



Breaking Out: VMI and the Coming of Women

Laura Fairchild Brodie

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On July 26, 1996, the United States Supreme Court nullified the single-sex admissions policy of the Virginia Military Institute, the last all-male military college in America. Capturing the voices of female and male cadets, administrators, faculty, and alumni, Laura Brodie tells the story of the Institute's intense planning for the inclusion of women and the problems and triumphs of the first year of coeducation.

Brodie takes us into the meetings where every aspect of life at VMI was analyzed from the perspective of a woman's presence: housing, clothing, haircuts, dating, and the infamous "Ratline"—the months of physical exertion, minimal sleep, and verbal harassment to which entering cadets are subjected. Throughout the process the administration's aim was to integrate women successfully without making adjustments to VMI's physical standards or giving up its tradition of education under extreme stress.

No other military college had done so much to prepare. But would it work? With everyone on the Post, we hold our breath as Brodie takes us through Hell Night, the unrelenting months of the Ratline, the fraternization, hazing, and authority issues that arose, the furtive sexual encounters, the resentments and, for the women, the daily difficulties of maintaining a feminine identity in a predominantly male world. Despite the challenges, we see the women ultimately making a place for themselves. Though new problems continue to arise, Brodie's lively and inspiring account makes it clear that VMI's story is an important and timely one of institutional transformation.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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