Placement report – NIMH

Placement at the Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie / Dutch Institute for Military History at the Dutch Ministry of Defence

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Introduction

This placement rapport will describe my experiences and findings of my placement period. The placement was done at the Dutch Institute for Military History, during the period of December 2017 until May 2017. The rapport will be following the following structure. First I will describe the process of finding a placement, with the ultimate ending of me getting one. It will be followed by a short description of the place other words, very straight forward.

Secondly, I will discuss the problems I faced during my placement, as well as the expectations I had. Like all people there is some bias to be found here, but most of that has been proved wrong. As for the part about the problems I faced, I have not gone into detail on the things that went without a hitch, after all there is not much to learn from things that have not been challenging.

And lastly, I will discuss how this placement has shaped my views about my future, the things I could have done better, and advice for others to wrap things up. The last chapter, though not named explicitly so, takes on the role of conclusion.
The Placement

Finding a placement

The road to finding a placement was, for me, filled with disappointment and odd surprises. Before I started properly searching, I had to find out what kind of placement I wanted to do. The requirements of the University, that the placement had some connection with International Relations, left me with a whole lot of possibilities. I myself had only thought of one requirement, it had to be a paid internship and preferable in the area of The Hague. Again, this did not limit my options very much.

With this not-narrow-downed idea of where to do my placement, and what kind of placement, I started looking at the possibilities, online. In the end it took me two months to find a placement. I simply replied to every placement that seemed like something that would be enjoyable to me. I based this solely on the description of the placement. To be honest, this was not the best course of action to find a placement, as it led to a lot of disappointment when I got the standard message back that I was not what these companies were looking for.

To be honest, I was on the verge of giving up, and starting anew after the summer break. Thus giving myself time to work on my master thesis. I sent out one last email for a placement. This was, in the end, the placement I got.

I found the opening for the placement via the site of the University of Leiden. Something I found by googling “Internship International Relations”, and since the University of Leiden has a similar program to Groningen I came to a site that listed possible internships with email addresses. One of the placements listed had to do with research on International missions that the Dutch Ministry of Defence was participating in. Thinking that I would never get the placement since I had gotten a ‘no’ from similar positions, I still sent an email to the address listed, a professor at University Leiden who happened to be working at the NIMH. A few weeks later he emailed me stating that he forwarded my application to an associate of his at the NIMH. The next day I got an email from that associate stating that he had a place for me in December and that we should meet beforehand to work the details out. Tis happened in June (2016). I emailed back, stating that I would like that very much, and we planned a meeting in September. At this point I stopped looking for a placement, thinking that if I got this one it would be great, if not I would start again after the summer break.

When September came around, I went to that meeting thinking it would be like a job interview. However, upon my arrival (and half-way through the conversation) it became clear that I got the placement already. At the end of the meeting we agreed that I would start on the
fifth of December 2016 until the beginning of May 2017. Allowing me time to complete the forms for the University and to contact my Placement coordinator at the University to see if the placement would fulfil the requirements of the University. It did. To be honest I have no idea why I got this placement, when I didn’t get another with the same description. However, I think that because the institute is not broadly known, I got lucky.

As for the reason that I chose this particular placement, I have to be honest, I chose it because they offered me an internship. The disappointment of being rejected at earlier opportunities takes out its toll, and this has a great impact on one’s self-confidence. However, at the same time I accepted it because not only would it pay, it would open up some connections to maybe become a Civil Servant, something that has always been a very attractive career choice for me. After all, the Government takes good care of her employees.

The Dutch Institute for Military History (NIMH)

As stated before I found a placement at the Dutch Institute for Military History. This research institute is part of the Dutch Ministry of Defence and the Military Academy. The institutes job is to compile information (historical and more contemporary) for the education of new officers at the Military Academy and for the assessment of military actions. This can lead for example to an investigation on whether or not a certain unit is fit to receive a new insignia.

Another duty of the institute is to collect historical knowledge with a link to the military on the whole and make it accessible to the broader public. This includes information on individuals, units within the armed forces, and the different branches of the armed forces (for example the Marine and the Airforce). The end goal is to present the information in the for of research that deals with the Dutch military and her history, and in answer to this many of the people that are employed at the NIMH are either working on their PhD, or have finished it (via the NIMH) and work on further research.

My assignment at the NIMH

Within the institute I did my placement in the department of Operational Service, and was tasked with doing research to a specific component of the mission to Mali, MINUSMA. The jest of the research was to write an article about the Dutch police (Nationale Politie, NP) and

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1 For more information on the Institute go to https://www.defensie.nl/organisatie/cdc/inhoud/eenheden/nimh
Dutch Gendarmerie (Koninklijke Marechaussee, Kmar) that went to Mali under the command of the United Nations Police (UNPOL).

The how and what of the research was left up to me. I was given the freedom to decide the focus on the subject. There were two requirements; I had to plan, and do, and that were interviews with people who had gone on this mission, and it had to be written in Dutch. Having gotten my task, I spend the first few weeks reading up on the existing material on UNPOL missions and MINUSMA as a whole.

After this I started working on putting the information into something that could resemble an article, while finding out how I was going to get in touch with people who had gone on the mission for the interviews. My supervisor, Richard van Gils, at the NIMH usually had a contact person for setting this up. However, his contact person had just left for a new job opportunity, and as such I had to figure things out on my own. Richard did however give me the name of someone who could help me. But without an email-address this person was hard to contact.

This resulted in my searching for ways to contact people, while still putting down the information I had already gathered into an article form. In the end I found out which department I had to contact in order to reach the Dutch gendarmerie that dealt with MINUSMA. I sent an email stating that I was an intern at the NIMH, that I was doing research on the activities of the Kmar that was sent to MINUSMA, and that I would like to do interviews with them if this was possible. After about a week I got a reply, stating that my email was forwarded to the person that was in charge. This person was quicker with reacting to my email and this resulted in my planning of my first interview.

This interview took place at a different location that the one in The Hague where I was working, and so I travelled by train and bus to the interview location. This interview resulted in help with contacting people who had gone on the mission, and thus after I returned, I was able to contact these people and to plan another four interviews.

At the same time, I was looking for a way to contact the National Police, as they had also sent people on the mission, and after searching and thinking creatively I managed to plan an interview with the person that managed the people going on the mission to Mali. By thinking creatively, I mean that I had to think outside the box to find a contact. I ended up sending a mail to the Police Academy, because they offered courses on international missions, and they forwarded my email to the correct person. This was the person that I eventually had an interview with. But this was also after trying to find a contact via the official roads, meaning the ministry of Justice. However, they answered my mail stating that
they would forward it to the ‘correct’ ministry, that being Defence, while I wanted to get in touch with the National Police which is part of the ministry of Justice. A setback, but one that made me think in more creative terms, and the one that brought me to look via the Police Academy.

Having planned all of the interviews, I had to of course also do them. I had prepared most of the questions I wanted to ask in advance. This was the first time I had to interview someone, and to be honest I was scared and very nervous. The people I would be talking to were professionals and I was (and still am) a student and an intern. However, it was easier that I had anticipated and actually I really enjoyed doing it. This included even the transcribing of the interviews.

In the end, after the interviews, I started transcribing them and returned to working on the article. The interviews were not like official interviews done in journalism, meaning that the transcript would go back to the interviewee so that they could state parts that they would rather not have on the record. When they made such a statement, I removed the part from the transcript and put the statements with the transcripts.

The fact that I did not know beforehand how big the article could be, I started looking into it on my own. I had asked my supervisor before, but he stated that I should just start writing something and that he would look at it later, and that we would have to trim it down then. The information I had put together before had taking on the size of a history thesis (about ten thousand words), and I feared that if I would continue on that it would get to big to properly trim down.

In order to get the research into the line of the proper proportions I looked at the journals that the NIMH published in. These were journals such as Mars et Historia, and the Militaire Spectator, and both journals had article limits around five thousand words. This meant that the research I had written so far was far too big. To be honest at this point I was a bit panicked and annoyed. If I had known this beforehand, I could have done the research a lot more focussed. However, I had to work with what I had, and I started to trim down the research I had already done. In the end I did hand in something of an article in the size and form that was expected, it as however not up to the standard I wanted it to be, nor to the standard my supervisor had envisioned.
Other tasks

Aside from the research I also had some “intern tasks”. Within the NIMH it was mandatory for the interns to divide the Monday shifts in the Reading Room on the first floor. The Reading Room was closed on Mondays, however people would still call to ask for information, to make appointments, or the simply get in touch with one of the employees of the NIMH. The Monday was divided into two shifts, either the morning or the afternoon. Basically it meant that one of the interns would open the door and turn on the lights in the morning, and close up in the afternoon. The rest of the time we were able to work on our own researches and we had to answer the phone if it rang.

Beside the research and the ‘intern tasks’ there were some incidental task as well. On occasion, and on request, I helped at the Secretariat. This basically meant that I would pick up the phone, and I would welcome people in who came for an appointment with the director of the institute.

My experiences

Expectations

When I found out I got the placement at the NIMH, I had some ideas about how it would work out. The most prominent expectation I had, had to do with the idea of working in an academic setting with people who had more experience and knowledge than me. The idea that I had before starting was that the people would be more like the stereotypical historians, combined with the previous experience I had had with PhD-candidates and holders. In other words, this means that the idea I had of the people who I would be working with was at one hand very intimidating and on the other hand very unsocial. I was proved wrong on this. The people whom I met during my time at the placement were friendly, and always willing to lend a hand.

Of course, there were a few that were very intimidating as well. Though always with the best of intentions. One instance that describes this the best happened when I was nearing the end of my placement period. Two of the employees of the NIMH were linked to the more educational part of the institute that dealt with the Military Academy. They had planned a Battlefield Tour for a unit of officers, and one of my fellow interns had requested to come along sometime. They came by the intern office to tell him that they had a place for him, and
another. Before I knew what was happening I was told that I would be accompanying them as well. It wasn’t a question; I was told that I would come along. I was caught off guard to say the least. I could have told them I didn’t want to go; however, I did decide to go along with it. And I’m glad I did, it was an eye-opening experience that not a lot of people get to experience. So even though I was practically to intimidated to say I didn’t want to go, it was all in all a good experience. The employees of the NIMH can be intimidating but they do mean well, and they want you to experience as much as possible.

There is one expectation that did hold up, and it was the one I was actually hoping to be wrong about. There are a lot of men. Large men. Nine out of ten people there where men. And although you hear them say that they would like to have more female employees, you get the feeling that they don’t really want to do anything about it. Unfortunately, this high rate of men does create a little intimidating environment. This does not mean that they were degrading or mean to women, or people in general, it just was a lot of men in the same space. There was not a single time that I have felt unsafe, but it does get you thinking about where you are.

Effort and chance
During my placement I found out that I had to do things on my own. Looking back, the first week or even the first day illustrates this already, though I did not see it at the time. When I arrived for my first day there where a few administrative things to take care of, for example to get the proper passes to enter and leave the terrain. It is still a military location and thus there are a few safety regulations one has to participate in. While waiting for my account to activate my supervisor took me along the halls in order to introduce me to the people with whom I would have the most contact or who were important, the director for example.

After this, he showed me to the intern rooms. Due to the fact that there were five interns ate the time, and a room for four and a room for two interns, I was placed in the second room. Meaning I sat on my own at first, and moved to the bigger room for four after two weeks when another intern finished her placement. The rooms, or offices, where furnished with a desk, chair and computer, so everything I would need in order to do my research. After the initial introductions I was left alone, my supervisor had a meeting and had to leave. At this point I had to figure things out on my own, and with help from the other interns. I found out that there was a meeting that afternoon where I was expected to attend as
well. That first week, I spent alone in my office, and sometimes with the other interns, just to get the gist of the place.

Of course, I was told that I could always stop by when I needed help by my supervisor, something I did on occasion, and he would check in every now and then, but due to the fact that he had a very busy schedule and the fact that I was new, I did feel a little intimidated. I tried as much as possible to figure things out on my own and to ask the other interns before I would bother my supervisor.

At one point, after the initial reading and collecting of information for my research, I needed to have a chat with my supervisor. I needed to know what form the article should take on and whether or not he had any specific ideas or pointers that needed to be addressed in it. I did not get the answer I had hoped for then. He told me to just do it the way I wanted, but that I had to stick to the assignment as it was given to me before (see My assignment part). The word count did not matter to him, nor did he state a possible deadline when I asked. I was given total academic freedom in that regard. This was actually my biggest, and ongoing, problem. I have never had total academic freedom before. Even if I could choose the content of a paper or thesis or article, there have always been certain rulers about the form and length of it. Or even a deadline. Not this time.

Not to give the wrong impression, having freedom on that level is very rewarding in the sense that you can look into things you would normally push aside. But at the same time it does not allow you to bring in a proper focus on what you want to do. I feel that there was maybe a bit too much freedom. And in the end this did influence the product that I was trying to deliver. As stated before, I had to trim down the research I was working on, and I had so much information that I did not use in the end, information that I had spent time and energy on collecting and understanding. I think this has also impacted the way I used my time during my internship at the NIMH. If I had a more structured assignment, I would have been able to work more focused and could probable have finished the article earlier. I feel that the quality of the work would have been better.

Another problem I encountered during my placement came along when I was nearing the end of it. And this problem has shaken my confidence when it comes to writing a research paper. My Dutch. I had researched and written papers in Dutch before, and I was very well aware that my mother tongue is not my strongest point. I have always had issues with the grammar. However, during a check-up conversation with my supervisor at the NIMH I was told that it wasn’t just the d/t-grammar that was a problem. My sentences did not flow properly, and I was not detailed enough with the subjects of my sentences. To be honest I was
shocked, and a bit hurt. Before this meeting, I knew that my Dutch was not perfect, but I also knew that I was improving on it. Apparently I was wrong.

This problem was not as easy to deal with as the previous one. This would take more time than the time I still had available to me at the placement. And in the end I could not remedy it before the end of my placement period. Thus the research article I have worked on during that time is unfinished. I have however looked into courses to help improve my Dutch at both the grammar level as the actual writing of it. I have also discussed with my supervisor that I would work on the research in my own time, and when I am able, to send it to him when I have finished it. In this way I will be able to finish up something I put so much of my time and energy is, while at the same time providing a product to the placement that has thought me a lot about myself.

And that is also what I learned about the connection between academics on a university level, and as a career option. The way research is done, is the same. You still scourge the internet, archives and libraries, looking for information. There is just an added sense of purpose, because the things you research actually go somewhere (if done correctly). So in that sense the university does know what it has been teaching us to do. The only thing lacking is the preparation for entering the work force. Nowhere in my studies has it become clear to me what it really means to be doing research for a living. The placement has given me a taste of that, and even though my field of studies was not focussed on Military History, I did possess the skills needed. The rest of the information, I could learn from others and my own research.

Food for Thought

My insights for the future
Nothing about my placement, of the road to it, has been straightforward. And what I learned during my placement period has given me more of an idea about what I can and want to do after I graduate from university. The fact that I had a lot of freedom and trouble with it, has shown me that I need to have more structure when it comes to doing research, and to working in general. Too much of something is rarely a good thing, and creative, or academic freedom is no exception. It has also taught me that when the structure I need is not there; I need to be more forward or daring in asking for it. When the conditions that I need are not met, I need to
put myself out there and make them myself. This is something I am still struggling with, but I do know now that when they aren’t there in the end I struggle more.

Another thing I have learned is that I do not like to work on something by myself. Even though, I did not spend my entire time at the placement alone, the nature of the work does make it a solitary experience. I found I need to have more interaction with people when it comes to work, that I need at least another person to be able to understand what I am doing, and to have an impact on it as well. So I can say with certainty that the work I did at the NIMH is not something that I would want to do for the rest of my career. The fact that you have to work on your own on something for eight hours a day, without social interaction in the work is not something I look forward to. That does not mean that I would not want to work in research, it simply means that I do not want to do it alone.

Hindsight

All in all, the placement I had was a good experience. I got to work close to some very bright and interesting people, and I did take advantage of that by listening to their discussions and by looking at their work ethics. At the same time, I think that I could have done better, especially when preparing for the placement, and by asking smarter and better questions both before and during my time at the NIMH. In that regard I think I did let myself down a little. This applies not only the research I was doing, but also in the interaction I did with the people there. I have, however, gotten some contact that could be very valuable in the future. Not just career wise, also in terms of advice.

Another thing that I would like to come back to here, is the way that I let myself flow along with the way things went. Perhaps things would have gone better if I had not been to timid, but at the same time I am glad that I took a more timid approach. It is easy to be seen as too aggressive, even if the action is not meant to be aggressive. Yet the approach I took has allowed me to feel intimidated by the people who appear that much smarter than me.

Advice

If there is one thing that I could share with the people that still need to find a placement and that contemplate doing one in a research institute, I would say that you should be careful. There is this charming dreamlike feel to doing research, and people, myself included, often forget that it can easily become a nightmare. It is extremely tiring to do research eight hours a day, on your own. Even though there are people all around you, it remains a solitary
profession. So to the people who cannot cope with that I would say, chose something else. If you got your heart set on doing it nevertheless, be prepared. It takes a certain type of person to do that sort of work. I found myself lacking in that area.

Still, my placement at the NIMH was a good start in my studies. As I stated before, I do feel that I was properly equipped with the know-how of doing research. So that is one thing less to worry about for those still going for a research placement. And if you do not need the social aspect being a part of the research, by all means go for it!