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David Ian Hall

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Preparing for higher command: The British approach to the Normandy campaign staff ride

David Ian Hall

In mid-May, just before the official ceremonies to mark the 60th anniversary of D-Day began, I had the privilege of being a consultant historian on a NATO HQ's staff ride in Normandy. The HQ of the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps – Italy (NRDC-IT) examined the D-Day invasion and a number of the key battles in the Normandy campaign. Their stated aim was “to provide through military historical example, a practical focus for the study and analysis of high command and the planning and conduct of future campaigns and major operations, within a combined and joint context.”

EAGLE TOUR 04 was the exercise name given to the NRDC-IT battlefield study tour and it was aimed at both senior and junior staff officers. In total, 80 officers from this multinational HQ, including two major-generals, took part. For three very active days, we travelled around Normandy enthusiastically engaged in “applied military history.”

The itinerary included a number of the familiar and a few of the not so familiar sites:

- Pegasus Bridge (site of the glider landings by Major John Howard and the 2nd Ox & Bucks Light Infantry in the early hours of 6th June - an operation which Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory described as “the finest flying in the war”).
- Sword Beach (Queen sector, where the 3rd British Infantry Division landed).
- German Strong Point ‘Hillman’ (the regimental headquarters of the 736th Grenadier Regiment under Colonel von Krug, located behind Sword Beach).
- Arromanches (the site of *Port Winston*, the British Mulberry harbour).
- Longues Battery (a major German Coastal Battery, part of the Atlantic Wall).

- Omaha Beach (where the 1st and 29th US Infantry Divisions landed and suffered the highest casualties of all the Allied assault forces on D-Day).
- Pointe du Hoc (which was assaulted and occupied by the US Rangers, again with very high casualties).
- Amfreville (overlooking the Line of Departure for Operation Goodwood, 18-20 July 1944, the British and Canadian armoured attack east of Caen beginning on 18 July).
- La Petit Chapelle (Mortain - where Allied air power, mainly RAF and RCAF Typhoon rocket-firing fighters defeated the German counter-attack, Operation Lüttich, beginning on 7 August).
- St. Lambert-sur-Dives (where Major David Currie of the 29th Cdn Armd Recce Regt won a Victoria Cross in bitter fighting in the Falaise Pocket on 18 August 1944).
- and lastly, the Polish Memorial at Mont Ormel (where the Polish Armoured Division fought to seal the neck of the Falaise Pocket in August 1944, thus completing the encirclement of the German forces in Normandy and the end of the campaign).

I have described the outline of the NRDC-IT staff ride in some detail because it was based on the Normandy component of the very successful British Higher Command and Staff Course (HCSC) staff ride. The HCSC staff ride is run annually on a fully joint basis and over the last few years it has established itself as the premier staff ride conducted in the British armed forces today.

One slight departure from the HCSC Staff Ride format was the desire of the HQ NRDC-IT to hold formal remembrance services, including the laying of a wreath, at a number of the various national cemeteries and memorials in Normandy. The NRDC-IT visited the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in Ranville (near Pegasus Bridge), which contains some 2,151 graves. They also visited the German cemetery at La Cambe (21,300 graves) and the American Cemetery behind Omaha Beach at Colleville-sur-Mer (9,387 graves). A wreath was also laid at the Polish Memorial at Mont Ormel. At each site

an officer representing that particular nation gave a short speech before a wreath was laid, a prayer said and a minute of silence observed.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, all of the speeches were very different yet equally appropriate for the place and the occasion. One speech, however, struck me as being more poignant than the others. A young attack-helicopter pilot, with considerable recent combat experience, delivered a speech that was truly remarkable for both the humanity and the humility that it conveyed. She began by drawing the group's attention to the row on row of pristine gravestones that seemed to stretch beyond the horizon, reminding us all that each one marked a young life that ended prematurely because of war. Each grave, she continued, also represented a mother's loss, and the grief and loss that grew outwards, seemingly exponentially, through family, friends, community and nation. The cost of battle is never cheap, which is why, she concluded, that a Headquarters' Staff, like the one she was working in now, tasked with planning and conducting future operations, had an enormous responsibility to "get it right."

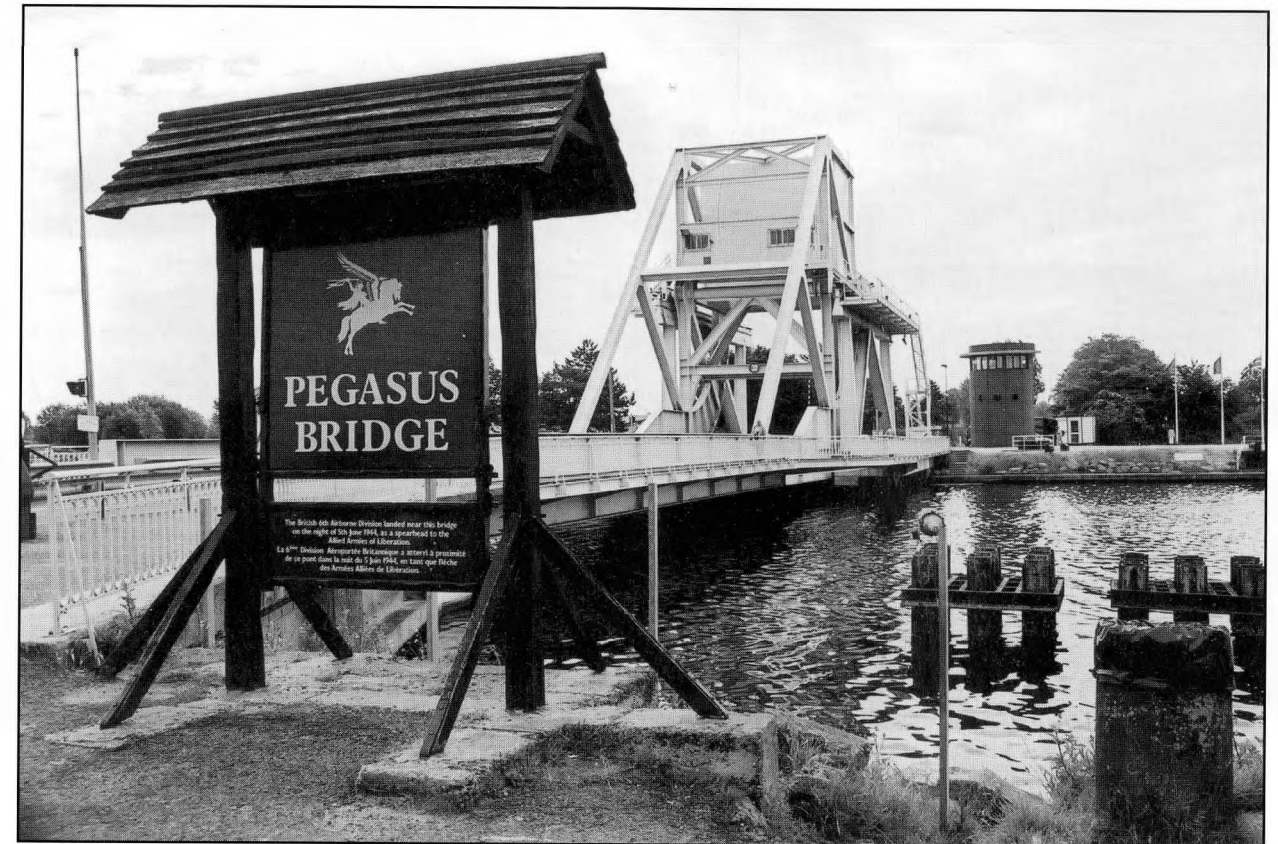
For this young officer and her NATO colleagues, the Normandy Staff Ride met their desired aims and objectives and then some. In a brief yet very practical way it helped them to gain a broader understanding of the nature of high command. It enhanced their ability to identify and focus on key strategic, operational, joint and

combined issues, and it revitalised their professional interest in military history. Not surprisingly, these are the three higher level training objectives stated for the HCSC staff ride.

Why Normandy (D-Day and the Normandy Campaign 1944)?

First, Normandy is the setting of the last great set-piece battle by the Western Allies in the Second World War – a large-scale airborne and amphibious landing operation which offers numerous lessons for all of the functional branches of the armed forces today, nationally and in coalition. Second, the Normandy battlefields today are largely similar to what they were 60 years ago and they are easily accessible both in terms of physical access and financial costs. Turning to pedagogical reasons, the D-Day landings and the successive battles that make up the Normandy Campaign also provide contemporary military commanders and their planning staffs with numerous case studies on Combined (multi-national) and Joint (air, land and sea) operations and campaigns. Operation Overlord was the product of all arms landing forces, naval forces that ranged from battleships to landing craft and submarines, strategic and tactical air forces as well as the largest assortment of transport aircraft ever to participate in a single battle, the Merchant navy, significant contributions from civilians and industry, and decisive input from the diplomatic and the Intelligence services. Last, and not to be

More than 60 years after its construction, Port Winston, the British Mulberry Harbour is still visible at Arromanches.



Pegasus Bridge as it appears today. On the night of 5-6 June 1944 the bridge was captured in a coup de main glider-borne assault by British airborne troops of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, led by Major John Howard. The original bridge was replaced by a larger clone in the 1990s and now resides in a museum closeby.

overlooked when understanding why British, American and Canadian armed forces study Normandy – we won!

History of British Staff Rides and Battlefield Tours

The modern concept of the historical staff ride has its roots in Prussian/German traditions beginning with Frederick the Great. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars the concept of combining theoretical instruction and practical exercises in the field was refined first by Scharnhorst and Clausewitz and again later in the nineteenth century by Helmuth von Moltke, the elder, Chief of the Great General Staff from 1857 to 1887.

Under von Moltke's direction, the long-standing Prussian tradition of officers reading military history and then taking their theoretical studies outdoors in the form of staff rides and war games was institutionalised. The rationale for studying military history seemed obvious: it provided "lessons for the future." And staff rides

were an effective method of testing both ideas and individual officers destined for high command appointments or not. With Prussia's victory over France in 1870, the staff ride concept was copied by other European nations.

The exact date of the first officially sanctioned British staff ride or battlefield tour – as a part of an officer's professional education and training – is not entirely clear. But staff tours – both overseas and to a much greater degree in the UK – were a semi-regular feature in training late Victorian Army officers during the 1890s. Not surprisingly, overseas tours studied the battlefields of Prussia's victories in 1870, while following the First World War, British officers on the Camberley staff course went to Flanders and studied Haig's battlefields.

Shortly after the Second World War ended, Camberley students as well as the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) began visiting areas of North West Europe, Italy and North Africa where significant battles of the Second World War were



The 1st Polish Armoured Division memorial and museum at Mont Ormel - Coudehard is located on the summit of the hill defended by the Poles during the closing stages of the Battle of Normandy.

fought. British staff rides also resumed under Field Marshal Montgomery's guidance – studying his victories – and often-included veterans and former commanders, such as Lieutenant-General Sir Colin Barber, Colonel Pine-Coffin, Major Howard, Canadian General Guy Simonds, and German Colonel Hans von Luck, formerly of 21st Panzer Division. The last such ride was held in 1979 and ceased with the fragility of the guest speakers. To call them staff rides, however, is misleading. In essence they were tours, conducted at a gallop and with little if any advance preparation.

Camberley resurrected the 'staff ride' in 1988 as part of the Army's Higher Command and Staff Course. HCSC officers researched a particular aspect of one of the campaigns or battles examined on their staff ride, produced a preliminary research paper, and led on a question that was tied to a particular stand. Applied history was back on the Army's syllabus. But this was not just academic history under examination: students on the HCSC also were tasked with identifying and commenting on a contemporary 'pull-through' that embraced the military strategic and operational levels of war. To a degree, as with the Prussian staff ride concept, they were examining the past for lessons

that had applicability in the present and possibly the future.

With the foundation of the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC) in 1997, reflecting the inevitability of both Combined (multi-national) and Joint (tri-service) operations for the British military, the HCSC Staff Ride was broadened to include greater emphasis on the planning and conduct of air and maritime operations. As in the past, Operation Overlord and the Normandy Campaign provided the richest training ground for this combination of theoretical and practical study.

HCSC Staff Ride

The HCSC staff ride embraces applied history, drawing on historical illustrations to highlight contemporary issues, to provide a practical focus for the study of high command and the planning and conduct of future campaigns and major operations within a combined and joint context. The ride itself is a nine-day Marathon across northern Belgium and France with a significant part of it taking place in Normandy. It is run annually for a maximum of 30 senior officers drawn from the three Services. Most rides also include two or three

civil servants of relatively equal grade to their military colleagues. The specific training objectives of the HCSC staff ride may be summarised as follows:

- To consider the military strategic and operational level dimensions of command, decision making and resource allocation.
- To highlight the application of the principles of war and practice of operational art during the campaigns, major operations and battles under study.
- To consider the impact of senior personalities on the conduct of war.
- To illustrate the significance of environmental and component factors in the planning and conduct of major operations and battles.
- To stimulate the conduct of original research, expanding student/officers' knowledge of military history at the strategic, operational and higher tactical levels of conflict.
- To consider the lessons of military history and their relevance for operations today.
- To take into account the impact of technology on the conduct of war.

In terms of its approach, the HCSC staff ride involves three stages of preliminary study, field activity and integration in some form of after action review. Each officer/student is required to write a 5,000-word research paper and then present their essay topic at the corresponding stand on the ride. A former Deputy Director of the HCSC has noted that "the combined pressures of personal pride and peer review normally generate some excellent papers as well as searching questions and stimulating debate on the stands." In addition to meeting specific training objectives, the HCSC staff ride also aims to achieve long-term educational benefits by encouraging personal professional development through

The German gun battery at Longues-sur-Mer was a major worry for the Allies on D-Day, but it was neutralized by naval gunfire before causing any serious damage. The site remains remarkably intact today and includes three large bunkers that contain their original 150 mm guns.

awakening or reinforcing an interest in military history and offering an analytical framework for the systematic study of campaigns and battles. The Directing Staff and the Course historians are an integral part of this educational process throughout.

Once on the stands, a member of the Directing Staff provides a short orientation, noting directional and topographical features as well as any key military deployments, force structures and command issues. A five-minute tactical/historical narrative by one of the HCSC historians follows. Three academic historians support the HCSC, each one specialising in one of the component environments – air, land or naval warfare. The student/officer then has approximately 20 minutes to present their essay topic and identify any themes relevant to contemporary military issues. The academic historians then field any questions of fact before a general discussion concludes the formal activities at the stand.

At the end of each day's exertions, a hot-wash discussion is held at the over-night hostelry. The aim here is to capture the main points that emerged from the



day's presentations and discussions, and to articulate any enduring themes of contemporary relevance. A slightly longer and more formal review is held at the end of the staff ride.

Conclusion

The staff ride is a proven training method that has evolved over the last two centuries. It is a fairly flexible training vehicle and it can be designed to achieve many training objectives. When used well, it also offers unparalleled opportunities to senior officers to prepare for higher command and to military personnel in general to prepare for war. Over the past 60 years, the British military have reflected widely and often on the D-Day landings and the Normandy Campaign, applying historical studies in the form of staff rides and battlefield tours as part of the modern military officer's professional development, education and training. Today, when most military operations are combined and joint, Operation Overlord and the Normandy Campaign remain an excellent choice for a staff ride, highlighting the synergy between air, land and maritime forces and offering many enduring lessons to all of the functional branches of the armed forces.

Notes

1. Undertaken and led by author 17 June 2004.
2. Bolero was the codename given to trans-Atlantic shipping effort to assemble equipment and stores for the invasion of Normandy.
3. The ACSC is an 11-month post-graduate course at the Joint Services Command and Staff Course, part of the Defence Academy at Shrivenham, UK, comprising about 340 officers of all three services including up to 90 international officers.
4. The author was tasked with setting the strategic scene in the Mediterranean and events that led to the decision to defend Crete, and to cover the naval aspects of the defence of the island and then withdrawal. The tour occurred in May 2004 on the anniversary of events in Crete in May 1941.
5. Based on discussions in Washington and at the US Marine Corps University at Quantico, Virginia, with Ike Skelton, Congressman for Missouri.
6. The latter events occur after the Normandy trip but help reinforce many elements of teaching and experience gained on the course, including the Battlefield Tour.
7. The wording is taken from the Visit Instruction for the European Regional Security Experience issued by the ACSC.
8. Academics at ACSC play a full part in designing, delivering and validating the course.
9. See Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), for numerous comments on events concerning DD Tanks on Omaha Beach. Of 32 tanks launched only 3 got ashore and one memorably destroyed the German 75 mm gun at W62 at the east end of Omaha beach.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.385-390 for examples of destroyer actions off Omaha beach.
11. *Ibid.*, p.339
12. *Ibid.*, p.406
13. Attributed to General Norman Schwartzkopf.
14. Covering letter written by Morgan to the Chiefs of Staff.
15. See Richard Collier, *D-Day*, (London: Cassells, 1992), pp.71-79 for deception operations. Similar bogus signal traffic indicated the likelihood of action in Norway by forces based in Scotland, further complicating Hitler's planning. See also Omar Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1983), pp.219-220.
16. Ambrose, p.83
17. Visit Instruction.
18. Quote taken from website of the Canadian Battlefields Foundation. <http://www.canadianbattlefieldsfoundation.ca/study_tour.htm>
19. "Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation 2003 Study Tour: Sicily and Italy," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 2003, p.75.
20. "The 1996 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1996, p.114. One of the requirements of the students is to produce and submit a journal which chronicles their experiences on the tour.
21. "The 1995 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1995, p.101.
22. "The 1996 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1996, p.117.
23. "The 1998 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1998, p.73.
24. "The 2000 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 2000, p.79.
25. "The 1997 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1997, p.127.
26. "The 1998 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1998, p.78.
27. Letter to author, April 2001.
28. "The 1995 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1995, p.104.
29. "The 2000 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 2000, p.80.
30. "The 1999 Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation Study Tour," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1999, p.80.