



# History and doctrine of the use of French tactical nuclear weapons (1959 - 1996) 2/2

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Commandant BAILLE

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Histoire & stratégie

## Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Service in the Army

. The Army began by deploying American tactical nuclear weapons acquired in 1957

Indeed, in the wake of the adoption of MC 48 in December 1954 by the Alliance (see above), France demanded that the United States allocate tactical nuclear warheads to increase its combat potential within the "shield". The United States thus delivered, under the Mutual Assistance Plan [1] of 1957, some 30 HONEST JOHN rockets with an adjustable power of up to 20 kT. With a range of 5 to 38 km, these first-generation rockets were fired from all-terrain ramp trucks.

The purchase of the HONEST JOHN rockets was thus, on the one hand, the materialization of the configuration of the French battle corps to the nuclear fact, whose decision was taken in 1954 [2]. It was, on the other hand, the materialization of the French integration to the NATO "shield", which the Paris agreements of October 23, 1954 had signified. Thus, in the event of activation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, and after national agreement, France had to make its French forces available to SACEUR.aises en Allemagne (FFA), i.e. its II Corps, <sup>composed of</sup> the 1st Armoured Division in <sup>Trier</sup> and the 3rd Infantry Division in Freiburg. Inserted in these two divisions, the French HONEST JOHN batteries, then under operational command of the VIIIth American Army, <sup>would have</sup> delunched their nuclear fire as close as possible to the enemy, notably in the direction of the Czechoslovakian border [3], following a top ordered by SACEUR himself.

NATO's "forward strategy" thus provided for a general maneuver in two stages: first a retrograde attrition maneuver punctuated by air-land nuclear strikes from the Iron Curtain line to the Czechoslovak border. the eastern banks of the Rhine, where a massive halt was to be issued to prevent the Warsaw Pact from crossing the river. This was followed by a decisive battle phase led in particular by the "sword", i.e. strategic nuclear strikes by Anglo-Saxon air forces. France, made stronger with its nuclear artillery, was thus placed in the front line of this intervention, in direct contact with the adversary. The operations were to take place on West German territory, which was then unfortunately transformed into a

glacis.

The maneuver was as much allied as it was joint, since the HONEST JOHN salvos were also integrated with the strikes delivered by the F 100-D fighter-bombers of the French Tactical Air Force - Mark 28-RE thermonuclear gravity bombs [4]. The acquisition of American rockets constituted a real transformation of the army's artillery regiments, in terms of technique, maneuver and use [5]. Indeed, the six HONEST JOHN artillery groups stationed in the FRG were then trained in the service of these rockets by the Americans, becoming accustomed to the rigorous method of the "operation list" or checklist.

The use of this weapon system was subject to a double political constraint: on the one hand, the placing of these regiments under NATO operational control and, on the other hand, the agreement of the United States to deliver the warheads whose implementation and adjustment were American. General de Gaulle's decision to leave NATO's integrated command on 30 June 1966 led to the withdrawal of American nuclear warheads from the French FFA depots. However, France continued to train with the HONEST JOHNS. Actors of that time, such as Army General Sévrin who was in charge of controlling the instruction and training of the HONEST JOHN artillery groups as the nuclear officer of the artillery of II<sup>Corps</sup> (ACA2) [6], put forward the hypothesis that in case of Soviet aggression, France could have counted on the allocation of American nuclear warheads between June 1966 and the arrival of PLUTON in 1973.

It can finally be considered that the ANT, as part of the strategy of massive retaliation applied to the "shield" forces, would have served as a super-artillery ordered by Washington and coordinated by SACEUR in the Central European theatre.

- Responding to the project of French nuclear autonomy, wanted by General de Gaulle, the Army then developed the PLUTON weapon system, with which it was equipped from 1973 onwards.

The decision to launch the programme was taken by General de Gaulle in the Defence Council in 1963. Constituting the first generation of ANT in the service of the doctrine of ultimate warning, the PLUTON weapon system was developed around the

AMX 30 chassis and had a missile with a range of 120 km and a power of 10 and 25 kT. Organic elements of the army corps (CA), the PLUTON regiments maneuvered at the rhythm of the 1st army, recreated in 1969 in Metz. The latter was in charge of designating the targets to be treated by nuclear fire.

As for the HONEST JOHN rocket, the purpose of the PLUTON missile was part of the "battle of the front". However, the withdrawal in 1966 led de facto to a French withdrawal from the first line of the Alliance, its installation being taken over by the II and III Corps of the Federal Republic of Germany which had been rearmed since 1954. The novelty allowed by PLUTON was the opportunity for France to launch the massive, unique and non-renewable [7] final warning strike in complete independence.

The arrival of the PLUTON missile was another revolution for nuclear artillery, because of the new technology brought by this complete weapon system, but also for the French Army, mainly because of the complexity of implementing the final warning strike.

In 1970, the CEMAT, General Cantarel, signed a document establishing the doctrine for the use of the PLUTON. On this occasion, he reminded his major operational subordinates,

the 1st Army and its two subordinate <sup>corps</sup>, of the political significance of PLUTON: it was not up to the tactical commander to decide on its use; it was the sole responsibility of the Head of State[8].

[8] It should be noted, however, that this employment doctrine has been the subject of debate throughout the operational life of PLUTON. General de Chergé explains how the arrival of the PLUTON missile confirmed the emancipation movement in which the land-based nuclear artillery had been engaged since the implementation of the HONEST JOHN: "We had to note at the French level a need to arbitrate between two decision-making positions, that of a government that wanted to remain in control of the "political moment" of the decision, and that of the commander of the 1st Army who considered himself as the only one competent to propose to the politicians the "tactical moment" when the effectiveness of the strike would be optimal, and especially when, after this period, the mission of final warning would no longer be executable". He also stresses that "in any case, it was less a question then of a difference of conception between the EMA and the 1st Army than of a decision-making" <sup>debate</sup> to the credit of two leaders, political and military" [9].

It should be noted that this "tension" between the political and tactical moments in no way prevented the framework established in 1970 from prevailing until the missile's withdrawal in 1993. In the end, not only did the PLUTON perfectly allow the Army to fulfill the "test and information mission" that Colonel Poirier had entrusted to it (cf. supra), but it also allowed the 1st French <sup>Army</sup>, placed in the second echelon of the Alliance after 1966, "to obtain a significant military effect, independently of NATO decisions" [10].

- Finally, in 1991, the French Army welcomed the second generation of ANTs.,

the ultra-modern ballistic missile HADÈS, whose short life can be explained by the geopolitical revolution that had just taken place in 1989. In fact, faced with the hardening of Soviet ground-to-air defences and the modernisation of the arsenal of both American (LANCE and PERSHING missiles) and Soviet (SS 22 and SS 23, the successors to the SCUD) ANTs, EMAT envisaged between 1978 and 1981 the construction of a very modern ANT. This was based on the assumption that it would be used in Germany, where the population density would have been such that "the use of a conventional power weapon would have been prohibited by a German veto" [11]. In October 1982, President Mitterrand authorized the launch of the HADÈS programme, the first firing of which took place at the Landes de Biscarrosse test centre in 1988 and the first three firing units, i.e. six missiles, were delivered in 1991. With a range of 480 km, integrating two missiles on a semi-trailer-type truck, the HADES missile described a semi-ballistic trajectory delivering a strike of a few kT.

Although it was very modern, and carried an autonomous secure transmission network[12] that would have allowed it to eventually break free from the 1st Army framework, this third-generation ANT unfortunately had a difficult life. In the first place, in fact, the autonomy of use allowed by HADES to the supporters of the "political moment" was badly accepted by the Army [13]. 13] Secondly, recurrent anti-HADES campaigns fomented by pacifist and ecological movements were carried out on both sides of the Rhine from its conception. Finally, the missile united many opponents within the governmental sphere against it. Thus, during the "Earth Summit" in Rio in 1992, after a leak organized in the press, the newspaper Le Monde even ran a headline on the "The missile ".the immediate and definitive cessation" of the programme, even though the President of the Republic had not taken such a decision[14].

14] This last episode is particularly revealing of the state of mind that prevailed at the highest level of the State on the subject of the tactical nuclear weapon - renamed "pre-strategic" (PNA) for political reasons from 1981[15] - after the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, like any nuclear weapon, the HADES missile was part of presidential sovereignty. It is for this reason that on 15 September 1991, appreciating how much its mere presence was a deterrent and proved beneficial to France and rather instead of abandoning it, the President of the Republic decided to set at six months the duration of the HADES "brigade"'s peacetime build-up. This was known as the "technical and operational watch" (VTO) posture in which the HADES "large unit" had a maximum strength of 1.800 men[16] and saw its missiles "de-joined", i.e. the warhead had been separated from the delivery vehicle. If it had been decided to end the VTO posture, it would have taken about six months "to bring the missiles up to full hit and bring the availability up to the 100% level required for the permanent stage" [17].

Finally, it is interesting to note that even before it was decided to abandon it, the HADÈS force had proposed in September 1993 to the committee responsible for drafting the future White Paper to develop its own mission, "taking into account the stakes, ambitions and constraints of the future". Thus, in this document, noting that the need for a PNA no longer existed in the new geostrategic context, the HADES force demonstrated that the missile still had a deterrent capability with regard to the "new geostrategic context". The HADES force demonstrated that the missile still had a deterrent capability vis-à-vis the new threat that had emerged as a result of the Warsaw Pact and that it also represented an opportunity to set up a European defence partnership provided it had a conventional warhead.

However, Army General Monchal (CEMAT) explained in his Agenda No. 87 of 11 June 1996 that "On 22 February 1996, the President of the Republic, Head of the Armed Forces, noting the geostrategic developments resulting from the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the new European Union, explained in his Agenda No. 87 of 11 June 1996 that On 22 February 1996, the President of the Republic, Head of the Armed Forces, noting the geostrategic developments resulting from the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the resulting new balance of power, decided to withdraw the ground component of the strategic nuclear forces from the Albion Plateau and the Hades ultimate warning weapons system. On 30 March 1996, the Minister of Defence declared the end of the technical and operational monitoring mission of the Hades force which had been entrusted to it on 1 July 1993. ...] Started in 1959 with the HONEST JOHN weapon system under the aegis of NATO, continued with the commissioning of the PLUTON from 1973 to 1993 as part of the HONEST JOHN project. an independent national defence policy, the Army's nuclear mission ended with the withdrawal of the Hades weapon system. Nuclear deterrence, maintained by other forces, remains the fundamental element of our strategy

It is therefore the end of the immediate threat in Europe, a strategic consideration combined with other foreign policy considerations (initiatives for disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives) and financial considerations (reduction of maintenance costs), which finally led President Chirac to abandon the HADES missile.

The reshaping of the European political landscape in 1991 led to a reorganisation of the Alliance Organisation in Europe and meant the end of the ANT's employment in the army. Indeed, the stationing of Allied troops in Central Europe was no longer necessary. The

collapse of the major threat of the past 40 years led to a reorientation of strategic priorities, which was confirmed by the publication of a new White Paper in 1994. The reconfiguration of the nuclear deterrence model according to the criterion of sufficiency - at least this was advocated by an inter-ministerial committee meeting between 1994 and 1996 - in turn led to the abandonment of the ground-to-ground, tactical and strategic component in February 1996. Consequently, the dismantling of the HADES weapon system in 1996 brought to a close the tactical episode in the history of the French model of nuclear deterrence. Moreover, although it was cited again in the 1994 White Paper, the final warning ceased to exist from then on, since the withdrawal of the HADES missile would obey all the more the credibility of the anti-force strike emanating from the air-land battle group.

1] Between 1945 and 1966, the United States allocated war materiel to France annually under the mutual assistance plan, within defined limits. Cf. Patrick Facon, "Les bases américaines en France (1945-1958)", in *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, n°29, 1992, pp. 27-32.

2] Cf. meeting of the Committee of Chiefs of Staff of November 5, 1954, in EMA archives, GR 7R 3, SHD.

3] Cf. Frederic Bozo, "[3] France and NATO, from the cold war to the new European order" IFRI, Masson, Paris, 1991, page 53.

4] Almost four metres long and weighing 984 kg, these bombs had a power (adjusted on the ground) ranging from 12 kT to 1.1 MT to adapt to the designated target. After release, they were braked by parachute. See Henri de Cointet, "Les armes nucléaires tactiques dans l'armée de l'air", in CERMA, op.cit., page 166.

5] Cf. General de Chergé, op.cit., page 16 ff.

6] Cf. the author's interview with General Michel Sévrin, Paris, October 4, 2016.

7] The single and non-renewable massive strike was in fact made up of a series of PLUTON strikes and AN 52 bombardments by the tactical air force (FATAC) in three successive salvos.

8] Cf. Archives of the TSS Cabinet, GR 2T 160, SHD.

9] Cf. the author's personal correspondence with Major General (2s) Robert de Chergé, 3rd February 2017.

10] Cf. General de Chergé, in CERMA, op.cit., page 17.

11] Cf. General Parraud, in "HADÈS vu par ses artisans", Association "Les artisans du PLUTON et du HADÈS", 2001, page 15.

12] The missile's "transmission and information system" allowed the HADES force, by means of a direct and automatic link, to receive the operation order issued by the operations centre of the EMA's "nuclear forces" division.

13] Cf. General de Chergé: "The second emancipation from terrestrial nuclear power will concern the Army itself. It will not consent to it willingly. The decision to use a weapon system for which it alone is responsible for putting it into operational condition escapes it", in CERMA, op.cit., page 18.

14] General de Chergé commented on this episode: "On his return from Rio de Janeiro, François Mitterrand's reaction was very dry and presidential. No one, inside or outside, will dictate anything to the French President in nuclear matters", in a personal correspondence with the author, February 3, 2017.

15] On this subject, President Mitterrand declared in Hanover on 22 October 1987: "In all the instructions I have given to the special staff, I have made a point of always using the term 'pre-strategic' rather than 'tactical', because confusion had gradually been created by a whole series of transfers of thought. The word tactical increasingly appeared to define a type of weapon, an extension of armies or so-called conventional combat, which seems to me to be a serious misnomer. Any nuclear weapon, of whatever type, whatever range, belongs to the strategy, to the strategy of deterrence". Lieutenant General (2s) Michel Forget, Commander of the Tactical Air Force from 1979 to 1983, points out that in fact "it was much more of an inflection than a real change. [...] In fact, in the official technical documents dealing with the conditions of engagement of the nuclear weapons belonging to the 1st Army (PLUTON) and Fatac (AN52), the qualifier "pre-strategic" would simply replace the qualifier "tactical" without any other modification. Our defence in a world in

crisis"Économica, Paris, 2006, chapter 5, page 101.

16] In its final version, the HADES force included the 15th Artillery Regiment with 4 batteries of 4 launchers, the 53rd Signal Regiment, <sup>three</sup> of reserve infantry regiments, a road traffic squadron from the 516th Train Regiment and a SATCP battery from the 54th Artillery Regiment as well as a dedicated maintenance group. (Ndr).

17] See General (2s) Cassagnou, "The HADES Weapon System," in CERMA, op.cit., page 138.

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**Title :** le Commandant BAILLE  
**Author (s) :** le Commandant BAILLE  
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