

SKIPPER

A Virginia Tech Tradition Since 1963



L.A. Ellis

Where did Virginia Tech get that cannon and how did it become a football tradition?

It all started back in the early 60's with the well established rivalry between VPI & VMI (Virginia Tech was called VPI back then). Every Thanksgiving Day since at least 1918, these two football teams met on the football field at Roanoke's Victory Stadium in a game known as the "Military Classic of the South." On game day, the VPI and the VMI Corps of Cadets would march through the streets of Roanoke from the train station to the stadium, often trading friendly barbs.



VPI Corps marches through the streets of Roanoke to Victory Stadium

In the fall of 1962, three VPI cadets in particular had grown tired of hearing from "Little John," the VMI cannon, as it fired at the start of the game. Worse, they dreaded the sound of the VMI Corps chanting, "Where's your cannon?"

Those three comrades, Alton "Butch" Harper, Homer "Sonny" Hickam, and George Fox, decided it was time for the VPI Corps of Cadets to have their own cannon.

Back in Blacksburg, Sonny unearthed blueprints for a cannon and convinced the industrial engineering department to build a wooden model as a class project. George and Sonny conferred on the best way to make a charge that would explode with an impressive boom but would not fire off any sort of missile. Meanwhile, Butch took on the formidable task of approaching the commandant with the plan and also locating a foundry where the cannon could be manufactured.

Money was a key issue in their plans, as well as rounding up enough brass that could be melted down to cast the cannon. The completed full-sized wooden model inspired the entire Corps, some 1700 cadets, to enthusiastically donate old brass buckles, hat grommets, breastplates, and cash to the cause. Sonny's father, a mine superintendent, contributed brass gears from coal mines in West Virginia. The boys also collected spent bullet casings from the campus rifle range.

Using the Yellow Pages, Butch made a providential choice in contacting the Virginia Foundry in Roanoke. When he told the proprietor, Paul Huffman, what the Corps was after, Mr. Huffman told him the foundry would do the casting free of charge. Huffman was a long time fan of the Hokies and a former Greenbrier cadet. Harper also learned that the money that had been collected would purchase a gun carriage from the Lorton Reformatory near Washington, D.C., where Civil War replicas were created for local historical battlefields.



Virginia Foundry, Roanoke, circa 1945

The brass was delivered to the foundry, and it was time to cast the cannon. Huffman began pouring the donated brass into a vat for melting down. Within minutes the foundry turned into a war zone with bullets exploding and shooting out of the vat at lightning speed. To everyone's surprise, not all of the collected bullet casings were empty. There were no injuries, other than to the walls of the foundry. So Huffman regrouped, discarded the bullet casings, and added brass from the foundry's stock.

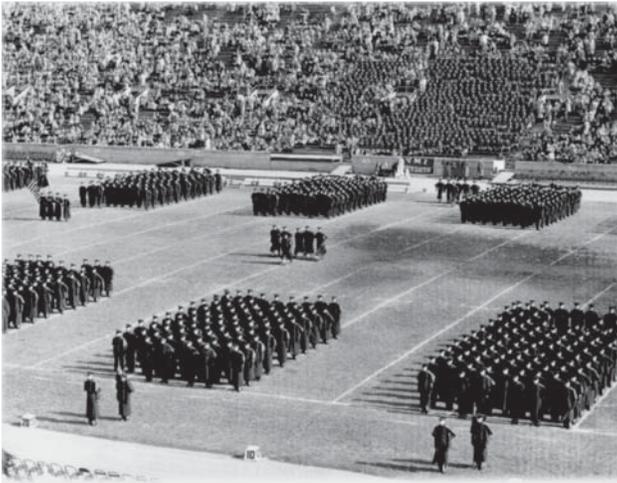
Homer "Sonny"
Hickam (IE '64)



Alton "Butch"
Harper (BUS '64)



George Fox
(ME '64)



VPI & VMI Corps of Cadets, Victory Stadium, 1956

Needless to say, on Thanksgiving Day 1963, the VMI Keydets were speechless when VPI rolled out their cannon and fired the first round. The blast was so intense it rattled the glass windows in the sportscasters' booth. VPI won the game 35 to 20. A tradition was born.

The Skipper is named in honor of President John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated the very day that the boys were hauling the finished cannon back to Blacksburg from the foundry. Like all Americans, the cadets were deeply affected by the President's death. Later that day, they decided to christen the cannon "Skipper" in honor of Kennedy's naval career.

Skipper proudly served Virginia Tech for the next 19 years, until an overcharge of gunpowder caused a blowout in 1982, sending plugs of brass through the windshield of a car parked along the drillfield, and through a second floor window of Slusher Wing.



Skipper I, 1968

Fortunately, only minor injuries were sustained by the cadet who lit the fuse. Skipper now resides in the VTCC museum. Before every home game, freshman cadets polish the cannon to a mirror shine.



Paul Huffman, Sr., & Paul Huffman, Jr. shown with the Skipper patterns

In 1984, the Corps became interested in replacing the original Skipper. In Roanoke, Paul Huffman, Jr., read about it in the paper. A recent graduate from the Virginia Tech materials engineering department, Paul knew all about foundry work and metallurgy. He called the Corps and said, "This is your lucky day!" He would be honored to follow in his father's footsteps and create the next generation Skipper, and at no charge.

Paul traveled to Gettysburg to research Civil War cannon, and he selected a three-inch Confederate iron rifle to replicate. He took careful measurements and returned to Roanoke, where a pattern was created by a local company. In creating this replica, Paul used updated techniques and a better understanding of metallurgy than would have been available back in 1862. "We calculated the metallurgy down to the element," Paul said. He contacted area businesses to solicit materials. "I called several suppliers and told them about this great story," Paul recalls. Not only did the companies donate materials, they came over to help.

Skipper II debuted October 1984 at the Homecoming game in Lane Stadium. October 2004 marks 20 years of service for this second generation Skipper. And thanks to careful research and design by Paul Huffman, Jr., this one should be around for a long time. "There are several safety precautions," Paul explained. "It's made of high-tensile strength gray iron, with a reinforced stainless steel pipe in the center." He also noted that the Corps' Skipper Crew holds to a high standard of discipline in maintaining and firing the cannon.

The Virginia Tech community and Hokie fans everywhere join together in expressing our heartfelt gratitude to three cadets from the Class of 1964, the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets, and to the Huffmans, for creating and keeping alive a wonderful Virginia Tech tradition.

Story credits include written accounts by Homer Hickam, George Fox, and Alton Harper; and discussions with Paul Huffman, Jr. and Paul Huffman, Sr. Special thanks to Lt. Col. William Stringer and the 2004 Skipper Crew for their assistance. Photos courtesy of the University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, unless otherwise noted.

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The Cannon Boys, Class of 1964, holding the original Skipper pattern, Butch Harper, George Fox, Homer Hickam with Paul Huffman, Jr.

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