

Indian Wars staff ride educates GMD Soldiers

By MAJ Laura Kenney

STORY, Wyoming — The hills look much different today ... Then, they were littered with the broken, bloody bodies of cavalymen in blue and of their equally agonized horses. The feathered arrows punctuating the battlefield served mute testimony to the agents of the combatants' demise, but naught else was quiet — screams from wounded and dying men and horses mingled with curses and prayers to create a horrific blanket of sound.

Today, all is quiet ... one could hear the wind in the tall grasses surrounding the silent white gravestones. The ground is now clear — evidence of that long ago tragedy is buried with its blood and bones and tears under the green hills.

Standing by the graves of LTC George Armstrong Custer and his men was a fitting culmination to an Indian Wars staff ride undertaken by Soldiers of the 100th Missile Defense Brigade (Ground-based Midcourse Defense). Sixteen members of the unit and six family members took the five hundred mile trip here from their headquarters in Colorado Springs Aug. 24-26. The purpose of the trip was to educate unit members on how military lessons of the past may be ap-

plied to today's battlefield, and to also build unit cohesiveness and esprit-de-corps. Staff rides are a centuries old tradition in the military of passing on lessons learned.

This particular staff ride emphasized the journey to the catastrophic Battle of Little Big Horn, both chronologically and physically. Unit members, accompanied by military history experts from the Staff Ride Team, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, visited three different battle sites that were considered to be preludes to "Custer's Last Stand," before completing the journey and the story where it ended 130 years ago.

Andy Tafoya, a Department of the Army contractor serving as a senior military analyst for the 100th MDB, set up the staff ride for the unit. Tafoya, a retired Air Defense Artillery officer who had previously worked extensively with missile defense during his military career, has been an avid history buff since his first staff ride twenty-some-odd years ago. And perhaps even longer than that, as he was raised on stories of a famous ancestor — Bernardo Miera y Pacheco — who was the first cartographer to chart the



At Fort Phil Kearny, Dr. Ricardo Herrera (back to camera) describes the layout of the historic fort as Soldiers and family members listen intently. *Photo by Sgt. Sara Storey*

Grand Canyon region back in the 1700s.

“We began planning this staff ride two years ago. Costs are always a concern, and have to be balanced with value and other priorities, but we were able to do this at minimal cost to the unit, with maximum effect. The military history teachers actually ended up being no cost to us, through a now-defunct funding site. Soldiers who took family members did so at their own expense.”

Practicalities such as expense out of the way, Tafoya brought an enthusiasm and a passion to the project that was contagious. At a planning meeting just two weeks before departure, Tafoya outlined upcoming events, ending with a heartfelt, “In just a few days, you’ll be standing where Custer stood, seeing something of what he saw in the last moments of his life. You should all be getting goose bumps about now.”

Numerous professional development classes prior to the staff ride gave attendees a baseline education on what they could expect to see, to better their future understanding. Officers and NCOs of the unit were tasked to research different aspects of the Indian Wars, and in turn educate their fellow Soldiers. Movies such as “Death runs riot/The West” and “Son of the Morning Star” were shown. A 200-page read-

ahead was given to attendees.

Finally, the two instructors from Leavenworth greeted the Soldiers and family members when they arrived at the staging area here, the morning of Aug. 25.

Dr. Ricardo Herrera and LTC Kevin Kennedy gathered the group together in a half-circle on the lawn outside the Wagon Box Inn — the cowboy-bunk style inn where staff ride attendees stayed. Introducing themselves, the instructors used charts to detail the upcoming journey, starting with Fort Phil Kearny, moving to the Bozeman Trail, then to the sites of the Fetterman and Connor Battlefields and the Wagon Box Fight, finally culminating at Little Big Horn. The instructors drew parallels between past and present, and the unchanging, in their view, nature of man.

Herrera stated categorically, “Don’t think what we’re doing in Iraq is the first time we’ve been involved in so-called “nation-building.” That is exactly what we were doing in the Indian Wars, facing many of the same challenges our Soldiers in the Middle East are facing as we speak. Back “then,” our Soldiers had to find the enemy, he didn’t just openly confront. Our troops had to figure out how many they were facing — the Indians didn’t want pitched battles as they

Tip of the Sphere



Above, Michael Tafoya, son of 100th Missile Defense Brigade (Ground-based Midcourse Defense) senior military analyst Andy Tafoya, checks out a cannon at Fort Phil Kearny with the assistance of Branwyn Kenney, daughter of MAJ Laura Kenney, during an Indian Wars staff ride that Soldiers and family members of the unit attended in August. Left, LTC Kevin Kennedy (pointing) describes the layout of the Fetterman Fight, in which eighty-one cavalymen were massacred by over two thousand Indians, to attendees of the Indian Wars staff ride. Photos by SGT Sara Storey

couldn't afford to lose large numbers of people. Their biggest threat to our Soldiers was often their constant harassment of supply trains. Think convoy. Does any of this sound familiar? It should."

Visiting Fort Phil Kearny, the Soldiers saw cannons and the outlines of the original fort. They listened as the instructors told of the fort's mission of protecting travelers along the Bozeman Trail, and of trying to prevent intertribal warfare between the Native Americans in the area. They heard how the site became the focal point of a violent war between the U.S. Army and the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians opposed to white intrusions into the last great hunting grounds on the Northern Plains. Silhouettes of Indians on horseback stood guard on the surrounding hills, allowing the modern day visitor a small inkling of how members of the fort might have felt so long ago, continually under observation.

One attendee, SSG Kurtiss Clark, who'd brought his nine-year-old son, Jaron, with, commented, "Reading about and seeing the actual sites of these battles are two different things. Literally seeing it from the perspective of the men who fought them made a big difference. Bringing my son was a good idea — although I'm sure he didn't get some of the details, he did absorb a lot of the big picture, and a big picture it certainly was."

Traveling to the site of the Fetterman Fight and the monument erected to commemorate the massacre, the group walked some of the trail eighty-one cavalymen fled down a century plus ago, in their uneven and doomed battle against two thousand Indians.

Instructor Kennedy read a moving account of one Soldier's heroism, told from the perspective of a victorious Indian.

"Fighting against the horse soldiers (cavalymen) Swift Hawk did not feel brave when he stabbed the bugler, an old man who had fought bravely. When the old man had used all his bullets, he struck at our braves with his bugle, refusing to give up. He was old, he should have been sitting by the fire while his children fought. After he died, a brave covered him with a buffalo skin." Kennedy concluded the vignette by saying that the body of the valiant bugler was one of the few corpses left undesecrated after the fight.

Another highlight of the unique professional development event was the opportunity to see the battlefields on horseback, by taking the terrain appreciation

ride. Soldiers and family members could survey the battlefield from the height of a nearby mountain, and many took the opportunity. Seeing the sites from the same vantage point many of the Soldiers of yesteryear had enjoyed gave participants a different feel for the distances traveled, and the pace traveled at. For many, this was the highlight of the trip.

Eleven-year-old Branwyn Kenney, daughter of a GMD Soldier, said, "It must have taken them so long to travel distances. The tour and all we learned was very sad and sometimes beautiful, like the story about the bugler. My favorite part was the horseback ride." Her 13-year-old brother Reilly, on the other hand, seemed more interested in tomahawks and scalping.

Coming at last, as Custer did, to Little Big Horn, the instructors intentionally took the group through the physical and chronological route of how the battle played out, discussing mistakes and misunderstandings that led to the final, infamous defeat. Ending at Custer's grave, attendees stood quietly for a moment, looking at the resting place of a man who, until that last day, had been renowned for both his battle prowess and his vanity.

SFC Charles Rice, missile defense crewman, a history buff who'd researched the battles extensively, said, "Standing there, after having seen and walked the actual terrain, changed my view of the battle dramatically. I understood it much better than before. It brought home to me two lessons: one, that you should never underestimate your enemy, and two, just because something worked before doesn't mean it will work again. This tour was a very clear demonstration of those points."

From Little Big Horn through missile defense to nation-building in Iraq — for the Soldiers of the 100th MDB, the staff ride drew it all together.

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