



Military horseback riding, an age-old tool meeting the modern requirements of the army's projection cycle

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 23/05/2018

Histoire & stratégie

The author of this article gives us a vibrant plea for military equestrianism. For him, it participates in the cycle of unit projection by providing a versatile tool that meets the requirements of a modern army. It also supports operational preparation, but also individual and collective reconstruction. Finally, it is a major player in the condition of personnel and the development of the armed nation bond.

The French armies carry the heritage of a long and rich military tradition having participated in the construction of a modern fighting tool with expertise and know-how unanimously recognized by our allies. The training structure and teaching methods have been perfected, but the common history and the diversity of the means at our disposal are an older asset that nevertheless directly contributes to the achievement of operational objectives. Far from being a mere artifice of tradition, the military equestrian system offers a wide variety of possibilities for using horses, thus meeting the contemporary requirements of armies. The obsolete tool that it seems to be, carrying an old image with strong connotations, often masks the reality of an animal whose immense potential can have a decisive action if one accepts to look at it from a different angle.

Military riding offers a natural answer to the direct and environmental problems linked to the projection cycle of armies and also allows the development of the armed nation bond.

It is in this perspective that the contributions of military equestrianism will be observed. In this respect, it is remarkable to note its action in the acquisition of the structuring values of our armies when it comes to preparing a unit for deployment. Its action is also significant in the stabilization of the personal environment of the combatant and the local anchoring of units during the projection phase. The action of military equestrianism is also essential in the individual and collective reconstruction phase during the reconditioning of combat units.

Horseback riding: a sporting practice in support of the physical and mental construction of the soldier

Sport in the armies is a moral and physical training activity for operational troops whose participation in domestic operations and projection in external operations have reached a high rate in recent years. In addition to the physical preparation of the soldier, his equipment has reached a weight and size that is now a real concern. In addition, the military operates in theatres of operation with harsh and aggressive terrain and harsh weather conditions. The question then arises of how to mobilise their physical capacities through a clear-sighted and lucid mind, as well as the acquisition of structuring values.

Equestrian progression in the armies is, in this respect, not an end in itself but rather a tool. During the decentralized preparation phases or in initial training schools, the horse proves to be an excellent revealer of personality. Man is on horseback as he is in life. To put someone in interaction with horses is, for those who know how horses behave ethologically and how they communicate, to give themselves the means to observe in man a set of reactions which relate to the control of emotions, the mind and leadership qualities. In this way, the instructor can participate in the typological definition of a group and precisely characterize each individual, thus becoming a valuable aid to leadership. In vivo experiments, conducted at the Saumur Cavalry School, clearly demonstrated the convergence between the assessments of a section made by a riding instructor during a session and the assessments of the coaching on how to serve after a few months of common activities.

Moreover, riding requires qualities that are directly employable in crisis situations. The horse is an imposing animal that we have become accustomed to do without over the years and has become a source of stress for anyone who has never or rarely ridden a horse. Putting a soldier on horseback, always without any notion of learning technical skills, means placing him in an aggressive and oppressive environment, and thus, in part, simulating a combat situation. Indeed, it is unusual and above all frightening to find oneself on an animal weighing 600 kg in movement, using one's own will, all perched 1.50 m from the ground. This is based on the same reasoning as placing the fighter on a cliff or on a high beam as can be practiced in combat training centres. Stress is an integral part of a fighter's daily life. It can generate stimulating physical and mental energy, just as it can hinder the action and prevent the achievement of a level of performance that is usual and necessary for the success of the mission. This factor is a determining factor in optimizing the use of physical and/or technical qualities and know-how. It is then possible to organize any exercise in which this support simulates the stressors of the battlefield, and whose goal is to achieve an objective very different from that of becoming a fine horseman. This work is proposed in regiments or garrisons with an equestrian section. Thus, it is not uncommon to see soldiers on horseback and in battle dress engage in exercises of memorization, skill, strength, speed or even reThese exercises are proposed by the riding instructor, following a joint reflection with the management team on the definition of the objective of the session.

Military horseback riding is also, and above all, a vector for the acquisition and development of the fundamental values necessary for the profession of arms and the exercise of command. "It forces me to be humble, it doesn't pass me anything and, if one day it accepts to reward me for my efforts, then I have undoubtedly deserved it. He is a great teacher." Humility, hard work, harshness of practice, courage, rigour, patience, the right balance between exigency and tact are the main qualities dictated by the practice of riding. They constitute a virtuous base that is easily transposable and particularly beneficial to the training of the soldier. It is not surprising when we look back at the common past of the horse and armies. In general, it seems easy to understand this idea, especially when one knows the expertise, praised to the highest level, of our military riders in the discipline of eventing. Historically, the cross-country event was a test of courage and candour for the riders and their mounts on a terrain simulating the battlefield

and its pitfalls. In a more targeted way, riding in armies is integrated into the training of instructors of techniques of optimization of potential (TOP) provided at the national centre for defence sports (CNSD), by participating in testing their qualities of concentration, control, stimulation or recovery and stabilisation. Here again, the horse is used for anything other than the simple mastery of technical know-how.

If it seems to be taken for granted that military riding is part of the military training of our soldiers, it is more often known for its action in favour of the stabilization of their personal environment and its unequalled action in favour of the consolidation of the armed-nation bond.

Participating in stabilizing the environment and fully integrating the environment

Environmental factors affect the psychological state and thus the performance and state of involvement of the soldier on operations. It is important to participate in stabilising the environment close to the combatant, but also to work towards the local anchoring of military bases and, ultimately, the consolidation of the armed-nation bond.

One of the pillars of military equestrian training is the condition of the personnel. By its action, the military equestrian sector allows access to a sport that is costly for the practitioner and with elitist paces. First of all, it is necessary to free oneself from these two a priori rather reductive a priori. On the one hand, the French Equestrian Federation has for many years been the third largest sports federation in France in terms of number of licensees. If it is true that it is complicated to practice horse riding outside a dedicated centre, it is even more true that a real craze surrounds this sport with a federal system envied elsewhere and yet so little media coverage. It therefore seems unrealistic to consider this sport as elitist with regard to this parameter. On the other hand, and this time even within our armies, the financing of this activity is partly supported by the activity itself (sections attached to sports and artistic defence clubs and associations under the 1901 law). In fact, the equestrian activity does not represent for the armies nor for the rider the expenditure that it seems to generate according to many a priori and with regard to the service rendered. In fine, and within the framework of the condition of the personnel, a real social fabric exists around the military equestrian sections, thus participating in the stabilization of the soldier's immediate environment. When the soldier is on operations and his family participates in the life of the equestrian section in the same way as many other members from all walks of life, the family anchoring in the garrison produces its most remarkable effects. Indeed, it is soothing and liberating to know one's family is fulfilled and practising a derivative activity at moderate cost in a benevolent environment.

The equestrian sector participates in the consolidation of the army-nation link. All the structures set up by the Ministry of Defence have the approval of the French Equestrian Federation and, as such, can accommodate a civilian population, whether or not a member of a defence family. This regional anchoring contributes to the promotion of a know-how, but also of a know-how of military origin among a population foreign to defence issues. Another pillar of military equestrian sports is training. This training is very widely recognized in the equestrian world, and many riders wish to benefit from the same training as the one that pushed some of our military riders as far as Atlanta, Sydney or London recently. The defence industry allows the expertise of its instructors/riders to be put to good use for the benefit of the civilian population. If it is an effort, it is only made at a reasonable price, and the return on investment is most optimal. In this way, a bond based on mutual benevolence is created between military instructors and students of all

ages and socio-professional categories. A section of the population, initially motivated by the practice of sports, finds itself involved in the construction of the army-nation bond.

The anchoring of our training tool is not simply local. The military equestrian sector is part of the French federal policy through the promotion of sports professions and sport for all, which are two development axes of the ministry responsible for youth and sports. Thus the armed-nation link is not simply cosmetic and superficial, but is really part of a national policy and coherent development through deep links within the different administrative entities. As an example, we should note the actions carried out by our few instructors in the regions within their equestrian sections. The latter are able to bring an activity to life through the organization of national and sometimes international competitions, to participate in the training of civilian teachers or simply to participate in the organization of professional certification exams. The 213 people involved in military equestrian sports (0.08% of the Army's wage bill) thus have a possibility of influence out of all proportion to their numbers; the potential target is nearly 690,000 licence holders accompanied by their families.

Military equitation thus contributes to the improvement of the condition of the personnel as well as to the consolidation of the armed-nation link and, finally, seems to indirectly support the projection phase of the combatant by stabilising his immediate environment. The last projection cycle, the return to garrison and reconditioning, is perhaps one of the most important and must be adapted to the conditions of the combatant's return.

Personal and collective reconstruction assistance

On the last part of the projection cycle, which consists of the return to normal, the horse is part of a process of putting back in place the initial parameters largely eroded by an often demanding operation, or even reconstruction, whether on an individual or collective level.

Horseback riding is an individual sport that is conducive to the development of group spirit and cohesion; is the animal's gregarious spirit transmissible? Whatever the answer, this quality is particularly useful in the reconstruction phase of the collective identity and cohesion of a group. a group of individuals who have been tested by a phase of projection in a complex theatre of operations, such as Afghanistan or Mali. In this case, the horse will be used for its soothing virtues. It will be a great support for derivative and cohesive activities. Again, this is common practice in garrisons with an equestrian section within them. Once again, the objective is not technical progress.

The effectiveness of this tool is made relevant by its deep roots in the military tradition. What has contributed to the greatness of our armies even though it could be the object of superiority on the battlefield or a simple means of transport or even conveyance, easily finds its legitimacy when it comes to regaining its deep identity. Thus, Murat's cavalry charges on the plains of Eylau, the glory days of the crews' train and the feats of strength of the artillery teams have helped to build a modern army that traditions structure beyond mere decorative artifice. It is a question here of going beyond the idea of an old tool that no longer finds relevance in the context of the moment, and using different aspects to allow our soldiers a return to the values acquired over the centuries, whose consideration and agglomeration have contributed to its current credibility. "The future is not an improvement of the present, it's something else." . Reconstruction is then collective and identity-based.

At the extreme end of the reconstruction principle are the many wounded in our armies. The equestrian sector acts in support of the health service of the armies thanks to equithérapie. The latter concerns soldiers suffering from psychological disorders and physical handicaps. Thus, a non-exhaustive list of pathologies including, among other things, post-traumatic syndromes and physical handicaps can be treated. Each patient receives a treatment adapted to his pathology in which the horse is used as a vector for both psychological and physical aspects. Locomotion difficulties will be improved thanks to the movement of the horse (equipped with specific equipment) which is totally irreplaceable by a machine. The psychic injury will also be taken care of thanks to the contact of the animal, thus facilitating the verbalization of the patient: "Caressing a neck is the gentlest of modern medicines". . Thus, the military equestrian sections of Metz and Paris, in support of the Legouest army training hospital and the National Institution for the Invalids, respectively, are taking part in therapeutic programmes for the benefit of wounded combatants. Although this concept is recent in France and does not allow sufficient hindsight on the evaluation of its benefits, it is possible to rely on the American or Israeli examples, where post-traumatic syndromes of former soldiers and civilian victims of attacks have been treated with the help of horses since 1980. Over time, riding therapy has become more sophisticated and teacher training has become more formalized. . A cell dealing with these issues has been set up within the CNSD with the mandate to organise military injury and sports meetings.

It is through this last phase that the military equestrian sector consolidates its action with the fighting troops.

Ultimately, military equitation has evolved over the centuries from a weapon of superiority on the battlefield to a physical but above all moral training activity. With its centuries of experience, it has reached a level of diversification and sophistication that is perfectly in line with the operational and contextual concerns of armies. In this respect, it is a modern and versatile tool, supporting armies heavily engaged in operations in increasingly difficult and aggressive theatres. General L'Hotte, at the origin of the famous [French](#) traditional equitation doctrine "[calm, forward and straight](#)", said that it is a modern and versatile tool to support armies heavily engaged in operations in increasingly difficult and aggressive theatres. . developed a doctrine perfectly and solely dedicated to French-style horse riding, but whose outlines today correspond to the structuring moral values necessary for our fighters.

1] General Ract-Madoux, Chief of Staff of the Land Army at the National Assembly's Defence Commission, in response to the question of Deputy Cornut-Gentille, July 2012.

[2] « The horse at the service of communication and the efficiency of men in organisations », H. Dufau & B. Piazza.

[3] Professor P. Gaudreau, "Stress management during competition: a step towards achieving performance objectives", 2003.

[4] G. Garcin, "Horse rider alone", 2006.

5] Le Drian, Minister of Defence, "Letter to the Chair of the Defence Committee", 2012.

[6] Statistics French Equestrian Federation, 2014.

[7] E. Triolet, "The red horse or human intentions", 1953.

[8] G. Garcin, "The fall of the horse"», 1998.

9] Development of federal patents within the FFE and FFH.

10] End of the 19th century.

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Release date 17/05/2018
