

Staff rides provide unique learning opportunity

Public Affairs staff report

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The Army War College is always looking for creative ways to help educate and inform strategic leaders. One of the most innovative learning experiences – the Gettysburg Staff Ride – helps Army War College students learn from the lessons of the battle while retracing the steps of leaders nearly 150 years ago.

The Gettysburg staff rides are a whole-of-Army War College effort that brings USAWC experts from all of the centers and institutes together with the students of the resident and distance education classes.

“The staff ride serves many purposes,” said **Prof. Len Fullenkamp**, a professor of military history for the Department of National Security and Strategy. “It affords our students an opportunity to reflect on the challenges of leadership at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war, as well as the opportunity to reflect on the complexities of using war and battle to achieve political ends. It is a tremendous learning experience,” he said.

The staff rides are designed to show real-world examples of strategic leadership and view lessons that are still applicable today through a historical context. A full day staff ride of the Gettysburg battlefield led by a USAWC historians, is followed by seminar discussions focused on strategic leadership and related topics.

“First, unlike a lecture or presentation, the staff ride is interactive, akin to our seminar discussions,” said **Dr. Jim Helis**, chairman of the Department of National Security and Strategy.

“I personally liked walking the actual grounds where the particular battles and skirmishes took place,” said **Col. Al Abramson III**, student. “To actually see what the leaders saw was a very unique experience. Being on the actual battlefield greatly assisted me in envisioning the rationale as to why they made the decision they did at the time.”

One of the most valuable aspects of the staff ride is that the lessons learned there are still applicable today, said Helis.

“They are drawn into discussing lessons derived from the battle,” he said. “Leadership, decision making, the human dimension of war, fog and friction on the battlefield are topics as relevant today as in 1863.”

“When students came to the Army War College they were focused on tactics and the battle directly in front of them,” said Fullenkamp. “However, when they leave here, they will shift their focus to strategy. They won’t be able to just focus on the battle in front of them but will also have to focus on the battle that will be fought next week or two months from now.”

As they walk the battle grounds, USAWC faculty remind the students of the three things that make a great Army: leadership, tactics and discipline.

“Of the three, leadership matters the most.”

For some seminar members, the most sobering part of the day was learning about some of the difficult decisions that the Civil War commanders had to make during those three days in July.

“Sacrificing a regiment to delay an advance until reinforcements can arrive is a dilemma that I hope I never have to face,” said **Air Force Lt. Col. Robert Mallets**. “If presented with the situation, I saw the effect that it had on the overall effort and pray that I know the right decision to make.”

At the end of the day, students say the staff ride provided them insights into strategic leadership.

“I suppose the biggest take away from the staff ride is the role that good leadership, both above and below, plays in accomplishing the end state, whether that’s a military end state or a political end state,” said **Lt. Col. Carey Wagen**.

“The personality of the leaders and their qualifications were critical to the success or failure of the individual battles,” said Mallets. “Commanders taking liberties with what they thought was the right move ended up putting the overall battle in jeopardy. Not to mention, not all of the commanders were professional military officers. Their lack of training and experience might have turned the tide for the enemy,” he said.

“I believe staff rides provide a better understanding of the issues/challenges discussed in the seminar,” said Abramson.

“Talking about an issue is one thing, but to actually visit the location -- you gain a better appreciation, and sense of the challenges the leaders had to endure.”

