



## Boldness

military-Earth thinking notebook

Lieutenant-colonel Emmanuel DUBOIS

Published on 24/08/2019

Histoire & stratégie

**In a historical field study, one officer, somewhat teasingly, said of the German offensive in the Ardennes in 1940: "Guderian is daring because he succeeded. If the offensive had failed, he would have been incompetent". Is audacity not inherent in the nature of daring? Is it only a subjective notion, a viewpoint of the spectator who judges the action a posteriori? Is it just a matter of chance, a roll of the dice whose success depends on his lucky star (or his opponent's unlucky star)? In short, is the audacity we cherish so much a fantasy of dreamy kids? The author of this article passionately provides his personal answers to these questions.**

Fame, combat, honour, comradeship are catalysts of ideals. These words shape the vocations of generations of officers from the dawn of their careers to its twilight, from the benches of the pump in Coëtquidan to the confines of the Sahel or Afghanistan. Daring is one of them. Its dreamlike force is powerful. Resolutely inscribed in action, audacity has the scent of youth, revolt and aplomb. It is a promise of posterity for those to whom "fortune has smiled" [1]. 1) Who has never dreamt of being a resolute hero, like Bournazel, always chic and victorious in his purple jacket, laughing at death, inspiring fear in his enemies and admiration in his companions?

### **Daring: courage and transgression...**

The first difficulty, and not the least, is to agree on the meaning of the word "daring". It has its Latin root *audere*, meaning "to dare". Audacity designates at the same time "the boldness that knows no limits, courage, but also the attitude or act of someone who despises the limits imposed, the rules" [2]. 2) We can easily distinguish the fascination of audacity which apparently combines two seductive concepts: courage and transgression.

First of all, courage is a virtue. The Army even designates it as "the keystone of all the other virtues" [3]. It corresponds to the energy, essentially of a moral nature, necessary to

produce an effort, to carry out an action in spite of fear, danger and the uncertainty of the result. It is the product of the will and makes it possible to take the ascendancy over the adversary or events. Only courage makes it possible to take the step of risk-taking. Without it, audacity would be nothing more than a vague desire, a pure intellectual abstraction.

Transgression, on the other hand, is equivocal. Disregard for rules' can be understood as an act of emancipation from a constraint that is deemed unnecessary, sclerotic or illegitimate. It is the revolt of the adolescent or the arrogance of the soldier. In this case, the transgression is not a matter of courage but, at the choice, of inconsistency, incompetence or recklessness.

With regard to audacity, transgression is not a matter of revolt but of risk. Boldness therefore knows a limit: the price to be paid (usually that of blood) for the hoped-for gain. This is what is commonly called the stake. The whole art of risk-taking consists in identifying this stake. The rule here is not normative, it is simply structuring. It proposes a frame of reference, a reference point that helps to measure the risks incurred when one crosses the limits.

In short, to be bold is to have the courage to go beyond the common rule by measuring, and assuming, the risks associated with the decision taken.

### **... to keep the initiative**

This might seem odd to anyone unfamiliar with the doctrine of the Army: the military institution encourages its officers to disobey! Indeed, modern French doctrine gives pride of place to audacity. One of the five founding documents that form the basis of land forces doctrine [4] deals with audacity when it deals with the principles of war and in particular freedom of action. This consists, in fact, of keeping the initiative. And this initiative is not conceivable without "the leader showing boldness". Boldness is then characterized by "a reasoned risk-taking that makes it possible to impose one's action on one's opponent".

This is a fundamental point of reference in the way military thought approaches war and its conduct: initiative. Bold initiative is the key to initiative, itself the key to battle. General Yakovleff even believes that "the mastery of initiative is at the heart of the notion of victory [...]. Initiative is characterized as holding options to be exercised. Victory corresponds to the seizure of options - and thus to the strengthening of the initiative" [5]. 5] He invites, with a small touch of provocation, the impatient reader to confine himself to this chapter, the most important in his eyes.

The conception of the officer's role is a structuring element of our command doctrine: the officer must not limit his action to a scrupulous application of prescriptions and recipes, but act according to general principles. At the forefront of these principles is freedom of action. He must understand and make full use of the freedom of action given to him by his leader and define that of his subordinates. Thus, all the notions of major effect and subsidiarity, which we shall not discuss here, should be seen through the prism of these fundamental notions of daring and initiative.

### **Knowing, wanting and being able: how to be daring**

The preceding elements enlighten us on what is at stake in the notion of audacity, the

"why". But being convinced of the importance of audacity does not solve the concrete question of "how". In fact, to be bold, one must know, want and be able.

Végèce asserted that "military knowledge feeds the soldier's boldness: no one fears to execute what he knows in depth" [6]. 6] Boldness first of all requires knowing in order to understand. In an ideal world, it would be a matter of having a perfectly accurate vision of the environment in which the action takes place: knowing exactly what we are capable of achieving, what the adversary is doing or can envisage doing and, finally, knowing with certainty what he will do in reaction to our action. But war is in essence an extreme human experience. It will always, to varying degrees, escape attempts to define its contours. So we will never really know everything, or at the right time. Two fields must therefore intersect: intelligence and doctrine, and the capacity for abstraction and imagination associated with the knowledge of a phenomenon of great complexity.

This step is very important. It is the foundation on which a tactical conviction will be built. The greater the knowledge of the doctrinal framework, the greater the confidence in that conviction.

Willingness is the second characteristic of boldness. Indeed, knowledge is intellectual and military action is action. Wanting allows us to move from one to the other. To give some perspective to the virtue of courage mentioned earlier, let us look at the notion of doubt. Doubt is virtuous when it is a method. Methodical doubt is an intellectual process that aims to voluntarily mishandle one's own thinking in order to test its limits. This is exactly what it is about when, in tactical thinking methods, friendly and enemy modes of action are compared and then confronted. Ultimately, it allows one to develop a "tactical conviction" supported by confidence in the chosen manoeuvre. Then the will can be strong and remain constant despite the uncertainties inherent in combat.

Finally, one must be able to be bold. A psychologist would easily show that certain characteristics favour boldness, it's obvious. However, I am convinced that it is above all a question of trust. It depends both on an endogenous factor, the tactical conviction we have mentioned, and on an exogenous factor, the culture of command. Beyond the posture of taking pride in the "French touch" formerly known as the "French genius", and professing to who wants to hear it the superiority of our "major effect", it is necessary to properly measure the foundations and consequences of our vision of command. It is based on the certainty that the fog of war being irreducible, it is better to learn to evolve in spite of it, and especially with it, than to try to dissipate it. Only then does the vanity of wanting to control everything become absurd, and trusting one's subordinates is no longer a luxury, a coquetry to maintain one's notoriety, but a necessity in order to win. Only then will young leaders be taught to be bold, not to shine, but to preserve their leader's freedom of action at all costs. And we will accept, incidentally, that they are wrong.

In the end, audacity is not a matter of chance. Guderian, like all great military leaders, was not a hothead who tried to force fate. He was first of all an officer who had devoted a lot of energy to study and thought.

The bold leader is one who understands the risks, fully appreciates the scope and holds his course through the storm. Finally, what better definition of daring than General de Gaulle responding to an American general officer who complained about Marshal Leclerc's adventurous and undisciplined character: "Leclerc always did what I asked him to do, even when I asked for nothing."

1] "Fortune smiles on the bold". The Aeneid, Virgil.

2 ] Larousse Dictionary.

3] L'exercice du commandement dans l'armée de Terre, 2016 (p. 58).

4] FT-02, General Tactics.

5] General Michel Yakovleff, "[5 ] General Michel Yakovleff, "Theoretical Tactics", Economica.

[6] Vegetable, "Epitome of Military Art". In the 5th century, while the memory of Attila is still vivid, Végèce writes, for the Emperor Valentinian, a synthesis of ancient practices and the writings of the Roman thinkers who preceded him. This work was an essential reference of military art from the Middle Ages to modern times.

---

**Title :** Lieutenant-colonel Emmanuel DUBOIS

**Author (s) :** Lieutenant-colonel Emmanuel DUBOIS

**Release date** 10/10/2018

---