



The social place of the soldier

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L'Armée de Terre dans la société

The place and role of the military in the Nation is a complex and subjective subject, as the introduction to this dossier points out. The standard of living is one aspect of it, albeit somewhat taboo. When one practises a profession driven by vocation, one does not count! The contribution that follows will therefore try to tread carefully in this field, addressing the link between the social level occupied by the military member, and particularly the senior officer or general, and his presence in society.

The first step is to consider the significant role played by income and lifestyle in the place occupied by an individual or a corporation. In this perspective, we will then see that, at equal professional level, the gap between the civilian and the military undermines both the symbolic and effective "presence" of the latter. We will conclude by discussing a few options for reducing this gap and thus creating the conditions for a fairer place for the military.

The link between social importance and standard of living has always been a marker. Having a high income gives social importance, first symbolically, but above all because the financial means make it possible to maintain a social life, to lead intellectual activities or to support various causes (patronage, special assistance, etc.).

However, there is a gap between the standard of living of a military member and that of a civilian of a comparable professional level, a gap that increases in the second half of a career. This gap is the result of two factors: the lower monthly income of the military on the one hand - without even making comparisons with the private sector, let us simply observe the existing discrepancies within the Ministry of the Armed Forces between general officers and senior civil servants, and on the other hand, the loss of income implied by military mobility, accentuated by the unfavourable characteristics of a significant number of our garrisons: the difficulty for the spouse to find a job and to pursue

a steady career, the difficulty of living in a home that one owns.

The CEMA, in its WISHES addressed to the associations at the end of January 2020, mentioned a study by INSEE, which found that at equal level, the income of a household with a military member is 25 to 30% lower than that of a civil servant.

This discrepancy takes on a special emphasis at the rank of colonel, especially when performing the duties of corps commander. The latter, who is generally the highest representative of the military institution in his place of establishment, very rarely has official accommodation. He must therefore "manage" to maintain the social life associated with his duties. However, the conditions for this resourcefulness have become even more complex with the support reforms of a decade ago, depriving the commander of the corps of the means to hold his rank, not for his own benefit but in the name of the institution.³⁸ This leads to the paradox that a departmental sub-prefect has, particularly in terms of housing and reception facilities, greater means of influence than a head of department.

The year of schooling at IHEDN, and the links that are created there, give the gap in the level of the military a new relief. Civilians with levels of responsibility roughly equivalent to those of trainee colonels are introduced to the military with great intellectual and human benefit. One is thus struck by the frequent difference in standard of living. This is particularly evident in the area of housing, largely suburban for the military, frequently Parisian for the civilians. This was not always the case. An interesting document in the Salle d'Honneur of the École de Guerre contains the addresses of a class from between the wars: with the rank of captain, they almost all lived around the École Militaire!

The difference was also felt in the financing of the children's education. The ability to finance business school studies is a strong marker of social level, as well as a powerful tool for perpetuating this social level. However, it is clear that it is difficult for a military member to make this investment.

Finally, the years of generals complete the picture, with, as for the chiefs of corps, the question of how to ensure social life, whether it is geared towards internal cohesion or towards their civilian environment. Many generals exercising command do not have places for this. The local mess halls, the last survivors of our heritage in this area, no longer meet the needs of the local mess, in terms of their level and mode of operation (heavy time constraints, weekend closures, etc.).

We will not change this situation in a short time, but that should not prevent us from having an ambition and setting ourselves a few positions to conquer over time and opportunities. The ones proposed below seem to meet the need and to be reasonably playable.

The number of official housing units has become modest. Where they exist, they correspond, with the exception of a few anomalies, generally linked to the history of the settlements, to proven needs. We will therefore not consider touching them. On the other

hand, the situation of the military authorities "on the street" can and must be improved. It is obviously not a question of acquiring palaces: other times, other customs. Although the memory of the times when prestigious residences were built or acquired for the authorities constitutes an interesting historical landmark in the reflections of this dossier. It is therefore a pragmatic matter of renting accommodation that meets the needs of these authorities. Our allies, particularly the British³⁹ or Germans, know how to use this practice. It has proved to be a very effective way of doing this because it does not cost significant sums of money, it is very flexible and offers the authorities a platform from which a real policy of influence and influence, as well as cohesion, can be exercised.

The collective capacities are virtually reduced to our messes. The network of messes, which our armies had until a few decades ago, has been gradually melting away, more probably due to a lack of vision of personnel condition issues than for the budgetary reasons generally cited. It was pointed out earlier that these messes were now proving to be ill-suited to outreach; this is not a foregone conclusion! There are still, here and there, when the local command has the strong will to do so and when the connivance with the support allows it, establishments of good quality exist. This is undoubtedly the cheapest way. Let us keep our ambition. But the other solution adapted to our times may be to establish partnerships with quality civilian establishments.⁴⁰ . This is a flexible and adaptable option, allowing access to good standards.

As anecdotal as it may seem, the possession of a credit card that allows direct drawdown on representation credits would be a step forward. It would provide a very flexible way of inviting working relations, while at the same time constituting a mark of confidence in the institution. The fact that very young managers in the civilian sector have this facility, which the military authorities do not have, is a discrepancy that can only be reduced by the Ministry.

Finally, we will conclude with a reflection on the question of a form of works council within the Ministry of the Armed Forces. By offering very interesting activities and rates, works councils have two effects: they allow access to expensive activities that the salaries of the beneficiaries do not allow or make difficult (winter sports, far-flung family trips, etc.), and by freeing up finances, artificially increase the level of income. It is therefore forbidden to envisage, as an extension and in the spirit of the "family plan", promoting the development of a project of this kind.

The social situation of military personnel is not bad, especially at the beginning of their careers. However, the gap that is subsequently created with situations of equivalent responsibility in civilian life is undoubtedly an obstacle to the social presence of military personnel, particularly when they are in command. The fact that it is certainly possible to remedy this, in a pragmatic way, puts us face to face with our responsibilities regarding our idea of the military state in a large country like France.

38) The author of these lines was able to observe, in functions previously exercised, the mediocrity of these conditions for certain heads of corps.

39) The commander of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, whose headquarters was established relatively recently in a small town in the

West of England, thus has a perfectly adapted villa with reception rooms and the possibility of accommodating visitors.

40l Some regiments have successfully used it for hotel accommodation. During the repatriation from Algeria, the mess of a certain foreign regiment found itself established, for want of anything better, in the restaurant of a nearby village, to the great satisfaction of all.

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