



**By: Jim Greer**

Throughout my life I have visited many battlefields, certainly more than I can remember. The first battlefield I visited was Kennesaw Mountain, with my Dad when I was seven years old. The most recent was Fort McHenry last year (crossing the birthplace of our National Anthem off my bucket list). Some of these visits have been strictly tourism, some personal development, some staff rides, and some for other reasons. All have been instructive and visiting battlefields has been a core component of both my personal and professional growth as a security professional and a member of the human race. Below are the five battlefields I'd like to highlight that have had a profound effect on my life.

## **Kennesaw Mountain**

When I was six years old we moved to Atlanta, Georgia. My Father was an artilleryman and always very interested in the Civil War and Civil War battlefields, particularly since he had grown up in the Northeast where none of those battles had taken place. When I was seven he took me out to the battlefield of Kennesaw Mountain. Kennesaw Mountain was one of the series of battles and engagements that took place during the defense and siege of Atlanta in 1864. It was the first battlefield of any type that I have been to, although it would prove to

be the first of many more.

Kennesaw Mountain was a particularly violent battle. In it, the Confederates were defending the heights of Kennesaw Mountain, well entrenched and with commanding fields of fire. The Union troops attempted to attack up the mountain to dislodge the Confederates and secure the high ground in support of the broader operation to take the city of Atlanta. The Union attacks were repeatedly repulsed with severe losses.

At the battlefield my Dad took me to the Confederate breastworks. We knelt down behind them just as the Confederate soldiers had done and so we had a view of the long slope up which the Union forces had struggled against withering fire from prepared defenses. My Dad explained the battle to me in terms a seven year old could comprehend. What I have never forgotten is how he stressed to me the leadership the Union officers must have been able to exert and the courage the Union soldiers must have had to attack over and over up that slope even in the midst of horrendous losses.

I never forgot that lesson and when later I served I tried to be worthy of the great Patriots who would follow me into battle, just as those Union troopers had followed their officers up that mountain.

## Sedan

When I was a Battalion Commander I took my officers and Senior NCOs on a staff ride of the German breakout at Sedan in France in 1940. We were fortunate enough to have Colonel (Retired) Michael Doughty, the author of [The Breaking Point](#), the definitive work on the battle of Sedan as our Staff Ride leader and facilitator. Colonel Doughty had a unique ability to be able to talk tactics to the junior lieutenant and the NCOs and operational art to the field grades. He was unbelievably knowledgeable about every inch and aspect of the battle.

One of the most powerful aspects of this particular battlefield was learning how to use a staff ride for leader development, and perhaps more importantly, staff collective development in a unit. I had been on many staff rides before, but those had been in an academic setting, and hence focused on individual learning, vice organizational improvement. On this staff ride our staff learned how to think collectively about a problem, devise solutions, and then think through how those solutions would be implemented and translated into reality on the battlefield.

The Sedan staff ride was also instructive for me personally in terms of putting together all

the pieces of what constituted the operational art, the arrangement of battles and engagements in time, space, and purpose. As we walked the battlefield for several days I was actually able to see how the operational art unfolded and generated victory in that operation.

## **Guam**

The only Pacific Island beachhead I have been to is Guam. There, in July of 1944 the 3d Marine Division and US Army 77th Infantry division conducted amphibious operations to take the island against an undermanned, but determined Japanese defense. The first thing that struck me when I went to the beach where the Marines had come ashore was how small it was. The whole beachhead where the landings occurred is probably only 200 yards wide. And the United States bombarded that beachhead and the hills surrounding it with battleships, cruisers, destroyers and countless raids by bombers for days before the actual attack.

What amazed me was the thought of the amount of force from that bombardment that was compressed into a relatively small space and then applied over time. And yet, there were Japanese defenders who survived. I walked into one Japanese machine gun emplacement set into the volcanic hillside on the western edge of the beachhead. It was probably only 30 feet above sea level and not more than 50 yards from the water's edge, in full view of the ships that had pounded the island for days. And yet the machine gunners there not only survived, but were able to engage the US forces as they came ashore. Sitting there in that machine gun emplacement hollowed out of rock with no concrete or other man-made protection, I was amazed at the ability of the human to survive such force. I think about countless other soldiers, in countless other wars, on every continent, throughout the ages, who fought and survived or died under such horrific circumstances. And I am reminded once again of the power of human courage and dedication. And just will to survive.

## **Suez Canal**

When I was a young captain I had the honor of taking the first military team back into Egypt after the Camp David Peace Accords. The Camp David Peace Accords had ratified the results of the 1973 October War, and brought peace between Egypt and Israel, a peace that has endured for 40 years now.

While I was in Egypt I was lucky enough to work with an Egyptian armor lieutenant colonel who had been a company commander during the crossing of the Suez Canal on October 6,

1973. One day he took me to the crossing site that the Egyptians have maintained in order to preserve their history, and to honor the efforts of their armed forces, in what was for them virtually the only victory they ever secured against the Israelis. It just so happened that that crossing site was the very location that the lieutenant colonel had crossed with his company. So he took me on a mini-staff ride of the Suez Canal Crossing. He showed me their hide positions on the Egyptian side of the canal, their approach march, how they had crossed the bridges, and their first objective on the far side.

He showed me where he had lost his first tank to an Israeli tank, and explained in great detail the tactics that were involved and why the superior tactics and training of the Israelis had caused that loss. He also took me to their second objective and en route explained how the mass of Egyptians pouring across the canal had overwhelmed the limited Israeli forces defending it. He also showed me how layered anti-tank guided missile infantry-centric tactics had defeated the previously victorious tank-heavy forces of the Israelis. It was a great day for me and one of the better professional development exercises I have had in my life.

What I learned, and the reason that I have used the crossing of the Suez Canal in many professional development events since, is that complex operations like wet gap crossings succeed only through extremely detailed planning, thorough preparation, the application of doctrine, and the ability to improvise as circumstances on the ground unfold that render portions of the original plan irrelevant.

## **Gettysburg (Pickett's Charge)**

I first learned about the battle of Gettysburg and Pickett's Charge in the fourth grade. I went to school in Virginia, and the narrative at the time was one of not just how the battle was lost, but also that Pickett's Charge represented the "high water mark of the Confederacy." It was only many years later that I visited the battlefield, after I had joined the Army, and walked Pickett's Charge up to Cemetery Ridge that I truly understood what the term high water mark of the Confederacy meant.

It is useful to remember that the Union victories of Vicksburg and Gettysburg were won almost the same day. Probably no two battles are more important to the ultimate outcome of the Civil War, but for very different reasons. Vicksburg contributed to the long-term victory of the Union from a logistical and resourcing standpoint. In contrast, Gettysburg saved the Union in the near term. Had Lee won at Gettysburg, it is entirely possible that his Army could have captured Philadelphia, Washington DC, or destroyed the major port of Baltimore.

Of course it is impossible to know if a victory at Gettysburg would have won the Civil War for the Confederacy. It is entirely possible that even with the loss of Washington DC the Union could have regrouped and eventually its manpower and industrial might would have overcome the more limited means of the Confederacy. But certainly Gettysburg was a decisive battle in every sense of the word.

I have visited the Gettysburg battlefield more than two dozen times in my life. Every time I go to the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, I make sure I take a few hours and go and visit the battlefield only a few miles away. Those visits have a singular purpose. I go to the start point of Pickett's Charge and I walk the entire charge across the fields up to the ridge and as I do so I reflect on why I joined the Army and why I continue to serve the Nation even today while retired. I am reminded of the Preamble to the Constitution in which:

*We the People agreed to form a more perfect union, establish justice ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty.*

That doesn't happen unless Americans join and serve in our Armed Forces. It is the Armed Forces who provide for the common defense and it is the Armed Forces who secure the blessings of liberty, just as those Union soldiers did so many years ago. Like so many others, I have lived and witnessed and experienced the death, destruction, and horrors of war. And I am reminded of that as I make that slow walk up the long grassy slope to the ridge, and stand among the monuments to the defense of the Nation. No other place on earth reminds me of why we fight and how important it is that future generations are ready, willing, and able to fight, and if necessary die, for the Constitutional ideas that really are the United States. Nothing else I do reaffirms my commitment to that effort than walking the battlefield of Gettysburg.

## Honorable Mention

Of the many more I have visited the next five: **Waterloo** for its multi-national lessons (and well ... duh ... it's Waterloo); **Vicksburg** for the operational art; **Jena-Auerstadt** for its elasticity in time and space (and because I suffered through studying it at West Point); **Harpers Ferry** for its homeland security implications; and **Yorktown** for the siege, joint and coalition operations.

## **What are some of your favorite battlefields to visit and how have they influenced your outlook on leadership?**

*[Colonel \(Ret\) Jim Greer](#) is a graduate of the United States Military Academy who commanded armor and cavalry units at every level through brigade. A veteran of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and peacekeeping operations in Balkans, he served along the Inter-German Border defending NATO during the Cold War. When not in combat units he served primarily in leader development positions, including instructing tactics at West Point and as the Director of the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies. Since retiring he has taught leadership, planning and organizational effectiveness in the private sector.*

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