



Participants in a Canadian Battlefields Foundation Battlefield Study Tour listen to a briefing on Verrières Ridge.

Former combatants recall their experiences during a British army staff ride in 1990: Oberst (ret'd) Hubert Meyer, first general staff officer of 12th SS Panzer Division (left); Major-General (ret'd) George Kitching (centre); and Air Vice-Marshal (ret'd) James Edgar (Johnnie) Johnson, commander of a Canadian Spitfire Wing in 83 Group, RAF (right).



Applied History

1944 Normandy campaign battlefield tours and staff rides

Stuart Thomson, Mike Bechthold and David Ian Hall

Introduction

These articles look at the D-Day landings and the Normandy Campaign in terms of “applied history” – that is, the active study of these momentous military events through on site battlefield tours and staff rides. All three contributors are experienced battlefield tour guides and staff ride leaders: Stuart Thomson has led many battlefield tours for the British and South African Armed Forces; Mike Bechthold has quietly become one of Canada’s leading battlefield tour guides, taking Canadians, military personnel and university students, around First and Second World War Canadian battlefields in Europe; and the third contributor, David Hall, has more than ten years experience leading battlefield tours and staff rides for NATO as well as the British, Canadian and American armed forces. The three short pieces that follow are some of their reflections on tours they have recently conducted. Thomson discusses the Normandy battlefield tour for officers on the British Advance Command and Staff Course. Bechthold shares his experiences on the Canadian Battlefields Foundation student study tours, and Hall looks at recent NATO and British Higher Command and Staff Course staff rides that he has led on the beaches and around the battlefields of Normandy.

The relevance of the Normandy battlefield tour to the professional military education of the British armed forces.

Stuart Thomson

During a Battlefield Tour of the Normandy Beaches with a group of officers from the South African War College, it quickly became apparent that there were widely differing interpretations of history.¹ They were very knowledgeable but their understanding of events in the west during 1943-44 was based on study in Moscow during the Apartheid period and the last years of the Cold War. Their analysis led them to a view that there was deliberate delay in the

West, with the result that the Soviet Army would be weakened through bearing the brunt of the German offensive. By showing them the Normandy beaches and explaining the difficulties of mounting and sustaining a vast amphibious landing that, if it failed, might put the war effort back months, it was possible to offer a different complexion on the issue. The link with winning the Battle of the Atlantic, then stock-piling equipment through Operation Bolero, training raw recruits, building the vast fleet of Amphibious shipping, guaranteeing sea and air supremacy in and over the Channel, and supplying the Soviet armed forces, before gaining and sustaining a secure toehold in Normandy changed their understanding.² It was an undertaking on a vastly different scale and complexity compared with a cross-border land assault, fighting in three dimensions not just two.

This exchange of views and exposure to different interpretation of historic events enhanced the South Africans' Professional Military Education.

It is necessary to highlight the difference between a Battlefield Tour and a Staff Ride and explain the advantages and disadvantages of each method of enhancing Professional Military Education (PME). The former is essentially a guided tour of the Battlefield by a well-qualified leader who imparts knowledge at the appropriate level for the party being led. While it is generally a passive experience an experienced guide should be able to enthuse the students and draw out questions and discussion of relevant issues. A Staff Ride is a more active experience and requires a substantial input from the students who present ideas and lead discussion at specific sites. It requires considerable time beforehand to study the issues and is normally only viable with small groups. There is usually an input from the tour leader or academic to draw out lessons and make relevant connections to modern day issues or areas of academic and military dispute and interpretation of events. The choice of the Battlefield Tour format at the Advanced Command and Staff Course (ACSC) is driven by practical necessity.³ There are 170 students on each tour and less than two days to cover the 13 stands. So students are given briefing notes and maps, plus a presentation on World War Two and Normandy before they travel, while the tour is led by knowledgeable academics. There is no real time for the extensive preparatory work that would be necessary for a successful Staff Ride. Neither would it be practical to conduct a meaningful Staff Ride in two days with all students contributing thorough presentations on site. However, a recent week long Staff Ride to Crete that brilliantly covered the events of May 1941 worked because the 20 participants had the time to prepare their papers well in advance and then the 'time to walk the ground' before delivering their verdict. The academic guide was able to set the very specific papers into the context of the war in the Mediterranean and draw overall lessons.⁴ Both forms of tour are valid.

Attendance at the ACSC is a major part of the continuous education of British officers throughout their careers. It prepares selected officers for senior rank and needs to develop their abilities beyond the core skills of their previous single service life. The officer corps of

other NATO allies have similar educational opportunities. US Congressman Ike Skelton was passionately of the opinion that officers must have time to study their profession, to think and debate, and to analyse the lessons of past campaigns.⁵ So the 'education' part of PME is very much focused on improving the ability to synthesise and analyse material and apply these skills to all aspects of their jobs. The task of this paper is to show the relevance of a historical Battlefield Tour by showing the practical application of studying, understanding and applying the lessons learned from Normandy. Modern British officers are faced with the reality of almost constant deployment to every corner of the world, and frequently in 'coalitions of the willing.' Recent examples are Kosovo and Macedonia, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. Many are 'Joint', that is involving more than one service, and 'Combined,' that is involving more than one country, some of whom may not be formal regular alliance members. All are 'Expeditionary' and some are undertaken at very short notice, such as Sierra Leone and the Congo. For the planning staff, any help and guidance gleaned from earlier campaigns, whose lessons have been studied, is gratefully accepted.

Among campaigns that are studied at ACSC are Vietnam, the Falklands, the Gulf Wars, and many aspects of World War Two. The Staff Course visits to Normandy are therefore inserted into a curriculum that includes academic and staff work study of campaign planning tools, estimate processes, essays that analyse other campaigns, role playing in a 'Theatre War Game' and partaking in seminars on the 'Realities of War' with veterans of earlier campaigns.⁶ Study of Normandy, however, is of huge value to officers at JSCSC for the reasons that it was 'Joint,' 'Combined' and 'Expeditionary,' all relevant today. Aspects of direct relevance concern leadership, planning, logistics, intelligence, compatibility of equipment, training, communications, doctrine, the nature of command and the links between grand strategy and operational level of war. Thus, the students travel to France with considerable understanding of the key issues that dictated the success or failure of the Normandy campaign. The training objective of the tour is 'to analyse past military campaigns to determine lessons that could be applied to future single-Service, joint and combined operations.'⁷ Some of these issues will

be illustrated with reference to the stands that are visited.

The tours are led by academics who have built up considerable knowledge of the Normandy campaign over many visits but who are also aware of how the visit fits into many other aspects of the course that they help design and teach.⁸ Hence while they do describe the key historical events at each site, as much time is spent in developing issues like deception or logistics or leadership, as relevant today as they were then. Indeed, many of the students will spontaneously give modern examples that they themselves have witnessed in recent campaigns. The level at which academics pitch their delivery is generally between Grand Strategic and Operational, rather than Tactical. In other words they link the Political decision making at the Alliance level to the Strategic military goals and then down to the Operational plans that achieve the overall aim. This reinforces teaching in earlier segments of the course, such as British Governance and British Defence Policy, where the students study how policy is made and promulgated. Tactical detail is used to give relevant examples of how well trained leaders adapt to the inevitable 'fog of war' that develops, as the well-rehearsed plan does not survive first contact with the enemy.

The D-Day plan was that necessary artillery support to the infantry in the first minutes of the invasion would come from specially adapted duplex-drive tanks that would swim ashore. Sadly, in the event, the tanks for Omaha beach were launched far too far out in unseasonably rough conditions, and in attempting to counteract strong lateral tides that swept them east of their designated landing areas, they altered course across the waves and many were overwhelmed and sank.⁹ Hence, the infantry stormed ashore without artillery support and suffered grievously. However, as visibility improved, individual destroyers moved perilously close inshore and began firing on German gun and trench positions that had been impervious to direct fire from the initial naval gunfire assault and from earlier bombing raids that preceded the first wave of infantry

A battlefield tour group receives a briefing on Omaha Beach near the spot where Brigadier General Norman Cota rallied his men to fight their way up and over the bluffs in order to get off the beach.

landings.¹⁰ Ambrose quotes many occasions when veterans claimed that this was the only artillery support that they had all day. Basically, the captains followed their Commander's intent and used their initiative to achieve the aim. Also on Omaha beach, Brigadier General Norman Cota, so memorably played by Robert Mitchum in *The Longest Day*, rallied the dispirited survivors of the initial assaults and led them over the sea wall, across the swampy field full of mines and up the Bluffs to infiltrate the German trenches.¹¹ The essentially static nature of the German defences was soon appreciated and this enabled well-led and mobile American troops to begin 'rolling up' the defences. At the east end of the beach Lieutenant Harry Spaulding did the same by using the cover afforded by grass fires started by rockets that fell short. The alternative was to be cut to pieces on the beaches. Once one led, others followed. The nature of leadership is a major part of PME at the College and students study the contrasting leadership styles of military figures from the past in order to learn lessons that may be applicable today.

At Pointe du Hoc, the assault team of US Rangers arrived late when they mistook the nearby Pointe du la Percée for their target in the murky conditions, unaware that strong lateral tides had diverted them. The heavy naval gunfire against Pointe du Hoc had ceased as planned, the command being unaware that it would be 20 more minutes before the Rangers eventually

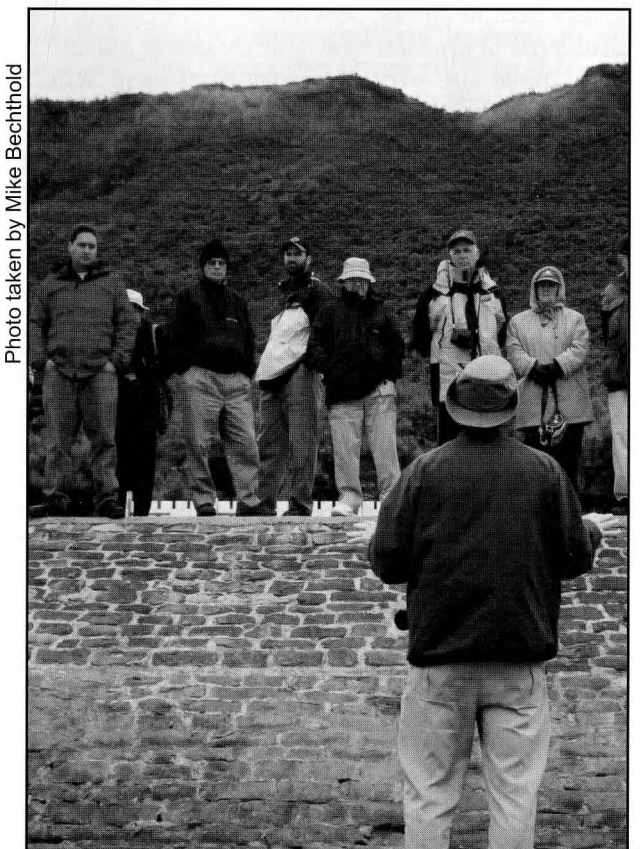
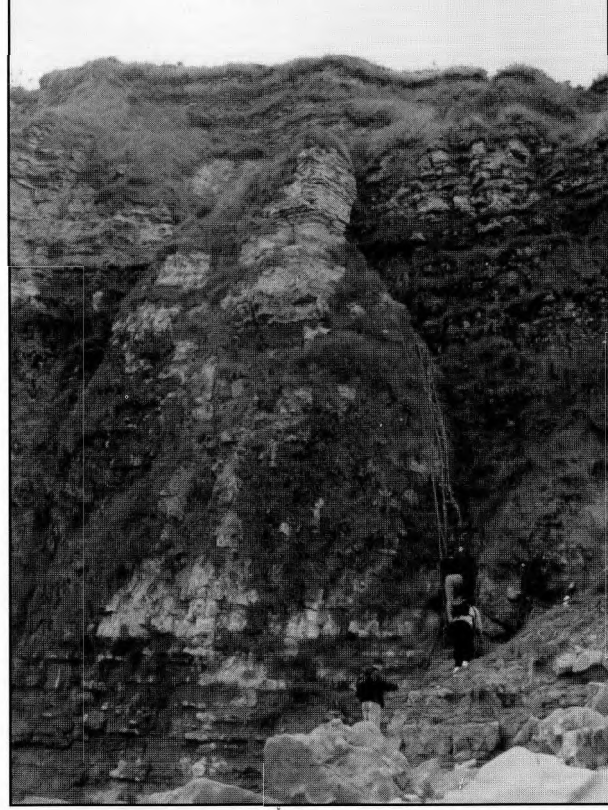
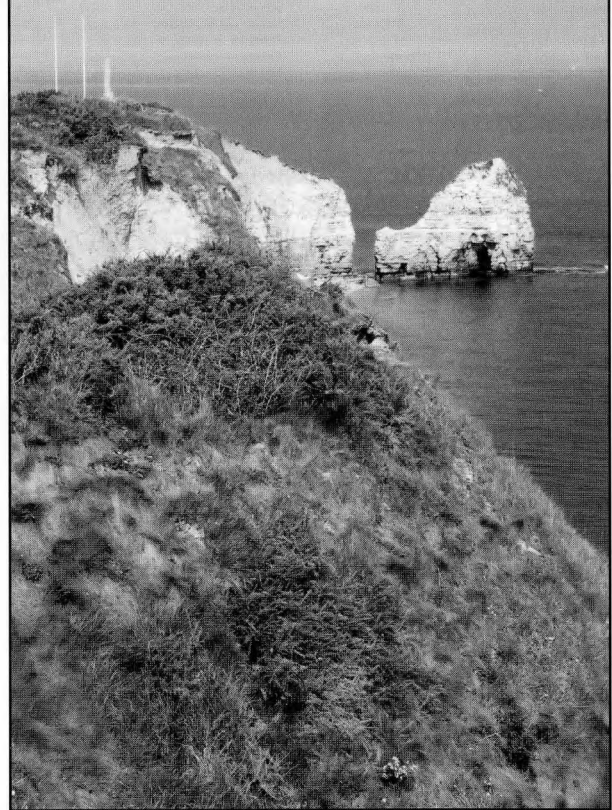


Photo taken by Mike Bechthold



Photos taken by Mike Bechthold

Pointe du Hoc as it appears today. Left: The view along the stretch of coast assaulted by the US Rangers on D-Day. Pointe du Hoc is visible at the top of the photo as is the memorial to the Rangers. Right: A view of the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc taken from the bottom. The magnitude of the task undertaken by the Rangers can more fully be appreciated from this vantage point.

gained their target. German defenders recovered from the concussion of the bombardment and began firing on the Rangers or lobbing 'potato masher' grenades over the cliff. As they became aware of the Rangers' difficulties, *USS Satterley* and *HMS Talybont*, moved very close in and gave covering fire that kept the Germans away from the cliff edge sufficiently long to allow Rangers to scale the cliffs and achieve their objective.¹² This example of one service understanding the problems of another and quickly using initiative to achieve the overall operational aim, when initial plans fail, is an integral part of military education at the college. One Ranger also used his initiative by firing his light machine gun from the top of a swaying London Fire Brigade ladder in his landing craft that could not be placed against the cliff. He diverted the Germans and survived! However, a serious failure in intelligence had failed to notice that their objective, the large calibre guns that could threaten the landing beaches, had been withdrawn inland until fully protective casemates were completed. Rangers used their initiative and found the guns in an orchard two kilometres inland and disabled them with satchel charges, before falling back and defending the perimeter around Pointe du Hoc to deny the Germans a salient dividing the landings on Utah and Omaha

beaches. Students are quick to understand the implications of renewed German occupation of this high ground between barely established footholds on the US beaches. In both cases, the initial plan had come unstuck but well trained men used their initiative to achieve the commanders' intent. This is something that is second nature to today's military, and study of Normandy reinforces the value of individual initiative and flexibility of decision-making.

Another example concerns logistic support. Modern officers are well acquainted with the oft-stated view that 'Strategy is for amateurs, logistics is for professionals.'¹³ Manifestly the invasion would fail if the initial impetus of the landings was not sustained with huge quantities of fuel, ammunition and fresh supplies of men and materiel, delivered in a timely manner. The Dieppe raid of 1942 had shown that attempting to take a heavily defended port by direct assault would be suicidal and that, in all probability, the port facilities would be destroyed. Guaranteed logistic support was therefore the 'centre of gravity' of the whole invasion effort and Churchill would not countenance an invasion without a plan for logistics. Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan presented his outline paper for Overlord to the Chiefs of Staff Committee on

15 July 1943 that discussed the problem of logistic supply. After accepting that it would be necessary to 'maintain a high proportion of our forces over the beaches' until port facilities could be restored, he stated that, 'this operation is not to be contemplated unless this problem of cross-beach maintenance and the provision of artificial anchorages shall have been solved.'¹⁴ The solution was the construction of two Mulberry harbours at Omaha and Arromanches and the Pipe Line Under the Ocean (PLUTO) at Port-en-Bessin. By the time the 'great storm' of 19-22 June had destroyed the Mulberry at Omaha and damaged that at Arromanches, the Americans had already begun the practice of landing supplies direct onto the firm sand on Omaha and waiting for the tide to float off the landing craft. Unorthodox practice and initiative increased the tempo at which logistic supply reached the troops. Students today understand the concepts of 'centres of gravity' and many will quickly make the connection with logistic problems in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the need to sustain tempo. Indeed some have first hand knowledge.

Deception is the last example. Double Cross used turned German agents to feed information to their erstwhile masters in Germany. It was important that 'real' information was released as well as deception. Hence agent GARBO was allowed to feed some detail that pinpointed Normandy as a probable landing site just before the landings. But along with that was overwhelming signal traffic evidence that the bogus First US Army Group in South East England was poised to attack the Pas de Calais.¹⁵ The whole of Operation Fortitude was used to reinforce in Hitler's mind that even were a landing to occur in Normandy, the main effort would follow across the short route to Calais, Paris and Germany. So successful was this that the Germans believed the Allies had 89 Divisions ready to assault so that weeks after the landings in Normandy they expected the next assault.¹⁶ A similar deception was used by the Coalition in the 1991 Gulf War, when the positioning of US Marines offshore at Kuwait tied down four Iraqi divisions while the *actual* assault swept around Iraqi positions in a classic left hook. There is nothing new in deception, as Staff Colleges the world over discover from the study of Sun Tzu, but in 1999 Milosevic also used deception brilliantly against NATO in Kosovo. A Battlefield

Tour of Normandy can draw out the eternal lessons of the value of a deception plan and students will often give examples to which they have been party.

By drawing some threads together it is possible to argue that a Battlefield Tour works well for several reasons. Firstly, it must be led by enthusiastic and well-prepared tour guides with the depth of knowledge to provide the right level of commentary. As provided by the academics at JSCSC, it sits at the right strategic and operational level and fits neatly into many other aspects of the professional military education being taught on the ACSC. Secondly, the students have considerable first hand knowledge of recent campaigns and can readily bring to bear their experience to that of the events in Normandy. Thirdly, the scale of Normandy and recent operations may well be different but the essential elements of planning, logistics, leadership, mission command and so forth today are much the same. That said the size of the Coalition force in Iraq in 2003 was similar to the troops landed on D-Day itself. The best students find the events of Normandy very sobering and they gain much food for thought. Finally, the tour always validates very well in student critiques, and many students comment that they are 'inspired by having been there' to read and think much more about the nature of command and leadership and the importance of planning. Those students visiting Normandy are tasked to 'investigate through personal inspection, the major military lessons to be learned from Operation Overlord.'¹⁷ Nothing is more valuable to this end than to allow students from each service to see with their own eyes the problems of achieving the desired end. The difficulties of terrain and visibility, the problems of manoeuvre in *bocage* country, the problems of close air support in a confused battlefield, the difficulty of line of sight communications and so forth, all add degrees of reality and understanding that cannot always be understood through the written or spoken word alone. Above all, the students see the difficulty of blending the separate operational skills of land, sea and air power and learn to apply lessons learned from Normandy to current operations. As such, it is possible to argue that the method of guided Battlefield Tour, using history to further Professional Military Education, is both valid and stimulating.

Lessons learned on the Normandy battlefields: The experience of the Canadian Battlefields Foundation student study tours

Mike Bechthold

After more than 60 years the Battle of Normandy still captures worldwide attention. The recent commemoration of the D-Day anniversary compelled thousands of people to make a pilgrimage to the Overlord beaches to honour the sacrifices made in the name of freedom. Sadly, this type of attention is fleeting, primarily centred upon major anniversaries and other notable events, such as the passing of major figures or the release of a new book. What can be done to raise the consciousness of the public? Obviously, education is the answer, but in what form? This article is about a program run by the Canadian Battlefields Foundation that has been educating Canadian university students for the past ten years. It is a program that has taken students to explore the Canadian battlefields of the First and Second World Wars and provides them with an experiential learning opportunity that cannot be gleaned from books. These tours aim to give students a deeper understanding of events on the battlefield and their relationship to topics such as combat effectiveness, the impact of war on society, and even the question of nation-building. This article will also explore the concepts and methodologies behind this very successful program.

The conduct of this tour is different in emphasis and execution from other battlefield tours whether they be military or civilian. It is intended to provide Canadian university students with a hands-on learning experience. Each tour takes a group of about a dozen Canadian university students to Europe to visit Canadian battlefields of the First and Second World Wars. The emphasis is generally on the battlefields of Normandy, Dieppe and Vimy Ridge, but other areas visited by specific tours include the Ypres Salient, England, the Scheldt Estuary, Sicily and Italy to name a few. Each tour is led by an experienced military historian, and the tours are more than simple whistlestop excursions where

the students are whisked around to see the sights. Prior to leaving Canada, the students are asked to complete background readings and be prepared to lead discussions on various topics. Once on the battlefields, the students are engaged in sophisticated discussions covering a wide range of topics ranging from weapons and tactics used on the battlefield, the operational conduct of larger formations and the strategic conduct of the war. As well, the social aspects of the wars are explored. Questions such as who fought our wars, and what was the cost to society are discussed along with notions of service, sacrifice, memorialization and commemoration. These issues are brought to life through visits to the battlefields and cemeteries as well as through discussions with veterans and locals who lived through the wars. Through discussion and argument, observation and reflection, the students come to gain an understanding of events not accessible in the written record. To say that the tours have had a profound effect on students is an understatement. The lessons learned from this tour can be applied to enrich battlefield touring in general for both military and civilian audiences, and are applicable whether exploring the battlefields of Normandy, Gettysburg or the Somme. In addition, many of these same techniques and principles can be used to enrich classroom learning.

The stated purpose of the CBF tours has been to allow "young men and women from Canada [to] visit and learn, on the actual battlefields, what the youth of Canada contributed to their freedom."¹⁸ In general, this captures the spirit of the tours, but not the actual accomplishments. The Canadian Battlefields Foundation was originally formed in 1993 as the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation to help preserve the memory of Canadian soldiers and their part in freeing France from the tyranny of Nazism. The impetus for this came when a spectacular new museum was opened in Caen called Le Mémorial. This museum marked the liberation of Normandy by the Allies, but incredibly, made no mention of the role played by Canada. This, combined with a significant American presence in both the museum and the surrounding area, led a group of Canadian veterans to form the CBF to see that Canada was given proper recognition for its accomplishments. The CBF was also set up to remind Canadians of their country's role in the

conflict, perpetuating the memory and deeds of those who participated, while both encouraging and supporting Canadian university students in programmes for the study of war and peace. One of the main programs of the CBF is the sponsorship and administration of the annual battlefield study tours.

The composition of the groups has been one of the strengths of the study tours. A national competition is held each year to select participants. It is open to Canadian men and women who are currently attending university, in either undergraduate or graduate programs, or those who have recently graduated. This has resulted in the selection of candidates from



Photo by Mike Bechthold

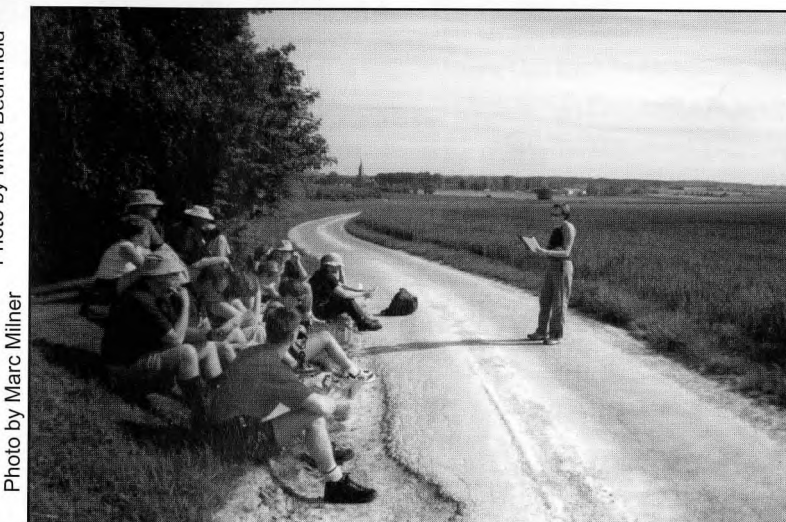


Photo by Marc Milner

Left: The 1995 CBNF group receive a briefing on a bunker in the Courseulles-sur-Mer sector of Juno Beach. I to r: Lee Windsor, Dough Cadot, Lisa Mullins, David Kelly, Jeff Clayman (sitting), Naomi Chosen, Serge Durlinger, John Rickard, Terry Copp and Trevor Rehel. Right: Laura Crawford, a student on the 1999 CBNF tour, stands atop Point 147 and briefs her group on the successful penetration of the Gothic Line by the Perth Regiment.

across Canada, of both genders, and ranging in age from 18 to 45. Another valuable dynamic in the group has been the presence of military personnel. These men and women are generally serving part-time in the Reserves while attending civilian universities, though some have also come from the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC). The interaction between the civilian and military participants in the group has been very useful because each group brings a different perspective that helps to enrich the learning experience of the other. For example, the soldiers often have an understanding of military culture and regimental tradition that is not possessed by the civilians while the soldiers often benefit from the views and opinions expressed by civilians who

develop a proprietary interest; for instance a battle in which their grandfather participated, or in which their regiment was involved. The passion developed by the student in researching the topic is often infectious when the topic is presented. This makes the presentations more meaningful for the group as a whole. The second presentation is much more emotional. Students are asked to research a soldier killed in battle and make a short graveside presentation about his life and death. It is up to the individual student who they pick to talk about. It is often somebody they are connected to, whether geographically, through a regimental affiliation or sometimes it is a family member. Doug Delaney related one such occasion: "The



Photo by Marc Milner (inset photo by Mike Bechthold)



Above: M. Vico, who lived in the Abbaye d'Ardenne during the war, tells the CBF group the story of the Canadian soldiers murdered there in June 1944. **Inset:** The Abbaye d'Ardenne.

highlight of the day occurred at the Cassino War Cemetery. It was there that one of our group, Addy Poulette, found her grandfather, Louis Brooks, an RCR soldier killed in action at the Hitler Line....She did such a beautiful job honouring him and telling his story....At the end of her tribute...[she broke down]. I'm pretty sure the rest of us joined her....It was a very powerful and moving moment. Though she'd never met him, you could tell her affection for him ran deep."¹⁹ Another requirement is that the students keep a journal. Each day they are to record their experiences, thoughts, emotions and anything else they have learned. At the end of the trip, this journal is to be submitted as a record of their journey. Some of the journals take the form of a simple day-by-day log of events, but most are much more elaborate encompassing detailed written entries along with photographs, drawings, poetry and other material the students think is important. In reading these journals, the one common thread is the depth of emotion experienced by all the students. Typical is the reaction of Diane Tomas upon her first visit to a Canadian war cemetery. "I knew it was going to be moving, but as soon as I saw it a feeling came over me which I don't think I can describe in words. My first reaction was simply to cry as I looked upon the row after row of headstones,

and I simply could not stop."²⁰ A similar response was recorded by Lee Windsor of his reaction to a ceremony to remember the Canadian soldiers executed by the 12th SS at the Abbaye d'Ardenne. "In 1939 we embarked on a mission to cleanse Europe of the Nazi disease that infected it. These words would have seemed a little idealistic and simplistic to me, at least until 7 June 1995. On that day we gathered in the garden at the Abbaye. In that dark and quiet corner of the compound that was once a German command post, we paid homage to 18 of my dear countrymen who were viciously and brutally murdered by Kurt Meyer's SS henchmen. As their names were read off, I fought to hold in tears and keep my legs steady underneath me. One of the last names to be read was Lieutenant Thomas Albert Lee Windsor, an armoured soldier of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The tears escaped."²¹ These excerpts capture the essence of this tour. This trip is as much a pilgrimage as an educational endeavour. In addition to learning a great deal about the wars, many of the participants are extremely moved by their experiences. When they return to Canada to continue their studies or share their knowledge, not only are they educated and interested in the subject but it is also a topic about which they are passionate. This is a quality

that comes through clearly in their writings and presentations, and is often contagious amongst the audience.

The major advantage a study tour such as this has over a similar topic being taught in the classroom is the ability to stand on the same ground where a particular battle took place. This is fully taken advantage of during the course of the tour. When examining a specific battle, the day usually starts off with a brief background lecture. The group then sets off and begins to follow the events on the ground. For example, when looking at the D-Day landings at Juno Beach, the group starts in St. Aubin-sur-Mer and proceeds through each of the coastal towns liberated by the Canadians on the 6th of June. At each stop a detailed explanation of events in that sector is given while pointing out specific features that played a role during the battle. A past participant, Christopher Evans, has stated that, "The opportunity to study the actual battlefields was of incredible value in helping me better understand the events that took place. I have a new and much improved understanding now of the importance of terrain and how it dictates the way a battle is fought. The concept of reverse slope, hull down, the positioning of anti-tank weapons versus likely avenues to be taken by armoured vehicles, all of it became clear during the three-week program. I've read hundreds of books and studied maps, watched

documentaries but nothing can replace the experiences of being there and seeing it for yourself."²² Interwoven with the tactical level discussions is an appreciation of what is concurrently taking place at the operational and strategic levels. An important aspect of this process is the interaction between people. Questions and discussions are always encouraged as a way of intensifying the learning experience.

A novel aspect of these tours is the opportunity for the students to participate in TEWTs (tactical exercises without troops) where they are given a tactical problem based on a historic battle. TEWTs are regularly utilized by the military to train officers in the conduct of a battle, but the intention here is to force the students to think about a battle from the inside out in order to better understand the decision-making process, as well as the pressures and limitations encountered in an actual battle. The students are broken up into syndicates or command groups of 3-4 people to work on a solution to the problem.

The exercise begins with a briefing where the tactical situation is explained as it existed on the eve of battle. The briefing includes the same information a commander would have had access to prior to the battle: orders for the upcoming operation, the existing tactical and

This garden in the Abbaye d'Ardenne is a tranquil place today, but in June 1944 it was an execution site. The memorial at the left commemorates the Canadian soldiers murdered here.



Photo by Mike Bechthold

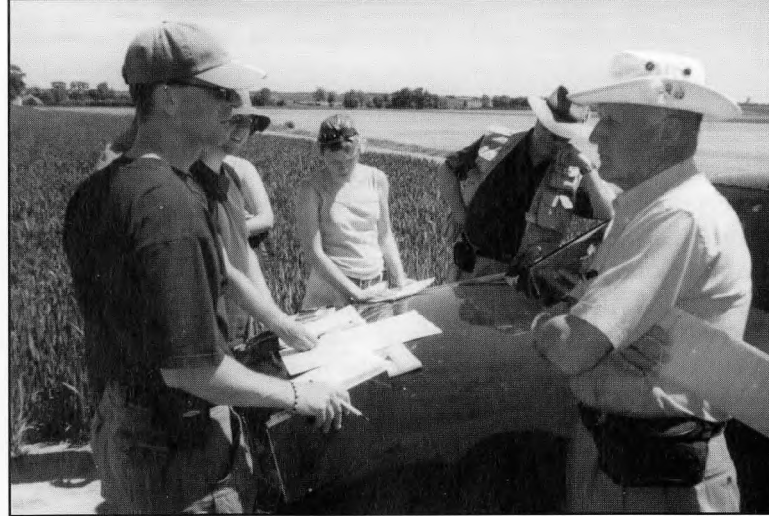


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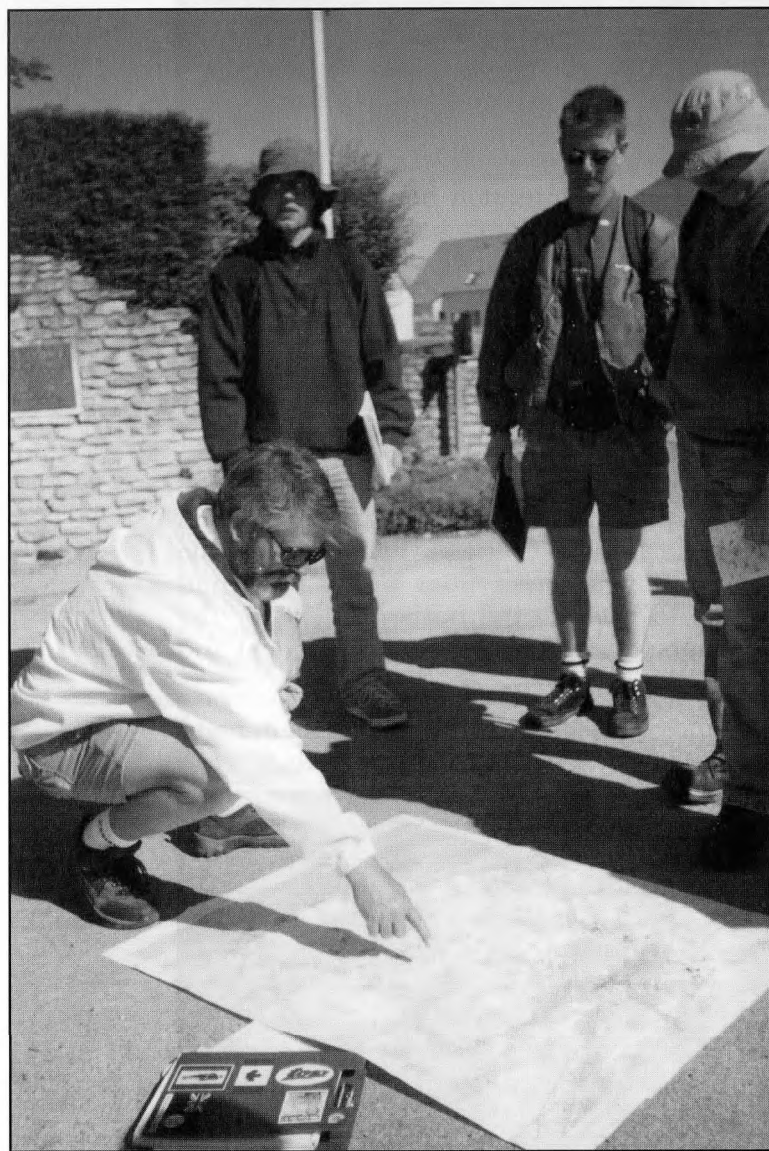


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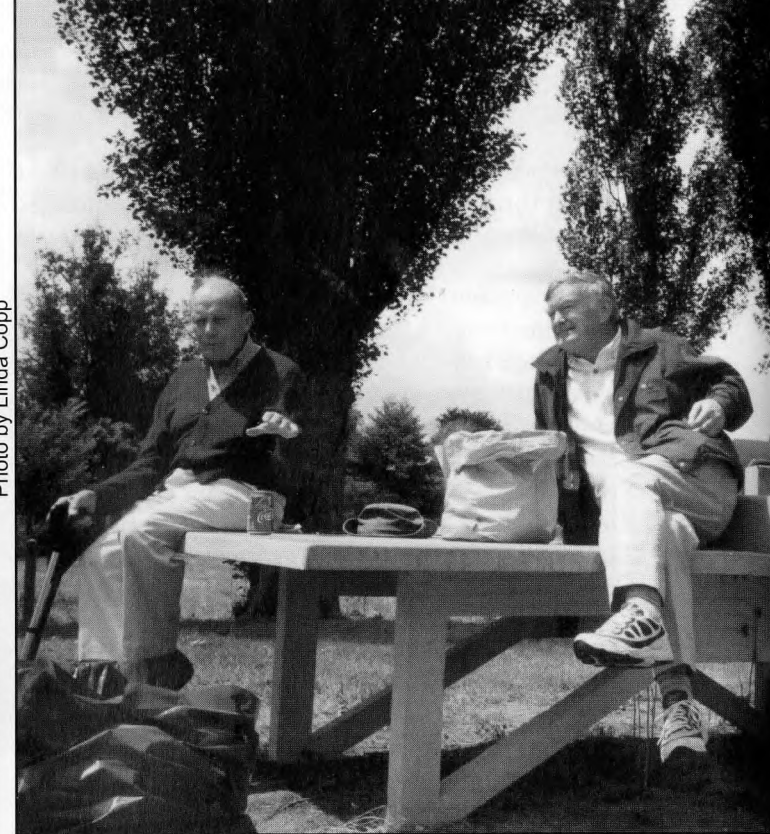


Photo by Linda Copp

Top left: Lieutenant-General Charles Belzile, a former president of the CBNF, talks to students on the 2000 tour during a TEWT in Normandy. **Left:** Group leader Marc Milner points out locations on a map. **Above:** Denis Whitaker, a veteran of Dieppe and Normandy, provided valuable personal experience to students on the CBNF tour.

strategic situation, composition and the disposition of his own as well as friendly troops, allocation of divisional, corps and army support, and lastly, expected enemy strengths and intentions.

The next step is to take the group out onto the battlefield to do a reconnaissance of the terrain. Stops are made at key locations to gain an understanding of the interplay of the topography, built-up areas, roads and other features. Following this, the syndicates are given time to formulate their plans. During this process, complications are thrown at the students in the form of 'breaking news' that will impact, and probably upset, their planning process. This includes changing orders and updating information regarding the movements of neighbouring units and enemy forces. Throughout the TEWT, the historian/group leader plays the role of umpire. He answers any questions the syndicates might have, clarifies any misunderstandings, and perhaps most importantly, tries to keep the scenario within the realm of the possible. For instance, the students often want to use their tanks and tank destroyers as the focal point of their plan, frequently deploying them right at the front, or even beyond. This was inconsistent with existing Allied doctrine and would generally not occur. The

students need to be told that if they, acting as a battalion or company commander, gave this order to a tank commander, he would probably tell you to 'shove it up your arse' and refuse to obey.

Once the planning process is complete, the students are asked to explain their intentions. Once all the plans have been presented, the historian provides a phase-by-phase account of the actual battle as it unfolded. Minimal emphasis is placed upon critiquing the plans devised by the students as would occur in a military TEWT. There is no proper solution other than what actually occurred. In this exercise, the focus is on the process, not the outcome. The ultimate goal is to better replicate the chaos and complexity of battle in a more tangible form. It is one thing to read about a battle and pass judgement from the comfort of home, but the intent of these TEWTs is to introduce some of the complexity commanders face in the field – limited and often conflicting information, the fog of war, finite resources, time constraints, the influence of geography and a host of other factors. Though the students are generally well rested and well fed, they do not have to fear being shot or captured and at the end of the day will return to a comfortable bed, the exercise does impart some lessons that cannot otherwise be taught. It demonstrates that combat is not a simple endeavour and that explanations and judgements of past battles are not as cut and dried as they first appear. What may be an obviously bad decision examined with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight may be entirely understandable given the specific circumstances in which the decision was made. Kelly Deschênes, a member of the Reserves and a student at RMC, found the TEWTs to be an excellent experience. "As an officer, I have taken part in a number of TEWTs. However, these TEWTs are generally carried out in a vacuum: the conditions are next to ideal. In today's TEWT we were not allowed to 'forget' that the troops were tired, that some equipment was missing, that casualties had strained morale and strength, etc. We had to take all those factors into account when making our plans. It only made the exercise more realistic, more valuable."²³ James Wood found that the exercise gave him a different perspective on events. "Our TEWT of the Bretteville defence has left me with a disdain for

those who would criticize military commanders after the fact. These men bore what must have been crushing responsibility; what right do we have to pass judgement on their actions without walking a mile in their shoes? There is a place for historians to examine and scrutinize the decisions made by these commanders, but not to attack them personally for their failings and mistakes. It is a fine line."²⁴ A bonus of these TEWTs is that students have a great deal of fun participating in these scenarios. It is an atypical, non-lecture learning experience that many of the students point to as one of the highlights of the study tours.

As much as the CBF Study Tour is about understanding the soldier's experience and trying to come to terms with what happened on the battlefield, the tour is also an exercise in nation-building. This may sound overly dramatic or even jingoistic, but the reality is that Canadian schools at all levels do a poor job of linking the events of the past with the realities of today. Canada has a proud history and there are many stories that need to be remembered and told. The field of military history in particular is poorly represented. The youth of Canada today need to know that an entire generation went off to fight to preserve the freedom that we enjoy today. It was always the hope that the students who participated in this tour would be energized by their experience. What they learned on the trip would inspire them to read much more. Even more important was the hope that they would pass on their experience to others in a meaningful way. Student journals show quite clearly that they recognize the importance of this. Andrew Godefroy stated that, "Standing in the quiet grove [in the Canadian cemetery], staring at row after row of dead men my own age, their lives cut short by this tragedy, I was made painfully aware that my freedom was not free. I can only make sure that I make every effort to teach others what I saw here today. We were given the opportunity this summer to experience something that way too few Canadians will ever see. We now have to take this knowledge and put it to good use. I feel I owe at least that much to those who fought and died for my future."²⁵ Sharon Roe offered a similar verdict on her experience. "I can honestly say that it was one of the most profound experiences of my life. We could all read about war but seeing the



Arlene Doucette, a student on the 2000 CBNF Tour, sketches out a map for her briefing on the Dieppe landings.

battlefields and graves made it more real. It is our duty, to keep these lessons alive. We must teach the next generation what we have learned so these sacrifices will not be forgotten."²⁶ To date, that seems to be happening. An overwhelming majority of the alumni from these trips are making direct use of their experiences. Most had an interest in military history prior to being accepted on the tour, but upon returning home a significant number have changed their career paths to take advantage of the knowledge and experience gained on the tour. Out of the 122 students who have participated to date, at least 15 are working on Ph.Ds in military history, and another 25 have completed or are in the process of completing a Master's degree. Also, a majority of the remainder have used their experiences on the tour to present lectures, lesson plans and other educational opportunities. Of perhaps more far-reaching potential are those tour alumni who go on to teach at the primary and secondary school level. Jeff Rivard, a grade 10 teacher in south-western Ontario, regularly uses his experiences from the tour to enrich his teachings on the First and Second World Wars. He states that, "despite all the excellent work being done [by academics in military history] today, only 1 per cent of it is read by the general public. I...didn't want to spend the rest of my career focussing on that. In high school I didn't have the advantage of being exposed to the wars in depth....I wanted to share our efforts with as many students as possible."²⁷ Overall, this is an excellent dividend on the investment by the CBF.

These study tours have had a dramatic effect upon the students who have participated. To say

it has changed the lives of those who have taken part is not hyperbole. Trevor Rehel states, "Put quite simply, I don't think any other experience in my life has affected me quite as much as this trip has. The memory will last forever in my mind."²⁸ Lisa Goodyear shares a similar sentiment. "To say that this was an experience of a lifetime does not seem enough. This trip has meant more to me than anyone can really understand. I have finally become a patriot of my own country."²⁹ Denis Dubord comments on the impact this experience will have on his future. "The study tour served to remind me that the study and understanding of military history is far from a simple or strictly academic pursuit. I think all the participants of the study tour have been invaluable and incalculably enriched. Our academic, professional and personal lives have been indelibly affected. Undoubtedly, I shall be a better military history student, researcher, writer and teacher thanks to this pivotal experience."³⁰

The CBF battlefield study tours have given students a unique opportunity to learn about the role played by Canada during the two world wars. Perhaps ever more important than the knowledge gained on the trip is the fact that many of the students have been energized by their experience. They have been motivated to learn more about the topic and to share what they learn with others. To date a total of 122 students have participated in the tour. But it is safe to say that the experience gained on the tours has touched a far greater number. This is a lesson from which we all can learn.