



Preparing the soldier for today's conflicts

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Le Chef de bataillon NOBEL

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Engagement opérationnel

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Our soldiers are now fighting with very sophisticated equipment, using the latest technological advances. Their new protections and the significant increase in engagement distances are a clear indication of this. These improvements in capabilities could lead one to believe that waging war is now within everyone's reach and no longer requires special qualities; it is not! Warfighting is more topical than ever, in all its dimensions, including psychological.

Technicality rhymes with sharpening...

"The first quality of a soldier is his patience to endure fatigue and deprivation. Value is only the second".

Napoleon I.

Our soldiers now fight with very elaborate equipment, using the latest technological advances. In just a few years, the efficiency and precision of their weapons have increased tenfold. The significant increase in the distances of engagement and the protection available to the combatants might lead one to believe that waging war is now within everyone's reach and no longer requires any special qualities; it is not so! It would even be dangerous to think that it is possible to disregard the most basic operational preparation, both physical and psychological. So, now more than ever, the need for hardening up is a topical issue. To imagine that advances in technology or in the law of armed conflict could mitigate this requirement would be a serious contradiction in terms [1].

A demanding appropriation

Although this equipment offers revolutionary possibilities, it is extremely demanding in terms of training, as the technologies used are complex. Many hours of familiarisation are necessary, otherwise these latest generation equipment will become unnecessary burdens if the soldier does not use it optimally. Thus, a unit receiving the FELIN system (infantryman with integrated equipment and links) will have to spend at least six months familiarising itself with it.

Above all, one must take into account the considerable physical constraints imposed by this equipment when it is on man. With all his equipment and ballistic protection, the combatant has to carry some 40 kg of equipment over difficult terrain and in arid climates, as was the case in Afghanistan, and as is the case today in the Central African Republic and Mali.

Beyond the simple weight of the system, it is the congestion that affects the user's mobility, particularly in urban areas. It must now be taken into account that slipping into a cramped opening or overcoming an obstacle can be difficult.

These constraints are not insurmountable, but it is necessary to train for them with very specific physical preparation. Very specific training sessions therefore complement the more classic sessions such as running in sportswear. The obstacle courses with all the equipment prepare the fighter to carry out his mission in a rugged environment. Intellectually too, this appropriation is demanding because mastering this state-of-the-art equipment requires advanced technical knowledge and unfailing lucidity. The fighter's "reflex actions", which enable him to continue his mission in the most critical conditions, or even to save his life, are increasingly complex. It is no longer enough to simply pull the trigger: in a fraction of a second, the soldier must have all the automatic mechanisms that enable him to use his equipment.

Nor is it a question of neglecting the logistical complexity of this new equipment. They require extensive maintenance, which is not always possible depending on the theatre of operation. Charging the batteries, for example, requires a dedicated shelter of good size. Fighters who have to advance on foot, far from their base and in total autonomy, may therefore temporarily lose certain capabilities. It is not unthinkable to consider hand-to-hand combat. The soldier must therefore retain the basic know-how that will enable him to fight in degraded mode, without the support of all these new technologies.

Reduced effectiveness in the face of an asymmetric enemy

Indeed, it has been observed that, in most of today's conflicts, our adversaries manage to counter our technological superiority through simple but effective modes of action.

"The demobilizing overconfidence that the strength of our technological weapons gives our combatants sometimes makes them forget that the asymmetry of conflicts also lies in

the strength of men" [2]. There is a significant gap between our soldiers, who are used to the comforts of modern life, and our adversaries, who are more motivated and more rustic. The latter quickly learn lessons when confronted with new weapons. They do not hesitate to move temporarily from action to observation, while they discover how the new equipment works and its effects. Understanding that our equipment enables them to engage them at long range, they will seek to interlock, as was the case in Afghanistan in 2008 during the Uzbini ambush. It is therefore by relying on the latest technologies available to our soldiers and integrating the constraints they impose that new processes have been put in place, such as C4 (hand-to-hand combat adapted to high-intensity combat) and ISTC (combat firing training). These techniques, often taught in training centres or commando training centres, make it possible to adapt to the methods of our adversaries.

Our soldiers must also prepare themselves psychologically for these new engagements. Their resistance to stress is put to the test by an asymmetrical enemy that clearly displays its rejection of the law of armed conflict and international rules. It is no longer a question of facing a predictable adversary who uses the same methods as we do. In the event of direct confrontation or even capture, our soldiers know that they can be subjected to the most basic barbarity. This moral preparation to cope with constant pressure is also a facet of warfighting.

A misconception of distancing from the fighter

In his book "Humane Warfare" Christopher Cocker writes that "in the context of the civilization of minds within the armed forces, war is no longer presented as a political fact, but as a mixture of humanitarian compassion and technical actions through crisis management, if possible conducted at a distance".

While current technological means make it possible to engage the enemy as far as possible, they do not in any way diminish the awareness of those who use them. The responsibility of the combatant is even increased since he sees in detail the effects he is producing. This is made possible by highly accurate means of observation and acquisition. The scope of the FELIN system or the optics of the remotely-operated turret (TOP) of the VAB (armoured front vehicle) leave little doubt as to the results of the shots fired. Following VBCI (armoured infantry fighting vehicle) fire, cases of psychological trauma have sometimes been observed. The operator who had neutralized an enemy several hundred meters away had a very precise vision of it.

It is even possible today to carry out firing in remote vision: in the shelter behind a building, the combatant can aim without being exposed. While this system has the considerable advantage of preserving the lives of soldiers, it can nevertheless create a perverse effect since it gives the feeling of giving death without exposing oneself. Indeed, experience shows that soldiers often find it easier to accept the fact that they have killed an enemy when they themselves were in direct danger.

It is for the same reasons that we are surprised to see how armed drone operators, sometimes on American soil while their aircraft are flying over Pakistan, can be shocked

by the damage they have caused.

It would therefore be wrong to consider that only the soldier directly in contact with his enemy is exposed to the torments of war.

It turns out that the new technological means also place at the heart of conflicts those who operate from the rear and who had previously, by necessity, been backward in relation to the situation on the ground. The transmission of data, which provides real-time knowledge of the tactical situation and encourages instantaneous and appropriate reaction, places leaders at the heart of the action. But perverse effects have been observed, particularly during the war led by the Israelis in Lebanon in 2006. In a book devoted to this conflict, Colonel Goya and Battalion Commander Brillant are very specific about this phenomenon: "This position behind the fighting does not prevent stress. Confronted with a difficult and competent enemy, a number of leaders were stunned. This attitude had an immediate impact on the battle as situational awareness was inhibited" [3].

A great deal of attention is being paid today to the psychological consequences of our commitments, including for those who have only been involved from afar. Highlighted in the United States under the name PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), these pathologies are as numerous and serious as physical war injuries.

Just as the combatant is prepared to carry and use his heavy pack, he now has the means to overcome the psychological difficulties of war. The use of potential optimisation techniques (TOPs) has become widespread during the engagement in Afghanistan. All of these tools to prepare our soldiers for their missions seem far removed from the idea of warfighting. However, this is the crux of the matter, because getting used to it is indeed "all the actions aimed at getting used to facing difficult things" [4].

"A warrior soul is master of the body that it animates".

By adding to this timeless maxim of Bossuet's mastery of new technologies in the service of the warrior, we summarize this whole concept of warrior re-actualization. It is indeed the combination of physical training, technical mastery and psychological preparation that allows our soldiers to face as serenely as possible an enemy who seems to disregard all restraint, even sometimes humanity. Hence the need to preserve and develop the means we have at our disposal to achieve this ...

Battalion Commander NOBEL served as a section commander, unit commander and training officer at the 21st Marine Infantry Regiment where he was in charge of the appropriation of the FELIN system. Instructor of commando and close operational intervention techniques, he commanded the Caribbean Warfare Centre from 2007 to 2009.

1) Lieutenant General Carpenter, Infantrymen: the infantry news magazine No. 26 of September 2011 on warfare.

2) Marc Defourneaux in "Strength of arms, strength of men"(L' Harmattan, 2005).

[3] «Israel against Hezbollah, chronicle of a defeat foretold» Michel Goya and Marc-Antoine Brillant (Éditions du Rocher, 2013).

4] Larousse dictionary definition

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