



## Discernment

Command exercise

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Valeurs de l'Armée de Terre

### DISCERNMENT... WHAT?

**Discernment can be defined as a disposition of mind to appreciate things according to their nature and their true value, to judge with common sense and clarity. To act with discernment requires reflection, circumspection and prudence. The virtue of prudence here is not antithetical to the acceptance of risk. It must be understood in the Aristotelian sense of the term as: "the sense of adapting means to ends to be achieved". This prudence is therefore meaningful only if it leads to a decision and an action. Thus, far from the common understanding of the precautionary principle, prudence is the source of effective action by the military leader. Discernment therefore preserves from confusion and calls upon the military leader's judgment capacities. It can be acquired through experience and should be developed prior to action. Discernment is forged through personal work, reading, reflection and general culture. It allows one to decide alone in the urgency of operational situations.**

### DISCERNMENT... WHY?

- It allows one to keep one's ethical points of reference, in the fog of war or during engagements in deteriorated situation.
- From peacetime onwards, discernment helps to resolve complex situations, distinguishing the important from the trivial and remaining focused on the mission.
- Discernment protects the leader from excesses, preventing him from over-reacting to events.

### NO DISCERNMENT ... WITHOUT :

- Sense of responsibility;

- ethical guidelines;
- exercise of personal reflection and judgment;
- circumspection;
- temperance;
- prudence and acceptance of risk;
- height of vision;
- psychological resilience;
- clarity of mind.

## **DISCERNMENT ... IN THE TEXTS :**

"What matters is the ability to judge more than the certainty of principles, the flip side of which is to impair the ability to judge and adapt. »

General de Gaulle - The Thread of the Sword (1932).

"One must always say what one sees. Above all, we must always, and this is more difficult, see what we see. »

Charles Péguy, Pensées (1936).

## **DISCERNMENT ... "IN CONTACT":**

Testimony of a Captain Unit Commander - Operation TRIDENT - Kosovo - 2004:

"Engaged in Kosovo in Mitrovica in early 2004, the company I command arms the unit equipped with crowd control capabilities of the French battalion. The mandate that we started in January promises to be calm: it is placed under the sign of progressive disengagement. However, on 17 March, the country experienced a sudden outbreak of violence. From the very first hours, inter-community riots killed nine people and injured several hundred in the city of Mitrovica and the Serbian enclaves. All combat units are urgently deployed on the bridge and in the city. By the end of the afternoon, the French battalion already had twelve wounded, most of them mixed, as a result of offensive grenade throwing by the rioters. In the early evening, we managed to regain control of the area, to prohibit the crossing of the river Ibar which separates the two communities. During the night, the neighbouring Danish battalion came under fire from our sector. The start of the shooting is identified. The corps commander gave the order to return fire and two snipers on the roof of a building were neutralized a few minutes apart by the company's sniper group.

The timely action of the snipers at that precise moment reduced the threat, allowed the use of force to the right level and allowed the area control mission to continue safely. Beyond the simple tactical situation that led to the response, it was the analysis by the Chief of Corps of the consequences of this opening of fire, in a context forced to be the analysis by the Chief of Corps of the consequences of this opening of fire, in a context of minimum use of force (against individuals from a population that we had to protect impartially) that led to the appropriate decision being taken. This reaction demonstrated our determination in the face of the parties involved, preventing the situation from getting out of hand. It also had a very positive psychological impact on the morale of the battalion. A few days later, dialogue with the two Kosovar communities resumed, as they

fully understood our action. This controlled use of force changed the balance of power and put an end to the outbreak of violence. »

Testimony of a lieutenant platoon leader - operation SERVAL - Mali - 2014:

"Our predominantly armoured Joint Weapons Tactical Sub-Group is engaged in an operation aimed at removing doubt about the existence of weapons caches used by armed terrorist groups. The aim is to use GPS coordinates recovered from the body of a combatant neutralised by special forces. We are advancing in the desert zone by tracing our own tracks, because there are no roads and no people for hundreds of kilometres. It is then that the lead vehicle crosses a freshly traced furrow in the sand. The unit commander decides to follow these tracks from a distance and we soon approach a dune, favourable for observation. In the distance, the panorama, disturbed by a heat mist, reveals turbaned individuals performing between their pick-up vehicle and a group of trees near a well. Appearances and context indicate suspicious behaviour: their coordinates correspond to the indications transmitted by the intelligence unit, their attitude suggests loading or unloading material; tension mounts a notch, the detachment commander understands that his report can lead to very different reactions and change the situation.

Unable to clearly appreciate the actions of the group observed, the captain decides to go to meet them, supported by an element posted on the mound. His analysis quickly reveals a very different scene: The traces correspond to a line of wells used by nomadic populations who stop from water point to water point and use makeshift ropes and pulleys left at tree level by other travellers to draw water; the group observed was therefore perfectly harmless. The doubt was removed by coming into contact with this population of shepherds who had simply set up a makeshift camp nearby for the time of a stop.

The unit commander could have over-interpreted the observed scene, blinded by the will to act, absorbed by the sole success of the mission. The discernment he showed certainly helped to avoid a tragedy. In such circumstances, the leader must maintain the necessary hindsight and a capacity for rapid analysis enriched by his knowledge of the environment, his intuition and his concern for precision. »

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