

THE NEWS VIRGINIAN

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Drilled to Perfection

By Michael L. Owens

The military drill—with rifles of dark wood stocks and barrels polished to sheens that shot sunlight in thousands of directions—lived up to more expectations Saturday afternoon than a circus carnival.

Fishburne Military School cadets twirled the 12-pound Springfields like aluminum batons to a series of barked commands. In unison, a dozen rifle butts slapped the asphalt, fell onto shoulders, spun through the air, slid down uniformed backs, defied gravity once more, fell back to shoulders and again slammed to the asphalt.

Parents grinned. An excited mother bounced on her heels and silently clapped her hands. A father muttered “Wow!” under his breath. More cadets would follow with even jazzier acrobatic rifle skills. The entire weekend was supposed to offer parents a chance to gush over the accomplishments of 122 cadets.

Mission accomplished.

Val Zelentsov, of Baltimore, Md., admits he was plagued by guilt a year ago after leaving his son at the all male FMS. He had hoped his son could find better grades and some direction. That heavy feeling had been erased by the time of the rifle drill Saturday afternoon.

An unending quest to fill the school yearbook had the tall and stocky 16-year-old Artem Zelentsov aiming his camera at just about everything that moved on the school’s asphalt drill yard. The camouflage-clad teen’s every step—hunched over with camera at eye level—was followed by a father turned shutterbug. “I’m real impressed,” grinned the father, his hands gripped around a camera of his own. “I see this dramatic transformation.”

The previous night featured a ball of cadets in dress uniforms ready to dance with mom. And a pig-picking was slated for after the parade. Some parents spent most of Friday night and Saturday morning preparing the meal. It was slightly less than an hour before the rifle drill that wrapped bubblegum and chocolates were scattered across the big wooden table centered in the school’s welcome foyer. Parents were in the midst of throwing together a surprise treat for Halloween.

“[Students] can’t get out for Halloween, so the parents bring it to them,” said school spokesman Maj. Christopher A. Richmond.

The foyer, furnished with cushy lounge chairs and ceiling-high trophy shelves, bustled with overactive adults Saturday morning. At the center table, parents bagged Halloween treats. More adults, most with steaming cups of coffee in hand, gathered near a large window to point out the mountain view. Others splashed back into lounge chairs to check and re-check camera batteries.



NORMAN CARTER/STAFF

The Fishburne Color Guard completes its pass in review as it marches by visiting parents Saturday during the Parents’ Day parade.

In just a few minutes, these mothers and fathers would witness precision military drills that promised sons in crisp uniforms and a discipline not often seen before at home. A parade with even more spit and polish was scheduled to follow.

Outside, Bill Clare, of Portsmouth, walked away from a demonstration that left him breathless. In it, his 17-year-old son rappelled down a 40-foot-tall brick wall.

“It’s amazing seeing him do these things,” Clare said.

The tall and lanky William Clare, clad in camouflage and combat boots, had no problem owning up to his pre-FMS life from two years ago.

“In public school, I used to think a D was good,” he grinned.

Battalion Commander Shane Rosencrance, 17, has no problem divulging the reason he learned to twirl a rifle - “It looked cool.”

After years of practicing every day, the school’s highest-ranking cadet is about to graduate. That means his mother, Tracy Helms, of Charleston, W.Va., has enjoyed her last parents’ weekend at FMS.

His grades made her proud. His ability to wow the crowd with weapons acrobatics has widened her grin.

“My heart is warm,” she said while placing a hand over her chest. “I could not be more proud of him.”