

# Reserve MP Brigade Studies Antietam

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Recently, the staff of a reserve component (RC) military police brigade and members from some of its subordinate units conducted a historical terrain ride in the environs of the Antietam Creek battlefield in Maryland. Although the exercise was not a staff ride under its strictest definition, most aspects of the staff ride system were included, and the end result was the same--enhanced professional expertise based on appreciation and analysis of a historical event.

The two primary purposes of this article are to describe how the Army's standard staff ride concept was adapted to meet the special conditions under which RC units operate and to encourage units to use this interesting, realistic, and effective training technique.

First, the unit was in the U.S. Army Reserve, which means restricted training time since these types units average approximately thirty-eight days of productive training per year at the most. Therefore this particular ride was limited to a total of one and a half days for the entire operation, which meant a

relatively simple, project easily well-defined within the capability of the unit. Participation was limited by a number of factors including difficulty in obtaining, reproducing, and distributing study material; dispersion of participants, who, by the nature of RC units, live over a wide area; and, most important, time. As often happens, the detailed preparation of the exercise then fell to a few individuals who had the time and expertise to pull everything together. Thus there was a primary deviation from the normal staff ride in which all participants are expected or required to be well prepared and each individual has a specific assignment in the program. In active Army units, for example, personnel normally work together on a daily basis and live in closer proximity, making more resources readily available and planning much simpler.

Second, the unit conducting the staff ride was a military police brigade staff with military intelligence and confinement facility subordinate organizations. This is hardly as homogeneous a formation as one would find in most active duty units. The

approach to the historical terrain ride had to be altered somewhat as a result. Again, basically it meant that the ride objectives had to be relatively simple and broad in scope. Thus the emphasis was on the fundamentals of terrain appreciation in the context of a historical event.

Third, the organization's being a military police brigade staff represented a particular challenge. Combat maneuver units can easily employ staff rides as TEWTs (Training Exercise Without Troops) and analyze historical examples of tactics, terrain, leadership, and a multitude of other battlefield dynamics appropriate to their current missions. Combat support and service support units have a somewhat narrower range of topics to choose from in adapting staff rides to their training objectives, and this was a problem for the unit at first. But, because the military police are the primary combat force on today's rear area battlefield, it was possible to perceive this as an exercise in light cavalry operations, which, as it turned out, was in tune with the battles fought prior to the one on Antietam Creek.

Fourth, many units, both Reserve and active, can conduct staff rides in areas where they may actually fight. Certainly units in Europe and Korea have this option. Active component units stationed overseas may even be located near battlefields fought over by ancestral units. However, this RC MP brigade's wartime mission is of a nature and in a location which is extremely difficult to train for, making the relevance of a Civil War staff ride even harder to establish. This required a degree of extrapolation that placed a premium on connecting the historical aspects of the environs with the type of unit and the area of projected actual operations. As we shall see, it was a challenge that met with rather unexpected success.

Finally, the objective of the exercise was to give the staff practical work in making estimates of the situation and producing an overlay type of operations order. Information necessary to complete these requirements had to be deduced from what the participants saw on the ground at Antietam, the historical framework of the campaign, FM 101-5, and their past experience, especially from Command and General Staff College course instruction.

The historical terrain ride began with little preparatory work by the participants but with a general familiarity about the Battle of Antietam, since many had lived in the Washington, D.C., area for some time and several had previously visited and studied the battle on their own. Staff members were enjoined to

do two things well: draw a good strip/sketch map of the area to be traveled and closely observe how the terrain looked and was utilized, particularly by the Confederate forces. The group then set out, accompanied by a running commentary of the situation by the terrain ride leader. Lively discussion on the bus quickly ensued with the subject matter quite varied, to include the height of the corn (and the concealment it provided) in the fields at the Battle of Antietam.

The immediate goal of the terrain ride group, however, was not the actual battlefield before Sharpsburg. Instead, moving over back roads, the bus drove through the battlefields of Crampton's Gap and South Mountain. These two terrain features are part of the extension of the Blue Ridge Mountains north of the Potomac River, running north to south. South Mountain, through which Turner's Gap runs, is about eight miles northeast of Sharpsburg. Crampton's Gap is about six miles due east of the same town. Here the principal part of the historical terrain ride was to be conducted, not at the site of the terrible battle fought just north of the Potomac River.

Briefly, on 14 September 1862, two days before McClellan and Lee faced each other across Antietam Creek outside Sharpsburg, McClellan's grand army marching out of Washington met what amounted to Lee's flank guard at Crampton's Gap and Turner's Gap in South Mountain. It turned into a critical Confederate delaying action with a modest force of infantry and cavalry under McLaws, D. H. Hill, and Stuart gaining time for Lee to gather his forces.

Longstreet, with three divisions, was several miles to the northwest of Sharpsburg at Hagerstown. Jackson was investing Harpers Ferry with three divisions, and Lee's trains were around Boonsboro, six miles northeast of Sharpsburg and near the crossing of South Mountain at Turner's Gap.

Opposing Lee was an army of five-plus corps under McClellan who also had Lee's famous Special Order No. 191 in hand. But for the caution and lethargy of Franklin's Corps in front of Crampton's Gap and two corps under Burnside at South Mountain, McClellan could have gone crashing into the midst of Lee's strung-out army which he was trying to assemble and move south of the Potomac River. The logistical trains in the vicinity of Boonsboro would have been uncovered if D.H. Hill had not held with Longstreet's support as long as he did in the face of Burnside's double envelopment. McLaws, at

Crampton's Gap, was driven off, but Franklin was spooked by McLaws' posturing after leaving the gap.

Now, for a military police brigade charged with protecting logistical and command elements in the rear areas, the relevance of the brigade's wartime mission to the preliminary battles of the Antietam campaign is brought into better perspective.

As the terrain ride group made its way through the countryside, the participants discussed the nature of the terrain as well as the actions taken by the various commanders. The intent, however, was not so much to concentrate on the Confederate or Union commanders' actions as to examine their thinking in accomplishing their missions. This was then translated into how an MP brigade might effectively employ relatively small mobile formations to accomplish those tasks derived from situations in which the Civil War commanders found themselves. Thus, at several stops discussion revolved around how a modern, well-equipped military police unit might perform the same mission that a Confederate infantry regiment might have been given in the same instance.

The group, all the while sketching their maps, went from place to place reviewing the historical events with the terrain and relating them to current doctrinal concepts. The culmination of the day's activities was conducted in front of Sharpsburg, where a professional historian described in detail the events of the bloodiest day in American military history. The evening found the brigade staff and subordinate units back at the starting point with each participant in possession of a completed strip/sketch map of the entire area. The exercise, however, did not end here.

The next day the participants assembled with their maps for an after-action review. They were divided into four groups, and each group was given a situation and mission that related to its unit's wartime responsibilities.

The simulated situation was that a Soviet airborne regiment equipped with light armored fighting vehicles had been dropped in the vicinity of the nation's capital. It was advancing west, as the Union Army had done in 1862, toward Sharpsburg, with the objective of securing the large airfield and logistical complex (both simulated) in the area where Lee had located his trains and unassigned reserves. The terrain ride participants had to determine the size and

composition of a military police brigade (based on current MP doctrine for area coverage) that should be assigned to defend the logistical complex from the advancing force.

Specifically, each group was required to use its previously prepared sketch maps and make an assessment of the situation given limited information, determine resources required, and prepare an overlay operations order within an hour. The group would then present its solutions for comments by the others and the brigade commander.

This after-action review/map exercise accomplished several objectives. First, it brought the past and present together in a relevant manner. The staff and unit participants had actually been on ground previously fought over and could draw appropriate conclusions as to placement of forces and maneuvers. Most importantly they gained an appreciation for the vagaries of the type of terrain that had features akin to terrain over which they would have to operate in wartime. Second, it required them to focus their energies on translating, in writing, a historical event into a present-day situation they might have to deal with, that is, to protect rear area installations against a large enemy force's attack. Third, it required utilization of limited resources, both in terms of information, i.e., troops available or required, and knowledge-crude sketch maps, to plan an operation. Fourth, it helped approximate, in a small way, the frustrations and uncertainties that a battle staff might encounter on today's fast-moving battlefield.

To reiterate, the staff ride is an effective teaching vehicle, but to realize its full benefit to specialized units, detailed preparation and participation are required. This is especially true of those units in the reserve components whose missions do not fall neatly into the staff ride category. Instead, the best approach may be a historical terrain ride, a close cousin of the staff ride. It is recommended to those who cannot meet the prerequisites of the more comprehensive staff ride.

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