

Revisiting the scene can be a good thing



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In the movie *Patton*, the general takes several of his officers to visit the site of a Roman Empire battle 2,000 years earlier. He understood the value of standing on hallowed ground and learning lessons from the review process.

The military recognizes that fighting and refighting battles teaches subsequent generations lessons of survival — or it teaches the opposite. Fighting a new battle using an old technique often results in death and destruction. The most meaningful lesson from the past comes as a new way to reduce loss.

This idea has made its way into the fire service — specifically in visiting the sites of major fire events and reliving the experience. The staff-ride concept is a step in the right direction when preparing for the future. It may well have a significant long-range impact on your personal and your department's knowledge base.

Recently, I was asked to participate in a staff ride in an area of California primed for a major disaster. The staff ride was led by a senior member of the local fire department who was retiring — leaving with him his huge institutional memory. This county native had become a firefighter at a very early age and been involved in almost all of the department's major operations during his lifetime. He was more or less a walking textbook on what is likely to happen the next time around. Working with other department members, the staff ride visited the sites of fires from the 1920s through the 1990s. The experience was designed to deliver lessons far beyond those learned just by reading about an incident.

Who should be conduct a staff ride? This is a good opportunity to involve retired or senior members of the department. Memory isn't wiped clean upon retirement. On the contrary, some of the old timers can remember facts, figures and phenomena from 50 years ago better than we can recall last weekend.

Here are some additional steps to help make staff rides more meaningful.

Step 1] Develop an agenda for the event. You don't just go to the site and stand around and wonder what happened. Do your homework. Develop a description of the area and read some history on the topic, if available.

Step 2] Define a set of questions for discussion. These questions should not be superficial details such as date and time but rather causes and consequences.

Step 3] Treat the experience as a personal event rather than as a class. Those who go on these staff rides should ferret out the lessons to be learned before the event. Rely on the ride's leader to share some details, but be able to ask the right questions to bring additional details out of that person.

Step 4] Keep copious notes. After staff rides, I was delighted to find additional information on the Internet, in various libraries and from other parties who had knowledge regarding the event.

Also a word of caution: Don't make the group too large. A group of six to 10 people is just the right amount to use two vehicles and to carry on conversation in which everyone can participate. Taking a yellow-bus trip with 45 to 60 people should be kept to grade-school trips, and going on a staff ride with just one other person seems like a waste of time.

At this point you have two choices: First, you can create staff ride led by someone from your department who has first-hand knowledge to share. Second, you can find another agency that conducts staff rides and make yourself a participant. I guarantee that you will gain confidence in what you already know — this is the epitome of adult learning. I used to tell my firefighters that we aren't being tested any time something goes wrong on the fireground — we are taking the final exam. ■

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