



Expanding the external mobility of commissioned officers: an opportunity for the Army

military-Earth thinking notebook

Par le Lieutenant-colonel Antoine FLEURET

Published on 27/05/2018

Autres thèmes

The author of this article has spent two years of external mobility within the Ministry of the Interior. He gives us a vibrant plea in favour of the perpetuation of this possibility, according to him a vector of incomparable influence of the Army in the ministerial and inter-ministerial concert.

Introductory remarks: this text naturally takes into account the context of army reform (deflation and governance). However, it is not a precise and exhaustive study, but rather a strong encouragement based on a particularly enriching personal experience.

Sending a dozen or so commissioned officers to serve for two years on mobility outside the armed forces (central or decentralised administration of another ministry, local authority, company) may seem an incongruous idea, even inappropriate in the current phase of executive deflation. Moreover, opinions have always differed within the Army on the advisability of this approach as the benefits may seem limited and the temporary loss of officers sent on external mobility (mobex) excessive. This explains the limited volume, which has changed little since the scheme was actually introduced in 2000 at the instigation of General Thorette, then CEMAT. Approximately fifty army officers have thus experienced this two- or three-year secondment [1]. At a time of drastic choices, it would be a pity if this meagre population were the adjustment variable.

However, it seems to me that this arrangement answers some of the questions that the institution is asking itself about the training of our high military authorities: how can we better understand the workings of the State and the places where decisions are made? How can we better understand and also be better recognized by the senior civil service? How can we prepare our young commissioned officers for the exercise of responsibilities, particularly at the political-administrative level? How can we take an outside look at our methods and operations in a period of profound restructuring?

Also, an increase in the external mobility of commissioned officers would be an unprecedented opportunity for the Army to strengthen its credibility at the joint and interdepartmental levels. Indeed, having a resource of officers with early experience of interministerial issues would be a solid asset for the Army and the armed forces in general vis-à-vis the other major State bodies, which are very involved in the management of public affairs.

The experience acquired by officers outside the Ministry is first of all reflected in their knowledge of the workings of other ministries and the senior officials serving in them. These officers are often recruited as chargés de mission to a deputy director of a central administration, which guarantees their immersion in the heart of these administrations. The missions entrusted are generally cross-cutting, thus making it possible to work on a wide range of public policies implemented by the host ministry. For example, our "mobex" officer at the Ministry of the Interior can work on the evolution of the missions of the district sub-prefects while participating in the design of the steering of the five-year strategic directive for the network of prefectures. Our officers on mobility at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are familiarising themselves with France's relations with major international bodies.

Furthermore, the professional proximity with senior civil servants and working together enables our officers to acquire new ways of thinking about issues with different prisms than those they are used to. Thus, an officer on mobility within the Court of Audit learns audit techniques and the methods and processes for conducting an investigation. He will later be able to adapt these methods for the benefit of the Ministry and better understand the stages of a Court of Audit investigation into the scope of defence. This technical benefit is just as true in terms of human resources for an officer working in the Directorate-General for Administration and the Civil Service (DGAFP) or in financial matters for an officer working in the Budget Directorate at Bercy.

Recognition of the quality of our officers in central administration posts, slightly beyond what is today called "the core business", would also be reinforced by an increase in external mobility. For the time being, this recognition is only possible when officers are confronted with civilian actors: either as heads of offices or at the Institut des hautes études de la défense nationale (IHEDN). The IHEDN was created in 1948 with the mission of promoting the spirit of defence by training civilian and military auditors every year and by fostering the creation of links and mutual knowledge. But why wait so late in their careers and for such a small population as our ten officers enrolled at the Centre des Hautes Etudes Militaires and at the IHEDN session?

Decompartimentalizing our officers earlier in their careers would help to sharpen and increase their qualities and skills. It would be an effective means of combating the isolation of military personnel and their oblivion within the major State bodies. Indeed, the vast majority of officers in "mobex" give full satisfaction to their employers whatever the nature of the job held, whether general or technical. They demonstrate the intrinsic qualities of officers, proven by almost ten years in command and several external operations. The relevance of our officer training system, in particular the War College, is thus indirectly highlighted. True ambassadors of the Army and therefore of the armed forces, mobile officers are recognised for their management and adaptation skills, their ability to plan and their spirit of synthesis. The state of mind of our officers is also praised,

with a special mention for their loyalty and sense of teamwork, which promote the success of the management teams into which they are integrated.

Moreover, the Army makes a genuine investment with these detachments, which is inevitably profitable, since an officer who has spent two years on mobility will find his senior civil servant counterparts in management positions ten or twenty years later when he himself takes up high responsibilities within the department. The chances are that this will facilitate a direct relationship and thus a better understanding of our problems. This is particularly true with the careers of officers assigned to Bercy or to the financial affairs directorate of another department or to the DGAFP, which are highly strategic administrations with very senior officials. As time goes by, these officers are likely to get to know this or that CFO or HR Director.

If, in the words of Marshal Lyautey's visionary, "he who is only military is only a bad military", the diversification of officers' skills to areas outside their own can only be desirable. Broadening external mobility would therefore be a real opportunity for our officers and the armed forces. Following the example of compulsory statutory mobility for the major civilian corps in their first posts to move up to the higher echelon, a system could be devised to encourage the mobility of commissioned officers in the two or three postings following their graduation from the War College. With the extension of careers and the maintenance of command times at two years, such a move is not technically unimaginable. This mobility would then have to be diversified to reach specialist posts in the major central directorates, positions as generalists, civil administrators or sub-prefects in central administration or in decentralised services, inspection bodies but also local authorities and private companies. This would be a formidable lever for the influence of our Army, a real guarantee of openness but also of recognition, and also an important aid to the retraining of our officers. Some ideas are flourishing in this direction, such as the reverse reserve of military personnel within companies in the Air Force.

In view of the current circumstances, all avenues must be explored to ensure that we have placed the maximum number of assets on our side to defend our place in decision-making circles. This is the usefulness of the "mobex", even if it cannot be quantified or translated into steering indicators.

1) This figure refers to officers on mobility managed administratively by the Cabinet of the CEMAT. It does not deal with the PARDEF system and officers assigned, for example, to the SGDSN or within joint cells with other ministries.

Saint-cyrien de la promotion Colonel Cazeilles (1995-1998), Lieutenant-Colonel Antoine FLEURET served from 1999 to 2008 as section head, deputy officer then unit commander in the 1st foreign engineering regiment. After attending the CSEM and then the CID, from 2010 to 2012, he was mobile outside the Ministry of the Interior in the sub-directorate in charge of territorial administration. He was then assigned until 2014 to the office of the Chief of Staff of the French Army in charge of external relations, and is currently serving in the Outreach Division of the French Army's Centre for Strategic Studies.

Title : Par le Lieutenant-colonel Antoine FLEURET

Author (s) : Par le Lieutenant-colonel Antoine FLEURET

Release date 08/01/2019
