



Land Forces: the conditions for excellence

Thoughts for the Army of Tomorrow

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Published on 21/04/2019

Histoire & stratégie

How do we maintain the acknowledged excellence of our Army?

By not neglecting the fundamentals, says SAG (2S) Jean-Claude THOMANN.

To envisage the future cannot, in particular with regard to the use of armed force, be done seriously without considering the past and its teachings, as it is so true that he who ignores the lessons of History condemns himself to relive the expected ones, if not the modalities. And if no commitment of forces is, strictly speaking, identical to previous ones, the fact remains that constants, principles and references are passed down through the ages with mutations in form that most often conceal a great durability of substance.

It is therefore interesting to examine certain aspects of the historically recent transformation of our conscript army into a professional army, with a view to maintaining it at It is therefore in the light of this observation that it is interesting to examine certain aspects of the recent historical transformation of our conscript army into a professional army, with a view to maintaining it in the long term on a path of excellence, which is now recognised, but which has had to be developed and maintained in order to meet the specific challenges of recent decades.

Apart from the quantitative criteria of budgetary resources, manpower and equipment, which are certainly crucial, but which are not addressed in this development, the question is to know what are the main factors which, with hindsight, can be judged to have been decisive in the search for and the conquest of a certain excellence of our land forces.

From a technical point of view, from a technical point of view and in all logic, the realization of a triptych of individual training, collective training and high-performance training must be the object of the command's attention as a matter of the highest priority. This has a cost, both budgetary and in terms of time, which, in a context of over-

employment of personnel and units, tends to be minimised. The short-term savings thus made in the short term in fact more than dangerously jeopardise future capabilities. Moreover, in terms of individuals, armies are a very specific field which requires, especially for the management and even more so for the senior management, a determined policy of "quality assurance". This policy is punctuated by numerous training courses and exercises, the temporal cost of which can be seen through the needs to be met for operational engagement or collective activities. But lowering the guard in training policy ultimately means giving up the quest for excellence.

On the other hand, and paradoxically, we must constantly remind ourselves that any war, whatever it may be, must, in terms of land forces, be fought with young human resources at all levels of action in the field, which requires a certain rate of renewal in balance with the previous imperative. This is a *sine qua non* for dynamism, daring and physical endurance, which, whatever the technological developments, will remain for the soldier in the field an inescapable imperative. It is therefore advisable, while refusing the pretext of a better mastery of the know-how acquired through experience, not to "age" more than the living forces of our land capabilities. The indefinite extension of possible career lengths, in particular for non-commissioned members, for whatever reasons, including "sentimental" ones, is in this respect a threat to the intrinsic performance of the forces that should not be ignored.

In force employment, as in many other areas of hierarchical activity in society, there is one principle that takes on a very special dimension for effectiveness of an operational system and the development of individuals, which leads to such fundamental values as motivation, esprit de corps, self-sacrifice and increased availability: this is the principle of subsidiarity. Every operational commander must be convinced of the extraordinary contribution to the performance and morale of the troops made by the judicious and reasoned use of this principle. Each subordinate, even the most modest, must be given a margin of autonomy and responsibility that makes him aware of the importance of his role and leads him to surpass himself in order to demonstrate that he is equal to what is expected of him. More trivially, each leader must be careful not to do what can be done by a subordinate whose level of competence has been well appreciated. The units where this principle of subsidiarity is systematically applied at all levels of the hierarchy radiate and have an undeniable predisposition to operational excellence, which is indeed the goal sought in order to have a truly solid and efficient tool. In this context, it is certain that the increasing digitalisation of the system may in many respects run counter to the proper implementation of this fundamental principle: it will undoubtedly be a major, albeit "hidden", challenge to find a good balance between the principle of subsidiarity and the hierarchical intrusions facilitated by technological developments.

This technological evolution, which some people are calling "a lightning transition"...⁵ is subject to accelerations undoubtedly unknown in the past, although the in-depth study of the 1914-1918 war shows already at that time the speed of changes (aviation, motorization, tanks, communications...) under the pressure of needs and the constant search, through the immediate exploitation of feedback, for improved performance and reduced losses. In the light of these accelerations, two problems arise, the importance of which can only increase in the short and medium term: that of the right technological adequacy and that of the resilience capacity of increasingly technologically advanced forces.

Staying on the crest of excellence by practicing the right technological sufficiency is unquestionably a most difficult art. It brings into conflict a very staggered time frame (research, development and above all implementation in the forces) for innovative

equipment and a much more short-term frame of reference concerning the evolution of the threats themselves, often marked by surprise, whether strategic or not. Without going as far as the Soviet practice of the cold war, which consisted in playing with the mass and stacking up generations of equipment using the depth of the operational apparatus, it is appropriate, in view of budgetary imperatives and those generated by the delin the face of budgetary imperatives and those generated by technological developments, the right balance must be struck between, on the one hand, technological sufficiency to maintain a degree of superiority over potential adversaries or, more simply, interoperability with the major allies and, on the other hand, sufficient equipment in terms of quantity.

Beyond that, there is a question that can be relatively distressing as progress imposes on mankind the service of increasingly sophisticated systems: What about the capacity of land forces to act in a "degraded " manner, i.e. by no longer having at their disposal certain technological means that have become indispensable on a daily basis? There is no doubt that there is no good answer to this question, but it must be taken into account in all aspects of basic and initial staff training. Exercises should be devised with a view to remedying the shortcomings of technical tools, at least on an ad hoc and short-term basis. At the same time, an in-depth reflection on this challenge remains to be carried out.

Furthermore, it is clear that in the dialectic between operational ambition, which is great, and the reality of the possible format of our land forces, which will remain very limited, the only realistic solution is to use the new technologies to improve the quality of our forces. Moreover, it is clear that in the dialectic between operational ambition, which is great, and the realities of the possible format of our land forces, which will remain very limited, the only solution lies in a certain versatility of these forces, all of which, whatever their specialities and specificities, must be able to carry out "elementary" missions, in particular on National Territory (NT). Here we find the "saving" principle of "joint missions of the army", which makes it possible to meet a number of basic operational needs, while in no way denying the need for specialised training to cover a wide spectrum of operational capabilities. In this connection, the role of this basic capability in motivating and maintaining the morale of units which would otherwise be forced to remain confined to the area of operational readiness alone, which could be demotivating in the long term, should be stressed. Moreover, this choice, which contributes to giving a "warrior spirit" to all our units by the simple fact that all of them have at one time or another an operational commitment and acquires a "warrior spirit". This choice, which contributes to giving a "warrior spirit" to all our units by the simple fact that they all have at one time or another an operational commitment and acquire a good collective self-defence training, can, to a certain extent, contribute to the answer to the problem of resilience mentioned above.

Finally, if it is a principle of technological sufficiency, it is also a principle of operational capability sufficiency, which has now proved its worth and made it possible to meet a number of challenges that could not have been met without it. It is a principle of operational capability sufficiency that has now been proven to meet many challenges that could not have been met with the monolithic and rigid design of the format and capabilities of each manoeuvre unit, from the elementary unit to the division, regiment and brigade, that prevailed during the Cold War. This means, including in coalitions and international organisations (NATO, EU, UN), the implementation of a reasoned and sensible modularity of our capabilities, taking into account first and foremost the nature of the engagement and the harshness of the threat. Indeed, the more demanding the operational conditions, the higher the hierarchical level at which a high degree of modularity can be agreed. This high demand for flexibility in the use of forces calls for a major effort in terms of operational preparation and standardisation of modes of action and procedures in order to ensure that modularity does not jeopardise the final operational capability. On the other hand, however, a good command of modularity is

certainly a very important criterion in the search for operational excellence in both qualitative and quantitative terms.

In conclusion, while it is a truism to say that the fog of war is not about to lift whatever the technological developments, preserving and developing the recognised excellence of our land forces involves, in addition to possible organisational changes, certain fundamental principles and the search for new balances between men and equipment. But however essential these factors of excellence may be, they must be amplified by a capacity for reflection, responsiveness, adaptability and innovation that can only be the fruit of well-trained brains, open to reality and curious about the major forces that are shaking the planet: all this can only result from a culture without taboos and a freedom to think and propose that are the best guarantees for an ambition of excellence.

5 See "La transition fulgurante" by Pierre GIORGINI (BAYARD).

Title :	Le GCA (2S) Jean-Claude THOMANN
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Release date	01/04/2019
