The Journal of Military History and Defence Studies
Volume 6, No. 3. *Special Edition* (Summer 2025)
Maynooth Academic Publishing ISSN 2712-0171
http://ojs.maynoothuniversity.ie/ojs/index.php/jmhds

Immersive PME: Building Habits of Mind Beyond the Classroom

Don Thieme

Classroom Professional Military Education alone is insufficient to provide the requisite cognitive capability to design, plan, and command major operations and campaigns. Professional Military Education is a topic of constant discourse. Taking the education beyond the classroom by adding case studies, war game techniques, and field studies develops field grade officers' intuition, knowledge, analytical planning skills, and commanders' empathy. This article covers a campaign of learning to build upon traditional andragogical methods by incorporating vigorous techniques to immerse war college students in the art of decision-making at the operational level of war.

Staff ride programs engage students intellectually and physically, foster critical thinking and collaborative planning, and enhance their understanding of the operational level of war. This article details a three-step process by which to design, deliver, and assess staff rides as part of a continuum of learning in the Professional Military Education process. The focus is on immersive learning experiences, practical applications, and the development of cognitive skills necessary for military operations. The article concludes that a carefully constructed staff ride program places students in the decision-making process through an intense, immersive experiential education to deepen their understanding and application of operational art.

Since (at least) Gerhard von Scharnhorst's *The Enlightened Soldier* (1805), military education has focused on the technical and tactical tools of the trade, and the requirement for critical and creative thinking in the ultimate contest of organized violence and human will in war. For nearly forty years, the United States has conducted educational programs under the moniker of Professional Military Education or PME. As anyone who has been either student or teacher knows, it all too often means a Perception of Massive Examples, groaning under the weight of case studies with little actual analysis and even less enduring effectiveness.

Truly valuable military education, especially above the technical and tactical levels of combat, focuses on the art, science, and decision-making of campaigns and major operations. A classroom, stacks of readings, whiteboards and maps are a solid beginning, but alone, insufficient. Effective professional military education requires immersion to develop the cognitive capability

for designing and commanding campaigns, and creative, detailed staff work to convert the commander's intent and guidance into feasible, sustainable campaigns and major operations.

Adding practical application and field studies to case studies animates the readings, actively engages a greater number of students, and generates enduring educational outcomes. As with all intense programmes of study, this requires careful thought, detailed planning, and flexible execution – just like combat. Faculty preparation is the foundation upon which this must be constructed. The first step in this process is the case study, the second, a war game or re-design, and third, the execution of the field study. Together, these comprise a continuum of immersive PME.

STEP I: Classroom Case Study

Many PME practitioners take this step for granted. Assign a batch of theorists, plunge into the First Battle of the Marne, and discuss. This alone, though, is a shaky foundation upon which to build a staff ride. The first decision is to determine the desired educational outcome. A critical question is at what level of war should the case study focus? A top-down approach, starting with strategic and operational level in the classroom and proceeding to the operational and tactical level in the field helps to scope this discussion.

There are then evaluation criteria to be assessed. One is access to battle-space that will engage participants with physical perspectives. Using a design thinking approach will generate many ideas - most of which will end up on the cutting room floor but should be retained for consideration in future iterations. Converting case study potential into field study execution often reveals that it may not meet staff ride requirements. The overarching aim is to link the preparation for the field study to the design of the case study academics.

The readings must then be selected. The amount of faculty work and research here cannot be underestimated. My experience is that every ten pages of preparatory reading may yield one page of assigned reading. A basic rule of thumb is that graduate level students can digest 20 pages per hour. As much as one might like to assign von Kluck's *Memoirs*, chapters from Meyer's *A World Undone*, and other scholarly readings, the reading must be balanced with the curriculum time available. 200 pages of reading is barely enough to understand August and September 1914, yet even that is ten hours of reading - a full student preparation day.

An outline that enables faculty to lead the case study discussion, a moderator guide, must be prepared for the classroom session. This is no small task, for as LtCol Tony Sama, USMC, noted, "as faculty we are terrible students" – we have forgotten the un-knowingness of the student who encounters this case study for the first time. This guide has the push function of directing the energies of the session leader to forge, review, and refine how to effectively execute the seminar session. Conducting a faculty preview session provides additional insights. Teasing out the pivotal decisions, made or not made, is the final aspect of refining the moderator guide.

A moderator guide might also show the faculty how to break the seminars down into smaller groups to encourage discussion while keeping them oriented on the desired outcomes

for subsequent steps. This is incorporated into the syllabus providing a guide for students in their preparation time – all aimed at making the seminar discussion of the case study more effective. It also helps develop the critical thinking skills and habits of mind we seek to impart.

Calendar Management

Calendar management can be broken down into two parts. Prior to the field study are the academics, war game or re-design, and administration time. Apportioning time to student and faculty preparation and seminar discussions requires careful calendar management. Some faculty will want to spend more time on the reading and seminar discussions while others will want to get to the practical application portion straightaway. Concurrent with this are the administrative and financial requirements to arrange travel, get the paperwork completed, make student assignments, arrange the billeting plan, get the travel requests approved, and if going overseas, passports, visas, and the unique requirements for each destination country.

The second part of this is the calendar in execution of the field study. To best develop an appreciation for the operation(s) and campaigns, the calendar should reflect the order in which operations were conducted. This is not always possible – for example, when conducting a staff ride at HUSKY (Sicily) or NEPTUNE/OVERLORD (Normandy) several large-scale operations happened simultaneously but will have to be studied and visited sequentially. There is also staff ride fatigue - immersive PME is intellectually challenging, and these tend to be ten-to-twelve-hour days. One will need to factor in time for a cultural day so that participants can do laundry, take a break, and reset with time for personal professional reflection. We have found that a ratio of six days field study to one day's respite (6:1) works well. Add in foul weather, a flat tyre on the coach, and the other inevitable human factors that take place along the way, having a built-in period of non-structured space is of great value.

Site Selection

The sites selected should afford good sight lines, access for transportation, availability of rest areas, and the ability to tie in diverse domains and factors with the overall educational objectives. One of the challenges when conducting a staff ride that appraises the planning and decisions of naval and amphibious operations is that, absent a boat, these must be conducted on the beach or as near the beach as possible. This challenges the students to gain an appreciation from the sea, but it also opens up the availability of looking at how the defence was arrayed, and what plans and decisions the defenders made – or failed to make – in posturing and preparing their forces.

There is also the matter of gaining access to sites that are either private or publicly controlled areas with inherent restrictions. Sending out an advance faculty recce requires additional time and fiscal resources, but time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted. If one wanted to study the Battle of Tours (732) the only decent spot is at a railroad crossing to the southwest of the modern city – not exactly optimal. On the other hand, the US Civil War site at Cold Harbor (1864) is almost perfectly preserved and with a bit of walking, is conducive to a detailed terrain appreciation of that engagement.

Two more considerations must be factored into Step I: faculty loading and student reflection time. There is an inherent tension between faculty-student-curriculum-time available. All of us who enjoy the rare honour and serious responsibility of educating future commanders and planners must remember that the students need time to not just skim the readings, but time to stare out the window, scribble notes on a tablet, walk the dog and ruminate on what they have read. All too often I sense a tendency to continuously add to the curriculum until the original ten-pound sack bursts with twenty pounds of feed. The last thing we want to create is a sense of "It's Tuesday – must be Verdun."

At the end of Step I, the outputs are the desired learning objectives, an identified case study that supports both classroom and field study application, curated readings and other media, a refined calendar that allows both student and faculty preparation and reflection time, and finally, the moderator guide.

Step II: War Game – or Re-Design

There is no shortage of *kriegsspiel* methods, but in the interest of faculty time available to assess, test, evaluate, and then decide to discard or further develop, there are two basic options. One is to find a commercially available board game; the other is to conduct a mission re-design and then conduct a Course of Action Analysis using war game methods and tools.

War Gaming

Commercially available board games are designed for profit. Their objectives and structure may not neatly align with your desired learning outcomes. The only way to discern this is for faculty to first learn the game, play and experiment with it, and then modify as needed. Choosing one of the many Napoleonic board games available, one might discover that none of them fully account for the state of training, cohesion, morale, and competence of the Grand Armée of 1805 or the youthful inexperience of Tsar Aleksandr I of Russia. Faculty will also have to consider how much time is to be apportioned in the curriculum for the students to learn the game, prepare their supporting materials such as an appreciation of the battlespace, orders of battle, and relative combat power analysis. These are all valuable learning processes, and to derive their fullest value, sufficient time must be accorded to the students.

If time allows, faculty can run through the military planning process from problem framing through Course of Action analysis using war game techniques. This is a significant time-tax – but there is a great deal to be derived from this approach. It serves as a pivot, an inflection point from timeless tomes and maps, to white boards, vibrant discussions (and often, heated disagreements) all of which encourage the students to think creatively, identify decisive points in the their vision for how it will unfold, and reconsider decisions made and not made – and the complexity of hefty decisions with known imprecise knowledge of the situation. It also helps teach the students the importance of evaluation criteria and assessment methods, none of which are perfect, but many of which can be quite useful.

Professors may instead decide to conduct a major operation or campaign redesign. By this we mean to take a snapshot in time and have the students re-design the operation or campaign

with the order of battle and the situation that existed at the designated time. While we know the outcome of the selected operation, we must remember Pierre Vidal-Naquet's admonition that "in order to understand historical reality it is sometimes necessary not to know its outcome."[1] Whether studying TORCH, KING II (Leyte Gulf), Waterloo, Trafalgar, Jutland, or any other major operation or campaign, I have found that forcing the students to convert their Socratic seminar discussions to a "what now, General/Admiral" concept of operations with supporting estimates to develop a course of action is an eye-opening experience for them.

Re-Design

The re-design is a student-focused, faculty-moderated exercise. The best approach is to conduct this before the field application so that students learn the challenges of planning in a knowledge vacuum. Students take the case study and convert it into a new operational concept complete with a commander's estimate of the situation and rough annexes that at a minimum cover friendly, combined, and enemy orders of battle, intelligence, sustainment, and command relationships. It is focused at the operational level of war, informed by (but not solely focused on) technology and tactics and briefed to faculty. Faculty must steer the students away from an overly detailed examination of weapons platforms and systems, P_h (probability of hit) and P_k (probability of kill), and other such minutiae – we are focused at the two-, three-, and four-star commander at the operational level of war.

Time permitting students can then conduct COA analysis. The re-design to produce a new concept of the World War II Italian Peninsula Campaign takes our students a full week. There is a hidden learning objective here: how to conduct assessment of relevant factors of time, space, and strength of opposing forces, and how to design and execute the most effective war game analysis of the selected COA(s). Often, PME graduates are assumed to know how to conduct COA Analysis using war gaming techniques once they arrive at a high-level staff, so this time is not wasted.

In addition to time-faculty-student considerations, there is also the mundane support required. Students need multiple spaces replete with maps, white boards, game pucks, dice, computers, and any other desired support mechanics. This requires a faculty and staff regressive planning approach to make sure that everything is prepared well in advance so that the students fall in on already prepared materials. For example, for our Italian Peninsula Campaign phase, it took two professors several months of research to build out the Allied and Axis orders of battle for September 1943.

Step II serves as a pivot, an inflection point from timeless tomes and maps to white boards, vibrant discussions (and often, heated disagreements) all of which encourage the students to think creatively, identify decisive points in their vision for how it will unfold, and reconsider decisions made and not made – and the complexity of hefty decisions with known imprecise

[1] Adam Rayski, *The Choice of the Jews under Vichy: Between Submission and Resistance*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), xiv.

knowledge. It also helps expand the horizons of the students and to begin to develop empathy for the commander.

The outputs of this step are the combined effects of the reading and seminar discussion plus the experiential education from applying theory to the planning and execution of a major operation or campaign. These steps develop a more nuanced understanding as students were forced to develop and explain possible counter factual, operational ideas, and concepts of operation. Together, this develops a greater understanding that leads to students developing their own intuition and setting them up well for the field study.

STEP III: The Field Study

This is the final structured step of Immersive PME. It should encourage a rest-of-career reflection on what has been observed, learned, and then applied. The Field Study incorporates all the faculty, staff, and student work preparing for an immersive, meaningful experience focused on warfighting and decision making. The Field Study is a student-focused and student-led core component of a major operation in a campaign of learning. Montgomery noted that "it is sometimes thought that when an officer is promoted to the next higher command, he needs no teaching in how to handle it. This is a great mistake."[2] One of our objectives is to accelerate the cognitive capabilities of our students so that they can out think and out fight our adversaries from the beginning of combat. War is a hard teacher – we aim to make our staff rides the prequel of hard teaching.

Student Focused, Student Led

To ensure that the focus in execution revolves around the students' pursuit of the identified desired learning outcomes, significant work is required well in advance of the field study itself. One of our techniques is to involve the students in this planning along two lines of effort. The first is the organization in terms of the care, feeding, and sustainment required to "keep the caissons rolling along" over a lengthy operation.

The second aspect is much more intensive and places the students in the decisions of war, for, to borrow from Slim, "the prime task of the commander is to make decisions."[3] We assign two types of student-led stands, each of which is meant to lead a discussion – not just a field lecture.[4] The first type is an operational level assessment of the planning and execution of operations at selected sites. This is not "this is where Patton stood overlooking St. Mihiel" but rather the planning for the operation, how the tactical actions fit within the operational concept, and what might have gone differently considering fate, chance, and other factors. The second is a leadership decision stand where students research a specified leader's decision. The focus here is not on

---

[2] Bernard Law, *The Memoirs of Field Count Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein*, (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958), 79.

[3] Field Marshal Sir William Slim, "Higher Command in War," (*Military Review*, 2020 originally published in 1990), 59.

[4] When staff rides were first conducted at the end of the 19th century, they were conducted on horseback, and sites selected for study and discussion meant that the horses would "stand" – hence the term. There is still a lot of standing today – but we usually get there by motorized conveyance, with a bit of walking here and there depending on access.

where Kesselring went to grammar school, but what were the factors in his personality, will, and intuition that led him to make – or defer – the decision. While the first is tied to terrain, the second may be site agnostic.

Preparation

As part of the preparation for the field study, students are assigned a faculty mentor to assist them in conducting research and preparing their respective stands. For operational stands, we require them to prepare a two-sided one-page handout for the rest of the class. This is not merely a reference aid for the presenter or the fellow travellers. It is an exercise that forces the student to decide what information is the most important relevant to that stand, and then exercise creativity in how to most effectively present that information. This is part of the overall educational drive to get them used to condensing voluminous information for a group of highly articulate, critical-thinking peers and senior leaders. Over the last three decades, every single participant to whom I have spoken not only remembers every detail of his or her presentation, but they can also quickly recite details of the well-executed stands that inspired them to think more deeply about the operation or decision-making process.

The final "behind the scenes" preparation that must take place is the faculty in developing the actual travel plan. This is a soup to nuts process, and every group will have unique requirements. There will be some students with limited mobility – you would not believe the number of field grade officers who are nursing significant injuries. First, transport is no small matter and must include stops for coffee and the conveniences. The second factor that requires detailed planning is the lodging plan. The third is meals. Finally, all this can be significantly affected by local cultural events. For example, if you want to do a study of Anzio and then spend the night in Rome, accomplishing this during a Vatican Jubilee year complicates your planning.

Execution

This all comes together in execution. The assigned stands, site access, travel time, and student-faculty pairings all converge on the day in the open-air classroom. Students who have operational stands will have their carefully prepared handouts. Faculty mentors will introduce the stand and then have the student first present their stand and lead a detailed discussion that should foment a vibrant discourse. The student must distil the battle-site down into a 15-20 minute presentation and prepare a set of questions to prompt further analysis. Each stop should allow the students to conduct their own survey after the discussion, on average, about 30 minutes, and overall about 90 minutes. If one can leverage existing museums, that adds another 45 minutes. Students should be taking copious notes, many of which will lead to follow-on questions on the coach and at shared meals. The importance of time for questioning, reflecting, and discussion must not be discounted, for herein lies the hidden value of the field study step in the overall staff ride program.

The daily grind of staff ride sustainment requires some time set aside for a nightly roundtable amongst the faculty, student leaders, and student-mentor final checks for the next day. What time is check-out and breakfast, where is lunch, what is the weather forecast, what changes to the original plan must be adjusted? These may seem to be small things, but aggregated,

they can become quite aggravating if one fails to plan some organizational leadership time each day.

One of the things that I have seen added to staff rides is a cemetery visit. It is one thing to stand on a hilltop and opine about how one might have done this better and achieved a (more) decisive effect; it is quite another to visit row after row of headstones that say "Unknown" and quietly consider the cost of combat. Even the best laid plans and executed operations still result in the maiming, killing, and emotional scars of the ultimate contest of armed will.

Conclusion

Commander's empathy is always my overarching objective for a staff ride. It is one thing to sit in a climate-controlled library with a couple of maps and various books and articles before you. It is entirely different to stand by General Gavin's fighting position a few meters from La Fière Bridge and look at the enormity of the tasks he faced, confronted by a determined enemy, with his force spread across the marshes and bocage of Normandy and ask, "what now, General"? I have never participated in a staff ride built upon academics and war games or re-designs where participants did not walk away saying words to the effect of "This is a lot harder than I ever imagined it would be looking at a map and an order of battle." You will never get that operational *Fingerspitzengefühl* sitting in seminar – you have to get out there and imagine, think, and feel the nature of the beast that is combat at the operational level of war. This is what immersive PME provides.