

# Coastie in Croatia

## Reflections on an “Olmsted Experience”

By LCDR Rory Yoder '10



“Scholars often travel more within a region over the course of two years than many Americans do in their entire lives,” writes Rory. “And yes, this travel is a huge component of the Olmsted Scholar Program’s allure. However, during these travels, Scholars are taking graduate level classes taught in a foreign language they just learned, and often at a level higher than their ability.” Rory and Marcus enjoying the views on the hike to Olpererhütte in Austria.

With my hand on the closed window latch I asked, “do you want this open, Mirela?” “No thank you,” she replied quickly. Removing my hand from the latch I asked her, “are you cold?” That day in Zagreb it was ninety-five degrees outside. “No, I just don’t want to die,” she replied. This was one of our first experiences with the significance of certain winds in Croatia. The wind in this scenario was *propuh* (PRO-pooH), or the draft which results from more than one window or door being open in a space simultaneously. In the Balkans this “supernatural” phenomenon has been blamed for all kinds of health ailments which range from a sore throat to arthritis, to, well, death. Other significant

Balkan winds include *bura* (BOOR-ah), an extremely strong and cold wind from the north that shuts down highways and ferries on the coast, and *južina* (YOU-zheena), which is a warm wind that blows mildly from the south and causes general unease in the population. When *južina* blew in the Republic of Ragusa (now known as Dubrovnik), punitive sentences awarded by judges would be less severe during that timeframe.

Contrary to what you might believe after reading the above, the Olmsted Scholar Program (OSP) is not just an extravagant way to become acquainted with various weather phenomena around the world. The aim of this article is to showcase the once-in-lifetime experience

that is the OSP by first defining it, then by sharing select anecdotes from my family's experience in Croatia. By the end of this text, I hope the reader will have a better sense of what this program offers both to Scholars and to their military branches.

### *What is the OSP?*

Founded in 1959 by retired Army General George Olmsted and his wife, Carol, the OSP is designed to transplant U.S. military officers from their operational element to a completely foreign environment. While pursuing a graduate degree in that country's native language, scholars are expected to fully immerse themselves and their families into the local culture while traveling widely within their assigned geographic region. As of today, the Olmsted Foundation has facilitated the life-changing journeys of over 740 Scholars around the globe with six Coast Guard officers listed among their ranks.

The OSP is an unbelievable opportunity, and for this reason it has attracted a fair share of attention since its introduction to the Coast Guard in 2016. However, several misconceptions about the OSP continue to circulate around the service. To dispel the most pervasive of these misconceptions, it is best to describe what the OSP is not.

### *The OSP is more than just a means to geographic expertise or a graduate degree.*

General Olmsted intended for his scholarship program to educate mid-career military officers broadly. A Scholar's education encompasses much, much more than a new linguistic skillset, expanded academic knowledge, or familiarity with a specific geographic region. Scholars do not learn the language of their destination country just to check the box of a graduate degree; they endeavor to learn the language well enough to have high-level conversations with academics and professionals of the native population about the most pressing issues facing their society. Obtained via the pursuit of a graduate degree in the humanities field, this linguistic capacity enables scholars to



*"Scholars and their families are carefully selected and placed throughout the world to exist, grow, and thrive outside of their cultural and normative comfort zones," writes Rory. "They and their families usually start from scratch to set up their lives in completely foreign environments, often having to learn things the hard way at least once." The Robinsons (Keith '08, Jennifer, Zoey and Zack) and the Yoders in Zagreb - the first time two "Olmsted Coasties" met in country, ever! Keith and his family were located in Florence, Italy for his Olmsted experience.*

grasp the perspectives of a different culture. Newly acquired cultural understanding then sparks questions, realizations, and comparisons about subjects which each Scholar may have previously taken for granted while living in the United States. These questions, realizations, and comparisons can pertain to all manner of topics, ranging from the most personal to the most general in nature, and, in my opinion, these lessons form the real essence of the program.

### *The OSP is not a Foreign Affairs Officer (FAO) program.*

Many who hear of the OSP assume it is a variation of a FAO program and, being unable to accurately fill in key gaps of knowledge, write it off as a fancy precursor to becoming a Military Attaché. The program sharply diverges from the FAO world from the outset, as Scholars are expected to "find their way" without the full backing of the FAO network. "Finding one's way" entails setting up every aspect of life in a foreign country without much streamlined bureaucratic support and figuring out how to tackle inevitable snags along the way. To provide a quick example, since



Croatia is not an option for my country of residence in Direct Access, Yugoslavia (which has not existed for over 30 years) is what is listed in my profile. If you are asking yourself, “how does one PCS to a country that does not exist in the personnel management system,” you are starting to get a sense for the administrative challenges that come with this program. Further distinguishing the OSP from an FAO program is the fact that Scholars are expected to return to their career specialties after completing their studies overseas. Yes, their regional knowledge and experience are valuable assets, but their transformed way of thinking is even more valuable, especially to the fleet.

*The OSP is so much more than an outstanding travel opportunity.*

Scholars and their families are carefully selected and placed throughout the world to exist, grow, and thrive outside of their cultural and normative comfort zones. They and their families usually start from scratch to set up their lives in completely foreign environments, often having to learn things the hard way at least once. Many casual observers of the OSP romanticize about its amazing travel opportunities. Yes, Scholars often travel more within a region over the course of two years than many Americans do in their entire lives. And yes, this travel is a huge component of the OSP’s allure. However, during these travels, Scholars are taking graduate level classes taught in a foreign language they just learned, and often at a level higher than their ability. What’s more, these studies usually pertain to subjects and disciplines that do not fall within Scholars’ prior academic expertise. These factors all combine to create a sense of overload, which is normal, encouraged, and even celebrated. Thus, the OSP is an (unbelievable) opportunity to see things you would never otherwise see while systematically identifying, testing, and sometimes exceeding your limits, both anticipated and otherwise.

To further put the above misconceptions to bed, here is a quote from the Chairman of the Olmsted Foundation’s Board of Directors, Admiral Kurt Tidd (USN, retired): “As

important as the language instruction, cultural immersion, and postgraduate degree seem to be, the Scholar experience itself is not the goal, but rather the means to a very important end: to develop leaders able to sort things out rapidly, see strategically, determine their mission, figure out how to achieve it - and how to do all that without much outside assistance or instruction.”

*Lessons Learned in Croatia*

Since the outset of this experience, one of our main goals has been to identify things which we have been taking for granted as United States citizens. One large, amorphous concept that we detected is the sense of hope that things can change. We grew up with the mindset that, with enough work and time, we can change things both as individuals and as communities. Sometimes we are successful and more often we are not, but still, we remain undeterred. This does not seem to be the case in Croatia. There is a sense of resigned disappointment with the status quo that manifests itself in different ways across generations. For example, Croats from our parents’ generation were hoping for economic and governmental conditions to be better after the “homeland” war, but those hopes never materialized. Croats from our generation have even less hope for the future, which explains the massive “brain-drain” that is occurring throughout the country as young professionals seek employment elsewhere in Europe. However, these younger Croats seem more willing to view the homeland war not as a righteous uprising, but rather as a messy, horrible conflict with no real winner or moral champion.

Here is a quick list of some things we now realize we took for granted:

- Being a citizen who feels capable of effecting change at some level in their society;
- Being a citizen of a country capable of realizing its economic potential;
- Being a citizen of a country whose young people (mostly) do not wish to leave.

The hardest aspect of a change is that what is lost via the change is immediately



*“Zagreb has transformed from a place that used to pose challenges in nearly every aspect of our lives to a place toward which we feel genuine connection and nostalgia,” writes Rory. The Yoder family (Rory, Sarah, and Marcus) on the ferry to the island of Korčula, the supposed birthplace of Marco Polo.*

apparent, but what is gained only reveals itself over time. If you were to ask my wife two years ago whether she would ever feel comfortable shopping in the local open-air market where no one speaks English and every *kumica* (market lady) shouted *izvolite* (go ahead, tell me your order) to get her attention, she would have laughed at you. Fast forward to present day, when going to the *plac* no longer induces anxiety but instead serves as a lovely excuse to get fresh air, see what’s in season, and to say *bok* (hello) to our *kumice* who now go out of their way to blow kisses to our son and give him free pieces of fruit. This “Olmsted experience,” more than any other, has forever modified the concept of change for us, from something we used to dread to something that incites curiosity, wonder, and even excitement.

Zagreb has transformed from a place that used to pose challenges in nearly every aspect of our lives to a place toward which we feel genuine connection and nostalgia. The sounds of the tram line outside of our building, the smell of *ćevapi* grilling by our favorite park, and the sight of old men walking always with their arms crossed behind their backs will remain in our hearts as long as we live. Time has revealed to us many of the things we gained by moving to this (once) foreign place. What

things have we gained? Perhaps most significantly, perspective. Perspective on what we thought was important, on what we now think is important, and on the ways in which that change came about. Perspective on who we are, on who we were, and on who we want to be – to ourselves, to each other, to our family, to our community, and to our country. These perspectives and the unforgettable experiences which produced them would not have been possible without the OSP. What’s more, this experience has bestowed upon us the unmatched gift of time together. Our son was born at the beginning of this journey, and we have enjoyed the privilege of watching him grow day by day in this amazing Olmsted environment.

In closing, allow me to share my best attempt at a pithy description of this experience:

*The Olmsted Scholarship Program is half breathtaking opportunity, half transformative crucible, and undoubtedly one of the most unique and engaging assignments of a Coastie’s career.*

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*Lieutenant Commander Yoder was selected in 2020 to be a member of the Olmsted Scholar Class of 2021 and is currently pursuing a master’s in political science at the University of Zagreb. A career aviator and aeronautical engineering officer, his previous assignment was at Air Station Clearwater. He graduated from CGA in 2010 as a civil engineering major and earned his wings in 2012.*