



## To practice the art of war, do you have to eat madeleines?

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Chef d'escadrons Christophe MAURIN

Published on 01/06/2020

Histoire & stratégie

**Napoleon is one of the timeless masters in the art of war. Beyond this formal parallel, can officers draw inspiration from the Emperor's aphorism by comparing it with other views on reminiscence? Squadron Leader Christophe Maurin proposes to sketch out a few steps along this path, considering perspectives offered by psychology, philosophy and literature.**

**"Inspiration is, more often than not, only reminiscence."**

### **Napoleon**

In the part of the unconscious that conceals the pleasures and sufferings of our years the term "reminiscence" may refer to the discovery of a major work, that of Marcel Proust. In fact, "In search of lost time" is most often studied through the experience of the narrator's return of buried memories. The first of these resurgences is the most famous: the tasting of a madeleine soaked in tea, which first provokes an inexplicable psychic well-being, before the images of childhood emerge in Combray.

Proust, Goncourt prize in 1919 <sup>1</sup>...has joined the ranks of writers. Napoleon is one of the timeless masters in the art of war. Beyond this formal parallel, can officers draw inspiration from the Emperor's aphorism by comparing it with other views of reminiscence? We propose to sketch out a few steps on this path, considering perspectives offered by psychology, philosophy and literature. On this path, we will maintain our military course by relying on the first chapter of Marshal Foch's course on the "..." and "...". Principles of Warfare» <sup>2</sup>.

Modern psychology uses reminiscence as a therapy (the re-reading of life), which can be compared to the After Action Analysis (3A) practiced in armies to learn from an exercise. It provides the leader with a retrospective view that illuminates the context and reasons for a decision, allowing him or her to refine judgment and increase personal resources to deal with a real-life situation later. This is, in a way, Foch's approach, which proposes to use military history as the basis for his teaching for the benefit of officers.

As a counterpoint, Freud takes a more clinical look at reminiscence, which he considers to be a mechanism of hysteria. <sup>3</sup> It describes how a traumatic memory can mark the psyche and cause neurotic pathologies. "Images impose themselves on our minds, with a tone that can be poetic or melancholic, but nevertheless frequently tinged with pleasure. We then passively experience the flow of ideas within us [...]. Let us add that a reminiscence easily turns into a pure fabrication". <sup>4</sup> This meaning should warn military leaders against excessive fascination with the past, the confinement in historicism, the belief that history repeats itself or that the lived experience is good by itself, at any time and in any place. As Foch also points out, "In war there are only special cases; everything is a matter of the individual, nothing happens again".

A more profound detour through philosophy allows us to reach the author of the "The War of the Elders". Principles of Warfare" in his theorist fiber. In Plato's work <sup>5</sup>Reminiscence is the trace left by eternal ideas in our soul before its incarnation, its confinement in the sensitive world. This conception, if we free ourselves from the discussion of Platonic metaphysics, sheds light on the relationship we can have with the theory of war. It consists in searching for the superior order hidden in the chaos of immediate appearances; in this case, the great principles that can guide the leader's decision making, evoked by Foch when he states that "the art of war, like all other arts, has its theory, its principles". The concrete case study or the comparative method therefore find all their meaning in going back to the sources of art. This requires an adapted pedagogy: maieutics, i.e. the technique which consists in questioning a person in order to make him express - give birth according to the etymology - his feelings. <sup>6</sup> - knowledge. This is reflected in the operational planning techniques still in use in the armed forces, which are characterised by a series of questions. But is this not a form of teaching that should be reinforced in military training to encourage more personal stance and prevent conformism? This would be all the more the case since maieutics only allows knowledge to be formulated, but its ordering remains a matter of reasoning and character, faculties that should be developed in parallel.

Aristotle also dealt with reminiscence <sup>7</sup>. Like Plato, he believes that it is the restoration of knowledge held by memory, but which would not present itself immediately to reason. However, it differs from the Platonic theory of ideas. According to him, knowledge is accessible not only through reason but also through sensitive impressions, which are retained by memory. Foch seems to have opted for this school, emphasizing the importance of taking facts into account: "In war, there is only one way to approach, to look at questions, and that is the objective way". What effect does this conception have on the process of reminiscence? For Aristotle, the process of reminiscence is based both on a rational, inductive approach and on the sensitive nature of the knowledge held by memory; for example, voluntarily remembering a place allows us to remember what we have heard there. This last point is particularly interesting for pedagogy. It highlights the influence of the material conditions in which instruction is conducted. This notion of an almost consubstantial link between knowledge and sensitive experience is at the origin of mental management techniques, such as those developed by Antoine de la Garanderie. <sup>8</sup>

and recently reinforced by neuroscience.

Applied to the teaching of the art of warfare, this approach obviously encourages the practice of historical field study, or staff ride, and combat executives. <sup>9</sup> It also reinforces the interest of one of the specifications of the future vehicles in the SCORPION program, which consists of using the machines themselves to conduct simulation training sessions: The crews will therefore be immersed in a physical environment identical to the one they will experience in a real situation, offering them directly usable memory anchorage points. The importance of using the full range of sensations is also stressed. It is up to the teacher to be inventive in order to embody his teaching by the tone of his voice, his posture, and the wealth of supports and aids he will use; and mistrust of sensory saturation, particularly through audiovisual media. Finally, let us not hastily conclude that the only military teaching that is worthwhile would be that which "comes in by the feet" or which is carried out "on the job". More subtly, for the more theoretical parts of the training, let us ensure that our schools and classrooms are marked by a visible identity that can be imprinted in the memories: let us cultivate the spirit of the place. What can be said, for example, of the impersonal Foch amphitheatre at the Military School, where not even a portrait or bust of the 1918 winner is displayed? What a contrast with the richness of the great amphitheatre at the Sorbonne, which clearly shows the ambition of this university institution!

This return to the concrete reminds us that Foch's words "do not aim at a platonic result of erudition. Beyond knowledge, it is about power"; therefore, it is not only about the transition to practice, but also, since it is an art, about the ability to apply principles in changing circumstances to create an always singular work, the chef's decision. Therefore, the crossover with reminiscence in literature offers an interesting perspective. The emergence of buried memories triggered by a sensory experience has become emblematic of Marcel Proust's work: the madeleine dipped in tea, the tinkling of a glass, the sensation of the disjointed paving stones in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Guermantes or that of a stale towel. All these episodes echo the importance of the sensible in Aristotle, and the psychic state they bring about in the narrator can be linked to Freud's analysis. But Proust does not confine himself to this inner experience. First experienced and appreciated for its own sake in "On the side of Swann" it becomes a source of inspiration and expression in "Time regained" The ebb of sensations and memories is followed by the artistic impulse. It is, in a way, the leap from the acquired to the original creation.

The parallel between the work of the fragile Parisian dandy and the teaching of the Lieutenant-Colonel of Artillery professor at the École de guerre may seem daring. But isn't this creative leap, this passage from idea to action, this transformation of acquired knowledge into a singular decision, what Foch seeks to train officers for, against dilettantism, positivism or formalism? He himself notes that "there is a long way from this [scientific] conception of the precious faculty that enables us to make acquired military knowledge the basis of our resolutions". It will be objected that the rational method advocated by Foch to take the plunge has little to do with a tea in the company of Marcel Proust. It is to forget that the latter forged his style on the demanding "Memories" of Saint-Simon. His work did not appear spontaneously, it was born from a long plunge into the torments of his soul. The summit of art that he reached makes us take for natural and obvious what is the result of patient work.

In this, is he not comparable to Napoleon declaring: "It is not a genius who suddenly

reveals to me, in secret, what I have to say or do in a circumstance unexpected to others, it is reflection, meditation." <sup>10</sup>. To paraphrase a maxim of Catholic doctrine<sup>11</sup>, we therefore do nothing new that we have not transmitted to ourselves. For officers to practice war as an art, it is incumbent upon them to live in the intimacy of their discipline, to frequent it in all its aspects, to go beyond the contemplative posture, but also to go beyond a know-how acquired in the field which will always remain partial and contingent. This is what Foch recommends when he quotes Moltke the Elder: "It is clear that theoretical knowledge is not enough [...]; what is needed is the free, practical, artistic development of the qualities of mind and character, based [...] on the knowledge and skills of the mind and of the character of the individual...on a prior and experience-guided military culture, either that which one derives from military history or that which one can acquire in one's own existence". We expect our training, our backgrounds and our organizations to create the conditions for this habituation to war. But do our personal efforts and leadership style always reflect this demanding imperative?

Reminiscence, invoked by Napoleon as the foundation of his genius, consists first of all in allowing notions and sensations linked to the art of war, captured in the most diverse fields, to infiltrate and retain in our memories. It is, then, the ability to order them. Finally, it is a question of providing, through regular exercises, access between this accumulated capital and our consciousness so that it can be mobilized in a timely manner. It is therefore a faculty much more developed than the simple acquisition of a reflex, and the very opposite of a lightning bolt or a form of divination which would be properly external to us.

**Foch published the first edition of the "Principles of War" in 1903. Since then, the work has been a must in the education of French officers, at the risk of being considered a penultimate book or a bible. However, the detours in which it has accompanied us have opened up perspectives, perhaps unsuspected, on the living thought and ambition of its author. It is an encouragement to meditate on it in the ever-renewed light of our experiences and learning. As for the question that opened these lines... there is no contraindication!**

-----  
**1 For "In the shade of the flowering maidens"**

**2 All the quotations from Foch are taken from Ferdinand Foch, "Des Principes de la guerre", chapter 1, Economica, Paris, (1903) 2007**

**3 Freud Sigmund, Breuer Joseph, "Études sur l'hystérie", 2002, Presses universitaires de France, coll. Bibliothèque de psychanalyse.**

**4 Commentary by Pierre-Henri Castel on Sigmund Freud, De la psychanalyse. Five lectures, <http://pierrehenri.castel.free.fr/5conf1.htm>**

**5 Plato, "Phédon", Flammarion, Paris, 1999.**

**6 The term maieutics would be a reference to Maïa, goddess of childbirth and midwives.**

**7 Aristotle, "De la mémoire et de la réminiscence", in "Œuvres complètes" (dir. Pierre**

Pellegrin), Flammarion, Paris , **2014**.

**8 La Garanderie Antoine (de), "Réussir, ça s'apprend" , 2013, Bayard Compact, Paris**

**9 Concrete tactical case study session conducted in the field by managers of elementary army units.**

**10 Quoted by Foch at the conclusion of chapter 1 of the "Principles of Warfare".**

**11 Nihil innovatetur, nisi quod traditum est. Nothing new that has not been transmitted.**

---

<b>Title :</b>	le Chef d'escadrons Christophe MAURIN
<b>Author (s) :</b>	le Chef d'escadrons Christophe MAURIN
<b>Release date</b>	31/05/2020

---