

# Conduct of the Staff Ride

Developed by Tactics Division

Amphibious Warfare School

Quantico, VA 22134

1. Background. First of all, you may be asking yourself, "Why conduct a staff ride?" I believe the following quote from Brigadier General Harold W. Nelson goes a long way toward answering that question:

**"...battlefields can help them (leaders) see how leaders' decisions influence tactical outcomes, how terrain shapes engagements, and how technology, tactics, and organization interact in a battlefield setting. Those observations, when combined with curiosity and diligence, lay the groundwork for a lifetime of professional reading and will produce officers who are mentally prepared for a warfighting role."**

Although staff rides have taken different forms, and specific objectives have varied, one common purpose is to further the development of leaders. Between 1858 and 1869, while Chief of the General Staff, von Moltke conducted annual staff rides for the Prussian General Staff that considered hypothetical situations, based on possible plans of operations against Prussia's enemies. Staff rides in the U.S. Army can be traced back to the turn of the century when the U.S. Army took charge of preserving and marking Civil War battlefields. Faculty and students at the Army War College assisted in the research and took extensive staff rides on the battlefields discussing leadership, decision making, tactics, and strategy. In 1906, students from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College conducted their first staff ride when twelve students and one member of the faculty traveled from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas to Georgia. Staff rides at both schools were interrupted upon the arrival of World War II and began to slowly gain acceptance during the 1960s and 1970s. Staff rides are once again a formal part of the curriculum at both the U.S. Army War College and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (USAC&GSC). Those officers who have participated in a staff ride confirm its value in developing leaders, in introducing officers to the benefits of military history, and in supplementing current doctrinal, operational, and technical knowledge.

2. Definition. A staff ride consists of systematic preliminary study of a selected campaign, an extensive visit to the actual sites associated with that campaign, and an opportunity to integrate the lessons derived from each. It envisions maximum student involvement before arrival at the site to guarantee thoughtful analysis and discussion. A staff ride thus links a historical event, systematic preliminary study, and actual terrain to produce battle analysis in three dimensions. It consists of three distinct phases: preliminary study, field study, and integration.

Staff rides should not be confused with a tactical exercise without troops (TEWT), which uses terrain and hypothetical scenarios, but not history, as a teaching vehicle; nor should staff rides be confused with a historical battlefield tour, which is a visit to the site of a battle but involves little or no preliminary systematic study on the part of the student. While a historical tour can stimulate thought and discussion, it is limited by the lack of student preparation and involvement.

3. Purposes and objectives. The staff ride is a unique technique for conveying the lessons of the past to present day leaders. In a general sense, its sole purpose is to further the professional development of leaders. It may be designed to achieve one or many objectives. Depending upon the campaign selected, the staff ride can illuminate any principle or lesson at any chosen level. Because its mixture of classroom and field study facilitates student involvement, it ensures that any educational benefits are more likely to be retained. Some of these objectives may be:

- a. To expose students to the dynamics of battle, especially those factors which interact to produce victory and defeat.
- b. To expose students to the "face of battle," the timeless human dimensions of warfare.
- c. To provide case studies in the application of the principles of war.
- d. To provide case studies in the operational art.
- e. To provide case studies in combined arms operations.
- f. To provide case studies in the relationship between technology and doctrine.

- g. To provide case studies in leadership, at any level desired.
- h. To provide case studies in unit cohesion.
- i. To provide case studies in how logistical considerations affect operations.
- j. To show the effects of terrain upon plans and their implementation.
- k. To provide an analytical framework for the systematic study of campaigns and battles.
- 1. To encourage officers to study their profession through the use of military history.

4. Foundation of staff riding. There are two keys to successful staff rides. The first is that students are active participants in the educational process in the exchange of information, in the formulation of thought, and in the collective analysis of the military operation. The second is that there must be a complete integration of the preliminary study phase and the field study portion of the course. Without the integration, the preliminary study phase is merely a battle analysis, and the field study portion is simply a historical battlefield tour. While either one is sufficient to derive lessons, the two activities integrated together generate optimal understanding and analytical thought.

5. Conduct of the staff ride. The following guidance is provided to assist the student in initial preparation. Staff rides are generally broken down into three phases: preliminary study phase, field study phase, and integration phase. Students and faculty are highly encouraged to conduct the integration phase in an informal manner to the extent circumstances allow.

a. Preliminary steady phase. The purpose of this phase is to prepare the student for the visit to the site of the selected campaign and is critical to the success of the field study phase.

(1) Step One. Step one is to be completed as an individual assignment. No written product is required, however, the more detailed the study, the greater the benefit for the individual. At a minimum, during the preliminary study phase the student must acquire the basic knowledge necessary to a general understanding of the selected campaign. Generally, this basic knowledge should consist of:

- (a) Organization, strength, armament, and doctrine of the opposing forces.
- (b) Biographical and personality data on significant leaders.
- (c) Relevant weapons characteristics.
- (d) Relevant terrain and climatic considerations.
- (e) General outline and chronology of significant events.
- (f) Operational context in which the campaign took place.
- (g) Analyze the campaign and determine, to the degree possible, significant factors in the historical outcome.
- (h) Interpret significant events of the campaign in terms of current Marine Corps doctrine.

(2) Step Two. During step two students will advance beyond general knowledge in their analysis and understanding by focusing additional study on particular leaders, units, functional areas, events, decisions, or phases of the campaign

b. Field study phase. If the preliminary study phase has been systematic and thorough, the field study phase will reinforce or modify intellectual perceptions of the campaign. It culminates all previous efforts by students to understand selected historical events, to analyze the significance of those events, and to derive relevant lessons for professional development. The importance of the field study phase is that it is the most effective way to stimulate the student's intellectual involvement and to ensure that any analytical conclusions reached at any point in the staff ride process are retained.

(1) Briefs on plans, orders, events, and decisions. Training aids may include after action reports, excerpts from actual plans or orders, situation maps, sketches, or vignettes (first person accounts).

(2) Briefs on individuals. Should go beyond a recitation of biography. Relate the individual and his background to the specific situation, event, or decision. Again, the reading of brief and colorful vignettes drawn from primary sources is a good technique.

(3) Briefs on lessons learned or discussion points should attempt to draw on some common threads: commander's estimate, maneuver warfare concepts, levels of war, the human dimension of war, battle leadership, decision making at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war, and command and control.

c. Integration Phase. The third and final phase is a formal or informal opportunity for students and faculty to "bring all the parts together" and reflect on the impressions and lessons learned.

6. Sources. Both primary and secondary sources are important for conduct of the staff ride. Secondary sources are most valuable in the initial stage of the study to gather general background knowledge and establish a chronology of events. Primary sources are important because they deliver the details that may have been omitted by writers of secondary sources. Primary sources also provide a "view" without the bias of the writer of a secondary source. Primary sources are particularly relevant with regards to operational plans and orders, as well as after action reports and official correspondence. Primary sources will be especially important during step two of the preliminary study phase.