

Are we prepared to fight the enemy head on?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Fighting is no ordinary human activity. For the soldier engaged in modern conflicts in the face of an aggressive and violent enemy who systematically seeks confrontation at close range, the challenge is not only personal. The prospect of a near death can inhibit behaviour. The strength of the collective in the face of adversity is the best asset for dominating and then defeating an enemy who has become fanatical. Land forces must therefore put in place an innovative operational preparation, combining both experience feedback and physical and tactical requirements. Excellence in combat must be cultivated.

"I remember the terrorist who targeted me with his machine gun. In a split second, I knew he was going to shoot me. Then I felt the bullets go through my body. I collapsed to the ground with my rifle down. I realized that the first bullet had hit me in the back, and I thought the next one would be aimed at my head".

Captain Yoni Roth of the 1st IDF Infantry Brigade,

during the battle of Bint Jbeil in Lebanon in July 2006.

The concept of "zero death" warfare, linked to the notion of technological superiority, has long given the illusion that armies could win battles without committing troops on the ground, without confronting the enemy face to face. Intelligent" bombs, drones and other technical means were thus used almost exclusively.

However, the reality of war quickly caught up with those who denied it. The complexity of infra-state conflicts, the return of irregular combatants and the concern to better control the human environment ended up rendering inoperative a strategy based solely on the dogma of air power. As such, the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah highlighted

the difficulty for a modern conventional army to confront a hybrid enemy diluted in the population, but capable of carrying out real direct combat actions.

Faced with this new situation, land forces have been put back at the heart of the commitments. They are thus faced with a dangerous problem: the radicalisation of armed violence. From Mexico to Pakistan, Mali and Syria, armed groups are practising violence without complexes, which only makes sense through the terror generated by the cruelty of their methods of action. Even if an asymmetrical logic persists [1] The fact is that these groups no longer hesitate to engage in a head-to-head fight. Without risking caricature, the irregular fighter, whether terrorist or insurgent, gains the recognition of his peers by fighting the enemy in hand-to-hand combat, with the idea of sacrificing himself for the cause.

For the soldier confronted with this type of enemy, the challenge lies above all in taking this phenomenon into account psychologically. Indeed, knowing that one is at risk of being shot at is one thing. To be certain of facing the enemy at close range is another.

Long engaged in humanitarian missions during which the encounter with the adversary was only a fortuitous event, some Western armies have recently rediscovered face-to-face close combat. Beyond the necessary acceptance of the risk of losing men, are land forces sufficiently prepared to kill eye to eye?

In other words, how can we be sure that the soldier will know how to fight in these trying situations and accept the violence of others as much as his own?

By refocusing since 2008 on close combat capability and rusticity, land forces have begun to capitalize on a formidable war experience. Just like a company that relies on the spirit of its brand to attract, unite and retain customers and employees, the Army has developed its own collective culture, which is both a source of identity and an ideal to be achieved.

Understanding the importance of the human factor in combat and in particular the need to preserve this famous culture of close combat, a sort of fighting spirit, requires us to look at explicit concrete cases. Thus, the comparative study of the use of Israeli troops during the July 2006 war against Hezbollah with that of the Serval force against jihadist armed groups in Mali in 2013 is interesting for more than one reason. It underlines both the risks due to the loss of a resilient ground combat capability, while at the same time highlighting the indispensable experience to be preserved.

The enemy will always continue to surprise

When Hizbollah brutally attacked an Israeli army patrol on 12 July 2006, no IDF staff in the IDF had the slightest idea of what had become of the Shiite militia. Tetanized by the surprise and violence of this deadly ambush [2] The Northern Military Region Command dithered for several hours over the response to this affront. The sending of ground units to hunt down the men of the Party of God was delayed. The memory of the first Lebanon war with its improvised explosive devices still had a strong inhibiting power. In addition, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli army, Airman General Dan Halutz, was a great supporter of air strikes. He thought primarily of retaliation through the projection of power and not war with the projection of forces into Lebanese territory. Thus, often decided in haste, the land

operations that Tsahal carried out brought only meagre results, when they were not resounding failures.

On 19 July, the sayeret Maglan[3] experienced at its expense the first failure of the Israeli ground force near the Lebanese village of Marun Al Ras. Infiltrated to carry out a guidance mission for possible air strikes, the Israeli commando encountered no obstacles during its progression to the first urbanized areas. Surprised not to find "a tent and three Kalashnikovs" as a Hezbollah position, its men revealed themselves. On the lookout and well entrenched in their underground shelters, the Shiite militiamen then opened fire. Maglan's soldiers, fixed on the spot, did not last their salute until the Merkava tanks of the 7th armoured brigade arrived, charged with evacuating them. During this violent fighting, the Israelis were stunned to see Hezbollah members fighting with procedures similar to their own, using RPG 7 grenade launchers as anti-personnel weapons and especially seeking close combat to inflict maximum casualties.

This amazement is explained in particular by the tropism of the "all-security" that had invaded the Israeli army since the 1980s. Indeed, the latter was mainly employed in police operations in the occupied territories (the famous culture check point). Favouring very small-scale actions without the use of joint arms, it had lost the fighting reflexes of the glorious Yom Kippur army. The gap between the reality of the enemy and the perception of the enemy by the ground forces had thus irremediably widened. This gap proved even more painful at the Battle of Bint Jbeil.

From July 25 to 28, 2006, several IDF battalions belonging to the prestigious Golani and parachute brigades attempted to seize this key city in southern Lebanon without success in order to continue the offensive towards the north of the country. Convinced that the air force had destroyed any will to resist, the IDF staff had conceived a simple operation with little support and almost no support. In fact, in the early morning of the 25th, two infantry companies of the Golani brigade entered the city centre unsuspectingly. They then fell into the trap of Hezbollah militiamen. Attacked simultaneously by several enemy positions, the Israeli soldiers suffered without being able to retaliate. Indeed, without artillery or Merkava tank fire , the Golani could only take refuge as best they could in the houses in the immediate vicinity of the ambush site. The conscripts were trapped in the houses and quickly ran out of water and ammunition, as the staff had only devised a short action (less than 12 hours). It was only after two days that they finally withdrew and abandoned the city after losing some 60 men, 18 of whom were killed. When questioned on their return, the survivors confessed their astonishment at having confronted extremely determined men, "in impeccable uniforms with their military plates covered with black ribbon so as not to shine in the night". They will also underline the propensity of Hezbollah men to seek systematic imbrication to sow confusion and demoralize the troops.

For the IDF, one of the great lessons of this episode is directly related to the loss of war experience, and in particular a culture of close combat. As a conscript army, Tsahal has only very young cadres. Few officers served in Lebanon in the 1980s and are still present in the units in 2006. Even if the Hezbollah they had been with at the time no longer corresponded to the paramilitary force it had become, their experience of fire could have been useful. Moreover, in tactical terms, the Israeli army had clearly forgotten the fundamentals of combat: no favourable balance of power had been established as a precondition for any ground action. For the conquest of Bint Jbeil, the staffs had decided to send infantrymen without support, as the Merkava were unable to move through the narrow streets and artillery was deemed unnecessary...

The blood spilled in Afghanistan was used in Mali

Operation Serval in Mali today appears to be a real military success. However, one should not forget the ground forces' progress in achieving such a level of commitment.[4]. As with other nations, it took an electric shock to challenge our certainties and accept the idea that we were not ready for combat, let alone close.

For France, the surprise came from Afghanistan. Indeed, the hardening of operations in the summer of 2008[5] initiated a real reflection on the state of our operational readiness, which was finally judged to be out of touch with reality. Warfighting, the fundamentals of the fighter[6] and operational procedures were then upgraded to an unprecedented level. Similarly, the feedback process has been renewed and more oriented towards combat lessons learned, thus enablingadapt force employment doctrine, improve training and, above all, create the "reactive adaptation" mechanism.[7].

These levers, soaked by the experience of fire, eventually led to the emergence of a kind of fighting culture, oriented towards close engagement. Put to the test in Mali, it demonstrated that the choices made by the army during the "Afghan adventure" were relevant, particularly because they helped prepare the war in general and not one war in particular.

Engaged in Mali on two distinct fronts, 500 kilometres apart (the region of Grand Gao and the Adrar des Ifoghas massif), the French soldiers faced a fanatical, trained and extremely violent enemy.

In the North, the combat groups of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb were installed on the defensive. Some of these jihadists, wearing explosive jackets hidden under their tunics, went so far as to surrender with their hands in the air and then literally exploded as soon as they were taken prisoner. The Chadian force thus lost 28 of its soldiers on 22 February 2013. Faced with this frightening situation, the general commanding Brigade Serval then set himself an imperative: to gain the upper hand over the enemy in less than a week, before the physical and psychological limits of the units were reached. Efforts were concentrated in the northern zone of the Adrar massif, in the direction of the key points of the terrain.[8] where the enemy seemed to have dug in. Supported by all the means of the 3rd dimension[9]... The melee units progressed slowly and methodically in order to avoid any intermingling in favor of the enemy. No point of resistance by the terrorists was overlooked. During the excavations of certain cavities and other caves, contacts were most often made at very short distance (less than 5 meters), sometimes requiring to penetrate very narrow crevices, while lightening to the maximum. More than 200 jihadists were neutralized during the Panther operations.

In the central zone near Gao, the French armoured infantry group and several Malian sections fought against the Sarrya.[10] AMMOJ[11]. On[1] March, during Operation Doro, a French-Malian reconnaissance detachment near the village of Imenas engaged in combat with an aggressive enemy hidden in the vegetation. Fighting without any retreating spirit, the MUJAO terrorists carried out real braking actions, tirelessly skirting around to defend their refuge zone. During these seven hours of fighting, the jihadists did not hesitate to attack the French VBCI before being destroyed by the firing of 25mm cannons, sometimes less than 20 meters from the machines. The French and Malian soldiers, disembarked from their vehicles, were systematically confronted by determined men wearing explosive belts. On that day alone, 54 terrorists were killed. Although no friendly casualties were suffered, the French soldiers were marked by the extreme

determination of the MUJAO and by the vision of the effects of their weapons at very close range.

A disturbing question comes to mind: Would the result on the ground have been the same if the French units deployed under the first mandate of Operation Serval had not all gone through Afghanistan and its demanding operational preparation?

Dying as a martyr...and if possible not alone

Faced with a conventional army with technical superiority, the irregular fighter has only a limited choice of modes of action to inflict casualties on the enemy and hope, in time, to win victory. Indeed, not being able to risk engaging in a decisive battle, he will rather seek to apply guerrilla tactics, whose primary objective will be to hide in order to strike and gradually wear down the determination of conventional troops. Time thus became his best weapon. If he decides to implement an avoidance strategy to preserve fragile resources, he will strike punctually (attacks, placing explosive devices, firing rockets) to maintain a climate of insecurity that is detrimental to the Force over time. If it chooses a more offensive strategy, it will patiently prepare each of its actions to attack at short notice a preferably isolated, and therefore vulnerable, objective.[12]. For the latter, the irregular must take into account its own weaknesses and transform them into advantages that are difficult to counter. It is for this reason in particular that it will systematically seek to engage in combat at short, or even very short distances. For example, during the clashes during Operation Doro in Mali, MUJAO fighters, hidden in wooded areas, waited until the last moment to reveal themselves and open fire almost at close range.

This concern for close confrontation aims to reverse the imbalance between the strong and the weak.

Indeed, by relying on interlocking, the armed elements seek above all to neutralize the real trump card in the fight of their opponent: the supports of the 3rd dimension.

Moreover, as the fighting in southern Lebanon has shown, an enemy that hunts you down and seeks hand-to-hand combat can stun you and thus inhibit reactions. At the end of the war in July 2006, the IDF soldiers told certain media outlets that[13] their fear of going back to Lebanon and facing an enemy that came out of nowhere, close by and often behind their backs.

Finally, the tactical and psychological benefits of suicide action in close combat should not be overlooked. It is no coincidence that many members of AQIM and MUJAO were wearing explosive vests or belts, intended as a last resort to commit suicide in contact with Serval's soldiers. The suicide action was not seen as a mission in itself, but rather as the safest way to avoid being taken alive, while providing a diversion for the benefit of other terrorist comrades in charge of the main action.

Advocacy for the preservation of a culture of close combat

Even though wars follow one another without resembling each other, recent conflicts thus reveal a constant in the radicalization of the use of armed violence. Consequently,

one of the future challenges for French land forces will be to prepare their soldiers to fight in increasingly difficult conditions, facing an unpredictable and fanatical enemy, for whom death, both his own and the other's, is a victory in itself.

Any skill acquired is doomed to disappear if it is not regularly nourished or at least maintained. When the veterans of the Afghan and Malian conflicts have left the military institution, the risk of losing this valuable experience will be very real. Couldn't we then use the simulation to mentally prepare the soldiers and thus replace all or part of the lost experience?

The Army's Intervention and Psychological Support Cell (CISPAT) answers in the negative by explaining, on the one hand, that each individual is different and that the experience of each soldier is different.The response to the horrors of war cannot therefore be predictable and that only the confrontation with reality creates trauma. Thus, training soldiers to receive images of increased violence through simulation does not prepare them for war. Worse, simulation could have the opposite effect, either by dehumanizing the adversary with the risks of lack of discernment, or by weakening certain subjects. Excellence in combat must therefore be cultivated.

How can we build the mental strength that pushes soldiers to surpass themselves in the worst of situations, that of close combat?

Most war narratives address this issue. Reading some of them, notably the works of Erwan Bergot[14] This book, entitled "The Power of the Collective", highlights the strength of the collective coupled with the experience of fire as factors in the emergence of a culture of close combat.

In freeing themselves from the modesty of societies that only see war through the prism of television, the land forces must therefore focus on building a fighting spirit and preserving the special culture of close combat.

But what is meant by a fighting spirit?

At its simplest, the fighting spirit could be summed up in two major building blocks: esprit de corps and operational readiness.

The first is the thread of emulation that will bind and unite soldiers around common values such as the cult of mission, the sense of sacrifice and courage. It is the honour to serve or "what I will fight for". We seek to persuade, that is, to act on the feelings of the soldiers through the history of the elders and examples of bravery. Transmitted within the regiments, this esprit de corps ensures that the "whole" is more effective than the sum of the individualities, however brilliant they may be. This cohesion must serve as a protective shield against the adversities of combat.

The second is the needle that weaves the thread of emulation into a strong and proven stitch. It is the way of fighting or the "how I will face the enemy". We try to convince, that is to say to act on the reason of the soldiers through concrete cases worked on during training. Of course, nothing can replace fire experience, but realistic operational preparation in the training centre will guarantee credibility in the mission. This training must lead men to be familiar with their limits without wearing them out before deployment. As such, the maintenance of the Canjuers Operational Assistance Detachment is a necessity in order not to lose any of the hard-won lessons learned.

"Democracies only prepare for war after declaring it".

While realistic, this quote from George Mandel may not be complete. It certainly has the merit of posing the problem of understanding defence issues in our societies far removed from the suffering that our grandparents experienced. However, it only scratches the surface of a broader problem, that of the difference in the appreciation of the price of life depending on whether one is a western military officer or an extremist fighter. The death of a comrade weakens the military troop facing it. For the insurgent or the terrorist, dying is often only the logical consequence of his or her engagement.

Without provoking controversy, has the concept of "living together" not made us more vulnerable to an enemy who does not have the same concept of life?

This assertion must be taken for what it is: a warning. The denial of the reality that our societies today face with regard to the idea of preparing for war, i.e. training to kill one's fellow man, is not shared by other nations. This initial difference in appreciation could quickly turn into a guilty conscience the day the cards are reshuffled...

1] The author understands by asymmetrical logic the fact of avoiding any frontal confrontation with a stronger enemy. Instead, the irregular fighter will try to strike at the rear, sometimes indirectly, in order to create a climate of insecurity conducive to the long-term use of conventional forces.

2] Three soldiers were killed and two abducted.

3] The sayerot are reputable special forces units. At the tactical level, each brigade has its own commando. At the strategic level, each army also has its own special force: the Mat'kal sayeret for the army, the Shaldag sayeret for the air force and the Yami commando for the navy.

4] For the majority of soldiers engaged in Mali, the combat conditions and the enemy were deemed to be much more trying than what they had experienced in the past, particularly in Afghanistan.

5] Uzbin's ambush of August 18, 2008, as well as the dispatch of a battalion to the province of Kapisa, east of Kabul.

6] Notably shooting and combat first aid.

7] The documents on counter-insurgency doctrine and the use of units in mountainous areas are the result of this questioning. Similarly, the Operational Warsfare Detachment (OWD) in Canjuers was born from a process initiated by RETEX. A process of study and purchase of emergency equipment, the reactive adaptation notably allowed the supply of individual protection equipment (new generation bulletproof vests) and over-armouring for armoured vehicles.

8] The Ametettaï and Terz valleys

9] Fighter planes, combat helicopters, drones and artillery guns.

10] A saryya is a Sahelian term describing a company of just over a hundred men.

11] Movement for the unity of jihad in West Africa.

12] This mode of action is well explained by the Sahelian tactic of the rezzou, which aims at attacking in a brutal way and by surprise, with very mobile means (pick-up), an objective presentedas weak. The goal here is not to seize it but to inflict a maximum of destruction.

13] From July 20 on, the newspaper Haaretz regularly reported on the anxieties of the conscripts, called to fight a war for which only Hezbollah had prepared itself.

[14] «The Legion in combat, Narvik, Bir-Hakeim, Diên Biên Phu" and " The Paths of War" to the Presses de la cité, " Commandos dechoc en Indochine, les héros oubliés " by Grasset.

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