



Mentoring in the first half of the nineteenth century: French officers in the service of the Sikh kingdom of Punjab (1822-18

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Chef d'escadrons Antoine VERLEY

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From the individual adventures of French officers in the service of the Sikh kingdom of Punjab between 1822 and 1849, generic lessons can be drawn, which are still valid today for the soldiers serving in Afghanistan.

"Neither swords, nor great elephants, nor cavalry, nor infantry help as much as intelligence to succeed in one's designs."

Pañchatantra, 5th century

More than 150 years before the deployment of the first French OMLTs[1] in Afghanistan, officers of the Napoleonic army, who were breaking the ban, had already lived an adventure consisting in advising a young army in training in the foothills of the Himalayas. Anecdotal[2] on the surface, this team of adventurers in the service of a foreign kingdom allows us to draw lasting lessons, still valid today in an Afghanistan that was, even at the time, a source of concern for the stability of the region.

The Context

From 1801, Maharadja Ranjit Singh unified the various Sikh principalities (or misls) to create the kingdom of Punjab. From this kingdom, born in the form of a confederation, he quickly made a state that he wanted to be modern and which gradually expanded at the expense of Afghanistan on the one hand, and India under the growing tutelage of the British East India Company on the other. The reign of Maharadja Ranjit Singh, between 1801 and 1839, is still today considered by Sikhs as a privileged period. Whether for his conquests, the administration of his kingdom or the selection of a new elite based on merit rather than heredity, this sovereign relied particularly on his army. In order to develop his army, he did not hesitate to call upon foreign officers. Among them, who arrived between 1822 and 1827, four "Napoleonic" officers particularly distinguished themselves. French or of Italian origin, generally struck off the ranks during the Restoration because of their attachment to Emperor Napoleon I, these veterans played a leading role in the creation of the Fauj-i-Khasor "special brigade", quickly nicknamed "French Legion" by the British. Generals [3] Jean-François Allard, Jean-Baptiste Ventura and Claude Auguste Court reorganized

respectively the cavalry, infantry and artillery of the young Sikh army. General [4] Paolo Di Avitabile, after his beginnings in the Fauj-i-Khas, quickly switched to more administrative functions. This "special brigade", composed of 5,000 men in 1823, will reach the strength of 10,000, or about a third of the regular army of Punjab. General Allard will succeed in legitimizing what was then only an individual adventure, during a triumphal return to France in 1835, by being appointed "agent of France in Lahore" by King Louis-Philippe. After the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839, the Sikh kingdom of Punjab gradually weakened before disappearing, annexed by the British in 1849. Allard died in 1839 in Peshawar, Ventura and Court returned to France and Avitabile to Naples.

Lessons learned

If the differences between the 15 to 20 years these adventurers spent in the Punjab and the six months of a French military "mentoring" mission the Afghan National Army (ANA) are many, there are nevertheless commonalities, and lessons can be learned from the creation of the Fauj-i-Khas.

- **Proving oneself**

Before gaining the confidence of Punjabi soldiers like Maharadja Ranjit Singh, the French officers had to prove themselves, both individually (competence, value in combat) and collectively (it was a question of showing the relevance of a "French school" of troop organization). Thus, as early as 1823, Allard and Ventura were engaged, at the head of their men, during the battle of Noshera, against jihadists from the pathan tribes of Afghanistan. The initial effectiveness of Allard and Ventura, who were able to convince the sovereign who had placed his trust in them, served as a sesame to Court and Avitabile in 1827.

This need to prove themselves remains relevant today. Each OMLT must win the confidence of the ANA kandak (battalion) to which it is attached, for its mandate of course, but also for those who will follow, since the Afghan soldiers expect a continuity of mentoring "à la française". And if today's officers do not have the experience of the veterans of the Napoleonic wars, they can nevertheless compensate for this lack by a demanding and adapted pre-projection conditioning (MCP), as well as by their personal investment.

- **The difficult balance between necessary modernization and respect for local culture**

The recruitment of French officers by Ranjit Singh was a response to the need to modernize the army of the Punjab Kingdom. Thus, Allard and Ventura designed French-inspired uniforms (while retaining the turban, the wearing of which stemmed from a religious imperative of the Sikhs), wrote and had translated a military manual for the Punjabi army. (transmission of orders to the sound of drums, progression in column or line, formation of infantry squares on the defensive) or imposed tight order in the French language. Court, for his part, completely reorganized the Sikh artillery (which had 400 heterogeneous pieces of all calibers andThe new guns were melted down, and in 1834 they were able to take the city of Peshawar by pushing back the Afghans west of the Khyber Pass.

However, this desire for accelerated modernization in no way prevented a deep respect

for local culture. The elders of the Napoleonic campaigns were also men of knowledge who showed an unabashed interest in Sikh, Hindu, Indo-Greek, Persian and Islamic cultures. They financed, for example, a large number of archaeological excavations or had a large number of paintings (pictures or miniatures) made by local artists, which still bear witness to the cultural life of the region today.

The importance of respecting local customs was all the more important as the Fauj-i-Khas was a multicultural army, certainly dominated by Pandjabis of the Sikh faith, but also composed of Hindu or Muslim soldiers from all the neighbouring ethnic groups (Gurkhas, Afghans, Kashmiris, etc.). This is reminiscent of the current ANA, composed of Tajiks, Pashtuns, Uzbeks and other Hazaras. If Afghan soldiers are ready to learn from their French mentors, they nevertheless demand respect for their culture and combat experience.

• Conditions for success

Acceptance of the four Napoleonic officers was facilitated by reforms in the following four areas:

- significantly increased combat effectiveness;
- increased prestige, through new uniforms and decorations;
- advancement on merit;
- rationalization of troop payments through the creation of a monthly pay system.

The same is true today in Afghanistan.

The mentoring system is accepted by the ANA only to the extent that it brings real added value. The first of these, as far as the French OMLTs are concerned, is access to the support of coalition forces (artillery, helicopters, planes) that they provide to their Afghan counterparts.

In addition to this combat support, the French Army participates, through the Epidote detachment, in the training and organisation of the ANA. Organic issues are becoming more and more important within this institution, which has to manage a staff of up to 149,500 soldiers, equip them (the prestige associated with the new uniforms remains) and administer them. In this respect, the rise of the Afghan logistics school since October 2008 is proof of the special know-how provided by the French and Germans, which meets a specific need in a country disorganised by thirty years of conflict.

Western military personnel engaged in this type of mission must therefore ask themselves the question of the benefit that their presence and action bring to the Afghan army in its fight against the insurgents, without taking their collaboration for granted.

In conclusion, the key to the success of the four "French generals" lies in the fact that they were men of culture. Claude-Auguste Court, a graduate of the imperial special military school of Saint-Cyr, had received a solid classical education coupled with a particularly lively intellectual curiosity. Thus, without initially knowing anything about the region he was going to (unlike the French soldiers leaving today for Afghanistan), he quickly became an expert in it, researching the routes of the expedition. He also collected Persian manuscripts and antique coins, had miniatures made locally to illustrate La Fontaine's fables, and wrote memoirs that now enrich the collections of the Musée Guimet. He, like the three other veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, made their own the

thought of Stanislas de Boufflers[5], a soldier and poet who rallied to the Bonapartist cause: "the warrior who cultivates his spirit polishes his weapons".

1] Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team, a phrase used by the French army and translated by the Canadians as "Équipe de liaison et de mentorat opérationnel" (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team).

2] Except for the lucky ones who would have seen, in 1974, the television soap opera "Le soleil se lever à l'Est" (The Sun Rises in the East), which was very freely inspired by this epic...

3] Within the Sikh army of Punjab; the ranks of those concerned in the Grand Army ranged from captain to colonel.

[4] Idem

5] A writer and officer from Lorraine and then from France, a colonel of hussars in 1772, camp marshal in 1784, the Chevalier de Boufflers (1738-1815) was governor of Senegal and Gorée Island. Elected to the French Academy in 1788, deputy of the nobility at the Estates General in 1789, he emigrated in 1791 and returned to France in 1800, quickly rallying to Bonaparte.

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