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Staff Ride to Jena/Auerstadt Battlefield

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In 1806 one of Napoleon Bonaparte's greatest campaigns resulted in the complete destruction of the Prussian Army. Frederick the Great's creation, so successful for fighting in the age of limited, linear warfare, was crushed by the emotional, patriotic mass army of the French Revolution, led by proven tactical commanders under the command and control of that brilliant rising star, Napoleon.

The opening of the eastern states as a result of German unification makes the twin battlefields of Jena and Auerstadt (Auerstedt on newer maps) easily accessible. The U.S. Army Berlin Brigade chose to use these sites for a staff ride for its commanders and field grade officers.

While assigned to the Berlin Brigade, the author had conducted a reconnaissance of the battlefield for a future staff ride. In April 1992 the Berlin Brigade scheduled a staff ride to Jena/Auerstadt and invited the author to lead it. The organizers issued a read-ahead packet, enabling all participants to have an understanding of the battle. Both 1:50,000 topographical maps and copies of tactical maps or illustrations, showing relative positions during various stages of the battle, were included. In addition, specific topics were assigned to groups of officers, requiring them to read and research in more depth so that they could make presentations in the field on certain aspects of the battle.

The command historian, the project officer, and the staff ride leader then conducted a detailed reconnaissance of the specific points the staff ride would visit. To assist in this effort, a local German historian agreed to accompany the group for both the reconnaissance and the staff ride itself, adding the advantage of his personal knowledge of the battlefield, the area as a whole, and such amenities as good eating spots.

In final preparation for the staff ride, all participants came together for a class that set forth the differences between the French and Prussian armies, strategies, tactics, logistics, etc. The class addressed the campaign from the strategic and operational levels,

with tactical discussions left to be completed on the battlefield. The group moved by bus to Jena, arriving in late evening to ensure a fresh, early start the next day. Since unification, Jena has already begun to grow and modernize, so a comfortable hotel was available to the group.

Day one of the staff ride followed the approach march of the French army. Marshal Jean Lannes' V Corps moved through Jena and seized the heights of the Landgrafenberg to allow space for the French army to deploy for battle, although Napoleon did not plan to fight for another two days. The terrain clearly reveals the significance of the Prussian decision not to defend the Landgrafenberg, thus allowing the French to gain the difficult high ground uncontested. Napoleon's operational concept for concentrating his corps proved to make excellent sense when seen in terms of the actual terrain.

Staff ride participants were able to observe the significance of the initial fighting for the towns of Cospeda, Lutzroda, and Closewitz that allowed the French to mass significant combat power and caused the Prussian commander, the Prince von Hohenlohe, to decide to stand and fight, although his mission was to screen the withdrawal of the main Prussian army.

In the vicinity of the town of Vierzeheiligen, the armies locked into combat—before Napoleon desired, thanks to the impetuosity of Marshal Michel Ney. It was here that the well-drilled Prussian troops executed their linear formations with great precision and discipline, aligning themselves perfectly, then halting outside the village to deliver the volley fire that Frederick the Great's armies had so often used to blast holes in the lines of their foes. But the French did not play by those rules. Employing large numbers of skirmishers and a massed artillery battery (Napoleon's first use of what would become a standard tactic), the French inflicted massive casualties on the Prussian lines, which continued to close ranks as soon as a man fell.

Napoleon had positioned himself on a hill to the

rear of Vierzehnheiligen and gathered the commanders of his increasing reserves around him. Standing in that location, the staff ride participants could see exactly what Napoleon saw as he waited for the critical moment to unleash his massed forces to break and overrun the ever-dwindling Prussian units.

The local historian was extremely interested in how U.S. battlefields are “packaged” so that the events can be clearly understood by visiting tourists. After several Civil War battlefields were described to him, he started planning how to improve the Jena/Auerstadt battlefield so that it would be easier to understand and to picture what happened during the various phases of the battle. As an example, he later stated that there would be a large map painted on the side of a small building near Napoleon’s command post that would show the events occurring to the front of that location.

After lunch at a *Gasthaus* located within the confines of the Jena battlefield, the staff ride group followed the route of the fleeing Prussians and the exploiting French. Then the group moved to the location where Prussian General Ernst Rchel had moved his reinforcing “army” of about 20,000 men—too late to impact on the main fight and in poor position to halt the French exploitation and allow the Prussian forces to rally. The group ended the first day by visiting several

sites where individual Prussian and Saxon units had fought particularly well as they retreated, allowing the group to observe the terrain and to analyze and discuss why units were successful or why they failed.

Day two of the staff ride followed the route of Marshal Louis-Nicolas Davout’s III Corps as it marched through Jena and north to Naumburg. There Davout received orders to conduct an envelopment of what Napoleon thought was the main Prussian force at Jena. Davout was to envelop the Prussians and cut off any retreat so that Napoleon could complete his battle of annihilation.

Moving from Davout’s bivouac sites in Naumburg, the staff ride group moved across the Saale River and up the steep ridge coming out of the Saale valley. The group was able to see where, in the fog, Davout’s advance guard stumbled into part of the main Prussian army moving away from Jena. At the small village of Hassenhausen, the group moved along the positions hastily occupied by the French as Prussian General G. L. Blcher von Wahlstatt launched his initial hasty—and unsupported—cavalry attack against the French right flank. By seeing the terrain from both the French and Prussian viewpoints, participants were able to get a feeling of the intensity of the fighting and the difficulties both sides faced. The Prussians launched a series



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of piecemeal attacks as units came forward against the badly outnumbered French troops. The Berlin Brigade officers were able to locate the decision points from both the Prussian and French perspectives. They could see where the Duke of Brunswick, the Prussian army commander, fell mortally wounded from a musket ball through the eye (while leading a *battalion* into the fight), then better understand the lack of leadership which caused the Prussians to squander their final chance for victory by dividing the last reinforcing division against *both* French flanks, instead of massing on one or the other flank and overwhelming the badly weakened French corps.

So, too, could the staff ride personnel understand how Marshal Davout decided to go over to the attack, demoralizing the Prussians in the face of their already heavy losses. The staff ride followed the route of the exhausted Prussians, pushed by the equally exhausted French infantry (Davout having little cavalry at the beginning of the battle and much less by the end).

The staff ride itself ended at the long ridge overlooking Eckartsberge and the Unstrut River valley, where Davout halted his troops, resupplied them, and prepared them, as part of the entire *Grande Armee*, for the pursuit which began the next day. This classic pursuit ended at the Baltic Sea with the complete capitulation of the Prussian Army. Thus ended the campaign of 1806, one of the most significant campaigns in military history because of the Prussian reform movement that immediately began trying to make changes necessary to bring Prussia once again to a position of military prominence. The reforms that Gerhard J. D. von Schamhorst, Count Neidhardt von Gneisenau, Karl von Clausewitz, et al., brought to the Prussian Army resulted in the formation of what became known as the Great German General Staff and changed the face of warfare in the modern age.

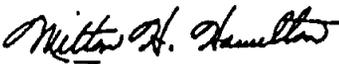
The staff ride group ate lunch on the edge of the battlefield, then drove the short distance to Weimar. Passing through the extensive casernes and training areas formerly occupied by a Soviet army headquarters and two divisions, the group drove to the former Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. The camp is now a museum to the Holocaust victims and brought to life the horrors of that period in the two hours the group spent there before returning to home station.

A staff ride to Jena/Auerstadt offers some tremendous learning opportunities for professional officers. One of the unique aspects of visiting this battlefield, as opposed to World War I or World War II sites, is that the officers are able to consider the strategic, opera-

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tional and tactical perspectives as they combine at this single locale. How strategic- and operational-level decisions impacted on tactical operations becomes readily apparent as the staff ride moves over the terrain. This is a superb opportunity for educating and training the future leaders of the U.S. Army. It is one that should not be missed by those units stationed in Germany that have the chance to study this campaign—for a very small relative cost. The professional value of

such a staff ride may never be known until one of the participants becomes a key leader of our Army in the future.

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