

Army War College uses battlefield staff ride to carry lessons in leadership

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Standing near the High Water Mark in Gettysburg, Pa, historian and professor Doug Douds demonstrates how Pickett's division moved across the open battlefield. The lesson to students of the U.S. Army War College was part of a battlefield staff ride



Army War College students in Seminar 14 listen as Doug Douds explains Gen. Lee's options as he moved into the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg. Douds gave the lesson in strategic leadership as part of a battlefield staff ride Sept. 20.



Army War College students of Seminar 14 led by historian and professor Doug Douds complete their march across Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg Battlefield. The reenactment of Pickett's Charge was part of a lesson in strategic leadership and battlefield

Standing in a line of trees along what was once the Confederate Army's battle line, Doug Douds looked across the nearly mile-long field in front of him. The field had witnessed the ill-fated infantry assault known as Pickett's Charge. He turned to the Army War College students of Seminar 14 and asked, "What are Lee's options?"

Professor and historian, Douds posed the question as part of a battlefield staff ride Sept. 20, and to engage the group in an exercise in strategic thought. He encouraged the group to consider the geopolitical environment of both the Confederacy and Union, and weigh the pressure from the leadership in Richmond, the strategic goals of Lee's Northern Campaign, and the logistical and operational stress of maintaining and maneuvering an army behind enemy lines.

The exercise would bridge two elements of the curriculum, linking theories

of war with the challenges of strategic leadership, using the decision-making of general officers on the Gettysburg Battlefield in July of 1863. A dozen war college historians moved through the battlefield, each guiding a seminar group to see how the insights of Thucydides, Jomini and Clausewitz were applied by generals Meade and Lee.

"It's a real case study to see how things actually work together, and it's very gratifying for me as a professor to see they're actually making those connections," said Prof. Vanya Bellinger, part of the seminar 14 faculty team.

"Theory of War and Strategy is the first real course the students take, and sometimes it feels too complicated, too theoretical, too abstract, too many great ideas," said Bellinger, who is the USAWC Professor of Clausewitz Studies. "As a professor I sometimes feel like we're throwing them into the deep water, and it's really cold water. Sometimes the students can't make the connection. They have a hard time, in the beginning, realizing why we need to study those ideas: Why do we need to understand the theory of war?"

"When you come to a staff ride like this, then you actually realize these things do matter. Those ideas do matter -- the ideas about the political nature of warfare, about the ends, where we want to go, and what are our means, and what are our ways," said Bellinger, she said, referring to the ends-means-ways strategy model. "These things do matter."

At each stop, at places like Little Round Top, The Peach Orchard and the High Water Mark, Douds and the students discussed the leadership decision-making associated with the battle's development. What were the options available and how did relationships between the key leaders influence the decisions that ultimately led to a Union victory.

As they faced the field of Pickett's Charge, the seminar weighed Lee's options as he would have understood them. With a better understanding of his decision-making, the war college students set off across the long-ago fields of fire.

Years from now, they may not remember what we talked about here today, said Douds, but they will always remember Pickett's Charge. That drives home the complexities of senior-leader decision-making – and the effects on soldiers who execute those decisions.

"We study theory of war, and you don't really get a sense for that human dimension, said Army student Lt. Col. Jim Pangelinan. "We learn from

Clausewitz who says, 'war is fundamentally a human endeavor, it's a clash of wills,' but at Gettysburg you get a sense of that human cost, that human dimension."

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