

Midshipmen Broaden Global Awareness with Semester Study in China

Midn. 1/C Tristan Willman

Special to *Trident*

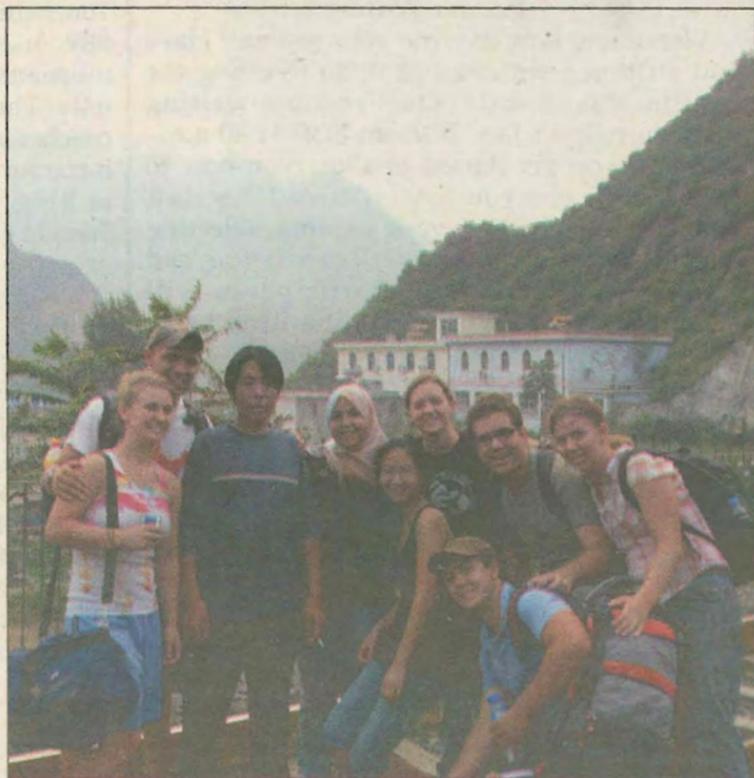
In early 2005, the Navy began outlining the need for improvement in language proficiency, knowledge of different regions of the world, and a better appreciation for other cultures among personnel.

In response to this demand, the Naval Academy set up the International Programs Office in September 2005. According to its director, Mr. Tim Disher, the purpose of the International Programs Office is to facilitate and develop opportunities for international experiences for Midshipmen.

The office sponsors a variety of programs including semester study abroad, summer language immersion trips, cultural opportunities, and professional training. This year, the semester study abroad program sent 23 Midshipmen overseas for the fall semester, six of them to the People's Republic of China.

Midn. 1/C Marco Anich, Megan McCulloch, Riley Walls, Tristan Willman, Kelly Zahalka, and Midn. 2/C Margaret Morton described their time in China as an eye-opening experience that increased their cross-cultural understanding and their appreciation for the effort necessary to establish clear and meaningful communication in a global environment.

"Living in Beijing and studying the Chinese language and culture gave us an understanding that should stand to serve us well in our



Midshipmen who participated in the semester-long cultural and linguistic study program pose for a picture in Hebei Province in the People's Republic of China. Photo courtesy of Midn. 1/C Tristan Willman.

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future careers," they said as part of a collaborative written debrief of their semester abroad. "We not only have a solid foundation in the Chinese language, but also a much more informed knowledge of China's place in the world as seen by both the Chinese people and through the eyes of our own nation."

The program, hosted by Beijing's Capital Normal University, was run by the American-based study abroad organization CET Academic Programs. Along with students from various American civilian universities, the Midshipmen were each paired with a Chinese roommate who filled a variety of roles ranging from occasional translator and language partner to friend and coach in Chinese cultural nuances.

While at the institution, the Midshipmen's studies mainly focused on the Mandarin language, but the curriculum also included an understanding of Chinese politics, the nation's cultural and religious history, and the issues that currently plague China and characterize its ascendancy to greater global prominence. They were exposed to a variety of intriguing viewpoints and ideologies and afforded opportunities to supplement the classroom curriculum with forays into the intellectual and cultural community.

The Midshipmen took advantage of every opportunity to explore many of

China's more distant locales, from areas in the south of China with high concentrations of the nation's ethnic minority population to rural and impoverished areas where one Midshipman researched non-governmental organizations at work among the local population.

Other trips took them across northern and central China by train through the provinces of Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Gansu, and Shaanxi. In the ancient Silk Road hub of Kashgar, they participated in festivities celebrating the end of Ramadan with China's Muslim Uyghur population and taught English for a few nights as guest-speakers at a small Uyghur school. Others traveled to one of China's swiftly-disappearing cultures in Tibet. From exploring the holy city of Lhasa to visiting the Everest Base Camp, they experienced first-hand a region that is still at the forefront of China's national concerns.

The Midshipmen agreed that they were lucky to witness the diversity of China at a pivotal point in its development.

"While this experience removed us from the atmosphere and military training inherent in a semester we would have spent at the Naval Academy, we were given a chance to examine the military's international role and the way that it functions from a new perspective."

