

# The Art of the Engineer Staff Ride

By Captain Robert F. Hynes

**W**hen the subject of conducting a staff ride is mentioned, the first question that often comes to mind is why. When training resources are so short, why spend time and money on a staff ride when there are platoons and companies to be trained? We hope that staff rides will make us better commanders, but there are a number of reasons for conducting them. William G. Robertson, author of *The Staff Ride*, lists 13 purposes of staff rides, with the end objective being to further the professional development of U.S. Army leaders. In analyzing a staff ride that the 307th Engineer Battalion at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, conducted in Vicksburg, Mississippi's Civil War Military Park and comparing Robertson's objectives, I came to this conclusion: *Experience the historical battle from the perspective of a commander or a soldier on the ground.* Regardless of our unit objectives, most of us can agree that experiencing the battle is an outstanding opportunity to further develop the professionalism of leaders at all levels.

## Conducting the Staff Ride

**T**he 307th Engineers chose the Civil War Military Park for its staff ride because of the work engineers performed there during the war. The campaign for Vicksburg lasted through the spring and into the summer months of 1863. Because of redoubts overlooking the river, the Confederates were able to blockade the Mississippi River from the Federals through well-placed artillery. Because Confederate forces had occupied the town since the beginning of the war, they had ample time to prepare the defense. During the course of the planning and execution of the staff ride, I identified several planning principles that were key to success. With these simple tips, you can turn your battlefield tour into an exciting training opportunity.

**Choose the Right Expert.** To be a professional experience, a staff ride needs a facilitator, an expert on the history of the campaign who can answer and ask the questions that stimulate the learning process. It may or may not be someone from the unit. Just as in any presentation, the speaker must be chosen to fit the audience. Ask yourself, What is the experience level of the staff riders?

Most of the tour guides at the Civil War Military Park knew the locations in detail but were not historians. We wanted someone who had studied the history of the battle and could relate it to lessons learned in modern warfare. We selected a professor from the Department of Military History at West Point, because he could explain the principles of war and the tactical perspectives of a commander.

**Do Your Homework.** Let's face it; it is difficult to plan for a staff ride while performing the constant tasks of training,

maintenance, and daily operations. In fact, it is difficult even when the staff ride is a high priority. The first requirement is ownership. As the S3, it was my operation, and it would succeed or fail based on how I prepared for it. Some units task one officer to be in charge, but I recommend against it. Command emphasis is always the key. The S3 or executive officer needs to be the driving force to divert resources to the project without letting routine operations suffer.

As a matter of policy, each member of a staff ride needs to research ahead of time. But rather than leave that entirely up to individuals, come up with a training plan. Set the milestones ahead of time. Assign certain areas of responsibility to each unit to make it the resident expert on a particular area of the battle or possibly a historical commander. Give sufficient time to research, and then tie everything together. After assigning areas of the siege of Vicksburg, I presented an officer distribution plan on the overall campaign. The presentation was general enough that everyone understood the campaign, but it also focused on and tied the bits of research into the overall scheme. The diversity of the research areas helped to stimulate questions during the presentation.

**Delegate.** Assign areas of research to the staff-ride members. Make each company responsible for researching and presenting a site along the tour. This is a great way of dividing the work while forcing the members to learn. I conducted a thorough reconnaissance a couple of months ahead to ensure that I was assigning good research. Then the companies went to work.

The key is quality not quantity. Although the urge may be to try to squeeze as much training as possible into an entire day, remember that it is supposed to be fun. Do not risk losing everyone's attention by over tasking. One site per company was an easily achievable goal. Each of the five companies in our battalion presented about 45 minutes' worth of material, and all had enough preparation time to make a quality presentation.

**Be Creative.** This is very important. The purpose of the staff ride is to experience the battlefield from the perspective of a commander or soldier on the ground. One of the most effective ways to do this is to use the terrain. What can we learn historically about this terrain? One site in particular, Thayer's Approach, required the Union forces to attack up a nearly vertical slope against Confederate parapets. Imagine what that must have been like. To practice, we encouraged members of the group to try running up the hill. It was exhausting, but we learned a great lesson. There are always new ways to add spice to the presentation. Find some authentic uniforms or take the time to examine some actual weapons of the battle.

Our study of the Louisiana Redan presented the case of Union miners tunneling under the Confederate parapet and blowing it up with 800 pounds of TNT. When the hole opened in the parapet, an entire infantry regiment stormed the gap, attempting to break through the lines and capture the fort. The battle lasted nearly two days with the Union forces eventually withdrawing.

To experience the battle, we began with a rock drill on a terrain map prepared ahead of time. Each member took the role of a particular commander or historical figure. When the rock drill was complete, we passed out cap pistols to all of the infantry commanders and told them to take up positions on the opposing hills. Caps are better than blanks for a staff ride because they do not require permits for transporting Class V supplies, nor do they have security requirements like weapons.

On signal, the engineer actors walked the route of attack, simulating the tunnel that Union engineers dug under the parapets. With the wave of a flag, they signaled that the parapet was blown, and the infantrymen rushed forward, firing their pistols. Both sides stood on the remains of the actual parapet and engaged for several minutes. Finally, on the commander's order, the Union actors withdrew.

The result was fantastic. Everyone in the group spoke about what a great tour it was. Even the battalion commander fired off blanks like an old cavalry commander.

### Conclusion

**D**on't forget that the main purpose of a staff ride is to experience a battle from the perspective of a commander or soldier on the ground, regardless of your military branch or research experience. However, another purpose is to have fun. Don't become sidetracked. A staff ride should be a reward to a unit that has worked and trained hard and deserves a chance to get away from "the mill" for a few days. Don't think of a staff ride as just being more work. Think of it as a chance to train out of the ordinary. With a little planning, you are sure to have a winning training event. Even if you repeat it year after year, your unit will still benefit each time. 

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## Libby Bridge Staff Ride

*By Second Lieutenant James A. Westgate*

Recently, officers of the 44th Engineer Battalion at Camp Howze, Korea, and the 82d Engineer Company (CSE) at Camp Edwards participated in a staff ride to the Libby Bridge as part of the Broken Heart Battalion's Leader Development Program. The purpose of the staff ride was to present an actual wartime engineering challenge, discuss a possible solution, and then visit the terrain to see firsthand the types of challenges the 84th Engineer Construction Battalion (ECB), the "Conquerors of the Imjin," experienced while building the Libby Bridge.

During the last two years of the Korean War, U.S. Army engineers dealt with the difficult task of bridging the Imjin River in the Eighth U.S. Army sector. Many float bridges and more substantial timber-trestle structures were destroyed during the summer flood season. By the fall of 1952, I Corps faced the winter with no bridges across the Imjin to support its divisions in combat along the front lines. Engineers of the 84th ECB made a significant contribution to the Eighth Army's effort by building the Libby and Teal Bridges across the Imjin in only 242 days.

Teal was a low-water bridge that could be used almost year-round, except during heavy rains. The Libby Bridge, the focus of the staff ride, was a much more substantial structure. Made of reinforced-concrete piers and steel-plate girders, it spanned 1,075 feet and could be used year-round to support a possible advance or an armistice. But, before the 84th ECB could begin construction, it had to overcome significant supply and personnel shortages. In addition, both bridges had to be built simultaneously before July 1953 by three line companies, which in October 1952 were spread between Seoul and the Freedom Gate Bridge working on other projects.

At the beginning of the staff ride, officers of the 44th Engineer Battalion received a preliminary briefing from the S3 on the timeline and plans prepared by the 2d Engineer Group for the construction of Libby Bridge. The focus of the brief was to point out the personnel shortages, equipment availability, logistical shortfalls, and engineering design challenges that confronted the 84th ECB during the various phases of the Libby Bridge construction. The officers learned that after conducting initial site preparation and receiving steel, wood, and other supplies from Japan, the 84th ECB worked through the winter to emplace the concrete caissons, build the reinforced-concrete piers, fabricate the steel-plate girders, and place the bridge deck. During the bridge construction, which was within artillery range of North Korea, the 84th ECB sustained two deaths. On 4 July 1953, Eighth Army commander General Maxwell Taylor dedicated the bridge, which was named after Sergeant George Libby, 3d Engineer Battalion, who earned the first Medal of Honor in the Korean War for actions near Taejon in July 1950.

For the officers of the 44th Engineer Battalion, the intent of the Libby Bridge staff ride was to foster an understanding, from the perspective of engineers facing a formidable