If you want a new idea, read an old book!

– Quote attributed to Harry Truman –

If there is one single method commonly applied by most military academies and defence establishments, it is the use of history as a tool to educate young and senior officers, commanders in chief and even politicians. One of the most common mistakes, however, would be the misuse of military history, as its purported lessons are “like the Delphic oracle: it is only in retrospect, and usually too late, that we understand what [Clio] was trying to say.”2 Learning from the past and defining enduring lessons requires caution, since “the chief utility of history […] lies in its ability not to point out lessons, but isolate things that need thinking about.”3 In short, history not only provides a methodological approach to events but also fosters a better understanding of complex situations; it offers a series of examples (which are admittedly no substitute for the real thing), affording possible solutions and responses to given problems.

This set of examples explains why history accompanies the future commander in his quest for self-education. It is accurate to say, however, that since the end of the Cold War, the relevance of the history of war in military training and education has been regularly challenged. In a recent review of the US National Defense University’s academic programme, some critics have pointed out that the curriculum is too focused on the past at the expense of the emerging future, steeped in military history and the immutable principles of war, and not enough on critical thinking skills relevant to current issues.4 Does it make sense to study past battles fought with muskets, cannons and large infantry battalions at a time when drones, GPS-guided missiles and network-centric warfare are the daily fare? Others opt for a more balanced approach, believing that while technology and tactics continue to evolve, strategic issues remain largely unchanged.

One key challenge is the need to shrewdly draw lessons from the past and use them in a smart and useful way. The past dec-
ade of crises and operations has seen a new generation of leaders emerging from within NATO’s militaries, who are better trained, and more able to overcome a number of difficulties. But the mission remains to continue to develop these leaders’ skills and capacities in order to face an uncertain and unpredictable future. Hence, putting education at the centre of our military transformation, and using its tools as key enablers, would help to maintain a decisive advantage over all potential adversaries, along with the flexibility to overcome any problem.3 Undoubtedly, this requires a keen sense of awareness – in short, a critical mind with the ability to face up to the unknown – and the use of a wide range of platforms and educational methods.

The tools and resources for enhancing knowledge and decision-making skills are already available. Among them, the staff ride is cited as one proven method. It enables the build-up of leadership at every level, and furthers the professional development of leaders by conveying the lessons of past historical events (campaigns or battles) to the present day. Interactive-ly applied in a selected group of people, the staff ride is, above all, an educational technique, whereby participants develop their professional competence, question and define leadership and command, and explore strategic and operational ideas and their implementation at the tactical level. They will discuss not only “What happened?”, “Why?” and “With what results?”, but also: “Did this commander make the right decision at this juncture?”, “How would I have acted in his place?” and “Should he have made a different decision given the information he had?” It is, to use an unpopular term, a judgmental exercise and often a counterfactual one.6 Not surprisingly, this kind of exercise is increasingly popular. In British military units alone, as many as 300 battlefield tours and staff rides are made each year.7 To meet the requirements of this steady success, the US Army’s Combat Studies Institute has even developed “virtual staff rides” based on recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, modelling the terrain and analysing the available data, to bridge the inability to travel to unsafe areas or warzones, while still gathering valuable information and providing useful training.8 In addition, the method has spread outside its primary audience; far from being reserved for senior officers in the Anglo-Saxon world, it is now seen as one of the most valuable training occasions for national and multinational staffs, civilian or/military audiences, and is even being used as a unique opportunity to train the managers of private companies.

What is a Staff Ride?

A staff ride is the comprehensive study of a selected battle or campaign, whether ancient or modern, followed by a visit on the ground and a discussion period that tries to integrate the lessons learned from

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8 For instance, Baghdad has already been recreated in 3D using “virtual views” to produce enhanced warfighter training experience and opportunities prior to deployment (https://www.metavr.com/casestudies/baghadaviews.html, accessed 15 July 2014). Moreover, CSI announced at the end of 2013 that a ‘Virtual Staff Ride’ of the 2004 Fallujah Campaign was available (http://usacac.army.mil/caac2/csi/docs/CS%20VSR%20OVERVIEW%20-%20DEC%202013.pdf, accessed 16 July 2014). As of today, eight virtual scenarios have been designed, leveraging technology to achieve the same degree of leader development and education as with a field staff ride.
each stage. Hence, a staff ride can be divided into three phases: a preliminary study, a tour of the battlefield (or a field study) guided by a facilitator – possibly a military historian – and an after-action review where all the attendees draw lessons from the experience. This last part is the most important, as it allows the group to reflect upon their experience, analyse what they have been seeing, share it with their peers and integrate it in a coherent way.\(^9\) Success is achieved if the audience considers the exercise as a training event, commits itself to the preliminary readings and study and arrives ready for thoughtful analysis and discussion.

At the risk of being excessively meticulous, the staff ride should not be confused with other types of exercises, despite the loosely interchangeable terms. Staff rides should not be mistaken for a tactical exercise without troops (TEWT) or with battlefield tours, because their goal and purpose are not the same. A TEWT uses terrain and hypothetical scenarios, but not history, as a teaching medium. It is conducted on what can coincidently be a historical location, but is mainly thought of as a fictional scenario where staff and subordinate leaders would conduct an operation using current doctrine. A historical battlefield tour is a visit to the site where a battle took place, but involves little or no preliminary systematic study on the part of the student. While a historical tour can stimulate thoughts and fuel discussions, it is limited by the lack of student preparation and involvement. Hence, staff riding is a “specific military activity [which] concentrates more on the analysis of operations rather than on providing an historical narrative.”\(^10\) It is neither a fictional scenario nor a historical re-enactment: it is a versatile training exercise which does not simply foster lessons learned but helps the audience to better grasp and understand the realities of war and the principles of leadership while enhancing their own professional skills.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|}
\hline
 & Battlefield Tour & Staff Ride & Tactical Exercise Without Troops \\
\hline
Historical background & Mandatory & Mandatory & If played on a former battlefield \\
\hline
Commitment of participants & Passive & Active & Active \\
\hline
Training objectives & None & Yes & Yes \\
\hline
Target audience & Civilian/military & Civilian/military & Military \\
\hline
Lessons learned & No & Yes (integration phase) & Yes (after action review) \\
\hline
Anticipation & No & If related to current challenges & Yes \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\(^9\) William G. Robertson, *The Staff Ride*, Washington D.C, US Center of Military History, 1987, pp. 5 and 17. Robertson provides “the” official 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 thought, analysis and discussion. A staff ride thus links 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.”

Old practice, relevant themes

The modern staff ride dates back to late eighteenth century Germany, under King Frederick the Great. Convinced of the relevance of history for meditating on the military profession and dedicating oneself to the profession of arms, he took great interest in training his army, and especially its commanders. He assembled and took his staff for study days and staff rides, and the term “staff ride” originally arises from the German practice of what was a map exercise for the staff conducted in open terrain from the saddle. It was not, however, institutionalized before the second part of the nineteenth century, under the influence of two Chiefs of General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder and Alfred von Schlieffen. Moltke saw history “as a tool to forearm staff officers against the many possible contingencies”, while Schlieffen used history as a test bed for its strategic conceptions.11 Between 1858 and 1869, annual staff rides conducted for the Prussian General Staff considered hypothetical situations, based on possible plans of operation against Prussia’s enemies and, in the years leading to World War I, it became more and more an open terrain simulation wargame, testing the mobilization scheme, the deployment and the tactical employment of the Army, using either fictional scenarios or real war plans. In the same period, the staff ride concept grew in popularity, owing much to the Prussian victory over France in 1871. Indeed, the victory was attributed to the training of German staff officers and most war colleges copied the practice: the Russians tested it from the year 1875 on, while the British undertook a “staff tour” in 1895, and the Americans adopted it in the summer of 1906. In the US perspective, it was promoted as a possible response to the critiques revealed after the Spanish-American war (1898-1901), which had evidenced weaknesses in the preparation of the officer corps. Students from the US Army Command and General Staff College conducted their first staff ride on Civil War battlefields, discussing leadership, decision-making, tactics, and strategy. The staff ride was seen as an innovative method of training, imitating German practice, and hailed as the “best means ever invented of teaching officers their duties in the field.”12 At that time it was a tool to complement the training system, but was not meant to “compensate the infrequency of large-scale formation exercises where commanders and staffs could get to know each other.”13

13 Brigadier RAMS Melvin, “Contemporary Battlefield Tours and Staff Rides”, p. 64.
Set at the crossroads between history and hypothetical scenarios, and always looked at as an opportunity to further the training of military leaders, the analysis of these battles and campaigns served a variety of objectives:

- a purely historical analysis through the study of past campaigns, which was supposed to convince students of the practical benefits of reading and understanding military history;

- at the same time, and from a total different point of view, some officers were convinced that battlefield visits were relevant to the conditions officers themselves could experience. Major Eben Swift, one of the founding fathers of the staff ride at Leavenworth in the early 1900s, treated the rides as a component of his “appriciatory method” of instruction, using case studies rather than abstract theory to teach the principles of military art. 15 In this sense, it was both a teaching instrument as well as a “lessons learned” process, at a time when there was no institutional body to properly analyse past events. At a time in their career when officers had not yet experienced combat, it helped them to recognize the reality of the terrain (“ground truth”) for military manoeuvres and for purposes of decision-making, as much as the limitations placed on combat operations by logistical capabilities;

- more specifically in Germany, the staff ride was a programme of instruction for aspiring general staff officers, and an efficient way of selecting the most gifted officers, testing their ability not only to solve problems indepen-

15 Carol Reardon, Soldiers and scholars: The US Army and the Uses of Military History, 1865-1920, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1990, p. 64 and beyond.

cal 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.”

After the first Gulf War (1990-1991), and following the Balkan Wars in the late 1990s, some experts realized that future operations would be far more complex than expected, and that the study of comprehensive campaigns, whether multinational, joint or combined, would be helpful. With the proliferation of international military HQs within NATO, staff rides were considered more and more as a valuable training experience “highlighting inter alia the challenges of conducting multinational operations – a pertinent theme for HQ staff composed of personnel drawn from several NATO nations”. In 1999, a staff ride in Sicily was designed for SHAPE’s high-level exercise programme for NATO senior officers, with the underlying intent being to set the conditions for the discussion of a variety of component and joint issues that would initiate predominantly operational level study and debate. Senior officers trained and educated in Anglo-Saxon countries and military academies introduced the exercise as a part of the curriculum. In France, the Army Centre for Force Employment Doctrine – CDEF – began a yearly staff ride from 2007 on; the War College (École de Guerre) followed suit, first for members of the faculty, and then for the students in 2009.

Staff rides have also developed beyond the military domain, in pre-commissioning schools or military academies. Academic institutions, such as the Tufts University Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, now routinely include this as part of their curriculum. The set-up has found new audiences with private companies or other government agencies, which see them as an investment in leadership development and a way to understand strategic leadership issues. Since 1999, the US Forest Service has been conducting staff rides to train staff in fighting forest fires and saving lives. The Service considered the use of this military concept for wildfire training as a success and decided to implement it as a learning tool for all agencies at local and regional level, throughout the country. Elsewhere, staff rides are also used by corporations seeking to develop leadership training skills and apply the lessons to business or non-profit settings: decision-making, allocating resources, overcoming obstacles, etc. Major companies, such as Deloitte or the Boston Consulting Group, selected the staff ride as a capstone team-building and leader-development experience for both their staff and their major clients. When organized by military institutions

18 Brigadier RAMS Melvin, “Contemporary Battlefield Tours and Staff Rides”, pp. 59 and 72. See developments for the choice of Sicily as a case study in joint and multinational operations (Anglo-American-Canadian and German-Italian).
20 In March 1999, the US Forest Service conducted the “Dude Fire” Staff Ride as part of a national interagency fire behaviour workshop. While applying the framework of the military Staff Ride to a wild fire, participants were given the raw materials of the fire’s history (shift plans, weather forecasts, fire behaviour and fire danger predictions, maps, video footage, and photographs), they studied how firefighters behaved, discussed the events and challenges faced by the firefighters, and walked the terrain. Attendees then drew conclusions about the lessons learned. For additional information, see United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service: Fire Management Today, Vol. 62, no 4, fall 2002, pp. 4-15 (http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/fmt/fmt_pdfs/fmt62-4.pdf, accessed 26 June 2014).
and opened to external audiences, staff rides are perceived as a focused and coordinated interaction between strategic military leaders and key leaders from business, academia and government. This makes it possible to increase awareness, as participants exchange insights on important strategic issues facing today’s military. In the long term, a network of professional relationships can be created between the senior leaders of business, academia and government, who are, for the most part, decision-makers in their own organizations. That explains why, in the US Army, over 100 staff rides geared towards these new audiences have been organized since 2003.

A study in leadership

Staff rides are by nature comprehensive events that blend preliminary study with interactive dialogue. History and historical events provide case studies which are relevant for the future. For military officers, but for senior civil servants too, staff rides are a way to think outside the box, to upgrade their knowledge and familiarize themselves with other types of operation compared to those they are accustomed to. To quote a former British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt:

“We lost the capacity to think at the highest levels during our Small Wars experience prior to the First World War - I do not want us to lose again our capacity to think at this level. […] So, later this year [2008] I am running a Staff Ride to be attended by our bright up and coming Colonels, to consider just this point. We will study the ‘War that Never Was’ by considering the Soviet’s Third Shock Army and NATO Northern Army Group planning of the 1980s using the experience of retired officers who commanded and operated at the higher levels of command. Hopefully we will implant their lessons into the next generation of senior officers of the British Army – who in the last five years have almost exclusively focussed on High Intensity Counter Insurgency, and Stabilisation Operations, in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

This particular case highlights the two major results expected from the staff ride: to discuss a type of conflict – ancient or modern, historical or hypothetical – and give the audience the opportunity to apply conclusions beyond their current spheres of interest. This does require, prior to the field study, the identification of several key training objectives.

When the French Army Force Employment Doctrine carried out its first staff ride, the commanding general – a former Army attaché in Washington DC who had become familiar with the method – chose to revisit Waterloo, the epic but tragic battle (18 June 1815), arguing that “you better learn from your defeats than from your victories.” The main interest was in the strategic and operational levels: “Where to strike, breach and defeat a coalition?”, “Manoeuvre and Combined Warfare” and “Command, Control and Intelligence”. The main objective was to assess the link

23 In the Memorandum for US Army military history institute (Carlisle Barracks, 23 may 1994), the staff ride “may be designed to achieve one or many objectives depending upon the needs of the students and the circumstances under which it is conducted”.
and connections between strategy, operational skills and tactics, highlighting the application of the principles of war during operations. More generally, the exercise is meant to have every participant think beyond their current grade or rank, and prepare for future assignments and positions: it helps captains to think as if they were colonels and colonels as if they were generals, while also taking in the human dimension of war.

The value of staff rides lies within their training objectives, which range from political and strategic issues to tactical or technological ones. There is a constant back and forth movement between the past and the present: relevant historical precedents shed new light over today’s events and situations. Comparing Allied and German chains of command during Operation Overlord – the landings in Normandy in June 1944 – still makes sense by highlighting unity of command as a key principle, even 70 years later. In studying the battle of Gettysburg (1-3 July 1863), one is reminded that the Union XI Corps had a large number of German units: how were these men treated, and does that have any implications for today’s campaigns where multinational contingents are serving side-by-side? When explaining the same battlefield to “Rising African Leaders”, similarities also appear:

“Many of the challenges faced by General Robert E. Lee, commander of Confederate troops at Gettysburg, are similar to the challenges facing contemporary multinational peace operations forces in Africa […]. In a very real sense, the Confederacy looks a lot more like ECOWAS than it does a nation state. […] The army that Lee commands looks an awful lot like peace operations forces deployed in Africa where you have contingents from several different African countries who are all listening to their own governments – and you have a force commander who is trying to get them all to work together (…). This is Lee’s challenge.”

These sorts of issues also explain why staff rides, although mainly of interest to land forces because of the (tactical) ground considerations and the configuration of friendly and enemy forces, can also be developed for other components, such as Air Force academies or Naval Colleges, when dealing with strategic questions. Back in 1999, the British Air Force introduced its very first staff ride, Tally-Ho, which was a success, namely in demonstrating to “many in the service about the importance of the ground from a land perspective and just why it is that geographical features that are barely discernible from overhead can be so vitally important when operating on the ground.”

Eventually, the staff ride may form part of the process of lessons learned, especially when discussing joint operations and their obstacles. For instance, the Normandy case can be studied under the lens of air/land relations, in particular at the operational level; inviting individuals from both the Army and the Air Force, who have seen service in the same operational theatre, will give them the opportunity to discuss the case without the emotional involvement: staff rides thus provide a safe vehicle for exploring command issues that can be applied in a modern construct.

But the overarching reason which defines why staff rides are of some interest to today’s leaders has to do with how military leaders react to the “fog of war”, how they

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27 Ibidem, p. 111.
deal with friction and make decisions when facing specific dilemmas, when they are out of their comfort zone and are under pressure. The grounds for success or failure lie predominantly within the leadership’s ability to influence the outcome of battles and campaigns, and are related to whether commanders, at every level, possess the skill to create the conditions for sustained organizational success so as to achieve the desired result. When studying the landings on Utah beach, it is interesting to focus on Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt’s role. While landing with the first assault wave, he soon realized that the marine current had moved the landing two kilometres south of the planned landing beach location. There was one problem: the exit road leading inland was small and inadequate. Roosevelt, however, decided to carry on, famously stating: “We’ll start the war from right here”. He then personally welcomed all the landing troops, informed them of the change of plans in a cool and calm fashion, reciting poetry and telling anecdotes of his father to steady the nerves of his men. This example demonstrates how an operational commander sets goals and standards, provides guidance for action and establishes the direction that keeps the machine working and the force marching towards its purpose. The personal display of physical courage and self-discipline influences the soldiers and, finally, has an impact on the success of the force.

The consequences of selecting and appointing poor leaders can barely be seen in peacetime, hence staff rides provide case studies and historical evidence. From another perspective, Tom Ricks takes the example of the failure of the senior leadership in the 90th US Infantry division during its first weeks in Normandy, where the division head, the assistant division commander, two commanders out of the division’s three regiments, and no less than 16 field-grade officers were fired, dismissed and sometimes demoted. The cumulative effect of these reliefs was striking: “The 90th Division, for instance, improved radically – transforming from a problem division that First Army staff wanted to break up, into ‘one of the most outstanding [divisions] in the European Theater’, as Bradley later wrote.” Of course, when Ricks writes his piece, he refers to the most recent developments in US military history, but his endeavours are not very different from what our training medium suggests: the use of history to analyse the combination of management and leadership skills, and the degree of efficiency attained.

Finally, staff rides expose students to a part of their future military lives: not only gaining experience, but trying to learn the lessons from what has happened and operationalizing them. Hence the training objectives have to be carefully chosen to ensure and facilitate the students’ involvement, but also to make certain that they will retain some of the benefits. Therein lies the explanation of why it is important to make the staff ride emotional; climbing down a World War I trench in Verdun or looking out from Vimy Ridge, surveying Gallipoli’s narrow beaches or standing over the soldiers’ graves in a military cemetery corroborates the “face of battle”, the dynamics and realities of war and its timeless human dimension.

Implementing Staff Rides as part of leadership development programmes

To be effective, staff rides have to be sponsored by the chain of command, i.e. flag officers or senior officers who not only believe in the virtue of professional lifelong education but who also see their job as more than managing, directing and giving orders, since they consider themselves accountable for what their subordinates learn and know. Efforts should be devoted to providing an atmosphere conducive to learning, with shared values and intellectual seriousness. Of course, this may be a lot easier if it is part of the curriculum, but the flexibility of the format allows every level, from battalion to HQs and multinational staff, to identify a niche. The Rapid Reaction Corps-France – garrisoned in Lille – organized a staff ride in June 2014, centred on Monte Cassino (Italy), with a twofold purpose: to train staff to plan an operation based on historical data, and to get a better understanding for the different phases of a complex battle. More than 140 personnel from this NATO HQ, as well as additional staff, took part: “The field study translates knowledge into understanding the various aspects of the battle […] with the purpose of meeting the expectations of all parties,” explains one officer in charge.31 Furthermore, the participants gathered in a French military cemetery to lay a wreath in remembrance of those who died to help liberate the country. This part belongs to the “secondary benefit”:

“For many participants a visit to a great battlefield is an emotional experience that may reinforce their feelings for their profession, their units, and one another. If participants belong to the same unit, their shared experiences during the exercise may strengthen the camaraderie and esprit so necessary for unit cohesion.”32

Simply put, the team building that results from this intellectual adventure reinforces the ties within a staff or an HQ, bringing together all the personnel who thus meet each other, get to know each other, and come to understand each other. In addition, the younger ones and the newcomers fuse into an already existing organization.33


33 Interview with Lieutenant General Frederick Hodges, 27 May 2014. This is a reminder that one, if not the strongest, motivation for enduring combat is the bond formed among members of the same unit. Research has shown that cohesion is the single most important sustaining and motivating force for combat soldiers (cf John Keegan and Richard Holmes, Soldiers. A History of Men in Battle, London, Harmish Hamilton, 1985, pp. 50-53).

34 Source: http://www.nato.int/cfmd/news/121119a.htm
To ensure the success and the relevance of the staff ride, the commander – whatever his rank and command position – has to be involved. It is not just a question of identifying the training objectives, the topics and the principles that will be analysed. His role is to spur on the discussions and debates that are given emphasis during the last phase of the exercise. Even if each participant is to reap individual and personal lessons, the commander must insist on sharing a common vision of what happened. In fact, he has to let his subordinates express themselves and then explain his understanding of the situation and how he would react in a similar situation and timespan. To put it plainly, it is an effective way of understanding the commander’s intent. Designed as a permanent feature, the commander’s intent conveys the commander’s vision. Subordinates must have a thorough understanding of this to be able to act effectively; staff rides are an effective way to achieve this outside the normal job environment, with less stress and pressure. Furthermore, this highlights and disseminates the commander’s choices and grid of analysis, allowing flexibility and better communication with the staff and dispelling any risk of misunderstanding.

One reason to give up staff rides or battlefield tours could be the cost – especially in times of economic crisis and budget downsizing. In the past, the first staff riders used to pay fees to fund their participation. The main investment, however, is in time and not in money. Staff rides do require preliminary studies that will fuel further debate and fruitful discussion, to avoid having participants remain in “receive-only mode”. Students of the French École de Guerre dedicate an entire week at the beginning of their studies to preparing the vignettes at the stand and getting ready to face their peers’ questioning. To transport, and provide accommodation for, over 300 students and their cadres is no easy logistical task, but the cost is far from overwhelming: according to some estimates, the overall outlay is a little over €50 000, in return for which officers achieve a better knowledge of what is required at the operational level.

Conclusions

This paper advocates the staff ride as a flexible training instrument which uses a historical context with real past events. General E. DePuy, one of the great architects of the US Army’s reorganization post-Vietnam, was convinced that “among other things, soldiers are a fairly constant calculus, leaders make the difference; poor leadership gets far too many soldiers killed unnecessarily; further, poor leadership inhibits unit performance – to the point of preventing mission accomplishment.” Staff rides and related activities are all about leadership and training leaders; they can be used as a tool for professional development for a selected group of officers (and senior civilians) undergoing some form of training or serving together in a formation or unit. By instilling in them an understanding of the “realities of war”, staff riders appreciate each participant’s task and how decisions impact the soldier in the field.

Most staff rides have to do with identifying the lessons learned and the validity of principles that transcend time, even the

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35 The author is grateful to Lieutenant General Frederick Hodges for his insights and personal vision of staff rides as a training medium.

36 The author is grateful to the Staff Ride team (Études opérationnelles) at the École de Guerre for providing this information.

military frame of reference. They use history not to teach a linear process of “how to do” or “how to act” by referring to old recipes, but on “how to think”. History serves as a vector that detects differences as much as similarities between cases, by avoiding false analogies and by looking for the key questions to be asked. It is merely an analytical tool that complements the lessons learned analysis and process. It also allows for the comparison of historical events with contentious contemporary events, and ensures that military practitioners understand the conditional nature of doctrine and learning lessons in general. The staff ride is critical thinking in action, where individuals – whatever their rank or position – can think about how they learn from the past, and then apply it in their own environment.

For NATO militaries, especially multinational headquarters, staff rides are an effective way to understand, through the study of past complex multinational operations, how frictions, cultural challenges and technical difficulties were once overcome. Staff rides offer unparalleled opportunities to prepare service personnel to work and operate in a multinational environment, while conveying the lessons of the past to present-day military leadership. By encouraging participants to examine all the aspects of command and leadership, and the consequences of strategic choices at the lowest level and in reverse, this tool can be used by every organization to further creative thinking and professional development. In short, the staff ride represents an old cost-effective recipe, able to enhance NATO leaders’ ability to understand and face uncertain futures.

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39 Neville Parton, “The Future of The Staff Ride in the RAF”, p. 112