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Midshipmen Witness Egyptian Revolution

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Two Naval Academy midshipmen studying language in Egypt unwittingly became witnesses to history in the making.

Midshipmen 2nd Class Ian Cameron, of Rochester, Minn., and Simon Irish, of Harare, Zimbabwe, arrived in Egypt in January for a semester-long study abroad program at the American University in Cairo.

Both Cameron and Irish had visited the Middle East in 2010. Cameron spent eight weeks in Jordan as a part of the State Department's Critical Language Scholarship and a week at the Algerian Naval Academy in Algiers as part of the Naval Academy's Language Regional Expertise and Culture Program. Irish spent four weeks in Cairo on an academy-sponsored language study abroad program. This visit to the Middle East, however, would place them in the middle of a revolution.

"In the days leading up to Jan. 25, we did not expect anything other than minor demonstrations. Even after the first day of demonstrations, we fully expected life to return to normal in the following days," Irish said.

The protests gained momentum, however, and the midshipmen soon found themselves in the middle of rebellion.

"Everything that I thought I understood about the Middle East was completely upended by the confusing scenes I witnessed in downtown Cairo," Cameron said. "Fully veiled women led thousands in anti-regime chants. Angry cries for democracy melted away five times a day as waves of men sunk to their knees in prayer."

From the balcony of their hotel in downtown Cairo, the midshipmen watched a three-hour conflict between protesters and police in the street below.

"I was awed to witness incredible violence and yet at the same time incredible brotherhood," said Irish.

"When protesters were overcome by tear gas or



Photo by Midshipman 2nd Class Ian Cameron

Egyptian protesters congregate outside a hotel near Tahrir Square in Cairo Jan. 24 during the events leading to the Egyptian revolution. Naval Academy Midshipmen 2nd Class Ian Cameron and Simon Irish were staying in the hotel while participating in a semester study abroad program and were able to witness the events from their hotel balcony.

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injury, others would gain permission from the riot police for ambulances to drive into the protest and administer first aid.”

As the police disbanded after the first few days of protests, citizens took responsibility for neighborhood security.

“Armed with shovels, machetes and metal rods, some of the local men of the neighborhood set up a 24-hour checkpoint in front of the hotel and guarded our portion of the street from looters,” Cameron said. “We affectionately dubbed them ‘Barricade Boys,’ and in one instance, they even tried to flag down and question a passing tank.”

When the midshipmen entered the country, they were told to report to the U.S. embassy and establish contact with the naval attaché to better understand the security situation and procedures to be carried out during the semester. Little did they know how quickly these would be implemented.

“We were in consistent communication with the embassy and the midshipmen during the events leading to their eventual evacuation,” said Tim Disher, director of the Naval Academy’s International Programs. “The midshipmen were in the front row viewing history and experienced how our country team is involved with the host nation.”

The evacuation of the midshipmen from Cairo went relatively smoothly. It took several hours to travel to the airport due to the mass protests, and once they arrived, it took another eight hours before they boarded a plane to Athens, Greece. Eight cadets from the U.S. Military Academy, also in Egypt for a study abroad program, were evacuated with the midshipmen.

“Once the midshipmen were evacuated to Greece, we began to explore options for the midshipmen to continue their studies abroad,” said Disher. “Fortunately, and through the intensive efforts and support of a number of folks at the Naval Academy and abroad, the midshipmen were able to continue their studies in Morocco.”

Before the uprising in Egypt, midshipmen generally went to Egypt or Qatar for Arabic studies.

The semester study abroad program began in 2005 and has grown to support all seven languages taught at the Naval Academy. The midshipmen eligible to participate are either juniors or in the first semester of their senior year. They must be nearly fluent in the language for those programs in Spanish, French, German, Japanese and Russian. Within the last two years, the language proficiency of the Arabic and Chinese participants has increased to the level where a majority of the students take all of their courses in the foreign language.

The purpose of the program is to provide midshipmen with an opportunity to develop better proficiency in foreign languages, regional understanding and more awareness of other cultures.

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