Chinese Language Flagship program at ASU advances military service

By Margaret Coulombe

Though an Arizona native, growing up overseas in Japan, Guam and other regions of the Pacific, Midshipman John Paul Mulligan was captivated by Asian language and culture from an early age. It was a passion he pursued first at Brophy High School, where he studied Chinese, then at Fordham University in New York, where he also joined Navy ROTC.

However, less than a year later, he was back in Arizona; a decision that has changed his life.

“I came back to Arizona to attend the Critical Languages Institute’s summer program offered by the Melikian Center,” said Mulligan. “I had no intention of transferring to Arizona State University. Then, I met the director of the Chinese Language Flagship program Madeline Spring. I quickly realized that joining ASU’s Flagship ROTC program meant I could more quickly achieve a professional-level proficiency in Chinese and bolster my naval career.”

According to the Foreign Service Institute, to achieve an advanced level of proficiency in Chinese, Arabic, Japanese or Korean requires between 1,320 and 2,760 hours and up to 92 weeks to attain. That is nearly twice the hours that students typically commit to in more traditional language study. To achieve that level of proficiency, students entering Flagship programs undergo significant testing and targeted training.

One of 80 Flagship students studying Mandarin, which is the primary language in China, Mulligan discovered he was weak in grammar, fluency and language comprehension but strong in reading and writing.
So in addition to taking Chinese language classes, Mulligan received intensive tutoring tailored to address these deficits. Flagship students also take courses in history, literature, politics and religion taught entirely in Chinese. Summer immersion accelerates learning and cultural proficiency as well. In just two years, Flagship students can attain four years of language and cultural training.

"Programs like Chinese Flagship are critical in providing the level of expertise needed to understand the peoples and cultures in areas we operate in," said Captain David Price, commanding officer of ASU's Naval ROTC program. "Graduates of such programs become force multipliers for us and have true strategic impact, helping us to build friendships while also ensuring that potential enemies and we understand each other. In short, graduates from programs like Chinese Flagship can help us achieve our national security strategy while also helping us avoid potentially costly mistakes."

The ASU ROTC program is one of only three pilot programs in the U.S. funded by the Department of Defense. "Military leaders realized the importance of having speakers in critical languages in the services, post-9/11," said Madeline Spring, founder and director of ASU's Flagship program and a professor in the School of International Letters and Cultures. "ASU was chosen because we offered a strong foundation in both our Chinese language and ROTC programs."

Spring's staff worked closely with ASU's ROTC leadership to integrate the two programs over the past three years. One of the early challenges was aligning programmatic schedules, which were significantly different.

As Anthony Tam, the Flagship's program manager, noted: "We learned from each other. We developed online programs and other tools so that our ROTC students could maintain their training even if they are away for ROTC commitments. We wanted no breaks in the language training."

For nine weeks last summer, Mulligan studied in Xiamen, a city in the Fujian Province in southeast China. This summer, he travels to Beijing to study. One of the capstone requirements for his senior year is a full year overseas. Flagship Chinese students either complete one semester
at Nanjing University and then another semester working at an internship in China or spend a full year at a university in Tianjin, the fourth largest city in China. The second option gives students a more structured environment and more classroom time, Mulligan said. “You cannot study the language without understanding the culture.”

Nationally, the U.S. Army and Air Force will establish scholarship programs for Flagship programs in more than 26 critical languages, a result of the successes seen from the Flagship Chinese ROTC pilot programs. “This program builds stronger candidates, individuals who excel as they advance in the services,” said Spring.

Delving deeply into a language and culture also attracted the attention of Midshipman Meghan Treece. “I had been in the student ambassador program in 8th grade and gone to Malta, Italy and France. Our tour guide spoke five languages and I thought it was the coolest thing you could ever do,” said Treece, a junior in Chinese language who is also pursuing a minor in Spanish. “I want to be a pilot and perhaps go into military intelligence where there are lots of opportunities to use language.”

While modest and still growing, the Flagship ROTC program can really change misconceptions of what ROTC is about and what language in the services is really about. “We need language for national security but also for diplomacy, disaster relief and other civilian needs supported by our military members,” said Spring.

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Mulligan agrees. His hope is to commission directly from the ROTC program into cryptology (the technology of making and breaking of codes and ciphers), linguistics or intelligence work. While the Air Force and Army have already commissioned people through the Flagship ROTC program, he would be the first naval Flagship graduate from ASU. If successful, he looks to become a foreign area officer, be posted to an embassy or become a military attaché.

His advice to incoming freshman ROTC Flagship Chinese students: “There are more foreign Chinese speakers studying at ASU than in colleges in New York City or D.C. So don’t get overwhelmed in your freshman year adjusting to the military culture and college lifestyle. Put as much time as you can in the language and get a solid foundation. It will change your future.”