FIRST IMPRESSIONS
The thing that hit home immediately, or quite soon after exiting the airport on my way to the city of College Station and my accommodation for the next four months, was the sudden scaling up of things around me: the cars, the roads, the food portions, you name it. Hence, it came as no surprise to learn from the local students that the Texas A&M University campus was one of the largest in the US. Though, I probably should have asked that before trying to discover the campus on foot.

HISTORY & FOOTBALL FEVER
Texas A&M started out as a college specializing in agricultural and mechanical studies with compulsory military studies. This link to its past is retained by the ‘A&M’ in its name which stands for ‘Agricultural & Mechanical’. The region in Texas where the university is situated being dominated by agricultural farmland is referred to as ‘Aggieland’, thus, being the source of the nickname ‘Aggie’ for anyone from the Texas A&M university.

The military studies which were a compulsory part of the curriculum eventually became optional in the 60’s. However, the military tradition of Texas A&M is still very much intact, a fact which was most obvious during the football games on the weekends, where instead of having the usual cheerleaders we had yell leaders calling out special yells to get the support for the Texas A&M football team going. However, that was hardly a problem with pretty much the whole town of College Station gearing up for the weekend football games with the ‘Friday night yell’, when everyone gathered in the Texas A&M stands of the football ground to chant a series of yells, led by the yell leaders, to build up for the game.

I was lucky enough to be there at a time when Texas A&M had a football game with their biggest rivals UT Austin. Sadly, I couldn’t watch the game in the stadium as the tickets were way too expensive due to the demand for them, as it was the first match between Texas A&M and UT Austin in the past two decades. This in no way meant that I missed out on the atmosphere of the game as we could hear the stadium full of spectators a good few kilometres away. Sadly, though Texas A&M lost in the dying moments of the game. However, they were still great memories and made me into a bit of a football fan too, something I never thought I would say! The work I did there was just as exciting and interesting. I undertook work on applying the compatible spectral discretization method to beam bending problems which eventually developed into my master’s thesis.

EXPLORATION
One of the best ways of discovering the US is by road. So weekend road trips were a great way to travel to neighbouring places such as San Antonio, San Marcos,
Austin and Houston. The best of these places for me was Houston for the simple reason that the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Centre was located there. It was an awe-inspiring experience to be in the same place where the American space program took its first steps towards the moon and finally see firsthand the lunar modules and command modules used in the Apollo space missions, as well as the lunar rovers and of course the iconic Saturn V rocket, which seemed almost larger than life. Looking at the hardware used by the astronauts of the Apollo program and the desperately confined working environment it offered gave me a whole new appreciation for their bravery and ability, as some would say: they definitely had ‘the right stuff’. Another highlight of being there was visiting the mission control at Houston and watching the live trajectory and images from the International Space Station (ISS), which was almost a surreal experience. It was quite interesting to learn about the tradition at mission control where the mission patches for all ongoing missions were hung on one wall of the mission control room and moved over and hung on the opposite wall on the completion of a great event. Keeping with the aerospace mood for exploration, I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. The opportunity to finally see legendary aircrafts such as the SR-71 Blackbird, which was much smaller in size than I imagined, the Concorde, the Enterprise space shuttle and historically important aircraft such as the Enola Gay was the experience of a lifetime. Of course being surrounded by so much military aviation history I just had to take a go in the dogfight simulators there. In my first ever and probably last ‘sortie’, I managed to shoot down four targets spending most of my time upside down, just one shy of becoming an ace, at least in my mind. Not too bad for a first ‘sortie’ I suppose.

TALKING ABOUT FOOD
The exploration and experiencing of any new place is incomplete without discovering the local food, and Texas definitely had a lot to offer. Thanks to my local friends there, I discovered what a proper authentic cheeseburger tastes like and I have to admit that finding a cheeseburger that good has been next to impossible in Delft. Of course this being Texas, a good old Texan steak was a must have and what a steak it was. The fact that they took their steaks seriously was obvious from the size of the serving, (see picture) which was the smallest serving. Due to the fact that Texas shares its border with Mexico, there is a rich culture of Mexican food there as well. However, this was with a Texan twist to it giving rise to a new genre of food locally known as ‘Tex-Mex’.

Looking back, the time I spent at the Texas A&M University and the US in general was not only significant from the learning point of view for my masters but also discovering a new place, making some great friends and in the process acquiring lifelong memories of an overall enriching experience. Thus, not surprisingly, I would highly recommend an internship abroad to any fellow student considering it, be it Texas or anywhere, as the challenges of arranging one are far outweighed by the gains in experience and knowledge.