line.” In fact, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was considering the top three contenders for the position of chief of staff in the spring of 1939, none was a West Point man.**

The Virginia Military Institute—160 miles south of Uniontown in Lexington, Virginia—was the obvious course, and young Marshall begged his financially strapped parents to send him. Brother Stuart was dubious. Marshall remembered overhearing Stuart talking to their mother: “He was trying to persuade her not to let me go because he thought I would disgrace the family name. Well, that made more impression on me than all the instructors, parental pressures, or anything else, and I decided right then that I was going to ‘wipe his face’ as we say, or ‘wipe his eye.’” With great difficulty, his mother “scraped up enough money to get me entered at the VMI” by selling some property she owned in Kentucky.

Fortunately for Marshall, scholastic aptitude was not then a key determinant for admission to the Institute. The school was primarily concerned with character and acceptable antecedents, which Marshall could easily demonstrate. After all, there were seven other Marshalls on post during Marshall’s four years.

Marshall as a Cadet

School started on September 1, 1897, but a bout with typhoid fever during the summer delayed young Marshall’s matriculation, and he was still weak from the disease when he left home. In those days, the Valley Railroad ran to East Lexington from the north, and he could see the Bar-

* General Marshall told his authorized biographer in 1957: “As to the handicap of not being a West Pointer, that is completely untrue. I think in a way I rather profited by not being a West Pointer, because I was a little bit *distingué* as I got ahead, and every West Pointer I came into contact with was exceedingly helpful to me.”

** The two others being considered—Hugh A. Drum and John L. De Witt—had entered the Regular Army from civil life during the Spanish-American War. The large number of officers from that conflict just ahead of Marshall in rank (called “the hump”) was the chief cause of delay in his receiving promotions.

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Percy, Fayette Co., Pa., 11 Sept 1897

Genl. Scott Shipp,
Lexington Va.

My Dear Genl.

I Send You My Youngest ,And Last. He Is Bright, Full
Of Life,And I Believe Will Get Along Very Well .
A Cousin Of His Will Also Go,² Depending On His Eyes. Enclosed Find
Ck. For \$200. Any Extras George May Need, Please Advise Me,And I
Will Send You Ck.

Kind Regards

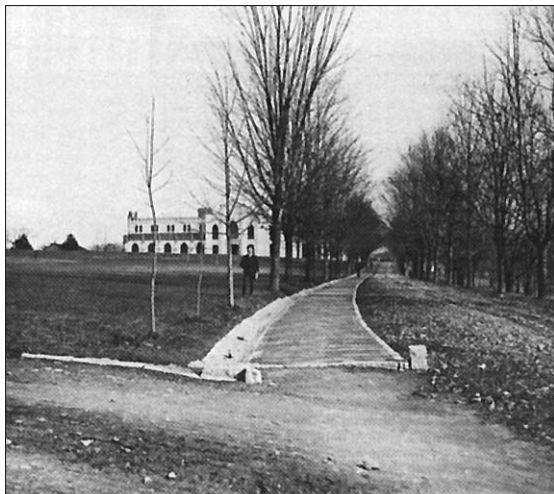
A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "G. C. Marshall". The signature is written in a cursive style and is located at the bottom right of the letter, overlapping the "Kind Regards" text.

Marshall's father's September 11, 1897, letter to Superintendent Scott Shipp enclosing the first semester's payment on the year's fee of \$365 for out-of-state students.

racks atop its bluff as he approached his destination. The train (referred to locally as "the Virginia creeper") reached the North River, turned around, and backed into Lexington.* Marshall had arrived on the evening of Saturday, September 11, alone and three and a half months shy of his seventeenth birthday. Leaving the train station, Marshall walked through Lexington, a dirt-and gravel-streeted county seat of some 3,200 people that, as the burial place of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, was a Southerner's shrine. Passing the Washington and Lee University colonnade and Lee Chapel, he reached the VMI parade ground. Nearly sixty years later, he recalled: "I will never forget walking down the long approach avenue to the barracks and hearing the bugle sound the assembly for dress parade and seeing the adjutant and the sergeant major strut out to form the line on which the battalion would form. I thought they were very wonderful looking figures."

He arrived bearing a note from his father to Superintendent Scott Shipp: "I send you my youngest, and last. He is bright, full of life, and I

* Rockbridge County's North River was renamed in 1945 to honor oceanographer and VMI professor Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-73). Lexington was at the end of the train line, and engineers preferred to back uphill into town so that they could go forward (downhill) out of town. The Lexington station stands at the corner of Glasgow and McLaughlin streets.



"The long approach avenue to the Barracks" about the time George Marshall arrived in 1897. The photo was taken just inside the original Limit Gates. The parade ground was leveled and enlarged to its present condition in 1914.

believe will get along very well." As it happened, that was something of an understatement. He was also the last to arrive of the 122 members of the largest "Rat" class since 1871. His tardiness and the general overcrowding in Barracks caused him to be assigned to Room 88 on the Third Stoop—lair of the Rat-baiting Third Classmen—rather than on the somewhat safer Fourth Stoop to which the newcomers were usually assigned; thus, he would have to run a gauntlet all year. Nevertheless, he immediately wrote to his father: "I am not

homesick and will like it." General Shipp reassured the senior Marshall that he had "just seen the cadet son and he already looks the soldier."

Old Grads of the Institute, ever detecting evidences of softness in cadet life, thought that they had cause for alarm in the mid-1890s. A few years before Marshall arrived, the cadets had received "comfortable wire mattress cots" and no longer had to sleep on the floor. The Barracks walls had been stuccoed, eliminating the drafts which had swept through the large cracks around the windows—not that this mattered to Rats, who were required to sleep with the windows open. Electricity had arrived on post in 1893, and by Marshall's time water was even piped up to each stoop—a single spigot at each corner of the Barracks. Before Marshall completed his Rat year, a new central heating system and inside toilets had been installed. Still, Marshall remembered life at VMI as "a pretty stern affair."

The Institute was still paying off the indebtedness from its reconstruction following General David Hunter's 1864 raid. "I could look out of my window my first year and count, I think, eight cannon balls sticking in the wall where they left them after Hunter had fired them at the Institute."



Marshall as a Rat. (From the Class of 1901 picture in the 1898 Bomb.) The navy-blue French-type forage caps were replaced in 1904.



H. O. Dold, the cadets' favorite storekeeper. His shop on the northeast corner of Main and Washington streets was cadet headquarters for smokes, eats, drinks, games, and firecrackers. The peanut roaster, with its quaint little whistle, was a memorable attraction.

The Civil War had had a profound influence on VMI and its traditions; the story of the cadets' charge at the battle of New Market on May 15, 1864, and the resulting annual commemoration at VMI greatly impressed Marshall. As a cadet he heard a former Confederate leader make a speech that was “almost treason in its enthusiasm for the Lost Cause and its condemnation of the North. The whole thing was very intense there even in those days.” It was not tactful for a Yankee to have much to say about The Late War. His western Pennsylvania accent was a cause of japes until the day he graduated. When he returned to VMI on the occasion of the dedication of the Marshall Arch in the Barracks (May 15, 1951), he jocularly reminded his Brother Rats of the Yankee-baiting that he had endured and of the satisfaction that he—the Class of 1901's only graduating Northerner—derived from their naming an arch for him.

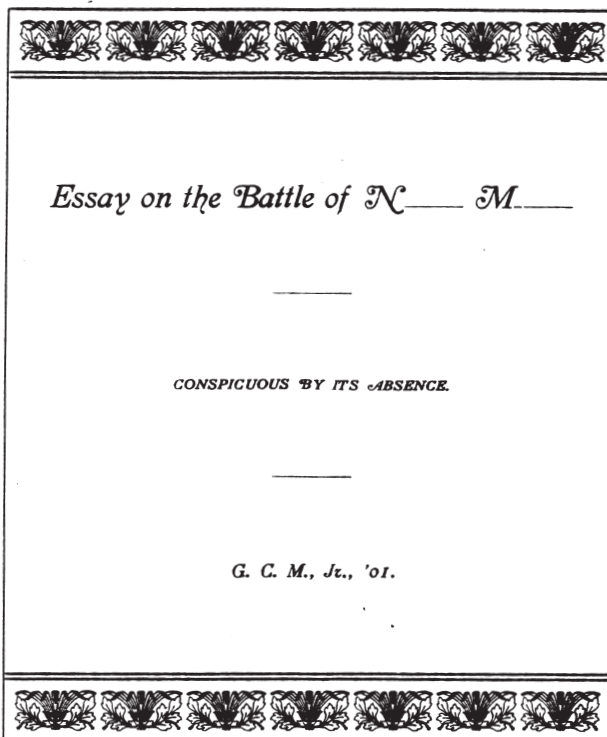
The school year ran from early September through June with but four holidays (Christmas, New Year's, Washington's Birthday, and New Market Day), little respite from discipline, and practically no provisions for entertaining the cadets. “I didn't go out socially, I think at all, for the first two years that I was there,” he remembered. “We would go uptown on Saturday afternoon and window shop.” Not that Marshall had much money to spend off post; his allowance was \$5 per month until his First Class year, when it was raised to \$7. But he did recall one special place on Main Street. “There was a famous little store there on the corner—Dold's, they called it. He was quite a character and made a great point of favoring the

cadets. On Sunday afternoon we were allowed to go in the back country but not uptown. We couldn't go until after midday roll call, and we had to be back for evening parade." This experience of restriction and isolation prepared Marshall to endure the first five years of his military career in small, isolated posts in the Philippines and the American southwest.

As has ever been the case, one of the trials facing a new cadet was getting used to the Institute's food. After nearly six decades, Marshall could still recall the main dish, the aptly named *growlie*. "I don't remember now much what was in it; I think most anything was in it that was around handy to dump into it. But we were all so hungry and we ate so rapidly—because you were not at the table very long—that it all seemed to go pretty well." Superintendent Shipp, unbending and austere, was unimpressed by continuous cadet complaints regarding the mess. His annual report for Marshall's Rat year noted that

the cadets presented a "healthy, ruddy, well-kept appearance." Besides, "in a soldier's mess it is neither practicable nor desirable to cater to individual tastes, and if the attempt were made grumbling would not be suppressed. Grumbling is the soldier's most highly cherished prerogative."

Tactical officers rarely entered the Mess Hall.* Throughout his year as First Captain, Marshall "was responsible for the entire corps in the Mess Hall every meal all through the year." Few documents written by Marshall during his cadet period have survived. One that did was his June 11, 1901,



The 1901 Bomb used a whole page to remind its readers of Marshall's status as the lone Northerner in the graduating class, and thus presumably not anxious to examine the Union defeat on May 15, 1864, at New Market, Virginia. Marshall had the last laugh, however, for in 1908, as a student at the Command and General Staff School, he wrote a detailed description of the battle of Gettysburg and led the class staff ride there.

* The Mess Hall of Marshall's period burned on May 10, 1905. The present Crozet Hall was built in 1934.

report on the Mess Hall.

During the time I have had charge of the Mess Hall I have not found it necessary to make any definite complaint to the Quartermaster. On a few occasions I have found reason to call the attention of the head waiter to untidiness in the setting of the tables and any lack of neatness in the dress of the waiters.

The fare is an improvement on that of the last three years, and in my judgment is all that could be expected, except in the manner of cooking the meats. The meat itself appears to be of a good quality, but it seems to have been dried up in the cooking.

Years later, as a member of the Board of Visitors, Marshall took luncheon with the cadets, at the superintendent's request, to ascertain the validity of incessant complaints about the food. He was received graciously and afterward told the cadets that he hated to disappoint them, particularly as it always irritated the young to be told about their father's life or the Old Grad's life when he was there. But, he recalled, "that meal was such a vast, vast improvement over what I had known that I thought it was quite wonderful. I didn't make myself very popular" with the cadets.

Grumbling is the soldier's most highly cherished prerogative. —Scott Shipp

"It was a very severe life," Marshall later observed. "The cadet life itself was very strict, but the hazing—which was very strenuous when I was there—made it still stricter. The first year was quite an ordeal, though I came afterwards, like all the rest of my friends, to look back on it with more appreciation than I did any other year." Marshall suffered silently one incident that attracted the notice of the entire corps and demonstrated one of his most important traits—loyalty. Early in his Rat year, while he was still weakened by his bout with typhoid fever, Marshall was made to squat over an upturned bayonet as a test of endurance. He slipped and was badly gashed in a buttock, narrowly missing serious injury. How he explained the wound is not known, but he missed drill for four days. The incident was so well hushed up that Institute historian Colonel William Couper told several inquirers in the 1930s and 1940s that he doubted that it really happened.

Marshall's stoic nature helped him to survive.*

The routine of cadet life I became accustomed to and accepted. I think I

* In January 1930, Marshall had occasion to write to a Rat who was the son of an old friend: "I hope your work goes well and that you are in good spirits. Of course January and February are the blue sour months at school and require a little of the philosophical attitude. Saw wood and exercise—and don't sit on the radiator and grouse."

was a little bit more philosophical about this thing than a good many boys. They would get very exercised over something of that kind. It was part of the business and the only thing to do was to accept it as best you could and as easily as you could. That I tried to do, and I think I was fairly successful in doing it. A good bit, of course, depended on your roommates. If they were agreeable fellows, why you were all right. If they weren't, why you were in trouble. Mine were very agreeable.

Leonard K. Nicholson, heir to the New Orleans *Picayune* newspaper fortune, was Marshall's roommate all four years. In their Third Class year, Philip B. ("Buster") Peyton, later an army major general, joined the pair and stayed until graduation. Before Forrest Pogue convinced Marshall to talk about his past in detail in 1956 and 1957, these two men provided

One of Marshall's Brother Rats Looks at Lexington (from the *1901 Bomb*)

"The Deserted Village Up to Date"

Sweet Lexington! slowest village in the State, Where bedtime comes at half-past eight; Where dryness reigns*—no more the note As sparkling booze goes down the throat. How often have we walked thy streets, In some sleepy church to take our seats, And tried with heroic powers To keep awake a pair of hours! Old Town! there's one thing you must know, You are too confounded slow.	The days of '61 are past, to come no more— Stage coaches are things of yore. But it's our age of sport and rush: So wake up, old fossil, and get in the push! Put up a place where one can go, Once in a while, to see a show; Give us once more the joint so dear, Where we can buy a mug of beer; Provide some excitement, for we can't begin To live on what our folks have been.
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Let us no more at thy slowness blush:
So wake up, old fossil, and get in the push!

many of the anecdotes about Marshall's cadet life that leaked into print after the general became well known.

Asked what subjects he liked best at the Institute, he replied: "Frankly, I didn't like any subject best. In trying to think about it, I can't recall now that any one pleased me." In later years Marshall recalled that his academic performance at VMI steadily improved after a poor start. In fact, he began and remained a mediocre scholar. His grades in English improved, but he tended to do poorly in mathematics and science. His college German consisted of "about a dozen words" and a bit of grammar, but even that was better than his French, he said. He finished fifteenth of the thirty-three graduates in the class of 1901 but managed to stand fifth of eighteen in civil engineering, his major. "Ambition had begun to set in," he later reflected. "But I started rather late." Not surprisingly, he did well in military

* Lexington had gone "dry" of alcohol on May 1, 1900.



Corporal Marshall at home in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, at the end of his Rat year, July 1898.

subjects and discipline, finishing his four years without a recorded demerit.*

There were two particularly exciting events during Marshall’s Rat year. First was the corps trip (October 15–23, 1897) to the Tennessee Centennial celebration in Nashville—which included a parade through Louisville, Kentucky, on the way. But more important was the hula-baloo surrounding the confrontation with Spain over Cuba. On April 23, 1898—the day after Congress authorized the

president to organize volunteer units “possessing special qualifications” — the corps met and voted unanimously to offer their services. Although that offer was declined, eventually 136 former VMI cadets, including Superintendent Shipp’s son, served in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection.

The Uniontown company of the Tenth Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry had already departed for the Philippines by the time Marshall—who had been named First Corporal, the highest rank in the Third Class—returned home from school in July 1898. Reports of the company’s activities and casualties engendered intense excitement in the little community. When the men returned in August 1899 to a hero’s welcome, Marshall was profoundly stirred. He told a Uniontown gathering four decades later:

I have sometimes thought that the impressions of that period, and particularly of that parade, had a determining effect on my choice of a pro-

* Marshall stood eighteenth of eighty-two as a Fourth, twenty-fifth of sixty-nine as a Third, and nineteenth of forty-two as a Second. His class standing is listed on p. 17 below. Five other cadets also had no recorded demerits; the class mean was well over one hundred demerits each year. Marshall did not receive a B.S. degree. The Institute awarded all those who successfully completed the program the degree of “Graduate” (a West Point tradition), reserving the baccalaureate for the top five or six men scholastically. This system was changed to the present one in 1912.

fession. . . . It was a grand American small town demonstration of pride in its young men and of wholesome enthusiasm over their achievements. Years later most of us realized that it was much more than that. It reflected the introduction of America into the affairs of the world beyond the seas.

Soon, however, Marshall learned that once the patriotic fervor abated, the recriminations began and the military suffered. "The aftermath of the war was not very wholesome, but at least gave you an idea of what democracy could do and particularly what politics could do in military matters during and particularly after a war." It was a lesson—reinforced in the early 1920s—that he would not forget.

Marshall returned to VMI for his third year as First Sergeant, having stood at the top of the list of rising Second Class officers. He selected civil

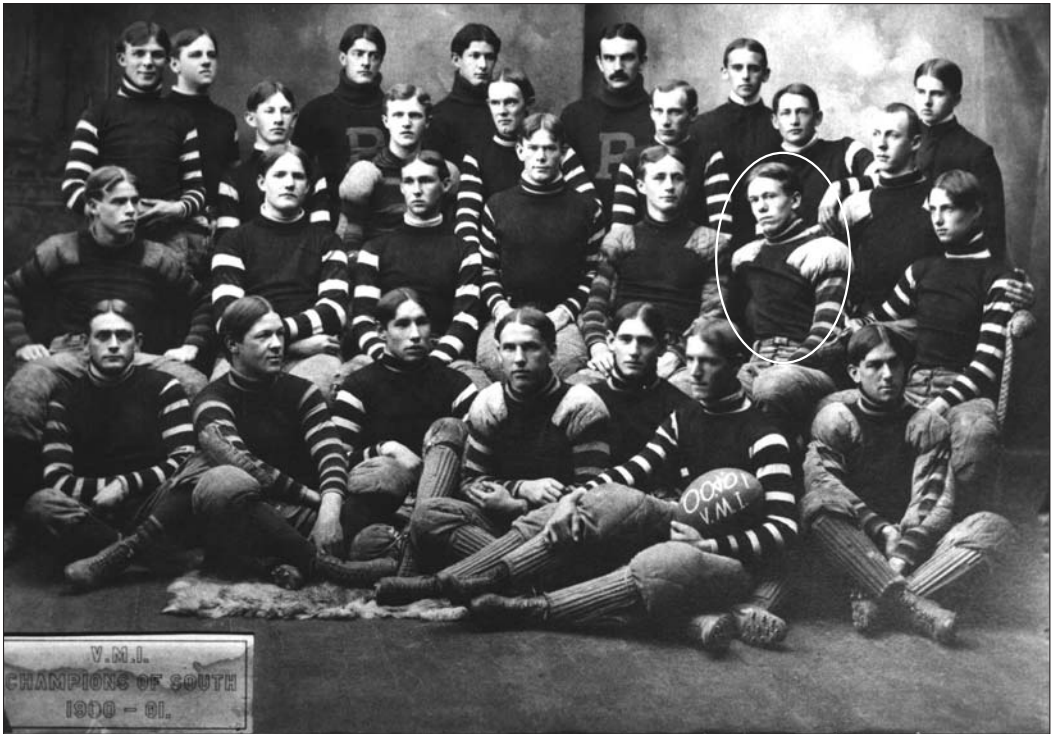
The first year was quite an ordeal, though I came afterwards, like all the rest of my friends, to look back on it with more appreciation than I did any other year.

engineering as his major subject. Scholastically he showed no marked improvement, but his authority as a cadet officer was considerably enhanced.

I tried very hard in all the military affairs. I was very exacting and exact in all my military duties. I was gradually developing in authority from the very mild authority, almost none, shown by a corporal to the very pronounced authority as First Sergeant, because I fell the company in, I called the roll, and all things of that sort. I kept tabs on it entirely and had to march the details to guard mount every morning. As a matter of fact, I came back from breakfast and I had about ten minutes to get into a coat and a sash and a sword (straight old non-commissioned officer's sword that the First Sergeants wore) and march my detail down to guard mount and stand behind them at attention during guard mount, and then get back out of that rig and into my blouse by eight o'clock every morning all the cadet year.

During the autumn he also had to get into his football uniform in the afternoon. The promise he had made to his mother upon entering the Institute not to engage in sports for two years, because of his bad elbow, had been fulfilled, and he tried out for and quickly made the team. Athletics were one of the few interesting departures from routine permitted. But college football was not the semiprofessional undertaking it later became. The team had one hour per day in which to dress for practice,

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The football team ended its tenth season of play in 1900 with a record of 3-1-2 against other schools; they lost to Georgetown, tied Virginia, and defeated Virginia Tech and Washington and Lee (twice). Someone at VMI decided that they were thus the "Champions of the South." One sometimes reads that Marshall (in the oval above) was named a Southern All-American, but that is a myth.

practice, bathe, and get back into uniform for the drill hour. Every day after drill there was a full-dress parade.

VMI had time to crush only Washington and Lee 39-0 before the 1899 season was abruptly ended by an outbreak of typhoid fever which closed the Institute for six weeks. The following season, with Marshall at left tackle, the team attracted considerable attention by tying Virginia 0-0 and defeating Virginia Tech 5-0. In the latter contest, a Lexington paper noted that "the tackling of G. Marshall in backing up the interference was of the highest order."

Football continued to hold Marshall's interest, and he attended VMI games whenever he could. For example, in the autumn of 1928 he traveled with a group of alumni from Fort Benning, Georgia, to Atlanta to watch the



*Drawing in the
1901 Bomb*



Marshall as new First Captain and thus President of the Final Ball, July 4, 1900. His date was Katharine Fauntleroy of Staunton, Virginia. (She and Marshall stand above the white line added to the photograph.) Dances in this era were held in the basement gymnasium in the old Jackson Memorial Hall. This building was built between 1892 and 1896 and torn down in 1915; the only portion of it remaining today is the Jackson Arch in Barracks.

VMI-Georgia Tech game. The Institute lost 13-0, prompting Marshall to write a letter that should touch the heart of every college football fan of every era. "We got the impression that the team lacked the old spirit which used to mark the playing of the cadets," he wrote to Superintendent William Cocke.

It also appeared that the coaching system had not been based on quick action and speed, which seem the only logical foundation for light weight teams which are opposed to much heavier ones. . . . The Georgia Tech crowd gave more the impression of representing a military organization than did our men. . . . I heard more than one comment that a player or two went to the bench at a more rapid run than they went down the field to a tackle."

Marshall continued in this vein for several sentences. "Like the usual alumnus, I am expressing opinions very freely, but it seems to me with the history of the Institute as a background every V.M.I. football team should give the impression of relentless fighters." Cocke replied in a wait-'til-next-week vein, and fortunately the season was salvaged by a 9-0 win over Virginia.

While at the peak of his athletic prowess in his First Class year, Marshall also reached the peak of his cadet authority. As First Captain, Mar-



Marshall and some of the battalion staff, 1900–1901. Behind him are Second Lieutenants O. V. Kean and F. C. Elliot.

shall later asserted, he “led a very pleasant life and amusing life.” He had a double room over the Washington Arch and a Rat to bring him and his roommates coffee and biscuits in the morning, alerting them with the cry: “My Lords, the breakfast is served.” But he was also in charge of a section of barracks and had the responsibility for the corps at mealtime, “which was the principal time that you had to exercise some talent at leadership.”

Marshall credited his cadet-officer responsibilities with broadening his mental horizons and forcing him to discipline himself for attention to detail and judicious command. “If I had been a first class private, . . . I would have been very indifferent about matters and made it a practice . . . to be as slack as I could be. That was the habit of all first class privates. But I in my job as First Captain had to exercise authority all the time, and I had to do it in such a way that it didn’t create resentment.” The cadets, particularly Brother Rats, continually tested their leader: “If they could get away with anything, that was considered a good stunt and didn’t particularly reflect on the cadet captain unless he was unable to manage it.” An officer’s slack performance was judged severely. Marshall said in 1957 that his later leadership reflected the impact of this experience more than he realized at the time.

Marshall also learned the extent to which he could challenge authority or established procedure and the degree to which he could permit challenges to his own authority. There are numerous examples of his challenging authority, including such famous instances as his reaction in 1917 to what he considered as unfair criticisms by General Pershing of the First Division in France or his later vigorous disagreements with President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. But an experience he had as First Captain will serve equally well to illustrate Marshall’s behavior.

As officer in charge of the mess hall, Marshall ran it, he said, “with

hardly a loud laugh.” But once, when the cadets had begun to eat a new and rare treat—strawberries for dessert:

there was a complete silence while they were eating and that attracted some fellow’s attention; so he shushed the rest and they all settled down to complete silence and then looked at me to see what I was going to do. It happened at that time there had been a famous case up at West Point of giving a silence to a tactical officer—meaning a sub-professor—and that had attracted a great deal of attention. . . . Anyway that added to this silence and they all turned to look at me to see what I was going to do. I had a small table there with three others. I merely got up and called them to attention and marched them out of the mess hall when the strawberries were only about a third eaten.

Without losing his temper, Marshall had reasserted his control, penalized the perpetrators, and ended the incident without further recrimination. He repeatedly demonstrated this talent throughout his career.

While he was sometimes austere, generally reserved, and always unwilling to suffer fools gladly, Marshall was neither monk nor marble man. In fact, as First Captain he became completely enamored of a Lex-



ington belle, Elizabeth (“Lily”) Carter Coles, who lived with her widowed mother in a house beside the Institute’s original southern Limit Gates. Lily was “brown-eyed, titian-haired, fair of skin—by common consent a beauty.” Five years older than Marshall and “something of a flirt,” she had dated Stuart Marshall when he was a cadet. Descended from Virginia’s first families, her maternal grandfather was Edmund Pendleton, a member of the first graduating class at VMI. Lily’s health was always a bit “delicate” because of a heart problem.

To see her, Marshall frequently went off limits and occasionally even “ran the block” (i.e., left the barracks at an unauthorized time), risking certain demotion and possible expulsion. His excuse, many

Elizabeth (“Lily”) Carter Coles (1874–1927).

“Fully the Equal of the Best”



The Class of 1901. Marshall is in the white oval.

years later: “I was very much in love and I was willing to take the chance.” Perhaps this is one reason why during his career there were numerous instances of his willingness to give one more chance to those who made mistakes but who acknowledged the error of their ways.

Getting Commissioned

The most serious challenge Marshall faced during his final year at VMI was neither scholastic nor romantic; it was getting an army commission. As officers appointed from civil life had to be unmarried at the time of commissioning, his relationship with Lily was also hanging in the balance. Fortunately for him, the United States Army, consonant with the nation’s new world position following the Spanish-American War and at Secretary of War Elihu Root’s insistence, was more than three times as large in 1901 (about 3,300 officers and 75,000 enlisted) as it had been when Marshall entered VMI.

A law taking effect on February 2, 1901, required the appointment of 837 new lieutenants. First priority was given to West Point graduates, next

George C. Marshall's Academic Record at VMI, 1897–1901		
	<u>Standing</u>	<u># in Class</u>
<u>Fourth Class Year (1897–98)</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>82</u>
Mathematics (algebra, geometry)	25	82
English	29	82
French	8	56
Drawing	29	82
<u>Third Class Year (1898–99)</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>69</u>
Mathematics (trigonometry, analytical geometry)	36	69
Descriptive Geometry	29	69
French	13	38
English and History	13	69
Astronomy	34	69
Physics (mechanics, sound, heat)	28	69
Drawing	14	69
<u>Second Class Year (1899–1900)</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>42</u>
Mathematics (calculus)	19	32
Engineering (materials, roads, surveying)	19	32
Applied mechanics	19	35
Chemistry (inorganic)	30	46
German	19	44
U.S. Drill Regulations	7	47
<u>First Class Year (1900–1901)</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>33</u>
Civil Engineering	5	18
German	28	34
Military Science & Art of War	8	34
Ordnance & Gunnery	6	34
Mineralogy	14	33
Geology	8	33
Commercial Law	24	34

The Class of 1901 matriculated 122 and graduated 33 (28%). This was about average for the period between the Civil War and the mid-1930s; for the years 1891 to 1911, an average of 33% graduated. (By way of comparison, the Naval Academy graduated 72% of its matriculants between 1896 and 1905.) Only in the mid-1960s, did retention rates at VMI consistently fall in the 65–75% range.

to successful applicants from the ranks, then to former officers of the volunteers, and finally to civilians. Although he was about to graduate from a respected military school, Marshall had to compete with the others from civilian life. Only West Point cadets were exempted from passing an admission test. In order to take the examination, Marshall needed a letter of authorization from the War Department.

Initially his parents had been dubious about the prospects of a military career, but they soon acquiesced. His father collected endorsements, including letters to President William McKinley. Superintendent Scott Shipp wrote a general letter on January 23, 1901: "I assert with absolute

confidence that if commissioned in the army, young Marshall will in all respects, soon take his stand much above the average West Point graduate.” In a letter to the president on February 14, Shipp stated: “Marshall is fully the equal of the best.”

By the spring of 1901 there were but 142 vacancies left and 10,000 applications on file; Marshall had to move rapidly and boldly. In April, armed with one of his father’s business cards and some letters of introduction, he assaulted Washington, visiting Attorney General Philander C. Knox (a friend of his father) and House Military Affairs Committee Chairman John A. Hull (distantly related by marriage to his mother). He even managed to penetrate the White House, hoping to see President McKinley himself. The usher was certain that the young man could not see the president without an appointment.

Undaunted, Marshall camped in the reception room. “I sat there and watched people go in by appointment, I suppose ten or fifteen, stay about

Marshall is fully the equal of the best. —Scott Shipp

ten minutes, and then be excused. Finally, a man and his wife and daughter went in . . . and I attached myself to the tail of the procession.” When the usher noticed the intruder he frowned mightily, but Marshall stood his ground. When the invited guests left after a few minutes, “Mr. McKinley, in a very nice manner, said what did I want. I stated my case to him. I don’t recall exactly what I said, but from that I think flowed my authority to appear for examination.” But these meetings were perhaps less important than the letters of recommendation his father had persuaded the important Republican senators from Pennsylvania—Matthew Quay and Boies Penrose—to write to the War Department.

After receiving permission to take the examination, he journeyed to New York in September, accompanied by a letter of introduction to the chairman of the examination board from New York businessman John S. Wise of the Class of 1866: “This boy has the very highest testimonials. . . . General Shipp . . . regards him as one of the fittest pieces of food for gunpower turned out by his mill for many years.”

The examination at Governors Island turned out to be a four-day ordeal covering arithmetic, algebra, geometry, logarithms, trigonometry, surveying, geography, grammar, history, and constitutional and international law. On the final day he was given a company to drill (this was optional for civilian applicants and Marshall was the only one of his group who did it) and took a physical examination. Most of the test was rela-

tively easy, he told General Shipp, but geometry and trigonometry were hard and geography “catchy.” Thirty percent of the total grade was based on physique and “moral character and antecedents.”

The military profession was not a common destination for VMI men in Marshall’s era. He was the only graduate in the Class of 1901 to make such a career choice. At the end of 1902, twenty-seven Institute graduates held army commissions, mainly as lieutenants and largely as a result of the expansion following the Spanish-American War. They were spread among the departments as follows: Infantry, 13; Artillery, 7; Cavalry, 4; Medical, 2; and Chaplain, 1. The Institute had no officer senior officers in the army who could help or be a mentor for Marshall.

Needing an interim job while awaiting the results of his examination, Marshall took the post of commandant of cadets at Virginia’s Danville Military Institute. After an excruciating wait, Marshall was notified in December 1901 that he had passed. However, as he was not yet twenty-one years old, he could not be commissioned until after his December 31 birthday. It was, he told General Shipp, “A little late, but very acceptable Xmas gift.”

There were some clouds over this generally sunny horizon, however. Marshall had listed the order of his branch preference as Artillery, Infantry, Cavalry. Infantry was last in the rough order of status among the branches, and that was the assignment Marshall received. Not only that, but he was

Marshall’s Army Entrance Examination Results			
No.	Subject	Average	Products of multiplication by relative weights
1	English grammar, etc.	75	225
2	Mathematics	86	344
3	Geography	65	130
4	History	89	267
5	Constitutional and international law	65	130
6	Army and drill regulations, etc.		
7	Military record		
8	Physique	100	300
9	Moral character and antecedents	100	300
			1696
		20	84.80

The Army Examining Board noted: “The applicant, . . . having attained an average in each subject of 65 per cent, and having attained a general average of 70 per cent, the board considers him as having passed, and as well qualified for the position of a commissioned officer in the United States Army.” On his application form, Marshall listed his preference of service branches as “1st Artillery 2nd Infantry 3rd Cavalry.” West Point graduates, primarily because of the mathematical emphasis of their training, were recommended for commissions in the Engineers, Ordnance, Artillery, Cavalry, and Infantry in the order of their graduation standing, thereby establishing a rough order of status for the branches. The Examining Board concluded that Marshall was “recommended for artillery on account of high standing.” But there were no artillery openings, so Marshall went into the Infantry.



The Marshall-Coles wedding party poses on the front porch of the bride's Lexington home, where the Episcopal ceremony took place on February 11, 1902. Left to right are Marie (George's sister), Elizabeth Carter ("Lily") Coles, George C. Marshall, Jr., Stuart (George's brother), Mr. and Mrs. George C. Marshall, Sr., and Mrs. Walter Coles. (Marshall officially dropped "Jr." in January 1933.)

ordered to duty almost at once with the Thirtieth Infantry in the Philippines. The Philippine Insurrection was flickering out, but the islands were still under martial law. The wives of junior officers were not permitted to move to the Philippines; besides, the tropical climate was no place to take a delicate woman like Lily. But with the commission safely signed, George and Lily were finally married in her mother's home in Lexington on February 11, 1902.* An understanding assistant adjutant general delayed

* At Marshall's urging, the Institute purchased Lily's mother's house and property in September 1928. The 1868 Gothic-cottage-style house—now called the Pendleton-Coles House—was moved 260 feet south to 309 Letcher Avenue in 1987 to make way for the new science building.

the young officer's departure by ten days to allow the couple a honeymoon, but by the end of the month, Marshall was on his way, alone, to his first posting.

Career to 1919

Although halfway around the world, the Institute was never far from Marshall's thoughts, and even in the Philippines he occasionally met a graduate. He felt an obligation to keep General Shipp informed regarding his career, "in view of the fact that I practically owe my present position to you." In January 1903 he requested that he be sent copies of the school's catalogs in order that he might "keep in touch with the progress of the Institute." Life in the Philippines was pleasant, he recorded, although his first post had been an isolated one—mail every three weeks. Even this had its compensations, however. "I was left to my own judgment since it took two months to receive a reply to any communication from Manila, and as the times were not serious the freedom it gave me was not offset by the responsibility."

Marshall returned from the Philippines in December 1903 and was assigned to Fort Reno in Oklahoma Territory. In March 1906 he learned that VMI's commandant and professor of military science was nearing the end of his tour, and he wrote to General Shipp:

Now, while I feel that you will consider that I have not enough years on my shoulders yet, I wish to tell you that I would like myself to be considered as an applicant for the detail as Professor of Military Science and Tactics at the Institute now, or at any other time the position may become vacant. I am putting this in the form of a personal letter to you as I do not care to have my name submitted to the Board of Visitors as an applicant for the detail unless accompanied by your recommendation. If you do not see fit to recommend me then the subject can be dropped with the receipt of this letter by you. . . . Please be perfectly frank with me, General, and do not try to avoid hurting my feelings as I really am not at all optimistic about the probable result of this application.

Shipp's reply was about what Marshall expected. He had always believed that the former First Captain would one day have that detail, but he needed an older, higher-ranking man. A few more years would give Marshall "the experienced, basic, matured judgment required for the very difficult position of commandant in this place. You think you know what is required, but you would find the difficulties vastly greater than anything you apprehend."

This rejection was undoubtedly a fortunate one for Marshall's career, because within weeks he was notified of his acceptance as a student in the Infantry and Cavalry School (later called the Command and General Staff School) at Fort Leavenworth. At a time when the majority of infantry



George C. Marshall at Fort Leavenworth, about 1908.

officers were hostile to or skeptical of the school, Marshall had been anxious to go. He recognized that Leavenworth was on the cutting edge of the new Army. When he arrived, however, he was shocked to discover that most of his classmates were older, higher in rank,* and better prepared. As soon as the students met at Fort Leavenworth, Marshall heard that nearly all agreed that there was one cavalryman considered most likely to be number one in the class. Marshall also overheard two classmates guessing

who were most likely to be in the top half of the class and thus kept on for the prestigious second-year course in the Army Staff College; his name was not mentioned. Marshall reacted as he had in 1897 on hearing brother Stuart's opinion of his prospects at VMI: he would show them.

I knew I would have to study harder than I ever dreamed of studying before in my life. I just worked day and night. My great trouble was going to sleep at night. I remember I used to get up and shine my boots in order to wake up.

In class, Marshall was immediately impressed and inspired by one of the new instructors, Major John F. Morrison. His language, new to Army training, was that of thought applied to military problems rather than the traditional language of rote memorization and regulations.

* Forrest Pogue noted in his biography that shortly after Second Lieutenant Marshall received his Leavenworth appointment the rules were changed and only captains were eligible. Marshall did not become a captain until 1916; had he missed out in 1906, he would have missed the ten years of intensive training and experience in staff work that prepared him for the important staff positions he held during World War I and that brought him into close association with General Pershing, so important to his career.

His problems were short and always contained a knockout if you failed to recognize the principle involved in meeting the situation. Simplicity and dispersion became fixed quantities in my mind, never to be forgotten. . . . He spoke a tactical language I had never heard from any other officer. . . . He taught me all I have ever known of tactics.

Through extraordinary effort, Marshall finished at the top of the class in July 1907, thereby earning a place in the next year's advanced class, steppingstone to the War College. He finished first again, and was made an instructor at the school for the next two years (1908-10). During the summers, he was assigned to National Guard instruction and demonstrated that he was an excellent teacher who was sympathetic to the problems of the citizen-soldier.

The regime at VMI changed in the meantime, and Marshall's friend Edward W. Nichols '78, who had been the professor of mathematics when Marshall was at the Institute, had become superintendent. In May 1909, Nichols wrote to Marshall to ask if he would like to be considered for the post of commandant. Marshall was delighted, but three weeks later he had to ask that his name be withdrawn because the Board of Visitors would not decide the matter until after he had to commit himself for the next school year at Fort Leavenworth. Moreover, the Army had been unwilling to bend the rules for Marshall. Chief of Staff J. Franklin Bell—for whom Marshall would later serve as an aide—wrote that

full college detail would keep him absent [from troops] seven years in succession. On account of low rank such absence would certainly result in his ruination as a line officer besides being an utter disregard of regulations and orders of the President. In addition he is a valuable instructor here with one more year to serve. His detail can not be so important at any college as to justify a disregard of all the above considerations.

General Nichols was not easily thwarted, however, and three years later he again asked Marshall to become commandant. He arranged an interview with Major General Leonard Wood, then Army Chief of Staff, and with Major General William H. Carter,* commander of the army's important "Mobile Army Division." Nichols wrote at the end of January 1912 that Wood and Carter were

disposed . . . to do anything that they can for us. . . . I want you to know that the board has applied for your services here, and if we can't secure you it is not our fault. I shall send in a list of officers in the order of our preference, and your name will head the list. Both Generals Carter and Wood know of you, and spoke of you in the highest terms.

But this time Marshall was up against the so-called "Manchu law," which

* Carter was the officer who delayed Marshall's departure for the Philippines in 1902. See pp. 20-21 above.

was aimed at reducing what Congress perceived as the excessive time many soldiers spent away from troop duty.*

In the summer of 1913, Nichols again attempted to get Marshall assigned to the Institute, this time as professor of military science and tactics, but Marshall had just been assigned to the Philippines again. Writing on July 4, 1913, from San Francisco while waiting to sail, Marshall observed: “I seem fated as regards a detail to the Institute, but the fact that you consider me a desirable person for the detail is the source of great satisfaction to me.”

Marshall’s reputation in the Army’s officer corps was growing, despite his relatively low rank—he had been a first lieutenant since March 1907. One clear indication of this occurred during the January-February 1914 Army maneuvers during his second tour of duty in the Philippines. When the colonel assigned to command the invading “White Force”—4,841 troops attacking from the south toward Manila—was found to be incompetent, and the force’s chief of staff fell ill, Marshall was given *de facto* command, issuing orders to captains, majors, and colonels. He wrote to General Nichols afterward: “I think we pretty convincingly licked the other side.”

Increasingly commanders sought ways to prevent Marshall’s being relegated to the routine duties that were the normal lieutenant’s lot. He hoped to be attached to a French regiment for a year, or perhaps to be sent to Texas, where units were concentrating on the border to guard against the spill-over of the Mexican Revolution. But despite his growing reputation, at age thirty-five, and after thirteen years of service, he was still only a lieutenant trailing in the wake of the Spanish-American War “hump” of officers in a seniority-dominated Army.

On October 4, 1915, Superintendent Nichols received a long letter from Marshall recommending a friend’s son for admission to the Institute and noting that he (Marshall) had been aide-de-camp to Brigadier General Hunter Liggett, commander at Fort McKinley in Manila. But in the middle of the letter was the following paragraph:

The absolute stagnation in promotion in the infantry has caused me to make tentative plans for resigning as soon as business conditions improve somewhat.** Even in the event of an increase as a result of legislation next

* A revolution in 1911 had removed the Manchu Dynasty from control of China. In 1912 Congress passed a law preventing officers below the rank of major who had not had troop duty for at least two of the previous six years from remaining on detached service. Army reformers hailed the expulsion from Washington of the “Manchus”: those officers who continually managed to arrange desk jobs for themselves in the capital. Marshall had been at Fort Leavenworth or on leave between August 1906 and January 1911, so at this time he had had troop duty only one and one-half of the past six years.

** A world-wide depression had begun in the fall of 1913. In the United States it continued into 1915, in part because of the disruptions to credit and trade caused by the war in Europe.

winter, the prospects for advancement in the army are so restricted by law and by the accumulation of large numbers of men of nearly the same age all in a single grade, that I do not feel it right to waste all my best years in the vain struggle against insurmountable obstacles. The temptation to accept an absolutely assured and fairly fat living, with little or no prospect of reasonable advancement, is very great when you consider the difficulties and positive dangers of starting anew in civil life at my age. However, with only one life to live I feel that the acceptance of my present secured position would mean that I lacked the backbone and necessary moral courage to do the right thing. All this is, of course, confidential, and I am afraid I am boring you with my personal affairs; but I place such a value on your judgment or opinion that I have written so much of my personal affairs.

Nichols's reply of November 22, 1915, may have been the best advice the superintendent ever gave anyone:

I know of no one in the army of your grade who stands higher. . . . Now my dear fellow, I would think twice and think long before I gave up my commission were I in your place. You are an eminent success in your present line of endeavor, highly esteemed by every one who knows you and with a standing in the service of the very highest bar none. Besides, every indication points here to a material increase in the regular establishment. . . . I would advise you to stick to it. If you do I am very sure in time you will be among the high ranking officers in the service.



Captain Marshall and General J. Franklin Bell at Governors Island, N.Y., spring 1917.

Marshall was finally promoted to captain in October 1916, after his return from the Philippines. With war consuming Europe and the “preparedness” movement growing in the United States, Marshall was made an aide to Major General J. Franklin Bell, commander of the Western Department, and helped to coordinate the mobilization effort there. After the United States entered the war in April 1917, Marshall accompanied Bell to the more important Department of the East headquarters on Governors Island in

New York Harbor. Bell became ill and named Marshall to represent him on all matters pertaining to the war mobilization. It was an “exceedingly hectic time,” Marshall recalled, “and I had to learn how to do business very quickly.” Fortunately, his VMI training and Army experience since had left him prepared for such challenges.

In June 1917, when the First Division was formed—mainly by assembling new units of inexperienced recruits—and readied for sailing to France, the division commander, Brigadier General William L. Sibert, requested Marshall’s services on his staff. On June 9 Superintendent Nichols received a letter from Marshall which said, in part: “I have been detailed on the General Staff, and appointed as assistant Chief of Staff of the First Expeditionary Force. By the time you receive this letter I will be out of the country.” When the convoy reached France on June 26, Marshall was the second man ashore to begin the difficult and lengthy

I had to learn how to business very quickly.



Colonel George C. Marshall, aide-de-camp to General John J. Pershing, Chaumont, France, 1919.

process of training the American Expeditionary Forces to be soldiers.

Eighty-two percent of VMI men between the ages of seventeen and forty served in the military during the World War, a total of 1,208 officers and 224 enlisted men. Five Institute graduates became brigadier generals. Little correspondence was possible between Marshall and the Institute during the war, but one June 1918 letter to Nichols, written after the AEF’s first battle at Cantigny, was full of praise for the role VMI men had played in the battle. “It happened to be my good fortune,” Marshall added, “to have the opportunity of



Pershing and Marshall during their tour of French battlefields, August 1919.

drafting the plans and writing the orders for the operation.”

Marshall was plucked from the First Division staff in July 1918 and sent to the Operations Section at AEF General Headquarters at Chaumont, where he played an important role in the planning and execution of the two great American operations in the war: the St.-Mihiel salient campaign (September 12-17, 1918) followed immediately by the Meuse-Argonne offensive (September 26-November 11, 1918). On September 17, Marshall had been made a colonel, and in mid-October General John J. Pershing had put Marshall's name on a list for promotion to brigadier general. Congress, however, decided to delay approval of new brigadier generals until the end of the Meuse-Argonne campaign, and when the Armistice unexpectedly ended that, all new promotions ceased. Marshall would wait eighteen years to wear a star.

Between the Wars, 1919-39

In May 1919, General Pershing made Marshall one of his aides-de-camp, a position he would hold until 1924. Marshall arrived in the United States with the AEF commander in September 1919, one of the last to return from the war. Considering the demands from all quarters for personal appearances by General Pershing, Marshall managed what must be considered a coup when he arranged for the general to visit the Institute on June 17-18, 1920. Pershing also visited the graves of Lee and Jackson, which provoked a few protests in the North. Marshall recalled: “General Pershing left me to answer all the letters. He said, ‘You got me to go there, now you attend to the letters objecting to my having gone.’” Writing from Lexington in mid-August 1920, Marshall told Pershing: “I find Lexington still excited over your brief visit. You made a tremendous impression on all these people, which means much as they still live somewhat in the



*Pershing and Marshall stand beside Stonewall Jackson's grave
in Lexington, Virginia, June 18, 1920.*

Civil War and are painfully conservative. You charmed them all, old and young." In 1921 Marshall tried but failed to arrange for a visit to the Institute by France's Marshal Foch.

One consequence of Pershing's visit was doubtless inspired by Marshall, who had never liked the VMI school year of ten months on post with but four holidays off. "I think we got so stale that we would have done very much better if we had had a breather here and there," he said in 1957. The cadets had most of Christmas Day off, and riotous behavior in town was the norm. Since the cadets and many Washington and Lee men stayed in town during the holiday season, their parents, friends, lovers, and

other visitors came to Lexington; the continuous round of celebrations constituted the social high point of the year.

For years there had been debate about the efficacy of keeping the corps confined so long. During General Pershing's visit, Superintendent Nichols asked his advice on the furlough issue. Having been briefed at length on the subject by Marshall, Pershing recommended instituting a Christmas furlough. The next Christmas all cadets in reasonably good standing (meaning about two-thirds of the corps) were permitted to go home for several days, and beginning in 1925 everyone was furloughed. Lexington's Christmas social season was never the same, thanks, in part, to George Marshall.

During the early 1920s Marshall's experiences in the Chief of Staff's office in Washington, D.C.—which he practically ran for months each summer while General Pershing vacationed in France—provided him with a graduate course in politics, government, and management, although at the time this perhaps seemed less significant than getting a good troop assignment. In September 1924 the Marshalls arrived in China—then in the midst of a civil war—for a tour with the elite Fifteenth Infantry Regiment which guarded American interests in Tientsin. At the end of 1926, when plans for Marshall's next posting were being made, Superintendent William H. Cocke tried to get Marshall detailed as commandant, but Marshall, now a lieutenant colonel, had already been assigned to teach at the Army War College beginning in September 1927. However, Cocke's letter of October 13, 1926, hinted that he had something larger in mind. To this Marshall responded:

One portion of your letter I do not understand. You expressed a desire for me to get in touch with the situation at the Institute with a view to future possibilities. From this I am compelled to infer, though I may be entirely off the trail, that you contemplate withdrawing as superintendent and had me in mind as a possible successor. It would be a tragedy for the Institute to have you drop the reins after the wonderful development you have engineered, and I trust there is no possibility of such action on your part. As for me, I would never consider throwing up my army career for the uncertainties of your job, unless financially independent. My ideas and methods would too probably arouse the restricting hand of a board of visitors, and I would never willingly place myself in the position of being wholly dependent financially on their good will. As a retired officer, my status would be a little different, but that does not happen to be the case. This may seem a strange point of view for one accustomed to the restrictions of army life. But it has been my good fortune to have had a number of jobs where I could pursue a pretty independent course, at least I did pursue such a course.

Marshall had been at the War College in Washington but a few weeks when Lily died suddenly. Marshall's friends in the Army arranged for him to move to surroundings more congenial to him than a college desk, and



Katherine Tupper Brown, a widow with three children, became George Marshall's second wife on October 15, 1930. General Pershing was best man at the ceremony in Baltimore.

in October 1927 he was made assistant commandant and placed in charge of instruction at the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. He remained for just under five years, reforming the teaching methods and curriculum, recruiting a superior faculty, and training scores of generals who would later command the nation's troops in World War II.

Contacts between Marshall and various VMI officials were constant. Apparently Cocke, whose health was not good, again attempted to induce Marshall to permit his name to be put forward for the superintendency, but Marshall refused. Cocke then invited Marshall to deliver the 1929 graduation address. The speech, according to the *V.M.I. Cadet*, “was one which stirred and inspired, not only the members of the Graduating Class to whom it was deliv-

ered, but also the hundreds of parents, friends and alumni who had gathered in the Hall.”

Marshall was always careful to keep himself thoroughly informed about the state of the Institute and its affairs. In 1937 Marshall (now a brigadier general and stationed at Vancouver Barracks, Washington) wrote to John A. Lejeune—who had replaced Cocke as superintendent and was himself now contemplating retirement—to protest against the possibility that either of two generals who were campaigning for the position would be appointed. “To appoint either of these men, in my opinion, would be a fatal error. In personality and in methods they are completely disqualified. There is not much else to say. I dislike putting my oar into this matter, but my feelings for the Institute are too strong to permit me to sit quiet under these circumstances.”

He also put a stop to an effort to encourage his own candidacy. Writing to Brother Rat John L. Cabell in March 1937, he remarked that Lejeune had already submitted his name to the Board of Visitors as one of the men he recommended to succeed him, but “confidentially, I would decline if offered the place, but I do not care to make any such announcement

unless the Board tenders me the opportunity, or at least expresses some preliminary interest in the matter. I take this position as there may come a day a few years hence when I would be honored and happy to have such an opportunity. Were I a major general today I think I would accept such an appointment. But, I would not care to do it short of that commission.”*

Undaunted, Cabell insisted that the Army had numerous major generals, but VMI few superintendents. “You missed my point of view a little on the reason I did not feel free to give favorable consideration to the possibility at this time,” Marshall replied.

That was almost purely financial. In other words, after about 35 years service, I would be throwing away a matter of about \$2,000 a year for the rest of my life, even should I become a centenarian.** Having just viewed the hazards of a profound depression, I am loath to walk away from as sure a thing as the United States Government.

Of course, through all of this, there is the question of abandoning the possibilities of the next eight or nine years, so far as that pertains to a professional soldier. With the world in its present turmoil no one can prophesy what the outcome will be, and as I made my life occupation that of a soldier I hesitate to take any decision which might leave me eliminated at the critical moment.

Given Marshall’s attitude, and the high regard in which he was held at the Institute and among its alumni even before he became world famous, it is interesting to speculate that had Marshall not been made chief of staff in 1939 and subsequently kept from retiring by numerous heavy duties and offices, he might indeed have become Lieutenant General Charles E. Kilbourne’s successor in 1946.

In mid-1938 Marshall was brought back to Washington to be deputy chief of staff of the Army. Friends and acquaintances from the Institute frequently came by his office in the State-War-Navy Building for a chat. In mid-December Major Withers Burrese ’14, VMI commandant, dropped in to say that he would probably soon be reassigned. Marshall wrote to recommend Colonel Harold R. Bull, a West Pointer who was then secretary of the General Staff and highly regarded by Marshall. Kilbourne was shocked that Marshall thought that having a West Pointer as commandant occasionally might be a good thing. Marshall was shocked that Kilbourne was shocked. “Please forget it,” he wrote. “I might say that it has been in my mind for some time that it would be a good thing at West Point to have a VMI superintendent. However, they never offered it to me, and I imagine

* Major general was the highest permanent rank in the peacetime army prior to 1945; the army chief of staff held the temporary four-star rank of general. Marshall did not become a major general in the permanent establishment until September 1, 1939, the same day that he became chief of staff.

** Annual army base pay at this time was: brigadier general, \$6,000; major general, \$8,000.

“Fully the Equal of the Best”

it would be ‘rather disturbing’, as you wrote, for them to consider such a possibility. But aside from the personal angle, I think it would be a damn good thing.”

Very soon, however, Marshall was offered an even better position. In April 1939 President Roosevelt announced that Marshall was his choice for Army Chief of Staff. VMI men everywhere were ecstatic; the Institute’s public image, especially outside the South, would be permanently raised. “In appreciation of your brilliant record and the service rendered to your Alma Mater in the reflected glory of your many fine accomplishments,” the General Alumni Association presented him with a dozen VMI Centennial Commemorative Plates. The October 1939 *Alumni Review* was dedi-

*It would be a good thing at West Point
to have a VMI superintendent.*

cated to Marshall and carried his picture on the cover. That same month he wrote a brief foreword for William Couper’s new four-volume centennial history of the Institute.

This book . . . records the development of high ideals in a long procession of young men, proven at times by the test of battle and self-sacrifice. No other institute of learning in America, I believe, can offer such a record. . . . The traditions and standards evolved . . . [have] permanently endowed the Institute with a legacy for the development of future citizens having that stamp of character necessary to the maintenance of a genuine democracy.

On October 21 Marshall reviewed the garrison prior to the Homecoming game, and the following day he inspected the Barracks. Requests for Marshall to make appearances or speeches before cadet and alumni groups increased dramatically. On each of the many inspection trips he made as chief of staff, Marshall found former cadets anxious to meet him.

The Pinnacle, 1939–51

The 1940–41 mobilization period was one of the most hectic times in Marshall’s life. The relatively safe world Americans had known seemed suddenly to be crumbling, and Marshall carried much of the burden of convincing a divided Congress that substantial increases in military spending and manpower were essential immediately, of representing the Army within the government, and of negotiating with allied and neutral nations. “These are pretty strenuous days,” he wrote to his former roommate Leonard Nicholson in February 1941; “I can only wish that I could



General of the Army George C. Marshall in 1945. Marshall was promoted to five-star rank in December 1944.

sit on the radiator again and cogitate on what was wrong with the administration of the Cadet Corps, and what the three of us might do and should we get something to eat.”

Despite the pressures and the demands on his energies, Marshall made time to deliver the commencement address at VMI on June 12, 1940. They were entering upon their careers at an uncertain, fateful, tragic time he told the graduates. “All of you, I am sure, realize that the day of drum and bugle armies is over. And we are determined that if it should become nec-

essary for us to use a club to defend our democracy and our interests in the Western Hemisphere, that it shall be a club of hard wood, and not of rubber hose.” Before peace returned, some four thousand former cadets—over 60 percent of the living alumni—participated in some military fashion in making this club hard.

VMI suffered institutionally during the mobilization and war years. Limited by its barracks size and its traditionally small corps, the Institute was unable to expand significantly its production of militarily trained graduates. Moreover, at the same time that the Army was experiencing a shortage of officers qualified for ROTC duty, there was growing demand for Army personnel and funds from formerly uninterested civilian schools. The draft dried up VMI’s traditional recruiting pool of eighteen-year-old males; moreover, given its male-only status and vigorous physical-training regime, unlike most colleges it could not bolster its student body by increasing the number of women or physically deferred men. Superintendent Kilbourne, as a representative of the nation’s military colleges, occasionally asked for Marshall’s assistance on particular problems, but

the chief of staff was reluctant to display even a hint of favoritism, although he did “receive a great many letters” from VMI alumni protesting the Army’s treatment of the Institute.*

Plans for the new Barracks, which would increase the cadet corps from 700 to 1,200, had been approved in 1941 but were shelved for the duration of the war. Early graduation and voluntary enlistments for active duty began to whittle away at the corps. In 1942 the U.S. government created the Enlisted Reserve Corps to retain in college a number of young men who would be educated to become officers. In the second half of 1943 and throughout 1944, VMI contracted to have Army Specialized

I can only wish that I could sit on the radiator again and cogitate on what was wrong with the administration of the Cadet Corps.

Training Program (ASTP) and Navy V-12 Program cadets at the school, which somewhat compensated for the loss of regular cadets. Marshall’s cancellation of most ASTP enrollment in late 1944—to help alleviate the shortage in the European theater of enlisted infantry manpower—was a significant blow to VMI’s finances. Regular cadet enrollment continued its downward trend until by the end of June 1945 there were but 120 cadets on the roll.

Occasionally someone would accuse Marshall of partiality because of the number of VMI graduates in conspicuous positions in the War Department, although these men had invariably achieved their positions without Marshall’s advance knowledge or help. “Way early in the game when we had Army-Navy Board, we had one meeting at which three out of the four army fellows were all VMI men. I didn’t know it at the time,” he recalled, until Army Air Forces chief H. H. Arnold pointed it out.** Naturally the VMI Alumni Association was inclined to point with pride to the number of its graduates in important War Department posts, but Marshall—ever sensitive to any charges of favoritism in the Army—asked the Alumni Asso-

* Kilbourne wrote to a number of alumni defending the War Department’s policy of granting no special treatment for military schools.

** In 1940, in addition to Marshall ’01, there was George H. Brett ’09, acting chief of the Air Corps, and Leonard T. Gerow ’11, acting assistant chief of staff, War Plans Division. There were several other VMI men in important positions, including Thomas T. Handy and his Brother Rat Withers A. Burress ’14, and John Magruder ’09. The crucial position of Secretary of the General Staff was held by Frank McCarthy ’33 (1944–45) and H. Merrill Pasco ’37 (1945).

ciation president “not to make any point of it all, because no one would believe that it hadn’t been done on purpose by me.”

After the war, Marshall told Superintendent Richard J. Marshall—whom he had helped to select for the post in late 1945—that he was “deeply interested in the complete rehabilitation of the Institute following the lean war years, and its further development to keep pace with other similar schools, for which it has in the past always been a model.” VMI was similarly anxious to have Marshall’s participation, as it added to the Institute’s status with the governor and the legislature and gave cachet to its fundraising efforts. In 1946 Marshall became director of the VMI Foundation, and the Institute arranged for the passage of a special state law to expand the Board of Visitors from twelve to thirteen persons so that he could become a member.

Marshall was able to attend but few of the meetings of the Board or the Foundation because of the other duties thrust on him after the war. He was troubled about this, but he did manage to meet with some alumni groups, attend a few football games, and make occasional appearances on post and at meetings. The superintendent pressed him to become president of the VMI Foundation in 1949, but the general—then head of the American National Red Cross—was reluctant.

I much dislike to enter my name in things and then only do a pro forma part. I think I could do better quietly on the outside, as I am now harassed by a multitude of obligations. I dislike entering into affairs and then being more or less aloof. Certainly I can’t do much. I am overwhelmed now by things, almost all of which I decline but nevertheless find myself involved in letters, telegrams, visits, etc.

Institute leaders were unwilling to let Marshall off the hook easily, however, promising him that the VMI Foundation’s vice-president would actually do most of the work. Marshall finally agreed to “do what I can to help out,” adding that he averaged “about ten pressure invitations a day. Global war was almost easier because I had more people to say ‘no’ for me.”* An example of Marshall’s “outside” efforts for VMI occurred during one of his trips for the Red Cross. In Houston, he met with a group of alumni who described in glowing detail what the Institute had done in and for Texas. Marshall’s response was: “What I am most interested in now is what Texas is going to do for VMI.”

Marshall was sworn in as Secretary of Defense on September 12, 1950, and ten days later he permitted the Board of Visitors to elect him its interim president. He agreed to serve until the normal election at the January 1951 meeting, although it was widely assumed that there would be

* The VMI Foundation’s vice-president was H. Merrill Pasco, who had been an assistant secretary of the War Department General Staff during the war and briefly (August-November 1945) the secretary. He had thus been one of Marshall’s “no” sayers.

an effort to convince him to accept re-election. Three weeks before the meeting Marshall definitely rejected that possibility.

I have been making inquiries in various directions and have arrived at the firm conclusion that the situation on the Board of Visitors is not at all satisfactory. What has happened seems to be very much what I predicted and arises out of the fact that there is no firm leadership because of my absences and inability to get intimately into the business week by week with you. As a matter of fact, the situation, in my opinion, has developed more seriously than even I anticipated.

Marshall was not removing himself from Institute affairs, however. He remained a member of the Board of Visitors until 1954 and a director of the VMI Foundation until his death.

What is Texas going to do for VMI?

Perhaps the most momentous occasion in the Marshall-Institute connection during the postwar period was his return to Lexington in mid-May 1951 for the fiftieth reunion of the Class of 1901 and for the dedication of the Marshall Arch in the Barracks. At the dedication ceremony he commented on various VMI graduates that he had seen in action over the years. Knowledge of specific academic fields or even of tactics or strategy were not the Institute's most important products, Marshall asserted; rather they were character, integrity, "dependability and the acceptance of responsibility" in a crisis. His remarks were widely and favorably quoted by the news media.

Marshall was moved by the honor that the Arch represented. The next day he told an old friend that the dedication "was a big day in my life, for V.M.I. paid me a great honor. . . . The day was perfect in all respects." To retired Superintendent Charles Kilbourne, Marshall wrote: "I was quite overwhelmed by the honor paid me by the Institute and agree with you that the whole affair was executed to perfection. It was a great day in my life and shall long be remembered."

The George C. Marshall Research Foundation

On November 11, 1978, a statue on the parade ground was dedicated to General Marshall, the only one on post to an alumnus. But perhaps the greatest memorial to him is a monument to his modesty as much as to his greatness: the George C. Marshall Research Library. For years Marshall had discouraged honors for himself, and he was adamant in his refusal to write memoirs. He was surprised when, in 1946, VMI Librarian Margaret Jones encouraged him to send his memorabilia to the post's museum and



General Marshall '01 (left) leads the Academic Procession at the graduation of the Class of 1956 on June 12. On his left is Superintendent William H. Milton, Jr. '20; behind Marshall is J. Clifford Miller, Jr. '28, President of the Board of Visitors. This was Marshall's last visit to the Institute.

sought to make Preston Library “a source of all information pertaining to your complete career.” The first shipment of items—swords, flags, war trophies, degrees, commissions—arrived in Lexington on April 2, 1946. Other installments followed at frequent intervals. Marshall was worried by the process, writing in March 1949: “I am wondering if this is proving an embarrassment to you, my continuing to send up these awards, plaques, medals, etc., that have been coming to me.”

Added to the idea of a storehouse of Marshall artifacts at VMI was the concern among the general's friends and admirers that his allergy to self-publicity would mean that his achievements and ideals would eventually slip from public memory, remaining alive only at the Institute. President Truman and others sought to give him a more permanent place in history by establishing a private foundation to finance an authorized biography as



First Captain Lee D. Badgett '61 views the plaque newly affixed to the wall of Marshall Arch in Barracks. The text calls Marshall "one of the great statesmen of our time," and quotes President Dwight D. Eisenhower, one of Marshall's protégés: "He is a patriot, a distinguished soldier, and the most selfless public servant I have ever met. Any school that can boast graduates like General Marshall—and all his associates who have been so valuable in wartime and peacetime service to this country—is indeed a distinguished institution and one that we certainly will nourish as long as there is an America."

well as to provide a permanent home for his papers and memorabilia. Numerous VMI leaders helped to launch this endeavor; particularly important were John C. Hagan '21, president of the VMI Foundation, who became the Marshall Foundation's first president, and J. Clifford Miller, Jr. '28, former president of the VMI Alumni Association and soon to become president of the Board of Visitors.

Before he left office in 1953, President Truman issued an order directing the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and the head of the General Services Administration (who then administered the National Archives) to make available to the Marshall Foundation official papers pertaining to General Marshall as far as possible under government regulations. The Foundation's initial job was to convince General Marshall to authorize a historian to undertake a biography. This done, in June 1956 Dr. Forrest C. Pogue, an Army combat historian in World War II and the



Dedication of the George C. Marshall Research Library, May 23, 1964. In the front on the left is President Lyndon B. Johnson; beside him is Marshall Foundation President General Omar N. Bradley; behind President Johnson (but nearly invisible in this photo) is former president Dwight D. Eisenhower; behind General Bradley (and also not visible in this photo) is Virginia Governor Albertis Harrison; behind General Eisenhower is former Under Secretary of State Robert A. Lovett; beside him is VMI Superintendent George R. E. Shell; behind Mr. Lovett is former Army Chief of Chaplains Luther D. Miller; beside him is Marshall's authorized biographer, Dr. Forrest C. Pogue.

author of *The Supreme Command* (1954) volume of the Army's official history of the war, was selected to be the authorized biographer. Dr. Pogue began immediately by interviewing General Marshall and his associates and beginning to search the voluminous official files for relevant materials. He and his assistants ultimately collected nearly a million pages of copied documents.

It quickly became clear to Marshall Foundation leaders that a permanent home was needed for the General's memorabilia and papers, the papers of Marshall's associates, and the materials Dr. Pogue was assembling. Superintendent George R. E. Shell '31 was one of the prime movers in the drive to establish a permanent research library and museum. A fund-raising effort was launched, and architect Alonzo H. Gentry '08, designer of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, contributed his services. On May 23, 1964, the George C. Marshall Research Library was dedicated on the south side of the parade ground. President Lyndon Johnson and former President Dwight Eisenhower both attended the dedication, which was one of the grandest ceremonies in Lexington history. Superintendent Shell began his opening remarks:

I welcome you to the Marshall Library, not a part of VMI and not the property of the Commonwealth of Virginia, but a project which is very close to our hearts. Built on land once a part of the Institute and given by the state of Virginia to the Marshall Foundation, the Library is closely linked with the dreams and hopes of this community, and we hope these lessons learned from the past may throw light on the problems of our generation and show the way to the future.

Marshall did not live to see either Dr. Pogue's biography or the library. In mid-January 1959 he suffered a mild stroke, and the next month a more serious one, followed by a long illness. The general died at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C., at 6:08 P.M., October 16, 1959. The next morning VMI General Orders Number 10 included the following eulogy which recalled Marshall's 1951 speech:

A man of exceptional abilities, it was not qualities of mind alone that earned for him a position as one of the truly great men of the Twentieth Century; it was, rather, qualities of the heart—unshakeable integrity, devotion to the highest calls of duty, and tenacious determination. Such steadfast adherence to principles of service and honor should be an inspiration to all who can know of the achievements of this eminent public servant.

The nation has not seen his like since, and we are the poorer for it.



Illustrations

The sources for the illustrations are listed below. Accession numbers are provided for the photographs in the George C. Marshall Research Library.

- front cover:* First Captain, 1901 (#2685);
background drawing of Barracks
from the *1935 Bomb*
- back cover:* Marshall Day ceremony,
1951 (#296A)
- page:*
- 2 Stuart and George, 1884 (#87)
 - 4 Marshall, Sr., to Shipp, September 11,
1897
 - 5 Entrance to VMI, c. 1900 (Royster Lyle,
Jr., and Pamela Hemenway Simpson,
The Architecture of Historic Lexington,
p. 262.)
 - 5 GCM as a Rat, 1898 (#99)
 - 6 H. O. Dold (Michael Miley collection,
Washington and Lee University
Library)
 - 7 Joke on Marshall in the *1901 Bomb*
 - 10 GCM, July 1898 (#1398)
 - 12 Football team, 1900 (#2603)
 - 12 Football runner drawing, *1901 Bomb*
 - 13 Final Ball, July 4, 1900 (#39)
 - 14 GCM and staff, 1900-1901 (#878)
 - 15 Lily Coles (#1785)
 - 16 Class of 1901 (#772)
 - 20 Marshall-Coles wedding, February
11, 1902 (#1197)
 - 22 GCM at Leavenworth, c.1908 (#98)
 - 25 GCM and Gen. Bell, spring 1917
(#1482)
 - 26 GCM at Chaumont, France, 1919
(#1227)
 - 27 GCM and Pershing, France, August
1919 (#129)
 - 28 GCM and Pershing at Jackson's
grave, June 18, 1920 (#1965)
 - 30 Katherine Tupper Brown Marshall
(#1801)
 - 33 GCM in 1945 (#485)
 - 37 GCM at 1956 graduation (Cover, *VMI
Alumni Review*, Fall 1956)
 - 38 Marshall plaque in Barracks (#625)
 - 39 GCM Library dedication, May 23, 1964
 - 41 Drawing from the *1901 Bomb*



