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Vestaburg naval cadet tours western Australia

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Staff Writer

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VESTABURG - Joy Caris knew her chances were slim when she applied for the Sea Cadet International Exchange Program.

But the Vestaburg High School junior persevered and learned in February that she had been chosen as one of two cadets from among more than 300 applicants nationwide to go on a two-week expedition in Perth, Australia.

"I was in a lot of shock," Caris said. "I couldn't believe it. The officer who called me, he said, 'Do you still want to go to Australia?' Like that's even a question."

The 17-year-old is a Petty Officer 1st Class in the Naval Sea Cadet Corps.

Caris made the overseas trip to Australia last month. She spent a day on the ship Leeuwin; a day on Rottnest Island; participated in joint activities with Australian naval cadets; went dragon boating, canoeing, personal watercrafting and cliff rappelling; spent three days camping in the bush; visited Her Majesty's Australian Ship (HMAS) Stirling Naval Base; and joined in a graduation parade with Australian naval cadets and in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) Day parade among other things.

"It was insane," Caris said. "The highlight I would have to say was meeting the people because Australians are awesome. The culture is great."

According to Lt. Shelley Rossell of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps in Fort Dix, N.J., the selection process is very competitive and only the top cadets from throughout the nation are selected to participate.

"This is a high honor for all participants," she said. "The comment I received most about Joy is that she is aptly named. Her participation constantly motivated other cadets, leading to her selection as Cadet of the Day during the first week of the exchange. She was a true ambassador for the U.S. and our Sea Cadet program."

Caris plans to earn a registered nursing degree and then attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. She is contemplating becoming a doctor.

"I went into it with an attitude of I'm going to give it my best and try," she said of applying for the international exchange program. "I just want everyone to know that even though they might come from a small town or their chances seem small, give it your best effort. You might be surprised."

Caris' selection thrilled Vestaburg High School administrative assistant Sharon Gerlach.

"She's one student who is always positive, bubbly and willing to go out of her way for others," she said. "I have never seen her without a smile on her face. We're so proud of her. She's a neat kid."

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