



“ONE MUST WALK THE GROUND”: EXPERIENCING THE STAFF RIDE

The Winter 2019 edition of *Army Magazine* included a number of perspectives on reimagining the “staff ride,” the practice of conveying the lessons of battlefields directly to students of Army Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) programs by bringing the students to the battlefield. There, students are presented a historical case study of the campaign or battle with the objective of exposing the students to the dynamics of battle and analytical thinking. After writers from U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, the Combat Studies Institute, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College presented their ideas on the staff ride, Temple’s own Dr. Gregory Urwin, professor of History, was asked to offer his unique civilian perspective on staff rides, something he has been participating in for two and a half decades. The following excerpt,¹ which highlights the major points of Dr. Urwin’s article, has been reproduced with permission courtesy of Brian J. Hockensmith, Managing Editor, *Army Magazine*:

My first exposure to the staff-ride experience came in the summer of 1985 when I participated in the West Point Summer Seminar in Military History. That now extinct program lasted a full month in those days, with a week devoted to a field trip that stopped at several locations. Our schedule included excursions to two famous Civil War sites—a daylong visit to Gettysburg National Military Park (Pennsylvania) and another full day at Antietam National Battlefield (Maryland). The young West Point tactical officers who were our instructors entrusted us to Dr. Jay Luvaas, a

civilian faculty member at the U.S. Army War College, during these outings...

I had visited several battlefields before meeting Luvaas, but I credit him with showing me how to read contested ground in a way that improved my teaching the art of war. What I recall most vividly of Luvaas’ method was the importance of terrain. There are certain things that do not stand out readily, even from reading good maps. One must walk the ground. Luvaas drove home this point in memorable ways. At Gettysburg, he broke into a run and led us up the steep, boulder-strewn southeast slope of Little Round Top where the 4th and 5th Texas Infantry Regiments had attempted their ascent on 2 July 1863. Luvaas was in his late fifties at the time, but he was still agile enough to beat the rest of us to the top. At Antietam, he led us over the undulating ground across which the 2d Brigade, 1st Division, II Corps, Army of the Potomac, also known as the Irish Brigade, had advanced against elements of Maj. Gen. Richard H. Anderson’s division and Brig. Gen. Daniel H. Hill’s division holding a stretch of the Sunken Road. The now-you-see-us-now-you-don’t nature of that terrain helped us understand how the Irish Brigade could reach a rise that permitted them and other Union troops to transform a natural fortification into the trap that became known as “Bloody Lane.” At the end of the summer seminar, I returned home to the University of Central Arkansas (UCA), my place of employment at the time, with dreams of someday converting a Civil War battlefield into an outdoor classroom...

¹ Urwin, Gregory. “Musings of a Staff-Ride Facilitator.” *Army History*, no. 112 (Summer 2019): 46-54.



After the [U.S. Army Center of Military History] published William Glenn Robertson's *The Staff Ride in 1987*, the idea of mounting such excursions began spreading to ROTC detachments at universities across the nation. A couple of years later, Lt. Col. Louis A. Kresge, UCA's professor of military science, and I decided to introduce the staff ride to his senior cadets' curriculum...

We launched our first staff ride before William L. Shea and Earl J. Hess published their classic *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992). To obtain a clear idea of what transpired at Pea Ridge, I approached the battlefield staff, who kindly sent me copies of the detailed and heavily documented studies that the National Park Service had commissioned in the 1950s for the site's interpretation guide. With these tools, I put together a "playbook" that allowed me to offer pertinent statistics and quotations at every stand on the route. In those days, I must confess, I conducted our Pea Ridge visits more like a battlefield tour than a true staff ride. The cadets and the non-ROTC students who accompanied us still seemed to get a lot out of the experience, but like a lot of teachers, there are things I would do differently if I could go back in time. One year, we opted for variety and staged our staff ride a little farther north at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield. Like Pea Ridge, the engagement that raged along Wilson's Creek on 10 August 1861 featured a wide flanking movement. It also produced lessons concerning the conduct of green troops in combat. Having tried something different, however, we



decided that Pea Ridge served our needs better and never returned to Wilson's Creek.

In 1999, I relocated to my current position at Temple University, and my staff-riding days ostensibly came to an end. Although I interacted with Temple's Military Science Department, no one ever asked me to facilitate a staff ride, and I assumed that the cadre handled the task for itself. Then on 3 April 2010, I led a tour of Gettysburg for the Temple Undergraduate History and Social Studies Association and it reawakened my appetite for staff riding. I broached the subject with Lt. Col. James P. Castelli, then Temple's

professor of military science. He told me that the ROTC's Red Diamond Battalion had been going without battlefield visits for some time. I offered to help change that, and he accepted...

The staff ride is now a commissioning requirement for Army ROTC programs, which means facilitators must keep in mind what U.S. Army Cadet Command (USACC) wants its charges to derive from that exercise. USACC Pamphlet 145–10, issued on 12 February 2019, states that a staff ride should involve cadets "in a formal battle analysis" by permitting them to discuss "the strategic and operational context" of an engagement and "focusing on the tactical level.

Effective facilitators come from a variety of backgrounds, but they all have certain traits in common. Facilitators are familiar with the battlefield and its surrounding area. They should not only know what happened on the ground in question, but also be able to situate that engagement in the larger context of the war during which it occurred. An ability to make connections between one battle and others—including those from more recent wars—is an added advantage. A knowledge of the weapons systems employed in your battle—and their impact on the tactics of the day—is also imperative.

The facilitator should not think of himself or herself as the “star” of the staff ride. Your job is to help the cadets learn as much as possible—either through their own efforts or with coaching. When I take the field with a class of cadets, I see it as my job to set the stage at each stand by orienting the group to the surrounding geography. Then I get out of the way and let the cadets deliver their briefings, occasionally coming to the assistance of anyone who runs into a snag. Once the cadets finish, I add some additional details that will help them to comprehend the lessons to be learned from that location.

Each facilitator draws on his or her own bag of tricks. In the course of my career, I have published scholarly work on military operations in the American War of Independence, U.S. Civil War, and World War II. I have also taught a U.S. military history survey and a Civil War course for three-and-a-half decades, adding a World War II course to my repertoire in 1999. If you do something often enough, you learn more, and I have managed to fill my head with the kind of facts, anecdotes, and ideas that enliven a staff ride. I also indulged in historical reenacting from 1974 to 2016, reliving the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Handling the weapons and mastering the infantry drill of those two conflicts imbued me with considerable practical knowledge concerning the life of the common soldier in the 1770s and 1860s...

When I facilitate a staff ride, I usually dress as a soldier of the war we are studying. Such behavior will strike



some as eccentric, but I find it works well as a teaching tool... There are numerous other ways to put staff riders in the moment, but these methods have worked for me. A facilitator should remember that a staff ride is a sensory exercise as well as an intellectual one.

The staff ride also treats facilitators to rewarding bonding experiences. Even under ideal weather conditions, tramping around a battlefield involves a certain amount of adversity, and the shared hardship usually brings people closer together. The staff rides on which I have participated will always rank among the high points in my years as a professor. With USACC implementing new standards and developing additional resources, the ROTC staff ride is due to undergo considerable revitalization. That possibly makes this the best time to function as a facilitator. There is no telling where strides in technology and cadet training will take us. That is an exciting prospect, and it will be interesting and fun to see where the staff-ride trail leads

The complete article is available online at:
[https://history.army.mil/armyhistory/AH-Magazine/2019AH_summer/AH112\(W\).pdf](https://history.army.mil/armyhistory/AH-Magazine/2019AH_summer/AH112(W).pdf)

