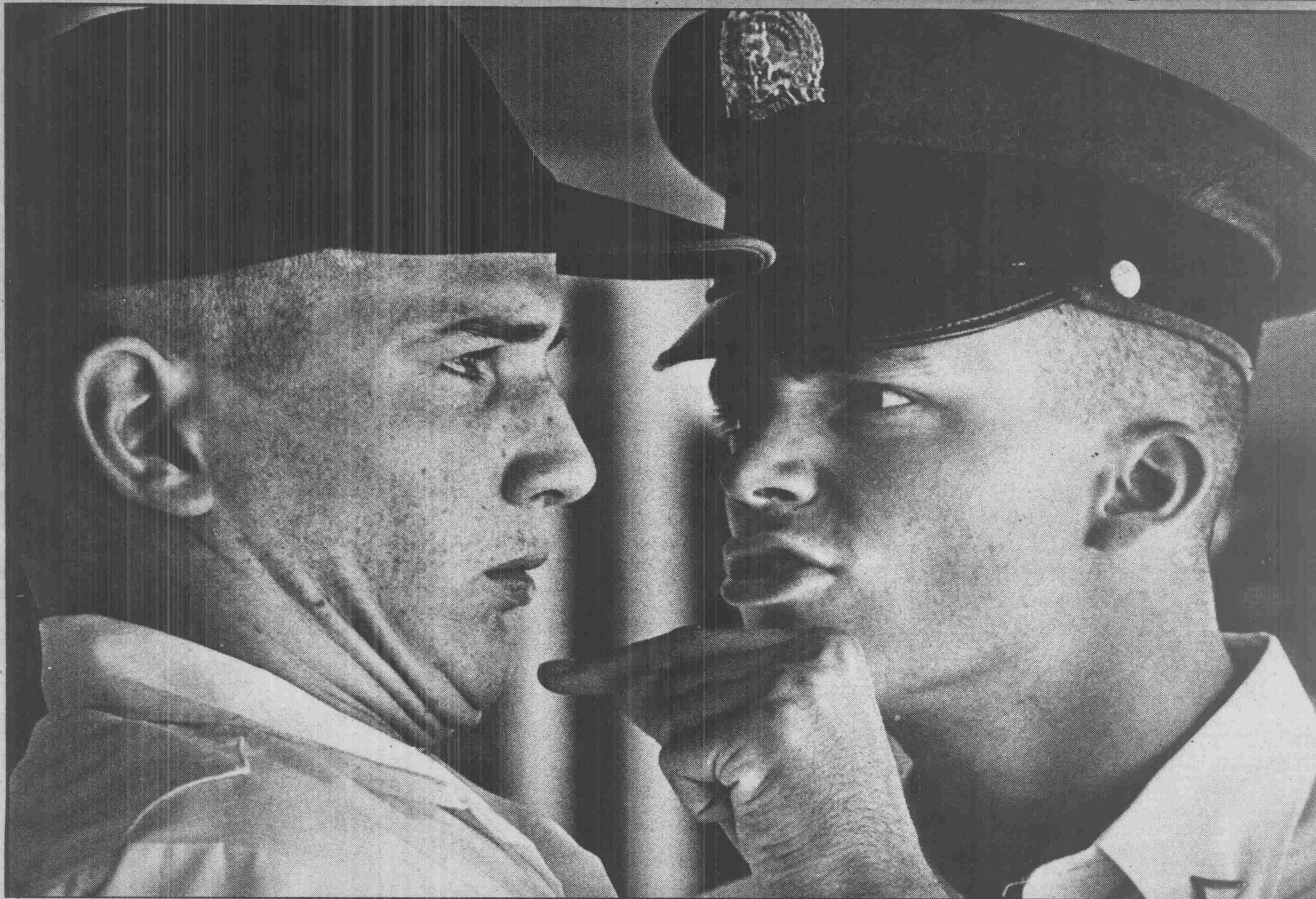


FOCUS: Virginia Military Institute



Third class Cadet Corporal David Furness instructs a Rat how to "strain."

It's your first day at college. After unloading the family station wagon packed with enough junk to furnish a three-bedroom condo, you say a quick goodbye to your parents and prepare for a year of more parties and all around fun than the law should allow, right?

Not if you're a new Rat at Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Va. At VMI, one unloads only what he can carry into the barracks by himself in one trip, says goodbye to his folks and prepares for nearly a year of Hell known as the Rat System.

For the Rat, the first year of college means hours spent straining (an exaggerated form of military attention) with upperclassmen inches away from his face barking out orders and asking (yelling) questions that to anyone else would be trivial, but to him are somehow of earth-shattering importance.

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME, RAT?"
"Burke, Sir."
"WHAT'S YOUR FULL NAME, RAT?"

"Patrick Burke, Sir."
"WHERE ARE YOU FROM, RAT?"
"Dayton, Ohio, Sir."
"SOUND OFF, RAT"
"Burke, Patrick, Dayton, Ohio, Sir."
(Repeat until upperclassman gets bored with Rat.)

That first year also means a new haircut which barely leaves the roots unscathed, and a new wardrobe that is primarily olive drab.

The obvious question is, why? Why for nearly a year address upperclassmen as "Mr." or "Sir," march in formation to the mess hall for meals and even eat at attention?

The answer is that the Rat System builds a "VMI Man," a man that never lies, steals or cheats — acts that are punishable by immediate expulsion under the Institute's strict Honor Code.

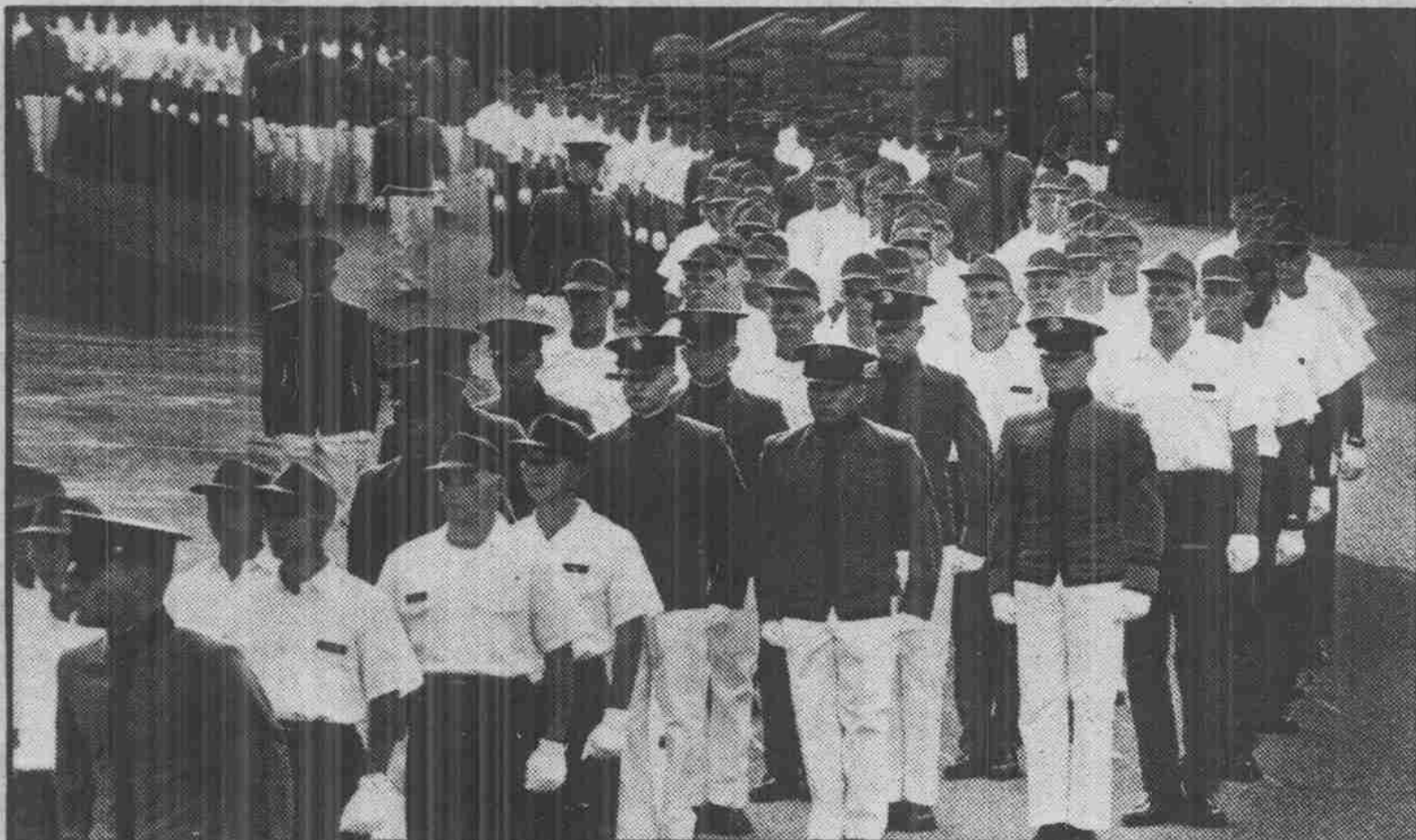
The Rat System also forms a common bond between the members of the class of Rats. "A bond of misery between the brother rats," as one VMI official said. "This is the world's largest fraternity," a cadet said, "and the year as a Rat is the initiation."

Since VMI was founded in 1839 as the nation's first state-supported military college, its graduates have been rewarded for their contributions to society with awards including a Nobel Prize, a Pulitzer Prize, Medals of Honor and Rhodes Scholarships. In World War II, both the Chief-of-Staff and the Deputy Chief-of-Staff of the U.S. Army were VMI alumni.

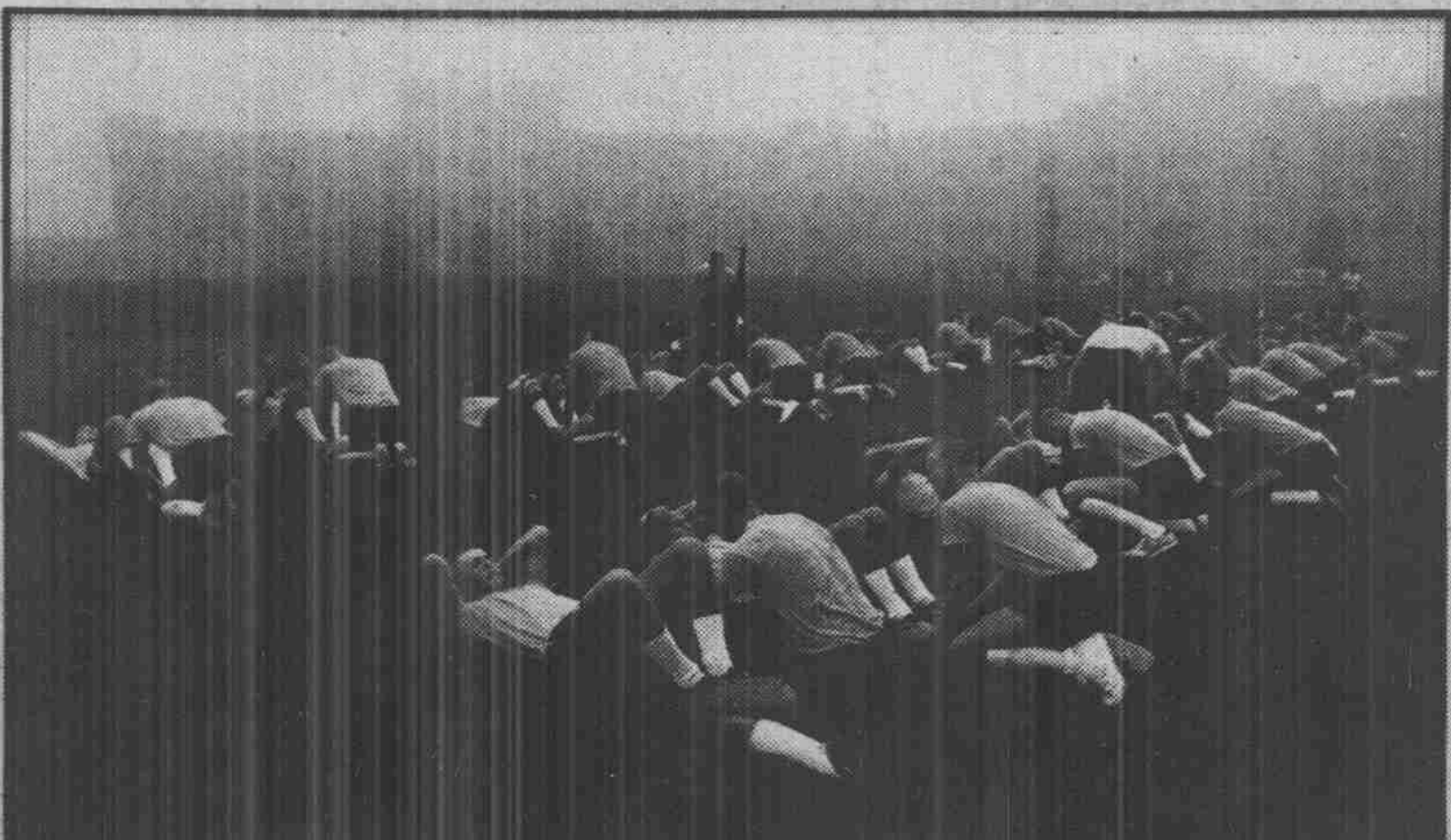
As Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, a one time professor at the Institute once said, "You may be whatever you resolve to be." This statement, carved in granite over the archway of the barracks, is the first thing a Rat sees after unloading the family station wagon, and the first lesson he must learn.

YOU MAY BE WHATEVER
YOU RESOLVE TO BE

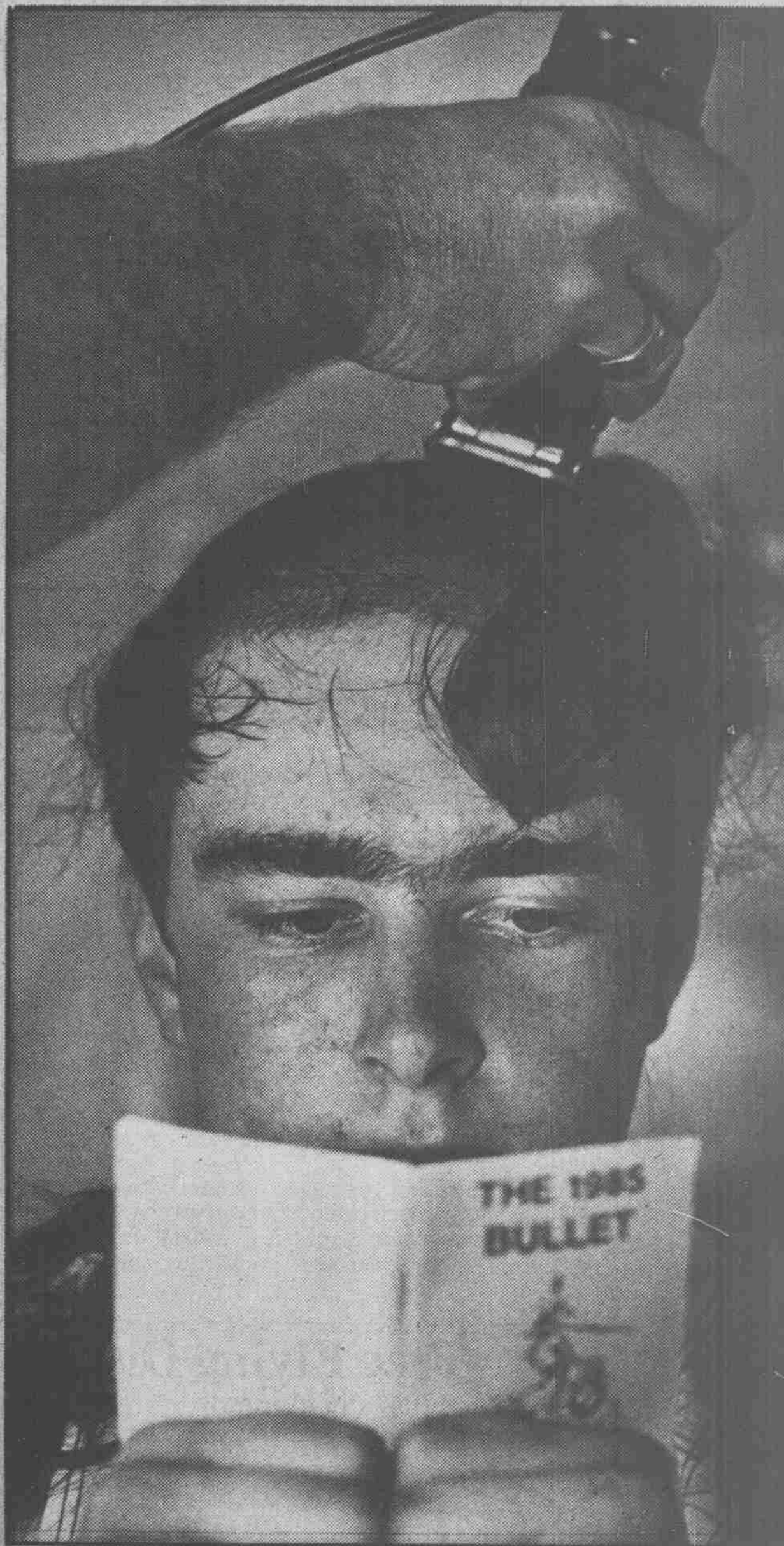
—"Stonewall" Jackson



Corps of Cadets marching in military fashion to the mess hall, as always.



Daily early morning workout performed in Virginia fog on barracks sward.



Even during first VMI haircut "Rat Bible" is present and read.

Photos and text
by Charles Ledford