

Students in the National Capital Region: firsthand view of national elements of power at work

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May 12, 2015 -- A staff ride is an on-site learning event for which the place itself is critical to the learning experience; battlefield staff rides are commonly used in professional military education. The Army War College employs the staff ride concept in the National Capital Region, exposing its students – senior military officers - to the "give and take" of the Congressional offices and committees, federal agencies, and non-governmental entities like media organizations that vie for attention and resources.

"We took what we have learned conceptually in the class room and see how it is put into play and practiced here in our Capital," said Army student Lt. Col. Richard Wright about the academic field trip in mid-May.



Reuters senior editors and Pentagon correspondent talked at length and in depth with students of the Army War College (right).

Photo credit Chuck Witt

Lt. Col. Juma Nkangaa Sipe, of Tanzania, put the National Capital Region field trip into the context of the yearlong study of the whole-of-government approach, using the military element of national power in concert with the diplomatic, informational and economic tools. Discussions at the State Department and FDIC inspired him to look at roles through new lenses. "We see how diplomacy generally considers the military as an important tool toward getting people to sit down and negotiate matters," he said. "We see how economics can influence activities the military is supposed to accomplish."



Oklahoma's Sen. James Inhofe greets Canadian Col. Harold Middleton while Turkey's Lt. Col. Taskini Heken and Tanzanian Lt. Col. Juma Sipe (right) listen to his comments about military service and about national security issues .

Photo Robert Martin



"The security of any nation depends on how well the country manages its economy, and the management of the economy has to do with investors' confidence with that particular country's financial system," said Sipe, about discussions at the Federal Deposit Insurance Company, drawing thoughtful contrasts with the role of his country's central bank.

Students Col. Bill Sheehy, Col. Ed Fisher and New Zealand's Col. Christopher Parsons discussed their group's visit to Reuters' News Office in DC. Between the New York City and DC academic trips, most students have the opportunity to engage with editors and managers of major news corporations, said Dean Dr. Richard Lacquement, as he described the link between the Reuters and other media visits and the USAWC curriculum about information as a national element of power.



Senator Joni Ernst, Iowa (right), reacts to comments by Army Lt. Col. David Casey (left) as Marine Lt. Col. Jim Shelton (center) and other USAWC students complete discussions about legislation she has sponsored.

To the editors' discussion of massive change in recent years, the students posed questions about how the company led cultural change, and how they will identify the next technological opportunity over the horizon. For example, a short and vibrant discussion about cyber security and journalists' sources led to no specific conclusion but a new way to think about the

military-media exchange of information.

Sheehy walked away with a new perspective about their decision-making. "They didn't seem to have an agenda. They do, it appears, try to balance information fairly - to include calling a leader when a detrimental story is in development." He noted especially the tension between values and competition. "What is victory: Getting the story out first or getting it accurate?" And, he noted the very real concern that Reuters demonstrates with policy and support for their journalists in harm's way.

Handshakes were the hallmark of the 6-8 visits of each small group initiating relationships with



congressional and interagency colleagues in national security .

The students found it an ideal exposure to media decision-makers operating in a fast-moving global



media environment. Fisher, for one, compared the editors' comments to what he learned in the core curriculum and found it cause to reconsider an apparent gap in planning for strategic communication at the national level.

Col. Steve Riley's day on Capitol Hill included an engagement with several professional staff members of the Senate Armed Services Committee. As he departed, Riley described his take-away bullets about Congressional engagements: "work with the staffers and clearly articulate first of all what risk is, really, and also to have a narrative: what is really important to the services. Don't look at it as a confrontation but as a partnership, and try to help the staffers to ensure that they understand the Services' needs."

Christopher Newberry (left) answers Marine Lt. Col. Russ Mantzel's question following his presentation on mission and process of the FDIC. Photo Robert Martin



The SASC engagement was one of several large group sessions with professional staffers who work for the House Armed Services Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, and the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, getting insights about how the business of Congress ensues from the hearings and Congressional/Staff delegations to develop understanding of the military's concerns.

Additionally, student groups engaged with Members or staff in 81 House and Senate offices, from Congressman Rick Allen of Georgia to Senator John Thune of South Dakota.

After an office call with Sen. Joni Ernst, of Iowa, Marine student Lt. Col. Jim Shelton came to a very practical conclusion about the so-called squeaky wheel. "There are decisions that have advocates on either side and if we are not astute enough to advocate for our position, or provide information that enable leaders to make correct decisions, then we are failing and we should not complain about the consequences," he said.



Ryan Cunningham (red shirt), legislative director for Congressman Rodney Davis of Illinois, has a lively discussion about the relationships among labor issues, trade legislation, and international relations.



The focus on Congressional engagements was balanced with opportunity to better understand the interagency environment, with visits to

Department of Commerce and the Department of State, among others.

"The visit confirmed that there are competing agendas and competing views as far as national security strategies go ... that what we in the military see may not align with what our elected officials believe is the correct approach, and may not align with what other federal agencies believe to be the correct approach," said Army student Lt. Col. Richard Wright. National security deserves open discussion and a degree of give and take for the process to function, he said. "There is no right or wrong answer necessarily - always a complex problem that has to be addressed, and there are multiple solutions posed for very complex problems. I think that's definitely been underscored in talking to different agencies."

Paul Arcangeli, (below, left) professional staff member with the House Armed Services Committee, takes questions from four small groups of USAWC students seeking to understand the processes associated with the National Defense Authorization Act. The House Members, whose seats they took, were in recess.



