

OLD BATTLEFIELDS AND THEIR LESSONS: THE CASE OF ANTIETAM

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The First Division Museum at Cantigny

A drive by Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on a warm summer day will convince you that many people think of old battlefields as a vacation destination. These same places, however, are excellent outdoor classrooms to teach and learn about history. In the United States Civil War battlefields were preserved intentionally as places to instruct officers of the militia and regular army, as well as to honor those who fought and fell there. The U.S. Army began to place interpretive markers on several battlefields more than a century ago and army officers still visit those same battlefields today to study military history. Today's military visitor prepares for a close examination of a Civil War battlefield using an old educational technique called the staff ride.

From the outset, Civil War battlefields were natural "classrooms" within which practical exercises could be restaged. Abundant reference materials about the Civil War were available and the terrain often was little changed from the events of the 1860s.¹ Even today pristine trench lines can be found on the lesser-known battlefields of the Virginia peninsula and in the woods above Chattanooga. Sadly, many terrain features, such as earthen forts and trench systems, are falling prey to housing developments and other construction. But enough locations survive to conduct productive discussions on sites where momentous struggles occurred, often those turning on opportunities lost or seized.

In their study of the Civil War, students quickly learn that war is an enormous catastrophe for all involved--combatants and noncombatants alike. Modern war is an affair of the nation and its people, not just the government, and the teacher should emphasize that its frequent recurrence demands its study. A visit to an old battlefield reinforces insights that are hard to simulate in the classroom. Preparedness, military and civil, even if only intellectual, is a reasonable premium to pay to avoid defeat on some future battlefield.

The practical utility of the staff ride for professional military people is evident, but there are also many useful historical applications for other students. In fact, a great deal can be gained from an interactive dialogue with the nation's military past. The Civil War has endured as a watershed event in American history. When Ken Burns produced his epic television mini-series using archival photos and first-person accounts of the war, the American viewing public was spellbound by the power of history presented that way.

¹*The War Of The Rebellion: A Compilation Of The Official Records Of The Union And Confederate Armies* [short title *ORs*], published in 128 vols. from 1880-1901; reprinted in 130 vols. in 1985 by The National Historical Society; also *Battles And Leaders Of The Civil War*, serialized in "The Century Magazine" in the 1880s and later published together in 4 vols; reprinted in 4 vols. facsimile by Castle.

Exploring old battlefields offers the same kind of first-person experience, providing an opportunity to grapple with the imponderables facing men and women caught up in war.

For example, the battle at Antietam Creek in Maryland in September 1862 provided President Abraham Lincoln with the opportunity to issue his Emancipation Proclamation, which had been crafted earlier that summer. Although the battle was a draw tactically, with each army suffering about the same number of casualties, General Robert E. Lee was forced to retreat into Virginia with his Confederate army, creating a strategic advantage for the Union that prompted Lincoln's action. France and Great Britain, watching the fortunes and misfortunes of the Confederacy, decided not to grant recognition to the Confederate States of America because they clearly were not "winning" the war. This sort of background information only introduces Antietam to students. But a visit to the battlefield offers realism for those same students at the boot-top level--with images of real soldiers struggling face to face for limited objectives with carnage all around them. There is something to learn of the resiliency of the human spirit in those circumstances.²

Moreover, the Maryland Campaign of 1862, of which the battle of Antietam (or Sharpsburg if you prefer) is part, is an excellent example of the operational level of war and battlefield tactics. As Jay Luvaas and Harold Nelson explain in *The U.S. Army War College Guide to the Battle of Antietam: The Maryland Campaign of 1862*, you can begin east of South Mountain, visit Harpers Ferry, and end up standing in the cornfield near the barn where Clara Barton plied her nursing skills, all in the same day.³

In that cornfield the two opposing army corps collided and bloodied each other--Union armies under Major General Joseph Hooker, whose name attaches to later actions at Fredericksburg, and Confederate forces commanded by Major General Thomas J. Jackson, whose "Stonewall" brigade at the first battle of Bull Run (or Manassas) established his reputation. For many Union soldiers Antietam was their first real fight. Robert Gould Shaw, a young captain in the 2nd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, later the colonel of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, was wounded and lost all illusions of war's splendor in the East Woods and that cornfield. Brigadier General George Gordon, the brigade commander, reported after the battle that the 2nd Massachusetts and the 13th New Jersey:

²James I. Robertson, Jr., in introduction to James V. Murfin, *The Gleam of Bayonets: The Battle of Antietam and the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), 26; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry Of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 546- 567 passim.

³Jay Luvaas and Col. Harold W. Nelson, eds., *The U.S. Army War College Guide to the Battle of Antietam: The Maryland Campaign of 1862* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), v, ix-xxi passim; Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam* (New Haven: Popular Library, 1983), 337-338.

were received with a galling fire, which they sustained and returned for a brief period, then fell back on their supports. So strong was the enemy, that an addition of any force I could command would only have caused further sacrifice, without gain. The loss in the Second Massachusetts was severe.⁴

Colonel George L. Andrews commanding the 2nd Massachusetts reported that his regiment:

received a very heavy fire from a large body of the enemy posted in the [West] woods. Our fire was opened in return; but the enemy having greatly the advantage, both in numbers and position, his fire became very destructive. Being unsupported, it was impossible to advance and a useless sacrifice of life to keep my position. The regiment was accordingly marched back in perfect order to the position from which it had advanced.⁵

In Andrews's U.S. command 12 men were killed in action, 56 wounded and two captured or missing. That fight was presented in the film "Glory" in a most realistic way.

The *Official Records* also lets us understand something of the Confederate operations at the same location and same time. Brigadier General John R. Jones, commanding Jackson's Division of Jackson's Corps reported that:

Two companies were at once [late afternoon September 16] thrown forward as skirmishers, and Poague's battery was placed in the road on the right At the dawn of day on the 17th the battle opened fiercely.⁶

Jones was wounded by an artillery shell that exploded just above his head early in the engagement. He turned command over to Brigadier General William E. Starke, one of his brigade commanders. Starke was killed a half-hour later leading an advance and was replaced by Colonel A.J. Grigsby, commander of Winder's Brigade. Brigadier General Jubal A. Early, commanding Ewell's Division of Jackson's Corps, came up on the right flank of Jones's Division as it was retiring before heavy enemy fire. Early positioned his

⁴ORs, Series I, Volume XIX, Part I—Reports, 494-498.

⁵ORs, Series I, Volume XIX, Part I—Reports, 198, 495-496, 500-501.

⁶ORs, Series I, Volume XIX, Part I—Reports, 1007-1008; the date of General Jones's report is January 21, 1863. It was not uncommon for after-action reports to be delayed that long in the Civil War.

available units to best advantage throughout the morning, holding the key ground along the Hagerstown Pike near the Dunker Church.

What might students learn from reading those reports, while standing on the very ground described? Questions about bonding and cohesion in an infantry regiment that faced withering fire from rifled muskets and cannon at short range probably easily come to mind. The teacher also would have an opportunity to discuss how soldiers sought cover--at a rail fence, a fold in the ground, or a sunken road--and how difficult it was for company and regimental officers to get them up out of sheltered positions and move forward in the attack. Fear in battle and fear of showing cowardice to one's friends (often from the same hometown) in the unit worked in opposition. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and Gerald F. Linderman's *Embattled Courage* can be used successfully to illustrate these points. As Linderman notes:

Often the most powerful fear was that one's fear would be revealed--and that meant a prohibition on discussion, frequently even among comrades, of the topic of greatest concern to each soldier. Fear was not an anxiety to be shared but a weakness to be stifled Civil War soldiers were thus unable to draw on that reassuring conviction of mid-twentieth-century soldiers that battle fear was 'normal.' Instead, the terrors of combat seemed to grow larger because so often they were suffered wordlessly.⁷

Richard Holmes, in his book *Acts Of War*, explains that "Fear is the common bond between fighting men.... Only a tiny percentage of soldiers never know fear at all."⁸ This aspect of Civil War battle is one that students need to understand when they are looking for explanations of seemingly illogical actions on the battlefield.

Other points can be introduced through the combination of assigned readings and walks on the battlefield. For example, the lethality of smoothbore cannon was displayed many times over on the morning of September 17, 1862. Captain William T. Poague commanded the 1st Rockbridge (Virginia) Battery in Jackson's Corps, which was in position to receive the attack of Hooker's infantry near the Dunker (or Dunkard) Church. He remembered the "awful fight" in his memoirs, *Gunner with Stonewall*:

We fought from four different positions that day. Our first was some distance in front of Dunkard Church woods and our second at the edge of said woods, both places being left of and near Hagerstown pike.

⁷Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 23-25.

⁸Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 204.

Soon outflanked by Union infantry from his right, Poague withdrew his battery "to a little ridge about 500 yards distant on a line with the [Dunker] church."⁹ There General Jackson inspected the battery and commended their performance earlier that morning.

On the Union side, Second Lieutenant James Stewart, commanding a section of Battery B, 4th U.S. Artillery, in support of Brigadier General John Gibbon's brigade, positioned his two guns forward of the North Woods near the Hagerstown turnpike where they could fire on the Confederate positions in the West Woods. In this advanced position Stewart's guns were only about 400 yards from the enemy infantry:

After firing two or three rounds from each gun, the enemy partially broke, ran across a hollow in front of the section, crossed to the left of the turnpike, entered a corn-field, and, under cover of the fences and corn, crept close to our guns, picking off our cannoneers so rapidly that in less than ten minutes there were 14 men killed and wounded in the section.

At this point, his battery commander, Captain Campbell, "brought the other four guns into battery on the left of my [Stewart's] section, and commenced firing canister at the enemy in the cornfield, on the left [east] of the turnpike."¹⁰ Captain Campbell was severely wounded and command passed to Lieutenant Stewart. The brigade commander, Gibbon, was in the battery position "acting both as cannoneer and gunner" at one of the guns. Gibbon had been an artilleryman before donning the blue epaulets of the infantry in order to be promoted to general officer. The battery suffered 40 killed or wounded, and 33 horses killed or wounded.¹¹

Students standing on the ground occupied by Battery B might learn the following from their staff ride: (1) aggressive use of artillery in the offensive often could break the momentum of a sizeable infantry attack, particularly if delivered from a flank; (2) artillery could only stay in an advanced fighting position if accompanied by a strong infantry escort; (3) battle at the infantry-artillery level was deadly and often decisive; cavalry had very little effect on the battlefield, although the mounted troops performed essential reconnaissance and security at the periphery of the battlefield; (4) folds and undulations in the terrain

⁹William Thomas Poague, *Gunner With Stonewall*, ed. Monroe F. Cockrell (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1987 [1957]), 46.

¹⁰Report of Lieutenant James Stewart, *ORs*, Series I, Volume XIX, Part I—Reports, 229-231.

¹¹*ORs*, Series I, Volume XIX, Part I—Reports, 229; also printed in Luvaas and Nelson, *The U.S. Army War College Guide to the Battle of Antietam*, 143-144.

provided some cover from direct fire of muskets and cannon; (5) skillful personal leadership at brigade and lower levels often made up for inferiority in numbers or weaponry; and (6) differences in artillery organization affected the quality of fire support in both armies. These kinds of lessons and more can be woven throughout a study of the Civil War and in this specific case the Battle of Antietam.

The main point of this discussion is that battlefields and the documentary record provide extremely effective teaching tools, and vicariously walking in the boots of a Civil War commander can be informative and stimulating. Study of the American Civil War needs no apologies, but for students of history there are added benefits from the use of the staff ride technique. Just as a laboratory course adds a practical dimension to the study of chemistry or biology, an old Civil War battlefield used as the laboratory for a historical examination of one of the most trying of human experiences can make clear some of the details less apparent from the two dimensional pages of a text. An informed teacher who links the reading materials and the "laboratory" helps to bring an important historical event into clear focus.

For my next visit to Shiloh, I plan to read Shelby Foote's novel, *Shiloh*, in addition to the standard non-fictional sources. Works of historical fiction, some previously mentioned, can help both students and teacher to understand some of the emotions that come into sharp focus on a battlefield. The combination of preliminary reading of historical analyses, first-person accounts, and historical fiction, followed by an organized visit to the battlefield, promises the rewards of enhanced understanding of our martial past.

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