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(August 23, 2010)—Participating in military staff rides may be an old practice, but the insights gained are timeless, as Army War College students recently learned by looking at a historic battleground through a new set of strategically-focused eyes.



Students listen as Professor Len Fullenkamp reconstructs the events of the Battle of Gettysburg during the Aug. 20 USAWC staff ride. Photo by Erin O. Stattel.

The lessons from the battle of Gettysburg were viewed through this prism by members of the Army War College Class of 2011 during a staff ride to the historic battleground Aug. 20, a capstone to the strategic thinking course. The nearly 340 member class split into their 21 seminars and walked the grounds learning more about the decisions and strategic thought from USAWC experts like Professor Len Fullenkamp, a professor of military history for the Department of National Security and Strategy.

“I hope they get a few things out of this experience,” Fullenkamp said. “First, I hope they can appreciate that leadership in war matters. I also want them to appreciate the continuity in their profession, many of them are another in a long line of Americans who, even in 1863, were just like them, and finally I want them to realize the human dimension of this particular war. Being a Soldier in 1863 is just like being a Soldier today.”

Fullenkamp began his narrative of the Battle of Gettysburg for the members of Seminars three and four before the bus even left Carlisle by pointing out that the Presbyterian Church on the square was where Gen. George Washington once worshipped and the courthouse just next to it still bears pockmarks from bullet holes from Civil War-era activity.

The staff ride is designed to show real-world examples of strategic leadership and view lessons that are still applicable today through a historical context.

“Unlike a lecture or presentation, the staff ride is interactive, akin to our seminar discussions,” said Dr. James Helis, chairman of the Department of National Security and Strategy. “Students are drawn into discussing lessons derived from the battle. Leadership, decision making, the human dimension of war, fog and friction on the battlefield are topics as relevant today as in 1863.”

“Placing the students on the actual battlefield brings home the effects of terrain and weather much more than any map exercise. The students are better able to get into the heads of the commanders they are studying by standing on the ground and seeing what they saw.”

Fullenkamp continued setting the scene of those early July days in 1863, highlighting the mounting frustration between Southern states and Northern states over a hot-button issue, slavery, and in a larger sense, states’ rights. As the bus rolled along past orchards and fruit farms heading toward Biglerville, Fullenkamp broke from talk of 1863 and mentioned recent headlines concerning immigration and how border states seem to have one view of the issue while the federal government supports another -- an interesting side note during a discussion on what started the Civil War.

The ability to walk the grounds and see first-hand the challenges that Lee and Meade faced brought a realism that can’t be gained from a looking at a map or reading a story in a book. Photo by Erin O. Stattel.



“In order for us to understand this conflict, we need to understand war as an instrument of policy,” Fullenkamp told the students. “War needs a political end.”

Under Fullenkamp’s lead, the seminars walked the open, grassy fields at Gettysburg, where he set the scene as the group moves as one. It was hot, much as it would have been on any one of the mornings of the battle days. He told the students of the problems faced by the Soldiers including trouble loading their weapons because they were packed in so tightly with one another, exposed during much of the fight in the open fields or blinded by the hilly terrain. He continued, telling them how the fight moves into places with legendary names like “Devil’s Den,” the “Peach Orchard,” and “Cemetery Hill.”

Fullenkamp then stopped and posed a question for the students and future strategic leaders, “What would you do?” as they reflected on the challenges which faced opposing Generals George Meade and Robert E. Lee.

“We are truly getting the general idea and Professor Fullenkamp is drawing parallels so we can understand why they made the decisions they made, then decide if they were the right ones or not,” said Lt. Col. Magatte Ndiaye, of Senegal, an International Fellow and member of the USAWC Class of 2011.

The ability to walk the grounds and see first-hand the challenges that Lee and Meade faced brought a perspective and realism that can’t be gained from a looking at a map or reading a story in a book.

“Problems which are abstract or flat on a map jump out when you stand on Cemetery Hill or McPherson's Ridge or at the Angle,” Helis said. “You can also tie together how tactical conditions and events on the ground are linked to and have effects at the strategic and operational levels of war, and how strategic and operational factors can influence tactical decision making.”

During the staff ride the students trekked up Little Roundtop to see firsthand the challenges facing Col. Strong Vincent’s and Col. Joshua Chamberlain’s troops while carrying out orders from their commanders.

“What is impressive to me is the immensity of the whole thing,” said Lt. Col. Michael Harlan, student. “In books and movies, we only get little pieces

and vignettes but Len has done a great job describing the complexity of this battle. It's not just about Little Roundtop or the Peach Orchard, and that's been great to get that detail really helps me understand where the strategists and troops were coming from."

Walking the battlefield offered a tangible experience in strategic leadership but Fullenkamp reminded them that at the end of the day basic human traits also play an important role in war.

"Sure there were people who wanted to leave," Fullenkamp said of the challenges facing the Soldiers. "But what keeps you in battle?"

Without any prompting, the group answered in unison -- "Your buddy next to you."

At the end of the day, students said that the staff ride provided them not only insights into strategic leadership but also to what is just as important in battle.

"I think this day has shown the will of Americans and our determination to fight for what is our freedom, and on a bigger scale abroad, fighting for our own freedom and the freedoms of others." said Col. Kevin Vereen, student.

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