

USAWC Distance Ed Gettysburg Battlefield Staffride emphasizes strategic leader decision-making

By John Goulette - USAWC Public Affairs 27 June 2022



USAWC faculty instructor J. Dave Price guides distance education students through the Battle of Gettysburg and Little Round Top. The class of 2023 distance students attended the guided tour on June 23.



USAWC faculty members brought students to various battle locations, including Seminary Ridge and Cemetery Hill. The guides emphasized strategic decision-making and leadership skills.

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Each year, Army War College distance education students go to Gettysburg and get an entirely new—strategic—perspective on the three-day battle in an interactive educational experience.

Students in the distance education program walked the grounds of the Gettysburg National Battlefield, discussing the roles of key leaders, locations, and turning points in the battle with their seminar mates and faculty historians, who use the battlefield as a strategic leadership case study.

Students learned the standard facts and details of the battle, like the 9 million shots fired during the battle, and more than 600 pieces of artillery used. But, unlike a regular Gettysburg trip that a non-strategic leader would

attend, this trip was focused on different points of analysis of the battle.

"I have been to Gettysburg before but I learned new things, especially from a military decision-making perspective," said distance student Ryan Leong, Foreign Service Officer at the Department of State. "It was clear that the guides knew the ins and outs of the battle, and their military leadership point of view brought a new perspective to the battle."

The primary focus of the staff ride was on the strategic elements of the battle. Focusing on issues like strategic positioning, organization, and battlefield tactics, students were better able to understand the full situation that former strategic leaders were in on the battlefield. This retrospective analysis is intended to teach students the importance of decision-making in stressful, rapidly escalating situations.

"The intent is to do more than come here and learn about Gettysburg. What we want to do is have students take away some real strategic or operational leadership lessons," said J. Dave Price, USAWC faculty instructor, and Gettysburg tour guide.

The seminar groups visited important locations on the battleground including Seminary Ridge, Cemetery Hill, and Little Round Top. From each different location, the faculty tour guide explained who was in each position during the battle, what they did, why they chose to do that, and what the effect of that leadership decision was. According to Price, these leadership decisions are what shaped the battle from the very beginning of day one, each decision compounding until the very end.

"This gives students the opportunity to understand what was in front of senior leaders before them, and to evaluate and analyze," noted Price. "They are able to come here and see the impacts of those decisions for themselves and be able to chew on those big thoughts or ideas, in the hope that they themselves are able to take some of those lessons away, learn from those experiences, and then use those in their own organizations."

For many of the students, who traveled from all over the country to attend this two-week program, this was their first time at the Gettysburg battleground. Students were able to put themselves in their shoes and consider the weight of the decisions made by strategic leaders from both sides of the battle.

To picture a battlefield of only a few square miles with more than 160,000 soldiers can be daunting, especially given the situation. For the Union, this

was a direct attack by an invading army who was looking to forcefully end the war by conquering major northern cities. While Gettysburg might seem in the middle of nowhere, it is in proximity to major cities like Harrisburg, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. If the Union lost this battle, they would lose their foothold in this important area. For the Confederates, for the same reasons given, a victory at Gettysburg would mean a step closer to victory and an end to the war.

From this military perspective, students can understand just how significant Gettysburg was, and how much weight was carried by leaders on both sides. These leaders had not only themselves to think about, but the lives of their men, as well as the future of their country. Students were able to reflect on all of these considerations, which are important from a leadership position when making difficult decisions.

The distance education students are here for two weeks of seminar discussions, presentations from academic scholars and military leaders, and a staff ride to Gettysburg before they enter their second year of study. This on-site two-week resident phase marks the midway point of their war college graduate studies, which will result in a Master's in Strategic Studies next year.