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Midshipmen Spend Semester at French Naval Academy

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Midn. 1/C Breanne Petrella, left, and Lindsey Asdal ride a ski lift in Austria during a semester exchange to the French naval academy. The two Midshipmen had the opportunity to travel within Europe on ski trips and military training events while attending Ecole Navale from January to July 2009. Photo courtesy of International Programs Office.

From January to July 2009, Midn. 1/C Breanne Petrella and Midn. 1/C Lindsey Asdal attended the French Naval Academy, Ecole Navale, as exchange students.

“We have been greatly shaped by our experiences with the French Navy,” said Asdal. “Living in a culture is much different than just visiting the country. We quickly learned the nuances of the culture and the language after making a few cultural gaffes at the beginning of the semester.”

The two Midshipmen found their semester abroad very different from a normal spring semester at the Naval Academy. Although they were at a military institution, Ecole Navale exists specifically to train competent mariners, and its students undergo a much more intensive seamanship and navigation curriculum. Petrella and Asdal spent many weeks underway on the school’s training vessels as well as two weeks on a patrol boat in the Bay of Biscay.

“By the end of our semester at Ecole Navale, we had progressed visibly, and the instructors allowed us both to take the con in French during several watches,” Petrella said. “As these are necessary skills for any Naval officer, we were glad that we improved so significantly.”

Both Midshipmen described the semester as an enlightening experience, being able to attend an allied country's naval school and witness the similarities and differences between the French navy and U.S. Navy. They also interacted with contingencies from the Italian, Polish, Spanish, British, South Korean, Gabonese, Kuwaiti, Qatari, Lebanese, Cameroonian, Togolese and German navies.

“It was also very interesting for us to be in Europe while cross-Atlantic debates and cooperation were occurring, as we experienced issues from a very different perspective and debated our opinions with the French,” said Petrella.

According to the two Midshipmen, their French-speaking ability and cultural awareness increased dramatically during their time in France. They gained a new understanding of the European mindset while interacting with friends from countries ranging from South Korea to Gabon.

“We have both returned to the United States much more culturally aware than we were when we left. Our experiences have allowed us to develop an appreciation for foreign cultures and navies, and our proficiency in enabling cooperation among allies from vastly different cultures will serve us well after graduation,” Asdal said.

During the course of the semester, Petrella and Asdal visited Italy, Spain, England, Austria and Germany. The school participated in a ski trip to Austria and there were several port calls in England. They also spent much time in Paris for conferences, parade training and vacations and were allowed time to tour France.

“It was a valuable semester, and our varied experiences throughout our seven months in France will prove essential to our future careers as Naval officers,” said Asdal.

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