



## The alliance of meaning and strength

The exercise of the profession of arms in the Army

Le général chef d'état-major de l'armée de Terre

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This Army document is singular. It is not a work of international law, even if it sometimes uses language related to it. Nor is it a work of morality, even though it is based on a religious and philosophical tradition within which our conception of war originated and took shape. Finally, it is not a document of doctrine, nor is it a code of conduct that is valid under any circumstances, even though it lays down a number of timeless military values and virtues. Rather, it is a document of reflection written by soldiers for soldiers of an army that has reached the maturity of its professionalization. It looks humbly at the foundations and principles of a specific profession: that of the service of arms, the questions it raises and the dilemmas it raises.

War is indeed a place and a time of extreme tension. The choices that soldiers must make, often in an emergency, are difficult and painful. Most of these tensions can be summed up in a military version of the dilemma of ends and means. Is anything allowed in war? Should the rightness of a cause be the criterion for deciding how to fight? Is it possible to win without ever losing one's honour? What level of force should be applied, and what degree of risk should be taken? Here are some questions that touch on morality. At first glance, they may seem very conceptual. Every soldier knows, on the contrary, that they are terribly concrete in action. These questions have been around all the time. Their acuity and scope have not diminished with the evolution of our strategic environment, the emergence of new weapons, or changes in our society.

However, there may be a general conception of war as a space where only necessity and constraint prevail. War would be hell, in a triple sense. First, because it would be an absolute evil, because of the horror of the death of human beings. Second, because it might seem pointless to morally judge soldiers for what they do for the sole purpose of hastening victory. Finally, because in times of war, it would be vain and illusory to pretend to form a moral judgment, as summed up in the Latin adage *Inter arma enim silent leges*: in times of war, laws are silent.

But soldiers, who wage war without loving it, do not share this opinion. On the contrary, their real and personal experience reinforces their conviction that there is indeed a moral reality of combat. Perhaps this is simply because they do not see the service of arms as an occupation like any other, and they do not see themselves as victims or spectators, but rather as active participants, with their own individual and collective responsibility. Perhaps because the torment soldiers feel when faced with a problematic decision is in itself proof that they are acting in a world where morality has not disappeared. Certainly because they themselves see that in the depths of the harsh reality of war there are always luminous moments of humanity. Most certainly because military traditions are still alive in the 21st century, and remind soldiers of the noble ideals of service in arms: warrior honour has thus survived the changing nature of war.

For soldiers, war is therefore a moral experience of unprecedented power. It offers a spectacle that is both terrifying and sublime. Each soldier may feel a sense of power at the same time as he or she observes the immense collective strength of a modern army, and a sense of weakness in the face of his or her extreme individual vulnerability as a human being. In war, the soldier cannot ignore death, whether it is given or received, as if it were something that happens only to others. All these reasons are at work to cause a moral shaking of the combatant, which can sometimes go so far as to blunt his conscience or make him lose his sense of responsibility.

**Thus, history teaches us that, in times of war, terrible actions can be committed by individuals whose only distinguishing feature is undoubtedly a lack of depth, a difficulty to think for themselves, that is, to examine and reflect, to pass judgment on events, and to be aware of their own responsibility. On the other hand, war stories and the lived experience of combatants also provide us with countless examples of situations in which soldiers have resisted without hesitation the misuse of force and its transformation into unacceptable violence. In this way it is possible to successfully combine meaning and force.**

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