



## Conversion in the service of others

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Le GCA (2S) Vincent LAFONTAINE

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L'Armée de Terre dans la société LAFONTAINE

**It is with great pleasure that I come to testify of my rather particular reconversion in the associative world, for the benefit of the education of the children of the districts. This experience illustrates, in its own way, I hope, the very strong link that unites the military and society, far beyond the issues of the defence tool alone. It is, of course, only one of the forms of commitment that this phase of our lives can take, after the more traditional phase of our active service in the armed forces.**

### Reasons for a choice

Coming to the end of a rich and varied career in the summer of 2014, I, like all of us, had to think about what I wanted to do with this new phase of life that was opening up to me. I should say "to us", because I have always thought that after asking our wives to make heavy sacrifices during our military life, it was not outrageous to take their advice before embarking on new adventures!

The wide variety of professional experiences that my military background had given me opened up a wide range of possibilities. As a "Weapons" technical graduate, having spent six years as a land programmes officer, I could naturally envisage joining industry to play the role of interface advisor that our companies are fond of.

Having had the chance to practice our major international organizations (UN, EU, NATO), I could also look at geostrategy and international affairs. As a strategic planner, I could also sell my services to the business world to help them structure their prospective approaches.

As a regular instructor and trainer, I could finally consider passing on the "soft skills", so important in the world of work, to our future elite from the grandes écoles! In short, there was no lack of options and I was a bit like a kid in front of a pastry shop who hesitates when faced with the diversity of cakes, so many desires and tastes that he would like to satisfy?

I must confess that the accompaniment by the Mission for the Return to Civilian Life of General Officers (MIRVOG), from which I benefited a little far, because of my provincial positioning on my last post (OGZDS<sup>15</sup> Rennes), has, in any case, allowed me to conduct a very useful personal process to determine what my priorities were.

Gradually, the idea emerged that after 40 years of service to my country, I needed to find an activity that would continue in the same spirit, a way of continuing to serve in a different way. In view of the fragility of our society and our youth, it became increasingly clear to me that what was at stake for our country was first and foremost a question of education and national cohesion, a cohesion that I saw crumbling before my eyes under the blows of individualism and communitarianism of all kinds. The very notion of "living together" increasingly seemed to me to be an empty slogan, masking our inability to truly "build together". On the strength of this still rather generic discernment, I gave myself a few months of reflection to identify the precise field in which I would serve. So it was after a journey on the roads to Santiago that I undertook to consult the people in my network for whom I had esteem and who had more or less connections with the field I had identified. And it was during one of these interviews that one of my interlocutors spoke to me about Espérance banlieues.<sup>16</sup> telling me he'd see me there ! Being myself quite seduced by this initiative, I contacted the person in charge to see if my experience could interest him. Faced with the immense needs of this budding adventure, my proposal was quickly accepted!

Two elements drew me into this adventure from the start.

First, the objectives! Observing that social inequalities were aggravated by our education system (international PISA studies clearly demonstrate this), Espérance banlieues had the will to fight against school drop-out in the neighbourhoods, but also to enable these children, through the transmission of French culture, to become citizens who know and love their country. This double objective resonated perfectly with what I had discovered among our young people from the suburbs: it is often due to a lack of transmission, made early enough and in depth of what France is, that a certain number of our young people drift and 'enter into a dangerous communitarianism.

The other very attractive aspect of the project is that it was in its very beginnings, that it was going to put me in contact with motivated and passionate young teachers and directors, in short that I was going to remain in a logic of concrete responsibilities and in contact with young adults who wanted to give meaning to their professional life!

So on January 1, 2015, less than six months after my farewell to arms, I joined Espérance banlieues for a development aid mission. The team was particularly small. Apart from the president, who had his own activities as an entrepreneur, and a few very valuable volunteers who were available on a limited time basis, only two other people worked

continuously on the project: a young employee, whose first job after business school was mainly fundraising,

A communication manager, mainly in charge of press relations.

Everything had to be built or structured: general strategy, network development principles, human resources policy, fund-raising strategy, etc.

After a few weeks of immersion and branding, I made proposals for structuring, particularly the decision-making process, which led me to move from development to General Management, including in particular the relationship with the two companies. The proposals included the relationship with the two existing schools, with current school projects and thus the progressive structuring of network life between a national team still in its infancy and local entities that were in great demand for support.

Fortunately, the strength of the project having made it possible to quickly obtain significant financial support, it was possible to gradually recruit the skills indispensable to the structuring of the project, while seeking to build a network of schools where subsidiarity, sharing of good practices and co-construction with the field would be the pillars of the operation.

After five years in the post of DG, the network has now really taken off; it is made up of 17 schools in the EU, of which 17 are in the process of being set up. It is composed of 17 schools, around 80 teachers and has just under a thousand pupils from primary to 3rd grade (the recently created schools only cover primary school in the first years).

### **What the military can bring to this kind of challenge**

One thing is certain: while the military often benefits from a favourable bias in terms of interpersonal skills, availability and commitment, the civilian world often finds it very difficult to identify in concrete terms which skills are directly usable and, above all, whether they will be able to adapt to a new environment.

With regard to general officers, the concern of civilians is generally even greater because they imagine that they are familiar with decision-making, but rather accustomed to heavy or even cumbersome structures in very tightly framed environments. While our daily operations are based on adaptation, reactivity and measured risk-taking, business leaders who have not had the opportunity or the chance to work with us sometimes have a less audacious vision and are more marked by the hierarchical weight of our institution... It is up to us to show them that their preconceptions are unfounded!

In the adventure of this educational start-up that is Espérance banlieues, all the skills developed over 40 years of career have been useful to me.

First of all, the experience acquired in the fields of leadership in the broadest sense (exercise of authority, human relations, organisational culture) has been particularly valuable to me. Indeed, my first observation about working relations in the civilian sector, even in a privileged environment of committed individuals and generous volunteers, is that we military members have an exceptional asset to draw on.

Noting that the inadequacy of initial definitions of each person's tasks weighed heavily on the quality of operations, I quickly had to distribute roles, allowing each person to identify who was responsible for what, on which his or her opinion was indispensable, only desirable, or even only advisory. The ability to tell each other the truth, within the framework of a serenely established "command" dialogue, also seemed to me to be an essential asset, in an associative world where good will does not exclude ego problems and the unsaid.

Concrete experience of relations with 'subordinate' entities involved in the field has also been very useful to me in guiding school principals and the presidents of local associations that support them. These local leaders, often confronted with situations for which they were not always prepared, particularly in their relations with parents, regularly came to seek guidance and advice, thus demonstrating the trust we had been able to build between the local and national levels.

Secondly, it was, without doubt, the know-how in terms of strategic vision and preparation for the future that was most useful for Espérance banlieues. Analysing the context, proposing realistic objectives and identifying the ways and means to achieve them are obviously skills acquired progressively through the implementation of our methods of "tactical" reasoning and even strategic planning. Adapted to the civil environment, be it associative or entrepreneurial, or both in the case of Espérance banlieues, these skills facilitate the development of a clear strategic plan that can be shared by all and that can be declined on different functional axes (here: fundraising, HR-training, pedagogy...).

Associated with this culture of strategic thinking, I have used my military experience to involve the members of the network in this prospective approach according to their level and creativity. This is essential for the creation of a true network united around the achievement of objectives and always anxious to share experience feedback and best practices in order to make progress. Very quickly, I was thus able to create the meetings that would allow us to optimize the implementation of our project (annual seminar, visits of the national team in the field, regular meetings of directors and presidents, initial and permanent training cycles for teachers...).

Finally, thirdly, the decisive contribution of a general officer is probably to be found in the availability of his or her network built up over the years, as well as in the recognition or legitimacy that he or she finds almost naturally with the public authorities or elected officials, thanks to his or her "star" status. I was thus able to use this argument without restraint to get back in touch with the political authorities that I had welcomed in theatres of operation (Gérard LARCHER, Henri GUAINO, Hervé MORIN and many others), with the prefects with whom I worked as OGZDS (Prefects CADOT (IDF), LALANDE (Hauts de France), STRZODA (Presidency of the Republic). All of them gave me the best welcome.

Some came to visit one of our schools and left as ambassadors, others opened their address books to me, facilitating high-level contacts with the ministries concerned by our project (National Education but also Interior and Territorial Cohesion). For example, in December 2015, I was able to welcome the then director of ESSEC, Jean-Michel BLANQUER, who was then only the director of ESSEC, but who, as you might have guessed, would have important responsibilities in the French National Education system.

If the status of general officer is always an asset vis-à-vis elected officials and senior civil servants in terms of respectability, even legitimacy, I obviously put him forward much less vis-à-vis the press and the media who are often more inclined to amalgamate and caricature!

### **What this commitment has brought me**

As always, the more you give, the more you receive! If I had the impression that I gave a lot (my wife, with a touch of annoyance, often told me that I was at least as busy as when I was in the military...), I also feel that I had an exceptional experience, both on a human and professional level. I also enriched myself intellectually by discovering areas that military life had not given me the opportunity to explore in depth.

Here are a few highlights of what I received.

First of all, I had the feeling that I was living an exceptional collective adventure, built step by step with highly motivated people of great personal wealth. Building a network of schools in line with the twofold desire to help families in the neighbourhoods, but also to turn their children into upright, free, responsible adults, capable of committing themselves to the common good of a country they have learned to love, is a very ambitious challenge. It requires first of all to deepen the vision of man that underpins any educational approach, to succeed in sharing it, and to know how to translate it into a robust and effective educational project.

I have been deeply amazed by the generosity of exceptional young teachers and principals, graduates of the most prestigious schools, who give up very high salaries in order to commit themselves in a very concrete and daily way to a difficult and tiring educational task. During my visits to our schools, I was often moved by the warm, direct, polite and respectful welcome that the children of these usually violent neighbourhoods gave to adults. I have regularly been impressed by the testimony of parents from immigrant backgrounds who, through the school's work, have found a new way of life. I have regularly been impressed by the testimony of parents from immigrant backgrounds who, through the school's work, have regained real dignity and a desire to integrate more deeply by adopting the customs and habits of a country that, until then, had not known or dared to offer them this. The massive participation of the families in the tribute to Colonel BELTRAME organized in each of our schools at the time of his heroic death was for me a kind of revelation, to me, to the people of the country. The massive participation of the families in the tribute to Colonel BELTRAME organized in each of our schools at the time of his heroic death was for me a kind of revelation, both of the willingness of parents to

express their disagreement with radical Islamism, but also of the role of our schools which allow this expression and beyond this path of integration.

In the more professional field, I was very interested in discovering functions or fields that I had not been able to carry out, given the specificities of the military or the particular curriculum of my career. Having to set up a team, I discovered the charm of recruiting functions (How to choose well? What level of remuneration should be granted? ...) and its corollary, labour law!

I discovered the world of fundraising, straddling the lines between marketing and communication, depending on the target audience, and I learned how to make strategic choices in this crucial area for a network of schools, which essentially depends on the generosity of benefactors of all kinds.<sup>17</sup>...that you have to hang on to and then stick to... I also got to know the associative world, its specific law, the role of the Board of Directors and how to use it well. Above all, I delved into the world of pedagogy, in particular to choose teaching methods that are both effective and respectful of our anthropological vision.

As the bearer of an atypical project, I also very much appreciated going to promote and defend it to actors as diverse as the Nation's elected officials, senior civil servants and cabinet members of all persuasions, the great captains of industry ready to invest in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

The richness and variety of these contacts and the often favourable reception given to the Espérance banlieues project have obviously been an exciting part of these responsibilities. The fact that, behind a complete agreement on the situation in the country and the interest of the initiatives taken by Espérance banlieues, the move to effective support could be made difficult for less glorious and more tactical reasons reminded me that courage and determination, backed by a good dose of realism, were definitely the essential qualities of a true decision-maker!

Here are, at the moment when I have just left the post of DG Espérance banlieues, in order to make myself a little more available to a wife who is tired of my weekly round trips to NANTES-PARIS and my weekend phone calls, the few elements of testimony that I could give on this atypical but exciting reconversion, as undoubtedly many others besides!

Society has real expectations of general officers in 2nd Section. By committing ourselves to the service of the common good, we can continue to serve our country and thus remain faithful to our initial vocation! Let us not hesitate, for the needs are immense...

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[15] General Defense and Security Zone Officer.

[16] [www.esperancebanlieues.org](http://www.esperancebanlieues.org)

17] If you are seduced by this initiative, do not hesitate to support it and make it known. There are no small donations: <https://donner.esperancebanlieues.org/b/mon-don>

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**Title :** Le GCA (2S) Vincent LAFONTAINE  
**Author (s) :** Le GCA (2S) Vincent LAFONTAINE  
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