

Staff Ride



Staff riders at the Virginia Monument

Gettysburg “was by far the best scholastic experience bar none,” exclaimed Scott Kershaw, who noted that the class “made me focus on a couple of characters, but the collateral learning enabled me to learn more about the Civil War in one month that I did in a whole semester.” Thirty five members of the CSUN history community joined Dr. Stephen Bourque for a staff-ride at the end of June at Gettysburg National Park. Since initiating the staff-ride program in January 2000 with eighteen participants, Professor Bourque has steadily expanded the participants and the scope of the program with plans for a July 2003 ride to the Normandy battlefield of WWII.

Participants ranging in age from nineteen to almost sixty and almost evenly split between men and women began their academic preparations with a study of a particular individual or military unit. In June the class met twice a week with discussions on the strategic and operational aspects of the campaign from both Northern and Southern perspectives. All students had to explain how their units arrived on the battlefield from Virginia. In subsequent meetings the students reviewed the movement of their units, their participation in the battle, and an “order of battle” on units under their command. At the last class

before departure to Washington, the class discussed the entire Gettysburg campaign and its significance for the war and U.S. history.

In order to manage successfully the logistics for thirty five participants, Professor Bourque received vital assistance and leadership from veterans of previous staff-rides and courses. From the start of pre-trip course work to the return home, the veterans took on the role of teacher and advisor to those on their first experiential trip. This “staff”, made up of Pat Cohen, Walt Hall, Matt Hauck, Dan O’Sullivan, Mark Thrift and,

the assistant leader, David Livingstone, helped students with presentations, arranged transportation and housing, and enabled Professor Bourque to concentrate on teaching.

On the first day, June 24, the staff-ride started off with each student visiting the two locations where they would brief the entire group during the battle in order to walk the ground and discover the difficulties that their character had on the day of battle. Starting the next day the group used vans to move around the battlefield but then moved by foot along the course of the battle, usu-



Day 1 Orientation on locations: Left to right, Tina Matthews, Judith Cassario, Shawn Lawheed, Stephen Bourque, and Lindsey Griffith

to Gettysburg



Yvette Bocz (General Picket) and Lydia Balian (General Hood) review maneuvers in the Wheatfield.

ally three to six miles a day, such as James Longstreet's Confederate attack against the left flank of Union forces from Willoughby Run, into the Peace Orchard, the Wheatfield, Devil's Den and to its repulse on Little Round Top. "The entire battlefield is deceiving," noted Rosemary Pollock at the end of the third day. "It is filled with dips, curves, rises and hidden valleys that become the stage for destruction I can only imagine."

The participants engaged in extensive cooperation and enjoyed the company of each other. Early in the morning, as the sun rose, they would be out walking the streets of Gettysburg or the lines of battle, reflecting on the experience they were involved in. And late at night, after midnight, the discussions and social activities continued ranging from sharing tips on how to research, present, and write about their topic, to the nature of this and other wars, to issues of postgraduate study and employment. The women did exhibit far more stamina than the men as the evening discussions shifted from field maneuvers to party activities.

On the last day of the trip, the staff-riders sat along the stone wall that General Hancock's Union forces defended against the final onslaught of General Longstreet's troops, mistakenly called Picket's charge, a field deserted in the early morning hours. They talked about what all that bloodshed meant to America, and what it must have been like. The staff-ride experience made their lectures and reading seem somewhat bland and superficial. "We had

become voyeurs of sorts," observed Rosemary Pollock. "We attempted to peer into the lives of others; first through books, papers, interpretations and then on home ground. We dissected their decisions and maneuvers with the same blunt, imprecise instruments that were used by the civil war surgeons." Then the group walked to Gettysburg National Cemetery. A few yards from President Abraham Lincoln's podium, they read his short address and Professor Bourque asked each student to explain the meaning of this event. When they were done, they were all in tears.

After a quick visit to Harper's Ferry and the nearby Antietam battlefield, the staff-riders departed for home and the completion of their required academic work which included a journal of their thoughts and observations after each class and on each day of the staff-ride and a research paper that evaluates some aspect of their assigned unit. "This experience was incredible, some kind of journey into the heart of a national ideal," concluded Walter Hall, an experience "branded on my heart. My love of history has deepened immeasurably because of this staff ride, as has my understanding of history."

Any students, alumni and friends of history that are interested in the staff-ride to Normandy, July 2-16, 2003 should contact Stephen Bourque at stephen.a.bourque@csun.edu. □□□



Stephen Bourque at the "Sunken road" at Antietam