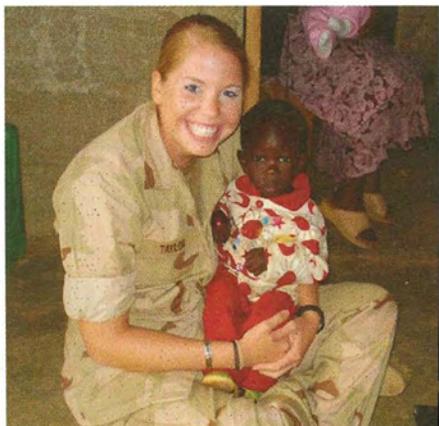


# The Africa I Carry With Me

By Midshipmen  
Ashley Taylor '09

I RESPONDED TO AN E-MAIL FROM THE PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS OFFICE SEEKING RISING FIRST CLASS MIDSHIPMEN INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN A NEW SUMMER TRAINING OPPORTUNITY. THE INITIAL E-MAIL WAS VAGUE ONLY STATING THAT THIS UNIQUE PROGRAM WOULD ALLOW A SMALL GROUP OF FIRSTIES TO TRAVEL TO EASTERN AFRICA AND WORK WITH THE COMMAND JOINT TASK FORCE OPERATING OUT OF DJIBOUTI. UNBEKNOWNST TO ME AT THE TIME, MY SIMPLE RESPONSE SPARKED WHAT WOULD BECOME MY MOST REWARDING ACADEMY EXPERIENCE.



Midshipman Ashley Taylor '09 during a visit to a Ugandan primary school where Chalk 2 handed out a sea-bag full of beanie-babies

After two months of intense preparations, including a plethora of paperwork, vaccines and revised packing lists, 14 first class midshipmen began a two-day journey to the Horn of Africa. Gone were the days of summer training clad in coveralls, flight suits or khakis; we had our Desert Camouflage Utilities, suede Bates boots, boonie caps and mosquito nets. We knew we would be spending a significant portion of the four-week training block down-range in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. However, none of us knew what to expect. Because this was a “trial program,” neither did anyone else.

On 22 July 2008, we piled into two vans outside of Luce Hall and drove to Norfolk where we met the Rotator which took us to Djibouti by way of the Azores, Sicily, Crete and Bahrain. By the time we touched down in Djibouti on the



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*I am a part of all that I have met;*

*Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough*

*Gleams that untravelled world, whose  
margin fades*

*For ever and for ever when I move.*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Ulysses*

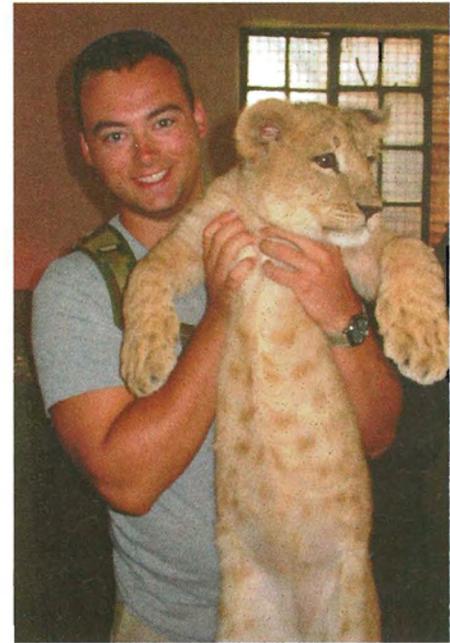
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24th, we immediately found ourselves in the midst of a flurry of activity, all centered around our specific training. After being bused to Camp Lemonier and given a few minutes to shower and get settled, we were handed detailed itineraries for the next four weeks, starting with that night. After dinner, we were taken into Djibouti City where we participated in the U.S. Embassy English Discussion Group. The topics for discussion, usually chosen by the local Djiboutians (who in some cases had been studying English for less than a year), were no trite subjects. They included issues such as the legality of the courts at Guantanamo Bay, U.S. versus Chinese spheres of influence and the significance of the outcome of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election. In less than 24 hours, we were thrown head first into the issues of Eastern Africa with our participation in the English Discussion Group. Over the next five days in Djibouti, a fire hose of information was directed our way; we attended countless briefings about the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) organization, background and mission, including a geopolitical pre- and post-colonial history of the region, and explanations of transitional tribal allegiances and the creation of porous border regions. We were also given a tour of one of the larger refugee camps outside of Djibouti City. The camp was filled with first, second and third generation refugees from conflicts in Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. All this activity was geared towards providing the most solid preparation for our journey down-range.

On 29 July we traveled to Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania, where we spent one night before beginning the seven hour bus ride to Tanga the following morning. The bus ride itself was particularly interesting as the lushness of Tanzania provided a stark contrast to the desert poverty we saw in Djibouti. Tanga, a coastal city in northern Tanzania, was home to the Army Civil Affairs Team we shadowed for the majority of the week. In a briefing at the team's house, we were informed that Tanga marks the southern-most point of extremist influence

spreading out of Somalia. The goal of this team was to stop the spread of this extremist influence by building stable relationships with the locals, mainly through humanitarian projects. We were fortunate enough to join the team in constructing foundations for well pumps in two villages in the region of Pingoni. After over a week of preparations, our first day in Pingoni provided us with our first full cultural immersion experience. We witnessed firsthand the logistical challenges posed by poor roads and difficult terrain, as well as the complexity of trying to accomplish specific tasks despite a large language barrier.

On 5 August, our group split into two separate Chalks (groups). As a part of Chalk 2, I traveled to Kambala, Uganda, to the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) Cadet Training Academy. This Academy, with more than 300 cadets in training, produces officers to the Ugandan army and air force. We were dropped off at the cadet barracks around 2200, and after about two hours of getting situated, we were introduced to the nightly Ugandan nap. At 0245, I was awoken by my host cadet, Brenda, who informed me that it was time to get out of bed, iron my sheets and my new, jungle green UPDF uniform, and begin the day. After a morning run at 0400, we went to the armory where we were issued AK-47s. We spent the rest of the day at the range, qualifying on and learning the intricacies of the weapon. In our time spent with the UPDF cadets, we were exposed to some stark and startling differences in our respective training experiences. The Ugandan cadets receive two hours of sleep, on average, per night. They have excellent endurance, completing daily morning and afternoon runs of about four kilometers, and longer but less frequent runs of up to 50 kilometers. However, proper nutrition and hydration are not emphasized. When the midshipmen, who had never touched an AK-47, averaged better shooting scores than the host cadets, their instructors chastised them for lacking stamina. However, the midshipmen were given boxes of water and MRE replenishments throughout the almost 12 hours spent at the range; they were given a one-liter canteen of water. Despite these harsh conditions, the similarities between the midshipmen and the UPDF cadets were even more striking.



*Midshipman Patrick Nolan '09 holding a lion cub at the Nairobi Animal Orphanage*

My first night in Kabamba, Brenda grabbed her flashlight, or “torch,” and escorted me to the bathing facilities outside. On our walk, she asked me why I chose to serve in the United States military. After breaking into some lengthy response about the great education and the need to always seek a challenge, I asked her the same question. Her response? “Because I love my country.”

On 12 August, after saying our goodbyes in Uganda, Chalk 2 journeyed to Manda Bay, Kenya. We spent the next two days at Camp Simba, a forward operating base with a maximum capacity of about 60 troops. We spent one day out on the Indian Ocean with the Special Boat Team, and another with the Civil Affairs Team in the towns of Siu and Lamu. From Manda Bay, we traveled to Nairobi where we participated in a safari in Nairobi National Park and shadowed officer cadets at the Kenyan Armed Forces Training College. From Kenya, it was back to Djibouti and Camp Lemonier



Chalk 2 (Midshipmen Jeff Lindbom '09, Brian Rigez '09, Allison Withers '09, Patrick Nolan '09, Peter Willet, Chris Odom '09 and Ashley Taylor '09) with a few of the Ugandan instructors

where we rejoined Chalk 1 in preparation for the long journey back to the United States and the Naval Academy.

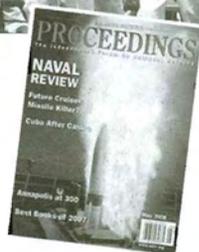
In terms of our leadership development as midshipmen, the lessons were invaluable during the trip. We received a first person perspective on deployed life, hands on exposure to foreign military tactics, a concrete understanding of the need for interagency cooperation, all while engaging in a continuous inter-service and cross-cultural exchange.

This experience gave me so much more. My world was expanded to include people and places that only three months ago were vague and unfamiliar. Even if I am unable to articulate this development in concrete terms now, there are certain things I will always remember. I will remember our first day in Djibouti; one classmate compared the heat to sticking your face inside an open oven door (and keeping it there), while another simply said, “It’s hotter than hell.” I will remember the women in Pingoni. With bare feet and babies snugly secured to their backs, they balanced buckets full of rocks on their heads; it was as if they rose out of the land they walked on, relying solely on the rhythm of their hips to steady their steps though the jungle. I will remember an evening run with Brenda and her UPDF classmates through the hills of Kabamba, Swahili cadences echoing out into the sunset. I will remember petting a cheetah and passing around a baby lion in the Nairobi Animal Orphanage and thinking, “Is this really happening?” I will remember 14 classmates who began the journey as simple acquaintances, but who can now be heard greeting each other in the Hall with a loud, “Jambo!” This is the Africa I carry with me. †

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