

Riding With the Paul Revere Battalion

ROTC experience includes helicopter ride-along and Meals Read to Eat
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Standing in unmarked fatigues waiting to board a Black hawk helicopter isn't a part of a Crimson reporter's typical afternoon.

But on one of the first hot days of April, I found myself precisely in this situation, desperately copying the motions of the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets to my left and right as they prepared their earplugs for the arrivals of the helicopters.

I boarded the military chopper two weekends ago with the Paul Revere Battalion of ROTC, comprised of students from Harvard, MIT, Wellesley, and Tufts and flew to Fort Devens, Mass. for the cadets' spring field training exercises.

The flight chief gave us a safety briefing on the choppers, warning us to avoid the rotors that could decapitate us as we disembarked.

In my naiveté, I strapped in to the windiest seat in the back right.

"Are you all right, son?" asked the flight chief.

I nodded and took a deep breath.

We took off slowly, flying over the intramural fields and crossing the river, past undergraduate Houses and Memorial Hall on our way out of Cambridge. The wind, churned by the chopper's rear rotor, knocked the visor off my face. It was caught up by the wind and disappeared in an instant.

A NIGHT AT THE BASE

The cadets were briefed and took up "security" positions, forming a perimeter to keep watch.

We were issued Meals Ready to Eat (MREs), which contained packages of pretzels, crackers and cheese paste, lemonade powder, and, for the main course, rice, beans, and sausage, a sort of U.S. Army jambalaya.

More cadets gradually arrived from throughout New England. As the cadets were issued their M16s, we laid our sleeping bags on the ground under and open sky, retiring early in preparation for a long day ahead.

We woke before dawn the next morning, packing our bags before an early breakfast at 4:30 a.m.

Then we separated into assigned squads for the day's dozen missions, which would occupy the next 15 hours with only a couple of minutes in between for rest.

Our squad consisted of mostly Boston University cadets with several MIT and Harvard cadets mixed in.

On our first mission, we were lost within minutes.

As our navigator miscalculated by 40 degrees, he cheerfully marched us through the woods in the wrong direction, allowing me time to speak to the mission's evaluator, Jason M. Scherer '08, who will receive his officer's commission after graduating in June and plans to attend dentistry school.

Scherer looked every inch the infantry officer while radioing back to base and calling out the mock casualties that volunteer "enemies" inflicted upon the squad by firing real M16s with blank rounds.

Scherer will not, however, be serving in the infantry after ROTC.

"I'm doing a little different path than most of the other seniors," he said, explaining that he will serve eight years of reserve duty in the Army National Guard rather than the four years of active duty his ROTC scholarship would otherwise require.

As my squad practiced calling helicopters to evacuate the severe casualties their shoddy planning had produced, Scherer explained that though he will not immediately be called to active duty, he has mentally prepared for the possibility of being deployed after his graduate studies.

"Doctors and specialists do a lot of work in hospitals and go around to work in clinics," he said. "There is a potential for harm, and it could be dangerous, but you just have a different mission than others do."

Though Scherer had punished them for a rough start, within just a few hours my squad was working as a cohesive unit: they conducted ambushes, sought a downed airplane, and practiced the procedure for encountering Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

After the missions, I spoke to cadets as they made their last assault of the day—on a dinner table.

As I walked by with my press pass, a cadet volunteered his take on the weekend.

“It’s a once in a life time experience,” he said, sitting on the 60-pound rucksack he had carried all day. “How many civilians get to sleep outside with an M16?”

SENIORS WHO SERVE

Back from his lane, Scherer told me he wished that more Harvard students seriously considered the Army and ROTC, noting that only he and one other cadet, J. Danielle Williams '08, will commission in June.

Scherer noted the contrast between this cadet class of two seniors with the great number of Harvard undergraduates who have served in past military conflicts.

Williams, who plans to serve in the Explosive Ordnance Disposal branch or the Judge Advocate General’s Corps (JAG) and eventually the Foreign Service, also said she hopes to see ROTC back on Harvard’s campus to dispel some “myths and stereotypes associated with the military.”

The influence of Harvard graduates serving in the officer corps, she said, might help “liberalize” the military.

Scherer said he agreed that Harvard students in ROTC are uniquely positioned to make an impact as officers.

“Our [supervising officers] say, ‘That will set you apart from everyone,’” he said. “We did have a great experience here, and we learned from some of the best professors in the world.”

Scherer believes his courses at Harvard will help him deal with the additional responsibilities officers face in Iraq.

“The type of leaders you see here are just the type of leaders the Army needs,” Scherer said. “It hurts [the Army] not having more of a presence on campus.”

Williams and Scherer both appreciate the extra attention ROTC will get from University President Drew G. Faust who will speak at their commencement ceremony, even though her subject will regard the Army’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

Scherer said he hopes Harvard will continue to recognize cadets who go off-campus to pursue their Army careers.

“I think Harvard should be proud that they have young men and women going from their school into the armed forces,” he said. “They are going to do great things.”