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Lessons of war. The significance of battlefield tours for the Dutch military

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the personal experiences of Dutch army members during military battlefield tours to historical war sites. We present a qualitative interview based analysis of the experiences and uses of the past by the Dutch military and discuss the tensions present in the military battlefield tours. In doing so, we argue for integrating research about cognitive procedures of re-enactment and bodily experiences on historical sites. Our findings suggest that the military battlefield tours help to evoke a specific place-bound engagement with the past. Visits to former war sites evoke detailed and vivid images of the past. The historical landscape thereby provides external clues and arguments that assist in comprehending the course of a historical event. The multiple visual and sensual triggers on a historical site allow for cognitive and bodily knowledge and appeal to the participant's imagination. How and to what extent the past is imagined strongly depends on the knowledge and cultural background of the participant, as well as the attempts of the participants to actively do something imaginatively with the material present on site. When trying to understand the emotional impact and consequences of warfare, the participants tend to identify with past actors, which sometimes generates dilemmas.

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Introduction

‘I stood on that bridge, and realized: this is the place where all could have turned out well ...’ With these words, a Dutch military officer summarized his memories of a military battlefield tour he undertook to the Belgian Ardennes as part of his education at a military academy. Even though the trip took place more than twenty years ago, the officers’ memories of this trip were very vivid. With a group of cadets and teachers, they spent almost a week in the area, following the footsteps of the Kampfgruppe of Joachim Peiper, responsible for the murder of eighty-four American prisoners of war in the town of Malmedy (Remy 2017).

Officers and cadets of the Dutch army regularly visit locations like the Ardennes, the beaches of Normandy or the forests in Germany, as part of the training and education program of the Dutch military. Through a confrontation with a tangible historical war

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landscape, the officers and cadets practice military tactics and discuss military decision-making. By studying the terrain, they hope to learn from past events and aim to enhance their tactical skills. Standing on the spot where it all happened thereby seems to evoke a specific place-bound experience, which can contain feelings of wonder and amazement, but also of awe and fear, of historical connection or distance, and more.

Military battlefield tours, i.e. the various types of military trips to historical war sites for educational purposes, have existed since at least the eighteenth century. The trips originate in the quest to find a useful way to teach inexperienced officers how to act in wartime (Haycock 2005, 9). Halfway into the eighteenth century, the Prussian commander Frederick the Great became convinced that knowledge about former battles was beneficial for the development of tactical skills. In an attempt to professionalize his army, he encouraged his officers to study war history, undertook trips to battlefields, and invited war veterans to help him to understand what had happened on site (Hall 2005, 38–39). In these practices, he stimulated his officers to discuss their observations and tactical solutions, urging them to think for themselves under guidance of the war landscape (39). This Prussian tradition provides the basis of the military battlefield tour as it is practiced nowadays in various European countries and North America (44).

Currently, battlefield visits, staff rides and tactical exercises without troops (TEWTs) are part of the military training and education programs of different western armies. The precise form these trips to former war sites take differs per nation; where for example British and American military battlefield tours are said to focus more on commemoration, pilgrimage and heroism (Caddick-Adams 2005; Kiesling 2005), German staff rides seem to emphasise tactical analyses (Hall 2005). The Dutch military battlefield tours contain elements of both traditions. As such, national preferences, traditions and military culture have an influence on the design of the battlefield tours.¹

In this paper, we use ‘military battlefield tours’ as a broad term to describe organized military educational travel to former war sites that range from classical ‘follow the guide’ battlefield tours and staff rides to more interactive tactical exercises without troops.²

In the Dutch context, the military battlefield tours usually contains multiple components – for example starting with a history class, followed by a TEWT and concluding with a visit to a war memorial. A specific feature of the Dutch military battlefield tours is the ‘historically themed TEWT’, where officers use modern means to solve tactical dilemma’s from the past. In general, the Dutch military battlefield tours have a diverse character that can be adjusted to the wishes and needs of a military unit or class.

Although tourist travel to former war sites has gained academic attention the last years (e.g. Dunkley, Morgan, and Westwood 2011; Winter 2011), less is known about professional visitors of these sites, like the military. Only a limited amount of research has been done about military battlefield tours (Woodward 2014, 48; Lloyd 2009, 177). Many of these studies have been conducted within the field of military history or by military professionals, often presenting a top-down view on the benefits of battlefield tours for the military (e.g. Melvin 2019; Due, Filley, and Byerly 2015; Hall 2005; Robertson 1987). Still, other authors criticize the assumed learning benefits and the ‘unique experiences’ that military battlefield tours are often said to offer (King 2019; Lloyd 2019; Kiesling 2005). These authors stress the uncritical attitude within different national armies towards the advantages of military battlefield tours. Where Lloyd (2019, 178, 182) questions the added value of experiential learning for the military and pleads

for a more interactive approach to educating the military on site, King (2019, 21) locates the benefits of military battlefield tours in social cohesion and moral growth rather than in the development of cognitive skills.

Despite these plausible points of critique to the design and function of the military battlefield tours, little is known about the point of view of those who are actually participating in the battlefield tours: the military personnel. Only Bechtold's study (2005) includes some remarks of Canadian (military and non-military) students who joined a battlefield tour to Normandy. In the current paper, we address this empirical lacuna.

Our analysis focuses on the personal experiences of Dutch army members during military battlefield tours organized by the Dutch army and the Netherlands Defence Academy. We will present a qualitative analysis of the personal experiences of the Dutch military during their battlefield tours. When speaking about 'personal experiences', we take into account that those experiences are never entirely personal, but are always part of collective cultural practices (Erlil and Nünning 2008, 5). Although we have also examined the goals and the organization of the military field trips, a bottom-up perspective is central to this paper. In doing so, we will address experiences, values, limits and tensions that are present while working with (tangible) history.

Our research question is: *How do Dutch officers and cadets experience the military battlefield tours, which possible tensions can be observed between the goals of the trips and the experiences of the individual participants, and what are the possible consequences for an engagement with violent pasts?* We start with discussing theories about historical re-enactment and bodily understandings of the past. Here, we propose a theoretical approach in which we explore the usefulness of re-enactment theory for understanding the motives and experiences of military personnel studying and practising on former war sites. Then, we will explain the used methods. Next, we will present our findings in three themes that arose from the analysis of the data. In the last part we present our conclusions.

Historical re-enactment and bodily understanding

The military battlefield tours are undertaken to study and reflect on past events on site in order to improve officers' and cadets' performances in future wars. These improvements range from plain tactical decision-making to an emotional understanding of what it means to be in the military. Consequently, the tours make use of multiple ways of approaching the past, sometimes focusing on cognitive understanding of the past and sometimes on obtaining emotional responses.

The process of reflecting on past events on site is related to what the British philosopher, historian and archaeologist Robin Collingwood has coined as the re-enactment of past thought: the *rational* rethinking of specific decisions of actors in the past in order to explain their actions and behaviour. This definition of re-enactment differs from the more popular understanding of re-enactment as a form of living history performed by history enthusiasts.³ Collingwood's re-enactment of past thought is a cognitive procedure, it is *not* about 're-feeling' an emotion or 're-experiencing' an experience (Collingwood [1946] 1993, 290, 294; Retz 2017).⁴ Collingwood emphasizes the possibility of re-enacting the logical structure of past thought: 'the historian is enabled, indeed not to "know" the past as it actually happened (...) but to solve with accuracy and certainty the particular historical problems which present themselves to his mind, in terms of the evidence at his disposal'

(427). With regard to evidence Collingwood makes a distinction between material remnants and past events. Material remnants have both a ‘real’ and ‘imaginative’ dimension in the sense that one can observe, for instance, a bunker from the First World War in the present, but can imaginatively re-think its construction in the past as well. As an event of the past the latter is not ‘real’, because we cannot observe it in the present: it is only the *thought* as expressed in the event of the action that can be re-enacted in the present (439–440; van der Dussen 1993, 47).

Collingwood points to what relics, written documents or other traces of evidence *reveal* about the past. The historical method then requires the application of the logic of question and answer to past events to solve historical problems, a kind of inner dialogue. His focus on evidence and rational explanations would mean ignoring the impact of emotions such as excitement, eagerness, fear, pain or trauma. Yet, in his manuscript *The Principles of History* Collingwood acknowledges that the history of thought also ‘includes the history of emotions so far as these emotions are essentially related to the thoughts in question’ (Collingwood 1999, 77).⁵ Emotions and irrational thoughts are both involved in the actions of historical agents and can and should thus be understood by the historian. But emotions are only considered when there is proof of them and when they have a bearing on the actions being studied. Still, this does not mean that Collingwood excludes all cultural aspects from the historical field, as some have argued (Megill 2007, 53–55).

Two extensions of Collingwood’s philosophy relevant to our case reflect a contemporary approach to affective experiences of traces of the past (e.g. Malpas 1999, 180–181). First, while Collingwood recognizes the influence of emotions and irrational thoughts on historical decision making, and the possibility to re-think those historical decisions in case the emotions left any traces, he pays less attention to the fact that the act of re-thinking past thoughts also involves the emotions of the interpreter (Grever 2012, 82). Think for example of an attempt to re-think the past thoughts of a battle commander that resulted in a war crime – like the thoughts of the earlier mentioned Joachim Peiper. For some persons, re-thinking his thoughts might arouse an emotional response that influences the interpretation of the cause of events. Also, previous experiences, in particular trauma, can have a long lasting effect on someone’s personality and his or her capacity to verbalize certain thoughts and feelings adequately. Recognizing the potential affective response of an interpreter is therefore necessary when working with historical interpretation.

Second, knowledge is not exclusive to the mind – it can also exist on other levels (Crouch, Aronsson, and Wahlström 2001). For Collingwood, the re-enactment of past thought is primarily a cognitive procedure (Collingwood [1946] 1993, 287). However, insights from a rather different philosophical tradition tell us that such a separation of thoughts from the body, and consequently from its surroundings, is not possible. The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty regards the body as the center of orientation in the world. As he writes: ‘Rather than a mind *and* a body, man is a mind *with* a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things’ (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 2004, 56). Therefore, knowledge is produced by mind and body, while being informed by movements, bodily actions and sensual experiences that are performed in a place (Casey 1997, 232–234). For Merleau-Ponty, such a place is not a neutral given, but something that is created and performed through the body (234). Hence, when analyzing the process of interpreting past events,

it is important to acknowledge the existence of different levels of (subjective) knowledge: cognitive, bodily, emotional.

These two extensions – emotional and bodily – point to an approach to historical re-enactment that is quite different from Collingwood's original ideas, as the contrast between the cognitive procedure of the re-enactment of past thought and subjective, emotional interpretations of the past seems strong – or at least in theory. In practice, the two appear to be much more connected. It is not difficult to imagine, for example, how an affective response to a narrative about the past stimulates someone's interest in history and perhaps also encourages critical reflection on the past (Landsberg 2015, 2). With this in mind, it becomes easier to regard the current Dutch military battlefield tours as an approach to engaging with the past in which the two modes coexist – even though it also clear that this coexistence should be regarded as complex, and possibly problematic. Therefore, in order to know how the members of the military themselves comprehend and experience their battlefield tours in practice, we will now present the outcomes of the empirical research.

Methodology

As a qualitative study, the research is based on a series of interviews with Dutch officers of different ranks and ages, cadets at the Royal Military Academy and their professors and battlefield guides. The Dutch context has been chosen because of the variety of forms in which the military battlefield tours exist in the Netherlands as well as for reasons of access. Eleven Dutch officers and cadets participated in a semi-structured interview in the Netherlands from November 2015 until November 2016. As such, the sample is diverse, ranging from young adults to experienced officers. Semi-structured interviewing allows for a focus on the interviewees' perspectives, experiences and worldviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2007, 27). The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide that contained questions about the motivation of the officers and cadets to undertake the military battlefield tours, their on-site experiences, and the significance that they attach to the visits. Next, data has been gathered in four open interviews with military instructors who were involved in the battlefield tours – teachers, experts and guides working for the Dutch defence department. Because these interviews mainly took place during the field-work these interviews have not been recorded. Instead, extensive notes have been taken. Although this does not align with our proposed bottom-up approach, their information was relevant for the preparation of the interviews with the (non-commissioned) officers and cadets and gave us insight in the goals and practices of the battlefield tours. As such, their information was used to write the contextual parts of the analysis.

Participant observation has been conducted during three military battlefield tours, each lasting five days: a historically themed TEWT to the Reichswald in Germany with officers of an armoured infantry brigade, a battlefield tour to the surroundings of Ypres, Belgium, with a group of non-commissioned officers studying to become officers, and a historically themed TEWT to the surroundings of Rotterdam with a group of officers of the Dutch airmobile brigade.⁶ The sampling of interviewees happened during those trips. The cadets were recruited during a class devoted to the preparation of their battlefield tour to Normandy and interviewed after their return. All interviewees have consented to participate in this study, to be recorded, and all were offered anonymity if

they wished so. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author at various military compounds in the Netherlands, at the Netherlands Defence Academy, or, in one case, at the home of the interviewee, with an average duration of a little over one hour. All interviews have been transcribed verbatim and were thematically coded with an open-coding strategy. The codes generated in the open coding were grouped under larger concepts and themes. These different themes form the basis of the analysis. As the interviews were conducted in Dutch, the native tongue of all participants, we have translated the used quotes.

Finally, it is important to mention the existence of a military culture, a culture in which there is little space for individual consideration. Becoming an officer implies a radical choice for living a military life spent on military compounds, under the continuous risk of being sent somewhere for a long time without having much to say about the character, goal and mandate of a mission. An officers' life is, especially during the training and educational period, a life spent in military surroundings, eating, studying and sleeping together with other cadets, with only the possibility of going home at the weekend. This way of living together provides the basis of the establishment of a military culture, a culture of shared values and a strong sense of companionship based on traditions from the past (Soeters and Weibull 2006). It also establishes a strict border between the civilian and the military world, in which the experience of 'being in the military' is considered difficult to explain to anyone who lacks this experience. During the interviews, the existence of a military culture was noticeable. Officers and cadets for example used the same words and expressions to describe their ideas, especially when talking about ethical or moral issues (e.g. Jansen and Kramer 2018). This might sometimes have obscured individual voices. However, one could reason that this learned way of thinking also constitutes the life-world of the interviewees. In-depth interviewing, with its focus on individual experience and meaning making enables a researcher to explore this military culture and expose the boundaries and tensions between individual and learned ways of meaning making.

Analysis

In the next sections, we present the results of the analysis. The analysis is divided into three themes. 'Re-enacting the past together' focuses on the officers' and instructors' motives to undertake battlefield tours and the employed historical method. 'Engaging with an authentic past' discusses the experience and significance the participants attach to visiting tangible historical war sites, memorials and war cemeteries. 'Working with different perspectives' considers the tensions present within the military battlefield tours. In doing so, we move from more general comments on the form and goals of the field trips and the used methods in the first section to more personal experiences and effects of the field trips in the second and third section.

Re-enacting the past together

Within the current Dutch army and military academy, the military battlefield tour is practiced in different forms. From more standardized guided tours along former battlefields that focus on analysing the past to tactical exercises without troops (TEWTs) on historical grounds, where former battles are mentally re-enacted with modern means.

During a military battlefield tour, which can take up to a week, these different forms can all be employed and adjusted to the learning goals of a unit or class. Both stand-by army units and cadets engage in these activities, due to which members of the military participate in battlefield tours during different periods of their career in the army, ranging from once a year to multiple times a year. In the case of the army units, the incentive to organize a battlefield tour comes from the army commanders themselves, while for the cadets battlefield tours are a standard part of their curriculum.

According to the interviewed instructors, the trips are undertaken for several reasons. First, to learn practical military skills, like giving orders in chaotic circumstances, developing a sense for terrain and learning to read the landscape in a military way. Here, a reference to a historical situation is regarded as a way to appoint similarities between the past and the present. Second, to develop insight in the difficulties of understanding and interpreting the discussed event. The confrontation with a historical situation is thereby seen as a way to teach the participants to deal with complex situations, to work with friction, and to think ‘out of the box’.⁷ Third, the instructors regard the trips as a natural way to stimulate reflection on the military profession as a whole, because discussing a historical situation allows to touch upon all facets of the job – from the practice of navigating in a forest to ethical questions about killing and dying. In the case of the cadets, an extra goal is mentioned: that of developing personality, for example by encouraging them to form opinions on issues like military responsibility and leadership. The teachers and guides agree that their personal preferences also steer the perspective taken during a military battlefield tour. For example, one guide mentions to be prone to discussing facts and debunking historical myths, while another prefers to focus on appealing stories during his battlefield tours.

Our interviewee Karel, lieutenant colonel of the airmobile brigade, and ten of his colleagues went on a TEWT in the surroundings of Rotterdam that was devoted to studying attacks and defenses of bridges in the Second World War in order to improve their tactical skills. Karel describes how he works with history during such an exercise:

‘Now, in this specific case, you are standing on a bridge that you want to conquer with modern means. It is not possible to compare that with [how they did it] then. But still, when you’re standing there, you discover that many things are in fact the same. And you will question yourself, why are we doing things in such a difficult way nowadays, they did it much more simple back then, or faster. (...) And you test, is it testing? It is comparing, it is searching for, eh, what do we take from what they did back then. And sometimes those are real discoveries, that will make you think, shit, it’s not always the planning, it’s also showing initiative in the execution. And sometimes it’s more like, why did they do such stupid things, what was the cause of that, and why? Well, it’s good to see those two [present and past situation] next to each other.’ (Karel, 54)

As Karel explains, during the exercise he moves between past and present, searching for similarities and differences. Hereby, he uses his knowledge of a past event as a means to gauge tactical plans made in the present. His judging of past events from a present point of view echoes Collingwood’s re-enactment doctrine, where insight in past actions or events is also established through an inner dialogue between past and present. However, for Karel, there is something more that makes the exercise beneficial to him: the possibility to speak openly with colleagues about all levels of an operation. For Karel, the discussion about the past does not end with himself questioning the past. Rather,

the past is used as a vehicle to debate tactical issues with colleagues in detail. Interestingly enough, the re-enactment of past thought happens here in a dialogical manner with others. Albert, a 35-year-old infantry captain, sees these debates with his officer colleagues during a TEWT as crucial for the execution of his profession:

'For me, a TEWT is super important, because I can hear my direct battalion commander think. I hear him say 'hey, I think this'. (...) During big exercises or on a mission I only have radio contact with him, and only very briefly. So it's very important that we know of each other how we react to specific situations.' (Albert, 35)

Here, Albert tells how joining a tactical exercise without troops helps him to get to know the ways of thinking of his commander, and predict his behaviour in future situations. Witnessing his commander reasoning and reacting to tactical questions thereby assists in creating intuitive knowledge of what he will be doing next.

Albert and Karel both hold a positive opinion about the benefits of the military battlefield tours, and are able to relate the historical information to their own position as officers. But is this also the case with younger and lower-ranked military? Although all interviewees speak about the benefits of historical knowledge for the military in general, not all of them see the direct connection between the lessons taught at the military battlefield tours and their own practices. Sometimes this is caused by the kind of job that the interviewee is working in. One army medic, for example, mentions that it is not very interesting for her to learn about the choices of former infantry officers. The same goes for an army engineer, who had looked forward to discussing the fabrication of the tunnels and bombs in Ypres, and was disappointed that the trip's main focus lay with tactics. At other times, the rank of the officer was an important factor. In general, the higher the rank of the officer, the more the military battlefield tours are valued in terms of applicable learning benefits, and the more knowledge of the past is seen as useful in their practices. This particularly applies to knowledge obtained from historically themed TEWTs that predominantly focus on the tactical decisions of past, high-ranked officers. Thus, the match of the content of a military battlefield tour with a participant's rank and specialization determines the appeal it holds for those participants: the more the historical example could be related to someone's specialization or field of interest, the more the trips were valued.

Concluding, historical re-enactment, as practised by the Dutch military on former war sites, has some clear benefits. By using the past both as a reference to a real situation and as vehicle to discuss tactical ideas with during a TEWT, officers are able to spend time discussing their ideas in detail and develop an understanding for the course of events in the past or in the future. To a certain degree, this way of working with the past resonates Collingwood's re-enactment doctrine: the way of thinking of former military is central to the exercises and the past is approached in a self-conscious, reflective manner. Yet, the benefits of military battlefield tours are as much defined by the urge to listen to other colleagues' reasoning. The past situation here functions as a vehicle that helps to evoke ideas and stimulate a detailed discussion about various levels of warfare. Additionally, the re-enactment does not work for everyone in the same way – the value ascribed to the military battlefield tours is depending on the rank and type of job of the participants. At the moment the historical example mirrors the personal situation of a cadet or officer, it is considered significant to study the past.

Engaging with an authentic past

The battlefield tours conducted by the Dutch military are according to the interviewed instructors based on the conviction that a historical site with an authentic appeal is a good way to instruct cadets and officers about war history and tactics, second only to participating in a real war (see also King 2019, 18). What does the presence of traces to the past contribute to the experience of the cadets and the officers? The interviews indicate that for some officers an unfamiliar landscape already awakens their historical imagination, while for others much more physical historical traces are necessary in order to have the past speak to them. Yet, all interviewees agree that a visit to a specific historical site provides something extra to a story. Particularly the cadets stress the necessity of the presence of distinctive historical traces in order to imagine past events and see the visits as beneficial for their personal development. Most of the officers have less difficulty in imagining the past. One of the reasons for this difference is the amount of knowledge and experiences officers have acquired throughout their career in the army: with a lot of knowledge about the past, it is easier to imagine it. Although the visual aides on a site help to evoke a certain image of the past – actually resulting in performing a specific past – the way the past is imagined is dependent on more than just visuals, and consequently differs from person to person (Crouch 2003; Daugbjerg 2011, 23). Thus, though visiting a historical site adds an extra layer to a story about a past conflict, these layers are coloured by personal backgrounds.

Another explanation for the difference between cadets and officers is earlier experience in real wars and the subsequent sense of responsibility. For Albert, for example, being on a tangible site where real events happened during a TEWT serves as an incentive to perform. This incentive is connected to a sense of responsibility for his unit:

‘What is equally important is that you are confronted with reality. Like, ‘Okay, what I decide will cause real losses, it will really cause casualties’. This makes it very serious, and makes you realize that the things you decide need to be really clever. It allows you to consider that, you know, real people stood here in the woods, and they were really bombed with all this artillery, so it’s very important that I include covering fire in my plans, and maybe it makes me realize that we haven’t practiced covering fire in a while, so it also works as an incentive to train specific military skills.’ (Albert, 35)

Next to the confrontation with reality, a military battlefield tour also provides a confrontation with the views of others. Mayke, a 32-year-old lieutenant, describes this process clearly:

‘Yes, I think that if something has really happened, it is easier to empathize with. Now you know the outcome of the events, and what ultimately happened (..) but go stand in the shoes of someone then (..) it will make you look more in depth at the reasons why he made a wrong decision, or why he chose to do it in that way, while in our opinion that would have been the least preferable solution.’ (Mayke, 32)

According to Mayke, focusing on a historical situation helps to get a more nuanced view on the actions and choices of the military in the past and causes them to become less judgmental. Sven, a 24-year-old cadet, experienced a similar call for nuance. When talking about the battlefield tour he undertook with his fellow cadets to Normandy, he mentions that a visit to a war site caused him to think in less black-and-white terms

about a historical event, and that it made it easier for him to engage and empathize with the situation. Later on, Sven brings up the issue of credibility. You can read about a historical event, but the story always stays somewhat abstract. Standing on the spot where past events occurred allowed him to realize the scale of what happened and believe the consequences of past actions:

‘At a certain moment we were in the bocage, those large hedges, and of course you see those in every documentary, but now you see them for real and that makes you realize that they are different than expected. (..) I know they had problems with it, but I didn’t see to what extent. And now you’re standing there, and you see such a hedge of four meters high, and you think ‘okay, yes, that might indeed cause problems.’ (Sven, 24)

Meanwhile, visits to historical sites during a military battlefield tour can confirm prior knowledge instead of nuancing it. Mayke tells how she liked that visiting a war cemetery in Ypres during a battlefield tour verified the things she read in books about this site:

‘Because you have spent so much time [on an assignment], you will recognize things, and it will make you think: ‘hey, there is this and this, this is that stone, and what the English have written on it and the thoughts behind that. And you will think, ‘Ok, now that I am standing here, I know that the books were correct in their description of this’, and that is a nice thing, yes.’ (Mayke, 32)

Both Mayke and Sven underline the importance of seeing things with their own eyes. By relating their experiences on site to their prior knowledge, they are able to understand the complexities of the past situation, a form of historical thinking desired by the instructors. Seeing the real terrain and obstacles that earlier armies had to face thereby helps them to engage with the historical situation, and allows them to recognize elements of friction. At the same time, it is also clear that the presence of familiar elements on site provides a certain satisfaction: by visiting a historical site, and recognizing facts and stories that were read about in books, these facts and stories become more credible. Here, one should keep in mind that historical sites not necessarily evoke a more convincing image of past events (Muir 2001, xii). Moreover, both the design of a historical site and in decisions to maintain or preserve certain places always reflect a particular interpretation of past events.

The various quotes of the interviewees illustrate that in this process of witnessing what happens on a historical site, prior knowledge can be nuanced, confirmed or enriched with details. In all these cases, the experience of standing on the spot is a positive experience that adds value to the personal understanding of a historical event (Gough 2004, 238). However, not everybody sees the benefits. Mike explains this very clearly:

‘It is nice to see the things in reality, but overall I don’t think the trip was a success. With all the means that we have nowadays, I don’t see the benefits of traveling all the way to Normandy. But this is of course also because of my personal interest. When I see a beach, it’s just a beach. For me there is no difference between Scheveningen [a well known Dutch beach] or Omaha. (..) But then such a cemetery, that I find really beautiful to see, because there a specific atmosphere is present that you can taste.’ (Mike, 21)

Indeed, visits to war cemeteries and memorials are a common part of the Dutch military battlefield tours for both cadets and (non-commissioned) officers, and offer a confrontation with the possible consequences of warfare. Sometimes the visits to cemeteries and memorials are accompanied by a military ceremony, and, in the case of

the battlefield tour to Ypres, by attending the Last Post memorial service at the Menin Gate in military formation. According to the instructors, even though killing and dying seem to be central to the military profession, they are not often talked about within the army. A visit to a war cemetery is therefore thought to create space for these topics to be discussed, and serves as a moment for reflection on the profession. Many of the officers speak about these kinds of visits as a natural activity, something that is an obvious part of being in the military. As Karel explains:

‘Go to Normandy, and go stand on the water line at the time of the attack and look at the dunes. Then you realize what kind of drama it must have been to get from the beach to the dunes, and what that might have meant. Then automatically the feeling will emerge that you want to pay respect to that. It is our job, we are working on it every day, so you automatically feel connected to the people that did these kind of things [in the past].’ (Karel, 54)

Karel tells how visits to historical war sites automatically establish a feeling of connection to past military, and stimulate him to commemorate those persons. A part of this stimulation is also caused by a sense of duty. In the next quote, Karel tells more about the origins of this sense of duty. By coming up with words like ‘polite’ and ‘respect’, it is noticeable that this duty is partly caused by his ideas of what is expected from an army member, and partly by his feeling of connection to military of the past:

‘If you do a TEWT in Normandy, then it is also polite to take a moment there, you know, because those military cemeteries are all over, to take a moment to contemplate. That is also a bit of respect towards those people, you see, we continuously have to be conscious about what we do, an army member has to realize that when he is sent somewhere, he might as well not return, and that is something that you need to realize all the time, and considering that it is not bad at all to take a moment [to pay respect].’ (Karel, 54)

Where for general visitors to war cemeteries, paying respect or fulfilling a duty is something rather abstract, something that is (mostly) far away from daily life, this is not the case for the military. Karel’s remark indicates how a visit to a war cemetery for him functions as a confrontation with the concrete possibility of not returning from a war. His sense of duty might therefore also involve something else: the desire that other members of the military will do the same for him in case he dies in war. Interestingly, for Karel the development of insight in the course of past events during a TEWT goes hand in hand with the emotional connection to that event, caused by the identification with army members of the past. Here we notice the impact of what we have called a military culture. Like Karel, many other interviewees mention both the connection to military of the past and the confrontation with their own possible fate as thoughts and feelings that arise during their visits to war cemeteries. For Daan, a 23-year-old lieutenant, these thoughts and feelings also stimulate him to work hard. As he tells:

‘You think about the fact that this is someone like me, this is someone who maybe had the same ideals and joined [the army] for similar reasons, who followed a similar education, and yes this guy died in this way, and lies here between I don’t know how many men. (..) So I think, this can happen to me too, and now with the upcoming mission, it makes me really conscious to do everything to prepare in the best way possible and train every moment I can.’ (Daan, 23)

Daan describes how a visit to a war cemetery makes him aware of the existence of similarities between a dead soldier’s life and his own life. Again, it is a personal

connection to the past, a recognition of similarities, which makes the past speak to the officers. Albert tells how he too looked for a personal connection with the men buried on a war cemetery:

‘In my case, I was just looking around a bit there, checking out how many graves of officers I could see, and thought by myself ‘so, still quite a few’. (...) I can sit here nicely behind my desk, but eh, officers die too.’ (Albert, 35)

By starting his story with the words ‘in my case’, Albert indicates that a visit to a war cemetery is a personal affair, something that you do in your own way and on your own conditions. Interestingly, this individual approach to commemorating contrasts with the collective and homogenizing character of the military culture. With regard to the education of cadets, Jansen and Kramer (2018) too mention this contrast: on the one hand, cadets are expected to adjust to existing hierarchies and cultures, while on the other hand they are encouraged to develop personality as future military leaders (11–12). With regard to the military battlefield tours, it seems to be that adjustment and obedience are expected when working on tactical decision making, while visits to cemeteries and memorials are seen as possibilities to develop individual points of view, both for the cadets and the (non-commissioned) officers.

Visits to cemeteries also allow for the development of personal rituals. Richard explains how he has established such a personal ritual, starting again with appointing that such a ritual is something you think up for yourself:

‘I find it important that when I’m at a military cemetery, I have walked past every grave. That might sound a bit weird, but (...) I find it important, and preferably I want to read all the names, and, you know, how has this guy died, and think fuck, you were only 17, you haven’t even had a beer.’ (Richard, 43)

Richard has turned the sense of having to fulfil a duty into a personal ritual, into a way of behaving that he can repeat every time he visits a war cemetery. In this way, he translates the expected sense of duty into a personalized performance that is based on earlier experiences. Daan also speaks about the ritual of paying attention to every gravestone. Only, for him, the performance of such a ritual leans more towards performing expected behaviour:

‘Only, I have seen so many [war cemeteries] already, I don’t spend hours there walking around, I don’t need to see each name on a stone. I just want to take a look, get a sense of the atmosphere, and that is a kind of, eh, contemplative moment, and yes then you get into the car and leave again.’ (Daan, 23)

Instead of reading names on graves, Daan’s personal ritual focuses on the atmosphere present at a war cemetery – on getting a sense for the greater narrative presented at the site. Daan explicitly describes the atmosphere on a cemetery as something that is different from other places, and something that invites him to spend a moment contemplating, before continuing with the rest of the day. Daan’s remark also refers to the fact that compared to the more indistinct historical sites that are visited for tactical purposes, war cemeteries and memorials are designed sites, where a clear distinction is made between an inside world, secluded by walls and gates, and the outside world. It is therefore also the atmosphere that is created through this distinction that invites for

developing and performing specific ritualistic behaviour, in which contemplation and self-reflection form an important part.

Paul Connerton has argued that people often need a spatial component in order to deal with the temporal changes that happen in life (Connerton 2009, 14). Secluded spaces, like for example cemeteries, with their particular atmosphere, ask for contemplation. Being in such a place can help to understand the changes that happened in the life of the visitor and allows to reflect on the life that lies outside. It is also clear that the kind of place matters: historical sites that are distinctively different from daily life, like a cemetery, have a stronger appeal for self-reflection than sites that seem to be more integrated in common landscapes and life rhythms.

In sum, for many of the interviewees visits to historical war sites during military battlefield tours evoke feelings of connection, of nuancing and understanding the historical situation and the ones who acted in it. Being physically confronted with the reality of war contributes to the credibility of an event, even though it can be debated whether historical sites or traces ever represent a 'reality of war'. The visits to war cemeteries serve as a way to establish a feeling of connection to the military of the past and function as a literal confrontation with the fact that not everyone returns from a war. The connection that many interviewees feel to former army members also causes them to reflect on themselves and their profession. However, not everyone leaves a former war site while feeling enriched or connected to the past.

Working with different perspectives

We will now address various tensions mentioned during the interviews – cases in which the goals of the military battlefield tours do not match the experiences of the participants and seem to be more problematic. The larger part of these tensions is directed to the limitations in identifying with different historical actors or perspectives and the limits in understanding the past.

Where almost all (male) interviewees speak about the connection they feel to army members of the past, and positively evaluated their visits to war cemeteries, this is different for Mayke. During the battlefield tour to Ypres, her group of non-commissioned officers concluded the day by participating in the Last Post memorial ceremony in uniform. She emphasizes the individual character of the ceremony, and the lack of connection she feels to the bigger story:

To me, [joining the Last Post ceremony in uniform] was not really necessary. I understand why they did it (...) and you stand there differently at the moment when you are wearing a uniform, and you are then of course also part of the attraction [laughs]. (...) You know, everyone stands there with their own [thoughts], that's what I also mentioned in my assignment, that actually with every commemoration and the two minutes of silence, everyone thinks about their own personal world, not about the greater story. In those two minutes you will go back to the ones you have liked and the ones you have lost, rather than that you think about the Dutch or the Germans. That is what I witness at those commemorations.' (Mayke, 32)

Interestingly, the absence of a connection to the greater story, as experienced by Mayke, might also be caused by the non-existence of a collective narrative in the Netherlands about the First World War – as a neutral nation, the Dutch do not have popular, widely

shared narratives about that war. Yet, where the male participants of that particular battlefield tour to Ypres seemed to be able to relate to a general (masculine) narrative about the military experience of war, Mayke did not. Here, differences in gender and nationality seem to play a role in the way these ceremonies are experienced and valued.

During the interviews, it appeared that the kind of perspective the trip focused on also played a role in the evaluation of the trip. In Dutch military battlefield tours, the Second World War is the main topic for many of the trips, because of the proximity of the historical sites and the presence of a collective memory about many of the events. Yet, among the cadets the idea prevails that battles are often only discussed from an Allied point of view, following for example the advance of the allied troops through Normandy, and leaving out other perspectives. As Klaas, a 21-year-old cadet, tells:

‘We have been discussing military thinkers, and there are some German things that were really, also that there were people that were super good and that were ahead of others, and then I think, we speak about German thinkers, but we rarely discuss a battle from the German perspective, it’s always the Allied perspective and they briefly mention ‘this was the German defence’ but it’s not like, this is what the Germans did and then a brief discussion of the Americans. Why can’t we discuss the start of the Second World War, when the German’s were winning? Why were they that good? They might have been fighting for a wrong goal, that’s how we see it now, but that doesn’t mean that they weren’t good military. Why can’t we look at that, we might learn something from it.’ (Klaas, 21)

Contrary to the focus on the Allied forces when studying military movements, both the German and Allied war cemeteries in Normandy were visited during the battlefield tour of the cadets, and discussions on the issue of why and how to commemorate the Nazi-German military took place. However, according to the cadets, the reluctance to discuss Nazi-German military operations was present. The interviewed officers do not experience such restraints in discussing the controversial, Nazi-German, perspective – instead, they have a positive opinion towards working with different historical perspectives. Yet, they mention other limitations, for instance, when studying and working with situations that surpass plain tactical dilemmas. Richard, a 43-year-old major, explains how he found it difficult to mentally re-enact a controversial situation and connect it to his own practice, because he had never experienced similar circumstances:

‘That question, you know, ‘what would you have done’, is really difficult to answer. Because if I would have been a member of Kampfgruppe Peiper and I would have been in the Ardennes in winter, without fuel, little sleep, and my unit had been decimated and I had to start walking back, I don’t know how I would have reacted. (..) So I find it difficult to empathize with such a situation (..) from a humanitarian perspective you of course always say ‘no! I would never do that’, but you know, look at Iraq, Afghanistan, at what the Americans sometimes do (..) so I find it a difficult question to answer. From a tactical perspective I immediately know the answer, like I would have done this and this, but if you start looking from a human perspective, than it’s almost impossible to know what you would have done.’ (Richard, 43)

Richard makes a distinction between looking at the actions of the Germans from a tactical point of view and a humanitarian point of view. The tactical point of view here relates to a rational way of thinking and decision-making that came into existence within a specific mandate. The humanitarian point of view is connected to his knowledge that people do not always take rational decisions in war. This is further complicated by the fact that as an active

member of the military, it is hard to admit that you expect to be susceptible to irrational or emotional decision-making. This is a paradox that might not be solved by a rational re-enactment of the past.

Richard's remark illustrates the complex position identification has when taking the perspective of the enemy and moving away from plain tactical dilemmas. On the one hand, identification is necessary in order to relate past events to present and personal practices, and potentially establish an emotional connection to the past. It serves as a means to enlarge someone's understanding of the past and knowledge of underlying factors that play a role when choosing sides. It also functions as a warning for the fact that everyone is susceptible to (perceived) wrong ideas. On the other hand, when confronted with perspectives that are difficult to agree on, a strict distinction between understanding plain tactical decisions and ideology inspired behaviour is required. Here, the limits of Collingwood's re-enactment theory are exposed. A rational questioning of past events can help in understanding tactical decisions, but does not always suffice in understanding someone's behaviour in war.

As stated in the earlier sections of the analysis, the establishment of a personal connection to the studied event is an important tool to bring the past to life for the participants and emphasize the usefulness of studying the past. However, not everyone experiences the establishment of such a connection. Sometimes, studying war history brings up feelings of distance, of the impossibility of completely grasping the past ever. This is especially the case when speaking about a certain mentality or about controversial actions. Yet, the urge to understand such a mentality is mentioned by the interviewees – as is the desire to study historical events from unconventional perspectives. Furthermore, when studying unethical or ideologically driven actions, the practice of using different perspectives demonstrates its limits as it is difficult to identify with the actions that led to violent and controversial events.

Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on experiences of Dutch officers and cadets who participate in military battlefield tours. Our findings suggest that the battlefield tours help them to evoke a specific place-bound engagement with the past. The multiple visual and sensual triggers on a historical site allow for gaining cognitive and bodily knowledge. Tactical discussions on historical war sites stimulate the development of tactical insights and enlarge the participant's historical knowledge. Both are cognitive; they are about (historical) facts and rational reasoning. Yet, whereas Collingwood's re-enactment of past thought in the mind of the historian is an inner dialogue of asking questions, in the case of the battlefield tours the re-enactment of past thought by military participants happened in a dialogical manner with others. Hereby, discussing and analysing historical events on the same spot as where they occurred decades ago, is thought to evoke an intuitive understanding for cause and effect in military operations, both in the past and present.

Furthermore, visits to former war sites provide detailed and vivid images of a historical situation. Books may describe a past event, but the interviewees regard witnessing physical traces of the past as more convincing, because these places refer to an 'authentic' past. Additionally, visits to former war sites made the participants regard the past as more complex. These achievements are in line with the general purposes of

the military battlefield tours. Yet, especially in the cases when prior knowledge was confirmed on site, we can question whether a more in-depth understanding of past events was developed.

Military battlefield tours also appeal to the participants' imagination. However, how and to what extent the past is imagined strongly depends on the knowledge and cultural background of the participant, as well as the attempts of the participants to actively do something imaginatively with the traces present on site. Here, tensions between the goals of the battlefield tours and the experiences of the participants are exposed. Nevertheless, the military battlefield tours opened up space for linking critical self-reflection of the participants to their personal, affective experiences. Particularly the visits to cemeteries stimulated the development of personal relationship to past events and past actors, to connect their personal story to greater historical narratives and to collective cultural practices, such as the military culture. Even the participants who had more difficulties seeing the benefits of the other parts of the trip, regarded the visits to the cemeteries as valuable. The distinct design of these sites creates a specific atmosphere and stimulates the development of personal rituals on site.

Recognizing the difficulties of past battles and the dilemmas of past actors plays a key role in making the past appealing to the participants of the military battlefield tours. This resulted in two seemingly contradictory processes: from the cognitive level of recognizing similarities between a past actors job and ones own, to identifying with the emotions of past military. When analysing tactical decisions while being on a historical war site, following the perspective of past actors – the re-enactment of past thought – seems to contribute to the development of a more in-depth understanding of the past.

When trying to understand the emotional impact and consequences of warfare, the participants tend to identify with past actors, which sometimes generates dilemmas. In some cases, this is due to the fact that the historical circumstances are too different from the present situation. Then identification confirms the existence of a gap between past and present. In other cases, the studied perspective hampers identification with the historical event, particularly when it concerns controversial actions or involves strong emotions. Then a tension is discernible between a military and a human perspective. Where a human perspective can include pity or understanding for individuals operating within a certain mentality or ideology, the military perspective lacks this possibility. In conclusion, being able to switch between these different modes of experiencing seems to be one of the central lessons of military battlefield tours.

This research considered a relatively small sample of respondents. Further studies are needed in order to solidify these conclusions. Hereby, it is important to take the background, nationality, education, gender and rank of respondents into account, as this project indicates the existence of differences between those groups. While the development of social cohesion through military battlefield tours was not a main topic in this study, it would be interesting to investigate this theme more in-depth. Moreover, the various national 'styles' of conducting military battlefield tours might cause different outcomes of the tours. To understand these differences, international comparative research would be necessary. Nevertheless, we hope to have made an argument for integrating research about the cognitive procedures of historical reenactments and the bodily experiences with places of the past, in this case through military battlefield tours.

Notes

1. There seems to be a link between the form of the military battlefield tour and different national cultures of remembrance with regard to their military past – a topic to explore more in depth in another paper.
2. The terms used by the Dutch army and Military Academy to describe the practices differ, and vary between ‘battlefield tour’, ‘military historical analysis’ and ‘TEWTs on historical sites’. ‘Staff ride’ – a term frequently used in the British and American context, is not a term that is used by the Dutch military and focuses on military staff only. We have decided to use the term ‘military battlefield tours’ as an umbrella term for the different types of military travel to and education on historical war sites. Although ‘tours’ has an association with touristic practices, it is a term that is well known and speaks to different audiences – both military and civilian. Moreover, ‘tours’ allows to emphasize the organized character of the visits, rather than as independent or individual visits.
3. In scientific research, Collingwood is often mentioned in this context of popular re-enactments, yet, his form of re-enactment has little to do with the popular approach to re-enactment. See for example Landsberg (2015).
4. This paragraph on Collingwood is mainly based on Maria Grever (2012). ‘Dilemmas of Common and Plural History. Reflections on History Education and Heritage in a Globalizing World.’ In M. Carretero, M. Asensio & M. Rodriguez-Moneo eds. *History Education and the Construction of National Identities*. Charlotte NC: Information Age Publishing. 75–91.
5. See also Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2008). *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*. London: Routledge. Many thanks to Jan van der Dussen for this valuable information on Collingwood.
6. All field trips took a week; the first author joined the trips to the Reichswald, Ypres and Rotterdam for a day. The descriptions of the types of battlefield tour related to the day that I joined. During their time Reichswald, for example, the officers did more than a TEWT only, but also engaged in commemorations, war games and historical classes.
7. The term ‘friction’ stems from Von Clausewitz’s classic *On War* (1832) and is still used in military jargon, and refers to the countless uncertainties and unexpected consequences of practical warfare.

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