



Ambush in Afghanistan (18 August 2008)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

A section of the 4th Company of the 8th R.P.I. in Afghanistan has had a painful experience of a skirmish. Ma and especially the polemic that followed (and which continues) generated by journalists, self-proclaimed defence specialists, encourage me to share some thoughts with you. I had to expose them in "8" chapters.

Geopolitics.

Having discovered, shortly before the new century, the existence of a group called Al Qaeda, the Western world suddenly became aware, on 11 September 2001 with the destruction of the World Trade Center, of the terrifying potential of this group ready to take any extreme action to destabilize and defeat the **Western** world. This Al Qaeda group, originally from Saudi Arabia and Yemen, chose Afghanistan as a sanctuary **because the topography** is favourable to it and the population has historically always rejected it. the infidel (the lancers of Bengal in the Khyber Pass in the 19th century and, closer to us, the Soviet army).

By an incomprehensible choice (apart from economic considerations in general and oil in particular), at the end of 2001, the United States placed its main effort (3/4 of the forces) on Iraq and its secondary effort (1/4 of the forces) on Afghanistan, whereas the opposite would have been more coherent. Indeed, it would appear that the two candidates for the US Presidency would agree on this reversal of the current distribution.

Since 2001, attacks committed in the name of Al Qaeda have continued to proliferate like a cancer throughout the world, Algeria being the latest country to be reached at the end of August 2008.

There is no reason to hope that these attacks will end tomorrow, just as it is futile to believe that they will spare France.

Therefore, the alternative before us today is one of biblical simplicity:

- either we tolerate the existence of the Afghan sanctuary of Al Qaeda in the hope that this terrorist enterprise will run out of steam and extinguish itself.
- Or we decide to eradicate the evil at its source and "go all out" in Afghanistan.

This tragic alternative takes the form of a deadly gamble for our society, 55% of whose citizens, ill-informed of the danger, wish, as if to give themselves a moral conscience, that our troops engaged there be repatriated.

Geostrategy.

We, the French, know from experience that a rebellion that has the support of a hinterland cannot be eradicated. The Vietminh in Indochina had almost won the game as soon as communism arrived in China in October 1949.

Conversely, the F.L.N. could never, whatever it may say, win the war on the ground in Algeria since that country's borders with Tunisia and Morocco had been made completely sealed.

Afghanistan shares a 1,500 km mountain border with Pakistan. Therefore, the answer to our current operations in Afghanistan lies not in Paris or Washington but in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. Two things:

- Either the Pakistani government agrees to carry out **permanent joint military operations and then the rebellion** can be defeated,
- or else it refuses and then the West will have to give up using its current means to fight this "Danaïd barrel" and organise itself differently, i.e. by doubling its forces and those of the Afghan army in order to be able to control the ground in its entirety.

Tactics.

The principles of war are immutable: concentration of effort, economy of forces and freedom of action. At present, the Taliban are the only ones who can apply them: they choose the time and place where to strike and how to act, they concentrate on their operation and disperse immediately to save themselves.

We have seen this kind of situation in Algeria. With patience and a lot of tenacity, we have reversed the roles by taking the field and turning the insecurity against the rebels.

I experienced this reversal as a lieutenant platoon leader in ^{Colonel} Bigeard's 3rd RPC. We "immersed ourselves" in the jebel where we took the place of the rebels by being, in the words of our colonel, "hardy, flexible, feline and maneuverable". The self-proclaimed experts we see on television today may well make fun of this era by claiming that we are no longer at the time of the "little guys" (a perfidious allusion to Bigeard). I'm sorry, but this war may be called "asymmetrical" (a military neologism that goes down well in the living rooms), but it is still guerrilla warfare. And here we know what to do and above all what not to do.

We know from experience that, against guerrilla warfare, a mechanized or motorized operation almost always strikes in a vacuum, because its beginnings are so obvious and

noisy, and above all because it is linked to a precarious road network.

Widely warned, the rebels have all the time they need to take to the open sea and wait for the operation to end before reoccupying the land, especially at night. These NATO Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are immutable. They are always carried out in the same way and prohibit any initiative or improvisation. They are sterile. The only assessments carried out to date in Afghanistan have been carried out by Special Forces immersed in suspect areas.

Common sense would dictate that our forces should be directed towards a fluidity that would allow them to occupy the terrain of these suspect areas in order to return the insecurity and hinder the rebels' action.

But since we are supposed to be in Afghanistan to help that country move toward democracy, the issue in the areas of insecurity **is the people**.

Counter-guerrilla operations, however necessary they may be, are insufficient. We must be able to supplement them with **pacification actions**.

Here too, we French have solid experience with this ingenious and effective system of specialized administrative sections responsible for taking control of populations hitherto under rebel control. Their success was obvious: I refer you to the remarkable work of Commander Oudinot "Un bétretrouge en képi bleu" [1]. In Afghanistan, this civil-military task should be assumed by the Afghan army...an arduous task in a country which, behind the scenes, produces 22 tons of opium per day [2].

2] Quite frankly, the forms of action in Afghanistan need to be changed completely. There is no need to invent, it is enough to redo here what has been successful elsewhere. Unfortunately, there is an allergy in the French armies to learning from past actions: On October 7, 1950 in Indochina, during the withdrawal operation of the Langson garrison, the 1st Foreign Parachute Battalion disappeared with all their bodies and belongings in the limestone of Coc Xa. However, in 1884, Battalion Commander Gallieni had forbidden, under any pretext whatsoever, to cross this deadly zone.

In our armies, the experience is not transmissible. Much more pragmatic and modest, the British and the Americans do not hesitate to call upon retired officers who have already exercised command in a zone that has come back into the news and, on request, they organize a Council of real experts. The main usefulness of these Councils of Experts is not so much to suggest what should be done, but to remind people what should not be done again. Because of its military past, our country is full of experts, but it does not know how to take advantage of them. That is unfortunate.

Intelligence.

The rules of engagement tell us that "intelligence protects the leader from surprise", which General Grant did during the Seoul War.cession of the United States (1861-1865) illustrated by wishing to have "officers who know what is happening on the other side of the hill". In Beirut in the 1980s, our Multinational Security Force brigade lost nearly 90 of its men without knowing who "came over the hill" to kill them. Our intelligence services then displayed a guilty ineptitude.

At the extremes of the range of means of intelligence acquisition are satellites and information given by the population. The latter, terrorized by the Taliban, does not talk. As

for the first, the satellite, it is inoperative above a skirmish, due to the fluidity and contingent nature of the action. What remains are the intermediate means: deep special forces, helicopters and UAVs, for which an urgent and priority effort must be made, because this range of acquisition means suffers from a serious deficit. It is criminal to allow our ground units to "crawl" blindly.

The articulation of forces.

It was with surprise that during the ambush of "Carmin 2" [3], we learned that the 4th Company (Carmin) was ^{detached from} the 8th R.P.I.Ma, 200 km away, with the Chadian March Regiment. We were not less surprised to learn that the medic of "Carmin 2" was a master corporal of the 2nd R.E.P.! There are surely good reasons of timing and circumstances to explain this mix of units.

We, the "Old Bosses", have constantly fought with force, especially in the 80's, against the non-respect of organic filiations. The "8" trained for five months with his four units and, upon his arrival, he had to separate from his 4th Company, which "landed" at the R.M.T. in ^{an} unknown environment. The quality of the R.M.T., which is widely recognised, cannot be questioned, but has anyone ever seen a rugby team start a match with players they don't know? It is vital in warfare to leave untouched the structures that have broken down in training.

The false polemic.

The former members of the 8th ^{R.P.I.} Ma, who had to endure the death on the field of honour of eight of their younger brothers in arms, had a bad experience of the insidious polemic launched by false experts on the youth of the paratroopers, their insufficient preparation and their poor protection.

- There are no old soldiers in the infantry. Since its creation in Indochina, the "8" has lost more than 500 of its own:
 - Michel Bornet, who fell in Indochina in 1951, wasn't even 19 years old,
 - Michel Lagathu, killed in Algeria in 1958, had celebrated his nineteenth birthday the day before his death,
 - Pierre Jacquot, who fell in South Lebanon in 1979, was 21 years old,
 - Jean Carbonnel, murdered by a sniper in Sarajevo in 1994, was twenty-two years old,
 - "Carmin 2", had an average age of 24 years and 8 months, with 11 senior officers and 19 paratroopers, the latter being 20 years old, who were humiliated and accused of being too young.
- Youth has nothing to do with seniority and experience. The young paratroopers who were enlisted at the age of 18 on 1 June 2007, had more than 14 months of service: 4 months of basic training plus 3 weeks of parachute training plus 5 weeks of commando training. At the sixth month of service, i.e. 1 December ²⁰⁰⁷, the section joined 4th Company (Carmin) ^{and}, since 1 March, has been training day and night for one specific mission: Afghanistan. We have never seen a unit receive such a notice period in our memory, five months in this case. The number of times we found out the day before our mission for the next day!

I would add to that experience that the section chief and his deputy had already completed 10 field operations, and the group leaders and corporals, an average of half a

dozen.

- The paratroopers were said to be poorly protected. The new CLS, General Irastorza, told me that two years ago we would have had two more deaths, according to the surgeons, because the new flak jacket saved them.

We old-timers of the "8" are enraged to see self-proclaimed defence specialists, most of whom have never held a gun in their lives, strutting around on television explaining how to fight a war. It's unbearable... I say forcefully that "Carmin 2" did not retreat in the face of an enemy far outnumbered and that it brought back its dead and wounded: "Carmin 2" was therefore an excellent platoon.

The media inquisition.

Yesterday, 26 August 2008, the regiment welcomed the President of the Republic to its Fayolle neighbourhood, where he came to spend an hour talking to him and also to meet the families. The survivors of "Carmin 2", lightly wounded and able-bodied, were in the ranks: it seems to be a NATO rule to repatriate a "traumatised" section (what an undertaking this would have been in Indochina and Algeria!). At the break-up, we saw a pack of journalists greedily falling on these poor guys who were wondering what was happening to them. And these journalists in search of copies were unashamedly trying to wrest from our paratroopers some reproaches or other recriminations against the command that could be triumphantly exploited in the press. Unlucky for the journalists, our young men were full of praise for their platoon leader, Warrant Officer Evrard, as well as for their officers with whom they had been living permanently for more than fourteen months (1 June 2007). You could see in their eyes that the admiration was sincere. Their eyes fogged up as they recalled the memory of their three master corporals, Buil, Grégoire and Penon, who had fallen before their eyes.

This game of guilt rubbed off from the media to the governing bodies. I have in front of me the eulogy delivered by the President of the Republic on 21 August at Les Invalides, and I quote: "...as head of the Army, I have no right to consider the death of a soldier as a fatality. I will see the families in a few minutes. I want them to know everything. They have a right to know. I don't want your colleagues to ever find themselves in such a situation. I want all the lessons to be learned from what happened...".

Yesterday, in the Fayolle neighbourhood, he said (I quote from memory): "assure the families that all light would be shed on the circumstances of the ambush and the responsibilities established". The soldiers present mentally completed: "and the culprits will be punished".

Wanting to deal with the circumstances of an ambush in a war operation like those of a civilian road accident is a worrisome drift for military leaders. If they have to find themselves "in jail" for overrunning from the left instead of manoeuvring from the right, the source of recruitment for our officers is likely to dry up quickly.

The fervor of a city.

An old garrison town, Castres (the Roman castrum) has revealed, in an admirable and moving way, its true nature. As soon as the drama was announced, the Mayor had all the town's flags flown at half-mast and opened a visitors' book at the town hall. On the evening of August 20, there was a one-hour queue to access the register. During the day,

the fenced walls of the Fayolle district were covered with flowers by anonymous motorists and pedestrians.

The ecumenical service celebrated on the morning of 23 August brought together a thousand faithful in the Cathedral of Saint Benedict and just as many people in the square where a giant screen had been erected. This Tuesday evening, August 26, the O.C. [4] hosted the Bayonnais Rowing for its first championship match. The popular stands were lined with a huge poster: "Far from the eyes, close to the heart, all with our 8".

The speaker observed a minute's silence after having asked the President of the Club, Mr Revol, the Mayor of the town, Mr Bugis, and Lieutenant-Colonel Meillan, second in command of the regiment, to come and take a seat in the centre of the lawn. At the end of the minute's silence, he asked the audience to applaud the "8" for one minute as well. The audience, standing up, took up the game: it's who applauds the loudest!

One must see in all these signs of friendship the culmination of a harmony forged between the Mayors and the successive Chiefs of Corps since the arrival of the Regiment in August 1963. Since that date, and especially since 1969, when the professionalization of the "8" began, more than two hundred executives and parachutists have retired in Castres and the immediate surroundings. They had a second career in local companies where they were appreciated for their punctuality, politeness, solidarity and professional conscientiousness. Most of them married Castraises, with whom they had an average of three children, so that this particular community of a thousand people, dignified and proud of itself, became a strong link in the local socio-economic chain.

This long-developed complicity culminated in the official sponsorship of the "8" by "his town" in 1999. Since then, the "8" paratroopers have been wearing the city's coat of arms on their right shoulder, whose motto is: "Stand up" and which, combined with that of the "8", strangely enough, is a symbol of the city:

"StandUp Volunteers"

There are places in France where it's good to live.

1) See reading note page

2) 8,200 tonnes in 2007, source Le Figaro, 23/08/08.

3) Radio call sign of the 8th R.P.I.Ma section ambushed in Afghanistan on August 18th.

[4] local rugby club

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