ADVENTURES ABROAD  By Amy Goodnite
Industrial and engineering systems student finds herself a world away

Recipient of a U.S. State Department Critical Language Scholarship, industrial and systems engineering junior Amy Goodnite spent the summer in Japan as part of an initiative to encourage students to learn a less-commonly-taught language that is important to American interests. She spent four hours in class each day, complemented by cultural activities and her home stay with a Japanese family. Goodnite, whose father served in the Air Force, hopes to become a military officer or government contractor at an overseas base.

When I first started studying Japanese as a freshman, I wanted to learn more about a language and culture I had little knowledge of. I never dreamed it would take me halfway around the world or affect my career choices.

I’ve always enjoyed mathematics and science, but I was just as interested in foreign languages, culture, and history. Industrial and systems engineering is a field where I can combine all of my interests and use all of my strengths.

People might ask what engineering has to do with culture and history, or how knowing Japanese could be useful. For me, the connection is strong. Economies of various countries around the globe become more and more intertwined. Products that are designed and sold in the U.S. are produced elsewhere, and our products are exported.

If we, as engineers, don’t take the initiative to study other cultures, how can we know what they consider important in terms of products and services? If we don’t understand how factories are set up or why work is divided a certain way, confusion could affect product quality or schedules.

In short, if we don’t understand where our foreign customers and employees come from, how can we hope to remain competitive?

For two months in Kyoto this summer, I studied Japanese in intensive language classes, explored cities, and experienced daily life firsthand through my home stay. I made lifelong friends. I also got an up-close look at the organization of Japan’s transportation systems when I took the Shinkansen, or bullet train, to and from Kyushu.

The 375-mile trip took three hours instead of the six that it would have taken by car. And because my host family lived an hour outside of Kyoto, I had to take a train and two different subway lines to school. I thought I’d be late because of delays, but that was not the case at all. If I was the one who was late, the next train was never far behind.

As a systems engineering student, I was duly impressed by the efficiency.

I hope to pursue a career in logistics with the U.S. military overseas. As part of my experience, I met the Japanese ambassador to America and learned about why some of our largest bases are in Japan. I also was able to travel to Hiroshima, where I toured the peace memorial and museum—and heard directly from a survivor in her native language what it was like the day the atomic bomb fell.

Her story impressed upon me the responsibility that I, like all engineers, have to the rest of humanity: not just to develop technology, but to ensure that technology is tempered by morality. It is a message I plan to carry with me wherever the future takes me.