

## Gettysburg Staffride: Analyzing strategic leader decision-making in the Civil War

By Elena Patton, with Robert Martin, Public Affairs Staff 16 September 2020



*Professor Doug Douds leads seminar 20 on the Gettysburg Staff Ride, Sept. 15.*



*Seminar students overlook Pickett's Charge.*



*Ret. Col. Doug Douds talking about the Gettysburg Address at the spot where President Lincoln delivered the speech.*



*Seminar 20 on Cemetery Hill.*

As General Lee looks along the tree line of Cemetery Ridge, before him is the mile-long field that would come to be known for the assault now known as "Pickett's Charge." Less than a mile in front of him is the Union line of

infantry and 12-pound cannons.

Professor and historian Doug Douds turns to the staff ride group and asks them, "What are Lee's options?"

To provide context about the geopolitical environment of July 23, 1863, in support of a thoughtful dialogue among USAWC students on the staff ride, Douds offers a video briefing, linked [here](#).

On September 15, Douds' purpose was to engage students in an exercise on strategic thought. The exercise would bridge two elements of the curriculum, linking Theories of War with the challenges of Strategic Leadership by assessing the decision-making of general officers during the Civil War Battlefield at Gettysburg.

Among the considerations for military students: the geopolitics of both the Confederacy and Union; pressure from Richmond; strategic goals of Lee's Northern Campaign; logistical and operational stress of maintaining and maneuvering an army behind enemy lines; support of the people.

Why study the Battle of Gettysburg specifically?

"We use historic battlefields as leadership laboratories," said Douds. "Rather than a history tour that looks at the past from the present, we use the staff rides to look at the present from the past. We can see the similarities in the unchanging nature of war . . . . We can also gain insights to war's changing character."

Why go to the actual battlefield?

"There is an inspirational component to visiting places where great events played out and to see first-hand how leadership, courage, and teamwork provided the margin of success amid crisis and opportunity," said Douds.

Visiting the actual battlefield is a valuable part of the curriculum. "Physically seeing and talking about a battle on the actual ground on in which it was fought allows us to elevate thought from the tactical to the strategic," said the USAWC Commandant Maj. Gen. Steve Maranian. "What the students learn here, they will apply in future assignments as they develop the next generation of Army leaders.

"There is something powerful in standing on the ground where a leader stood and suspending that you know how events turned out," said Douds. "You engage your senses in a way not possible just studying a book or in a classroom. Because we do engage our other senses, there is a better

chance what is learned on those fields will be remembered.”

The Gettysburg Battlefield National Park is about an hour bus ride from the Army War College. Making every moment count, Douds peppered the travel time with insights about Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell's Corps as it marched south from Carlisle. Once at Gettysburg, the tour began at Pickett's Charge and worked through major landmarks like Devil's Den, Little Round Top, and Cemetery Hill while wearing masks and social distancing.

This staff ride takes students from the familiarity of tactical operations—and raises their perspective to the strategic level. “The Civil War was a good learning situation from our country's past to analyze how and why decisions were made that affected both operations on the battlefield and communications amongst all echelons of Union and Confederate leadership,” said USAWC student Jason Barrett, Army civilian.

Throughout the tour, Douds went into minute details—creating a narrative about the tactics, formations and statistics. He periodically took time to pause and remind students of the larger lessons—stories are powerful, leadership is about people, and leaders win not only wars and battles, but peace.