



International Midshipmen: Focus on Middle East

By Rachel F. Goldberg



Not only do midshipmen benefit from the expertise at CMEIS, but the Navy does as well. Professor Deborah Wheeler, Ph.D., briefed Sailors aboard the JOHN C. STENNIS Carrier Strike Group as they headed to the Gulf on deployment. When she walked into the ready room of the ship, she was met by many Naval Academy graduates. She said the two weeks spent on the ship changed her in a fundamental way.

“The experience made what I’m doing here at the Academy seem so much more real and important,” Wheeler said.
Top: Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Denny Cantrell

While history and tradition are synonymous with the U.S. Naval Academy—I-Day and Plebe Summer, football and sailing, parades and formation—so are innovation and advancement: academic majors in information technology, exchange programs and now, Middle Eastern studies. In a changing world and a country at war, the Navy and Marine Corps seek officers with knowledge of tactically significant areas of the world.

“The Navy and Marine Corps agree that in-depth knowledge of the cultures, languages, history and civilizations of regions in which our forces are deployed can be a critical factor in the success of our military operations,” said Dean William “Bill” Miller ’62, academic dean and provost at USNA. “Such knowledge is essential for effects-based thinking and operational planning, and should directly impact campaign planning, strategic communications, theater security cooperation and naval engagement strategies.”

To give midshipmen this essential knowledge on Middle East affairs, the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies (CMEIS) was established. Growing in depth and breadth since its inception two years ago, the Center brings together faculty experts to educate future Navy and Marine Corps officers with a greater knowledge of this part of the world and one of its religions.

Curricular Growth

“Middle East studies may be part of majors in history and political science,” Professor Brannon Wheeler, Ph.D., director of CMEIS, said. A major focusing on the Middle East involves two years of language study, probably Arabic, and by first class year, a midshipman would have two years of Arabic and two or three courses on history and Islamic studies.

While it would be ideal for all midshipmen to study the Middle East, not all majors are able to fit into their schedules electives with such a focus because of already rigorous academic demands, such as those for engineering majors. Thus, the Navy has decided to pursue foreign language proficiency for USNA graduates majoring in the humanities and social sciences; regional expertise for USNA midshipmen taking foreign languages; and cultural awareness for all naval personnel, according to Dean Miller.

“We do encourage all midshipmen who have had previous language training and education to continue their studies at USNA where their choice of electives permits,” Dean Miller said. Plebes interested in studying one of the critically important languages are encouraged to start their studies in their fourth class year.

“The returns on this latter initiative thus far have been slow but encouraging,” Dean Miller said, noting that the Class of 2011 will have 44 midshipmen studying Arabic in the fall semester, 39 studying Chinese, 13 Japanese and 16 Russian; totaling 112 midshipmen taking one of the critically important

Courses Offered to Midshipmen through CMEIS

Courses in Language Studies

Arabic
French

Courses in History

Middle East History
Islam in Africa
Ancient Near Eastern History
Late Antique History
Crusades

Courses in Leadership, Ethics, and Law

Leadership and Law

Courses in Political Science

Middle East Politics
Iran
South Asia
Islam in Southeast Asia

languages during their plebe year, an increase of 32 midshipmen over the Class of 2010.

Among the electives offered, Wheeler has taught courses in classical Arabic, Quran and Muslim interpretation in Arabic, origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle East.

“It is rewarding to teach courses and supplement other course offerings,” Wheeler said.

Faculty Development

In addition to teaching, the CMEIS director develops and enables faculty to explore their areas of expertise further and share their knowledge with the Navy, Marine Corps and USNA midshipmen. Professor Wheeler coordinates 12 faculty members as of August 2007. They teach in language, history and political science departments. New courses relevant to the Middle East continue to be added to Naval Academy academics, some being electives and others will come in the form of modifications to the core curriculum.

“Greater curricular impact will come with the addition of more regional specialists in the departments of history, English, economics, political science and language studies,” Dean Miller said.

“Faculty changes come more slowly than course changes because most hiring opportunities occur only when an existing faculty member leaves the Academy. That is why philanthropically funded hiring opportunities, like the newly established Class of 1955 Endowed Chair in Middle East Studies,



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—Dean Bill Miller '62, academic dean and provost

CMEIS Spring 2007 Activities

In the four months of the spring 2007 semester, CMEIS organized the following activities:

Kylan Jones-Huffman Memorial Lecture Series

- Director, Center for Study of Civilizations, Ain Shams University, Alexandria, Egypt (January '07)
- Classical Arabic music (February '07)
- President of the Islamic Society of North America (March '07)
- His Royal Highness Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan (April '07)

USNA Visits

- Deputy Director of Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, Amman, Jordan (February '07)
- Deputy Director of Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning (March '07)
- Harvard Law School and Fulbright Fellow (March '07)
- Professor of Operational Culture at Marine Corps University (March '07)
- President, American University of Kuwait (March '07)
- KBR Force Protection, Kabul, Afghanistan (April '07)
- Special Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense for International Affairs (April '07)
- Director, Anti-Arab Discrimination League, Washington, DC (April '07)

are so important," he said. They enable the addition of faculty experts long before federal budgeting processes could respond to changing needs.

Professor Wheeler said that he works hard to get faculty educated with the military aspects of the studies, especially in a constantly changing world and war. "When faculty travels to the region they try to hook up with the local navy," the director said. "We have good connections with the international affairs division of the Navy and Marine Corps, Quantico and Carrier Strike Groups staff."

In fact, three professors have completed assignments aboard ships at sea where they briefed officers onboard on their subjects of expertise. Over the summer, Professor Ernie Tucker completed an assignment with the carrier ENTERPRISE Strike Group deploying to the Middle East. Professors Brannon Wheeler and Deborah Wheeler were deployed in January and April.

International Programs

Working with the International Programs Office (IPO), Professor Wheeler collaborates with

Commander Tim Disher '81, USN (Ret.), director of IPO, who manages all international programs for midshipmen, faculty and staff. IPO sends students to study and live in foreign countries, in the Middle East and elsewhere, for a semester or a summer.

A four year program, allows up to 60 students from foreign countries may attend the Naval Academy at one time for a four-year education. This program is not a reciprocal exchange program, but rather one for which students come from countries that are invited to apply for admission to the Naval Academy. Participating in the four-year program at USNA, 48 students represent these countries: Albania, Algeria, Belize, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Ireland, Jamaica, Korea, Lithuania, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Micronesia,

Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Tunisia.

Up to 24 students enrolled at foreign service academies may receive instruction at USNA in exchange for USNA midshipmen receiving instruction at those foreign service



Midshipman Ben Fehr '08, Professor Wheeler, HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of the Royal Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Commander Disher, USN (Ret.), at Prince Ghazi's palace in Amman, Jordan in Summer 2006 at Prince Ghazi's palace. Photo courtesy Trident newspaper

academies through the Semester Program. For the 2007 fall semester, there will be 20 foreign military students at USNA. They come from the French Naval Academy, French Military Academy, Colombian Naval Academy, Chilean Naval Academy, Japan National Defense Academy, Spanish Naval Academy, Royal Military College of Canada and Helmut-Schmidt University in Germany (where German Officers complete their academic program requirements).

U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen will study at these institutions this fall except the French Naval Academy where the midshipmen will study for the spring semester instead. Also this fall, USNA midshipmen will study at civilian universities in China, Egypt, Jordan and Singapore.

A shorter program, the Immersion Program is a Naval Academy sponsored language study and cultural program abroad to include university summer sessions, study tours, exchange visits and limited translator-intern duties. During the summer of 2007, 164 midshipmen visited 15 countries: Belgium, Cambodia, Chile, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Russia, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.

Also in the summer, Professional Programs offer midshipmen opportunities to work with foreign navies. For 2007, 46 midshipmen participated in tall ships and fleet units from Brazil, Chile, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Additionally, 15 midshipmen participated in sailboat regattas in Brazil, France and Turkey, often against foreign naval academies in the particular region.

Programs at Home

In addition to faculty and midshipmen traveling abroad, CMEIS initiates educational outreach activities that include visiting scholars talking to the midshipmen and faculty at the Naval Academy. Spring semester events included a visit by the Deputy Director of Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, Amman, Jordan; President, American University of Kuwait; Special Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense for International Affairs; and others. (See sidebar on page 14.)

The newness of the program makes it hard to measure success. At this point, however, "The success CMEIS has enjoyed can be measured in the number and quality of activities that it has stimulated," Dean Miller said. "We will continue to assess the contributions of CMEIS; but so far, the resources invested have appeared well spent." ↕

Strategic Priorities

This adaptation of curriculum at the Naval Academy has been jump-started by appropriated funds designated for faculty, infrastructure and enhancements to the language curriculum. The Naval Academy envisions a broader program and has requested an infusion of private funds to add the margin of excellence necessary to produce superb leaders for today's complex and dynamic world.

Already, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Saudi Aramco, the American Society of the French Legion of Honor and the Strake Foundation, along with numerous individual donors, have made a commitment to support the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies.

To find out more about the program and fundraising priorities, visit www.usna.com.

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