

## Summer Plans: Read a Book, Get a Tan, Visit Russia

As a college program, one of the things that makes NROTC most unique is the opportunity to travel (for free) as part of summer training. All ROTC cadets and midshipmen can train with active units during the summer, but the Navy offers the best chance of going abroad. This summer, I had a chance to take advantage of this by traveling to a ship forward deployed in Sasebo, Japan, and hitting the foreign ports of Vladivostok, Russia, and Okinawa.



**This revolutionary-era statue dominates Vladivostok's main plaza**

I flew to Japan from Chicago and rendezvoused with seven other midshipmen from across the country aboard the USS HARPERS FERRY (LSD-49). HARPERS FERRY is a landing ship dock, designed to carry 500 Marines anywhere in the world and send them ashore aboard boats and hovercraft. During my time there (just under four weeks), the ship's main mission was to pick up Marines and head to Vladivostok

for an annual diplomatic trip. We headed to Okinawa to retrieve about 120 Marines and then steamed to Vladivostok, where we stayed four days.

HARPERS FERRY pulled into Vladivostok's harbor the morning of July 3, something that would have been unheard of when her captain was just starting out in the Navy. Sailors and Marines, including us midshipmen, manned the rails as we approached the pier, giving the natives a nice view of white and green uniforms upon her decks.

After the ship was moored securely and otherwise squared away, the crew was sent out on liberty, to expire at midnight. At the request of the Russian government, all sailors, officers and midshipmen went into town wearing their summer whites. Thus we all had that "Top Gun" look, and the locals were very interested in taking pictures with us. With a very favorable exchange rate between rubles and dollars, we had a great time eating and shopping and talking with English-speaking Russians.



**Midshipman from across the country enjoy Vladivostok together in a theater restaurant**

We celebrated the Fourth of July at the pier by holding a big barbecue for the crew and inviting about 100 Russian sailors and officers to join us for food, and even karaoke. Our “cultural exchange” included one Marine belting out the importance of having to fight for your right to paaaaaaaarty.

The following day I got to tag along as the Russians returned the favor and hosted some Americans aboard a destroyer moored nearby. They took us on a tour of the ir vessel and then served lunch. With the help of civilian translators, the two sides exchanged toasts and trade secrets, including that the key to Russian ships’ high speed was actually the drinks they were pouring us. It was strange to think that the senior officers in the destroyer’s wardroom began their careers as officers of the Soviet Union.

Russia was a country I never dreamed of visiting in my life, yet all of a sudden there I was. It was an experience none of us would forget.



**Midshipmen pose with the local Russian militia**