Staff Rides to Chickamauga

CSUN students returned in 2001 to the Civil War battlefields of Chickamauga and Gettysburg. Under the direction of Professor Stephen Bourque, students arrived at both battlefields prepared with readings and discussions. Each student took on the persona of a key individual in the battle and were prepared to discuss their subject when they arrived in the theater of operations.

On January 8, fourteen students arrived at the Chattanooga Choo Choo hotel for a staff call at “Sticky Fingers”, a local establishment renowned for barbeque ribs. For the next four days the staff-riders traversed the mountainous terrain, following the routes of both the Union and Confederate armies as they moved towards the battlefield and engaged. On Wednesday the riders started at the old rail station in Ringgold, where the Confederate troops under James Longstreet arrived after their long trip from Northern Virginia. With the weather on their side, they spent the day hiking on the battlefield, examining the details of the first day’s fight. When the weather turned rainy, the group mixed short hikes with travel by car around the battlefield and concluded with an excellent program at the National Park visitor’s center. On the last day the staff-riders went up Lookout Mountain and ran into snowflakes. The ensuing snowball fight brought no casualties. The group withdrew to “The Loft” for a farewell dinner before returning to California to complete their research papers.

In June twenty-one students flew to Baltimore and commenced to follow the route of Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, fresh from its victory at Chancellorsville, as it moved across the Potomac river into Maryland and on to Pennsylvania. As evening approached the staff-riders turned east and followed the same route as the troops took on July 1, 1863. As Dave Livingstone pointed out in his journal, “it was like seeing a dip from the movie [Gettysburg]. To my right was the seminary with its cupola still intact! I could visualize Buford standing up there, rearing for Reynolds with his field glasses. Everybody in the van kept asking ‘where are the ridges?’ I said ‘we just crossed them.’ We all thought the ridges would be more pronounced which is why visiting a battlefield in person is so crucial.”

For the next three days the staff-riders walked the battlefield exploring the major engagements as different students led the discussions based on their persona as a key leader in the battle. On day two of the battle in the Peach Orchard and Wheatfield, Heather Guss pointed out that “walking from the Peach Orchard toward the Wheatfield, with a huge row of cannons on our left, was a harsh reminder that these men were...
not taking a pleasant walk through the fields.” At Devil’s Den, Heather found huge boulders and changes in elevation that brought much loss of life. Further on at Little Round Top, Lisa Helfrich noted that “it is so real. Seeing everything first person really changes my perspective. I can actually visualize the attack.” Nicole Volpe noted that “marching across this flat area to a ridge which was occupied by Union troops, gave me the sense of fear that the Confederate troops may have felt as they made this suicide mission.”

The highlight for all of the staff-riders was walking Picket’s Charge, starting with Jamie Lenoski, acting as Lee, describing what the Confederate commander hoped to accomplish, and Pat Coen describing the role of his division in the attack. As the students moved across the fields toward the Union lines, Jeri Armstrong noted that “as the class began to walk across the thick grass to the other side . . . everything began to come together for me. Brothers fighting brothers, a town in the midst of ruin, and the spirits that continue to have a strong presence in this place.”

According to the students journals and research papers, Steve Bourque notes that they have a better appreciation for the magnitude of events and the problems that soldiers of the period faced. They also have an appreciation for the importance of experiential learning and applying their abstract knowledge gained from books to the practical realities on the ground.

**Staff-Riders**

Debra Anderson  
Jerry Armstrong  
Raul Camacho  
Pat Cohen  
Heather Guss  
Walt Hall  
Matthew Hauck  
Lisa Helfrich  
Raymond Jensen  
Megan Jensen  

Jaimie Lenoski  
Rich Letus  
Dave Livingstone  
Myrna Livingstone  
Scot McNutt  
Amber McPherson  
Adeline Menedes  
Dan O’Sullivan  
Rocio Pinto  
Stacey Roth  
Francisco Salazar  
Scott Schwartz  
Mark Thrift  
Nichole Volpe