

Guns, Missiles and Firepower: A Research Intern's Quest at the NMF

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Date: 06 August 2018

The transformation of anxiety into joy upon receiving intimation, confirming that one has been selected for an internship at a prestigious think-tank, is always a memorable event. Sometimes, however, the lessons you gain from such attachments are not transient but provide lasting value that persists over an entire lifetime.

For me, interning at the 'National Maritime Foundation' (NMF) — a Navy supported think-tank, was like joining the country's defence forces without letting go the freedoms that I enjoy as a civilian. My generation of youngsters are being continually and positively impacted by the glitz, glamour, élan and panache of the military during the Republic Day parades, and are fascinated by the bean-counting that goes on in the electronic and cyber media in respect of India's military capabilities vis-à-vis the forces of our potential adversaries. All this generates much admiration and curiosity to know more, especially when the institution of the Indian Armed Forces is highly tight-lipped about itself. Hence, getting an opportunity at the NMF to know more about our potent Navy was an exhilarating opportunity that I was unwilling to pass-up

However, my quest took me on a route through 'uncharted waters' that I had never imagined existed. As the Executive Director of the NMF often says, "The foremost challenge for greenhorns joining think-tanks is that *"they don't know what they don't know", and hence are unaware of what is to be learnt"*. However, notwithstanding the valuable insights provided by the Director NMF on the rationale, role and functioning of think-tanks, I persevered in my quest to learn more about 'guns, missiles and firepower'.

Earnestness and Expectations

Expectations, excitement and curiosity ran high, right from my first day at the NMF. I was very keen to learn from naval officers, and to discuss and discover details on how our own weapon-capabilities compared with those of other navies, the challenges they face with regard to acquisition of new war fighting technologies, the up gradation of existing hardware, and so on. I looked upon my internship at NMF as a rare opportunity that would ‘finally’ enable me to know more than the ‘average’ civilian. Of course, I also wanted to learn about naval tactics, a prospect that was thrilling, and would add to this ‘edge’ I would have over my ‘average’ friends.

Upon joining the Foundation, my expectations seemed to have been met. For instance, the very sight of the vast collection of books on naval power and weaponry that was there for the reading in the NMF library, and being introduced to serving officers of the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard, were sufficient to further enflame my passion.

In addition to the NMF’s approach to provide a broad-based awareness of the maritime domain, I was told to choose a specific theme of interest to me. This was rather unexpected for me. I had never thought that I would have complete autonomy to select a topic to research without any compulsion or pressure. I had earlier thought that the NMF working would be similar to what I imagine is that of the Navy, where juniors look up to their seniors for directives and obey orders without questioning them. I chose my topic – ‘officially stated’, it was *“The Imperative of Aircraft Carriers for India”*, but within me, it was all about guns, missiles and firepower!

I began to pose my questions to whomsoever I met, on whatever occasion that I could. Whether these questions were naïve, critical or sensitive, I could not fathom, because I got no answers. On the other hand, the lectures delivered by the Director and other officers for us on geopolitical and conceptual issues, and even on military doctrine and strategy, did not interest me, since I found these rather vague and intangible. I continued in my quest to learn about military hardware and tactics.

Realisation and Reconciliation

Then came a day when the ‘cat was out of the bag’. The lecture at NMF on “Introduction to the Indian Navy — as the primary Enabling and Preventive Instrument of India’s Maritime Power” was accompanied by an intense volley of questions and answers — candid from both sides. The NMF’s management had realised the misalignment between my allure and the its own aim (to groom me). As I ought to have expected, the event was followed by a series of counselling sessions for me at the NMF, not only face-to-face ones, but through e-mails as well. It all began with an encouragement for my inquisitiveness and my keenness to learn, but the cheer was not unconditional!

It was then a fresh and profound realisation that dawned upon me, for which, I owe my gratitude to the NMF, and would also like to place on record for the benefit of the future generations of young interns like me. I discovered to my chagrin that my efforts at reading, researching and asking questions on ‘guns, missiles and firepower’ notwithstanding, I simply lacked the required underpinning of knowledge in terms of a fundamental awareness of national-strategic, doctrinal and conceptual issues. I had never linked-up naval hardware and tactics to their very rationale and the place that these occupied in broader national geostrategy so as to meet the nation’s overarching objectives.

I now realise how necessary it is for a fresh intern, barely out of college, to acquire a certain ‘breadth’ of knowledge before he/she strives for ‘depth’ in a specific subject. At this point in time, an intern’s focus should be upon acquiring an awareness of geopolitical and other issues at the national-strategic level, which is what think-tanks like the NMF are optimised to provide.

Furthermore, the glitz and glamour associated with the profession of arms need not be overblown. It is a critical necessity to motivate those in uniform to go into harm’s way for their country, and should, therefore, be seen by us in that context. Knowledge of defence hardware and operational tactics is certainly central to the armed forces, but these are functional issues best left to the professionals and the concerned policymakers. Once we youngsters decide upon our careers, including a possible one in the armed forces, we will certainly be given ample opportunities to dive deeper into the functional issues of our professions.

Interspersed with my rather frequent counselling sessions were opportunities afforded to me to participate in NMF's dialogues with foreign think-tanks. The rich discussions during one of these dialogues — pitched at the national-strategic level — helped me to assimilate better the advice that I received, and I began to see the value in the lectures at the NMF. Things were looking up, but I realised that I had already lost valuable time and my approved internship period was coming to an end soon. Now, having left the NMF, I realise that I have sensed the 'route' through formerly 'uncharted waters' to an enriched awareness that awaits me, but I am not there yet!

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