



## Primo Bravo: troop morale

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**Troop morale on operations is a key factor in the success of a mission. As such, its consideration deserves special attention from the commander, who must, like the other themes in the paragraphs of his order of operations, include it in his tactical reflection on the "friendly situation". The command is then confronted with the difficulty of influencing an element that is at once immaterial and intimate but also driven by numerous collective dynamics. So what role can the leader really play in ensuring the precarious moral balance of his unit in combat?**

Combat and its preparation expose men to trials and successes that impact on their morale and even their psychological balance when these trials lead to post-traumatic shocks. Although the latter are now the subject of numerous writings by specialists or the wounded, the more traditional management of the troop's morale on a daily basis during an engagement remains little addressed. It is however a determining criterion in the success of a mission: troop morale is the assurance of a willingness to fight. As such, its consideration deserves special attention from the leader who must, like the other themes in the paragraphs of his order of operations, include it in his tactical thinking on the "friendly situation". The command is then confronted with the difficulty of influencing an element that is at once immaterial and intimate but also driven by numerous collective dynamics.

So what role can the leader really play in ensuring the precarious moral balance of his unit in combat?

**Individual questioning, collective actions: the leader must make it his duty to grasp the complexity of the moral dynamics that animate his unit.**

Any soldier who has been involved in combat knows that the morale of the troop in

operation is an unstable construction that varies according to the events encountered, both individual and collective. Confronted with this phenomenon, the leader must seek to understand the dynamics - positive or negative - that can affect his unit, his men and himself in operation.

The complexity of these dynamics makes it necessary to start from an analysis of the morale of the individual, the elementary particle of the morale of a unit in operations. In the context of an operational engagement, this individual is extracted from his daily life. He finds himself confronted with uncertainties and sometimes existential questions such as the sacrifice of his life or the right to give death. The individual, including the leader, may then be weakened, hence the need to take the time to get to know each other better before and during the engagement by seeking answers to these fundamental questions. The fact that, among men engaged in operations, the maturation of this introspection does not follow the same rules or rhythms leads to recurrent fluctuations in the morale of the troop. Some, refusing this reflection before the projection, find themselves weakened during the engagement, violently confronted with a reality that they had deliberately set aside.

However, the best moral preparation before the operation cannot rule out the uncertainty of individual reactions to the fire. From the total loss of one's means to the act of bravery, the spectrum of possibilities is indeed very wide. The observation of the first behaviours in combat is thus rich in lessons for the leader, who can rediscover his men, even if it does not necessarily guarantee a single truth for subsequent engagements. Some traditionally introverted soldiers express themselves fully, while others who are more brave fade away. This lack of self-knowledge weighs on the combatant. It is therefore not surprising to see men in a hurry to know their baptism of fire, a necessary step in their personal and moral construction.

The morale of the troop, if it rests well on that of the individuals who compose it, is nevertheless similar to a much more complex mechanism. It is not simply the product of a simple aggregation of individual characters; it is also the result of a set of dynamic interactions that evolve in the context of operations.

While the moral repercussions of engagements are most often seen in a negative light, such as a drop in morale due to losses or operational failures, there is also an opposite but equally dangerous trend: euphoria. Success leads to a natural and positive increase in confidence in the fighter. However, overconfidence is to be avoided in operations for two opposing reasons. As the historian Delbruck points out, mentioning Frederick II, "an army is never less willing to fight immediately than it is after victory. Every man is overjoyed, the mass is delighted to have escaped the extreme danger to which each was exposed, and none is in a hurry to rub elbows with it immediately" [1]. 1) This euphoria of success can also engender a feeling of invulnerability which is just as harmful, since it can weaken one of the most useful qualities of a fighter: his instinct for survival.

It is therefore necessary to temper the extent of success in order to avoid these harmful effects. Awareness of threats during pre-mission briefings is very useful in this quest for temperance. But here again, these reminders must be done with moderation and optimism, in order to avoid any psychosis that would prove counterproductive. Indeed, the exchange of information, or even its distortion, will not fail to take place within the microcosm of an isolated unit in operation, a particularly fertile breeding ground for all sorts of rumours and exaggerations. The case of IED threat awareness in Kapisa is a case in point. While everyone must be aware of the methods used by the insurgents, too much focus on this threat can paralyse not only the manoeuvre but also the minds.

Group dynamics therefore play a key role in the moral evolution of the units in operation as events unfold. It is therefore necessary for the leader to identify the periods during which these dynamics develop. While it is generally difficult to anticipate hard blows, certain phases of operational mandates can however be identified as particularly sensitive for the morale of the troop. In addition to the first engagement at fire already mentioned, operational pauses and the approach of the end of the mandate are key periods for troop morale. The psychological influence of the approach to returning home is well known. The individual's natural desire to preserve himself so close to a return home confronts the need for the group to continue the mission. The impact of the operational pause on morale is more subtle. These periods of inactivity are indeed double-edged. While a short break combined with a change in atmosphere is generally beneficial to morale - it is sometimes called a "morale break" - it is also a time to take a break from work.e welfare - a break imposed by orders or weather conditions, for example, is generally detrimental to unit morale: spirits remain under pressure, prey to rumours, without the psychological outlet of carrying out a mission. Moreover, idleness gives the combatant time to dwell on certain delicate situations experienced.

The leader has the means to influence the moral situation of his unit through his behaviour.

Faced with these complex interactions, it is difficult for the leader in operation to claim to control the morale of his troop. However, he has the real means to influence it.

Certain principles to promote this morale, particularly before the mission, are well known. They consist of keeping groups identical and developing the competence of all levels through training. The post-operation questionnaires filled in by the Kapisa combat units in 2010 thus highlighted the importance of the perception of the competence of each level of command in the unit on morale.

But other actions can be taken by the leader. The first of these is not the easiest. It is based on the ability to identify one's own limitations and weaknesses in order to adopt behaviour that will allow it to last. He should not seek to be omnipresent if he wants to avoid becoming dispersed and thus losing his effectiveness during the commitment period. The leader must be serene and lucid, which requires periods of rest and physical maintenance to allow him to take a step back. His effectiveness and confidence, and therefore his morale, depend on it. If the war is above all the opposition of the will of the leaders built on this moral force, then we understand the influence on the troop of the morale displayed by the command. The moral collapse of General Gamelin in 1940, if not the cause of the military defeat, played a catalytic role in the French debacle. Historian P. Masson emphasises the lack of combativeness of the Generalissimo who, on the fourth day following the German offensive of May 1940, resignedly announced to the Minister of National Defence and War Daladier, himself collapsed : "Yes, it's the end of the French army" [2].

To this need to "be and last" morally, it is desirable for the command to add a communication chosen to have a positive influence on the morale of the troops. Thus the calm of the leader reassures his subordinates. If it is necessary to know how to punctually give voice to energize a maneuver, it is essential to maintain composure in moments of tension. A calmly given order will give the subordinates a sense of serenity and allow them to take a step back from the situation at hand. Moreover, the affirmation of this calm relativizes the seriousness of the situation by giving a sense of control over events.

Yet the leader is aware that he cannot control everything in combat. Indeed, "there is no

such thing as chance, but luck is needed". This phrase takes on its full meaning in daily operations. "Why was the previous armoured vehicle hit and not mine? Why did that bullet hit my rifle and not my hand?". These are all questions that multiply in the course of a mandate and give rise to questions and even moods. The combatants realize that the success of the mission is not only built on meticulous preparation, so that nothing is left to chance, but also on a measure of success and luck. The role of the leader is not only not to ignore the latter, but also to make his subordinates aware of it. The resulting "serene fatalism" is a guarantee of operational efficiency: while being aware of the risks taken, the combatant knows that he has put all the assets on his side to fulfil his mission and, at peace with his conscience or soul, goes into battle.

### **The way in which the manoeuvre is conceived and conducted: a moral lever for the leader**

The leader can thus, from a work on himself, have an action on the morale of his troop. He can amplify his effects by relying on processes of design and conduct of the maneuver.

The process of carrying out orders before an operation is part of a well-identified mechanism from the material preparation at the individual level to the rehearsal, the last general rehearsal. This mechanism plays a significant role in the psychological preparation of the troop. It allows each man to integrate a mission that he gradually appropriates. The mutual trust built by the stages of the collective preparation of the mission and their verification by the leader allows everyone to reassure themselves. The men become aware of the means implemented to their benefit (support and backing), of the presence of friendly units in their immediate environment or of their own firepower. The fighter who lies down on the eve of a mission is thus nourished by a collective consciousness, a feeling of belonging to a group and the certainty of being able to count on the other. He is morally ready.

Moreover, whatever the mission, it is up to the leader to build his manoeuvre. The way in which he chooses to conceive of it is another strong psychological signal. The amount of initiative that he leaves to his subordinates, but also the concern to give them sufficient time to enable them to take ownership of the future mission and to intellectualize it, are all ways for him to put his men in confidence and thus promote their moral stability.

During the course of the operation, other aspects of command have an influence on the morale of subordinates without having been the subject of in-depth study. The notion of the leader's place is thus of paramount importance, and goes beyond the tactical imperative. Too present, the leader can become a castrator for a subordinate who might consider himself under tutelage and therefore useless. On the other hand, if the leader is too absent, he can create a feeling of abandonment among his subordinates that is detrimental to their willingness to become more involved. Hence the need for the leader to take this psychological aspect into account in the sequence of operations when designing his manoeuvre. The position of the leader is not only the one from which he can best command, it is also the one that will enable him to reassure or share, even occasionally, the physical risk of the battle. In "**L'homme en guerre, de la Marne à Sarajevo**", **P. Masson** insists on the case General Patton made of the morale of his men and his place with his units. Aware of the psychological impact of the leader's presence, he regularly made a point of visiting his troops at the front in a conspicuous manner and systematically avoided leaving in full view of everyone.



### **Through the distribution of the missions entrusted to him, the chief had another lever to act on the morale of his men**

Not all missions, despite their usefulness, have the same value in the eyes of combatants. The so-called "captive" missions, because they are indispensable, but in which the posture is above all defensive, are little appreciated. Site defences or convoy escorts are the illustration of these missions during which initiative is limited and the risks just as numerous. It is therefore important to ensure equity between units in the distribution of these missions, otherwise they may create unfortunate imbalances in troop morale. A good alternation allows all combatants to be regularly engaged on more offensive missions or missions that appear to be more useful and rewarding. This perception that the combatants have of their missions is directly related to two key notions for the morale of the troop: initiative and recognition. They must therefore be encouraged by the command.

In an asymmetrical combat such as that encountered in Mali or Afghanistan in the face of an often invisible enemy, it is essential from a tactical and technical point of view for the leader to take the initiative as soon as possible. It helps restore the soldier's confidence and makes it easier for him to forget, at the end of his mission, the violence he has endured. The fighter will focus more on the last blow struck, even in reaction. The observation of troop morale during indirect attacks on FOBs in KAPISA is revealing: when the artillery fire on the starting zones of the attack follows the aggression, the troops have a higher morale: they do not feel they are being subjected to the course of events.

The second concept, recognition, only becomes important after the fact. Whether it is embodied in a look, a press article or an official award, it is essential to the fighter. During the First World War, the lack of media coverage of the confrontations during the years 1915-1916 encouraged the gradual moral collapse of the troops whose sacrifice did not seem to be recognized. When in 1917, General Pétain focused his efforts on the morale of the troops following the mutinies, he decided, among his many actions for the direct benefit of the Poilu, to resume official media communication to make public opinion more aware of the effort made by the soldiers. It was a success, as proved by the French army's ability to recover morally in the space of a few months.

Because it is the foundation of men's ability to endure suffering and to fight, the morale of the troop must be a permanent concern for the command. The leader, by his behaviour and actions, has a real influence on its preservation. However, he cannot claim to have complete control over it. Indeed, morale is a complex notion that touches on both the intimate and the group dynamics. Its non-quantifiable aspect is, moreover, not very much in line with our current results-based culture.

Hence the temptation for the command to downplay this moral aspect in current thinking on the art of warfare. The proliferation of writings on a technological approach to combat is indicative of this tendency.

But to seek refuge in a combat where technical progress would come to attenuate this part of uncertainty that man represents is both an admission of weakness and a utopia. Indeed, war is fundamentally linked to man. And without a real consideration of this human dimension of the fight, the leader cannot hope for victory.

[1] Quoted in "Theoretical tactics" Colonel M. Yakovleff, Economica Editions, p.372.

[2] «History of the French Army from 1914 to the present day" P. Masson, Perrin Editions, p. 215.

Battalion Commander Vincent MOUSSU is Saint-cyrien of the "Bicentennial of Saint-Cyr" promotion (1999-2002). An infantryman, he served from 2003 to 2010 in mountain troops, in the 13th Alpine Hunter <sup>Battalion</sup> of Chambéry, where he took part in four external operations in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire (2005, 2007), Central African Republic (2008) and Afghanistan (2009-2010). He then served as unit commander of a class of Saint-cyriens (2010-2012) and is now part of the 126th class of the CSEM.

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