



Changes in our conditions of engagement force us to question our exercise of command

Reflection circle G2S - n°23

GCA (2S) Jean Tristan VERNA

Published on 07/04/2019

Valeurs de l'Armée de Terre

In this contribution, the term "Chief" will refer to the commander of a unit, from corporal to large unit commander (more at the tactical level), who motivates and leads his men into combat. The term "Command" will be reserved for all senior officials who prepare forces for engagement, advise policy makers, or design operations at the operational level.

Sn a theatre of operations, the force commander is therefore divided between these two positions. In the French armies, the "Command" is made up of officers who have been placed in the position of "Chief" on numerous occasions throughout their careers, at different levels. But "Chief" or "Commander" are all "Soldiers".

To address the subject of the ethics of the profession of arms is in most cases to refer to the rules of use of violence, respect for the laws of war and attachment to the legality of action. However, there is one area whose importance should not be overlooked: Reflection on ethics must also focus on its internal dimension in armies, that which binds the leader to his subordinates, whom he consciously leads in situations where their physical, psychological or even moral integrity is threatened. It is an ethic of command that is well anchored in our armies, but whose foundations are today partly shaken by the nature of the missions entrusted to them.

Some 20 years ago, when I took command of a battalion and a sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina to enforce the military provisions of the DAYTON agreements on the ground, I was able to take over the command of a battalion and a sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was very surprised to discover that the ("NATO") Command had placed "Force Protection" at the top of my missions. In other words, what I was asked to do was to avoid losses. Isn't that what we understood a few years later in the reactions of political decision-makers when the time came for the first casualties in Afghanistan?

Now, in the culture of the French officer, the Chief is first of all the bearer of the success of the military mission as long as the orders were given by a legitimate political power respecting the rules of international law. This success is priceless, including in human terms, especially if the mission is directly linked to the defence of the "sacred soil of the Fatherland", to the immediate protection of citizens or, more broadly, if it is in the "interests of the Nation".

Certainly, the regulations, as well as the collections of memories that have marked military literature since antiquity, stress that the military commander must do everything to achieve his objectives at the lowest cost, with the least fatigue and suffering for his men. However, circumstances are what matter, and if necessary, he will not hesitate to take potentially costly risks for his men. There have been many examples of this since the wars of the Revolution.

Today, operations outside the national territory take the form of missions that are increasingly complex and varied in time and space, taking place in the midst of populations, facing adversaries who often do not respect the laws of war, under the watchful eye of the media, observers and commentators who are willingly polemical. There is no need to develop this well-documented characterization.

However, there is another characteristic that is less easily accepted: these operations rarely lead to a definitive "victory" and their military effect on the ground is often short-lived. In the end, military engagement can be unproductive for the overall resolution of the political situation. Under these conditions, the "sacrifice of the soldier" can be understood as a very heavy price to pay.

Therefore, looking back on the Balkan experience and in the context of the employment of French armies at the beginning of the 21st century, should not the Military Commander not henceforth give the protection of his subordinates the same level of requirement as the success of his mission?

Protecting one's subordinates means preventing them, through equipment, training or modes of action, from physical and psychological harm related to combat or operating conditions. Protecting subordinates means protecting them from the effects of the legalization of individual or collective acts in operations, and preserving their pride as citizens in arms. And this, while accomplishing the mission, since there is no question of going back on its "sacred" character.

It is the "Command" that is responsible for the conditions in which the units and their soldiers are engaged. This concerns its role in equipment, operational preparation and discussion of the rules of engagement. It thus potentially places it in direct confrontation with its "political masters" who decide on the launching of operations and set the final goals.

The role of "Government Military Adviser" to the Chief of Defence Staff and the expertise recognised by the Chiefs of Staff of each of the three armed forces in the use of the formations, which they are responsible for setting up and training, are linked to this responsibility.

A responsibility that is exercised on the spot, most of the time discreetly behind the closed doors of the Defence Councils, when an operation is triggered, prolonged or

complicated.

But it is a responsibility that is exercised mainly in the cold, over the long term, since the quality of recruitment, the care taken in training and education, equipment and adequate support are the first line of defence against risky and hazardous engagement in operations. The legal protection of the combatant is also part of this responsibility. It has taken on a very complex character in contemporary engagements, and it is little wonder that some commentators are surprised to see it placed at the forefront of the legislative provisions proposed by armies.

It is this responsibility that legitimises the Command's commitment to the ongoing struggle for the legal translation of military specificity, in budget matters. It is this responsibility that legitimises the Command's commitment to the ongoing battle to translate military specificity into legal terms, in budget matters, in the choice of equipment priorities and in refusing to dilute the organic links that, since the end of the 19th century, have guaranteed the relevance of the organisation of forces support. The consideration, both material and moral, accorded to "veterans" is also related to it.

The Command, as a prelude to the great Republican pomp and circumstance, welcomes, comforts and supports the families of its soldiers killed in operations, and explains to them the justification and significance of the sacrifice of a loved one. It visits and encourages its many wounded, often forgotten by the media. His responsibility to limit the number of wounded should therefore not be disputed. And the Commanders must be able to exercise it without restraint.

At another level, in the field, the exercise of command by the heads of contact quickly becomes very complicated, caught between the desire to have rapid results on the ground (it is necessary to "neutralize") and the concern to control violence against child soldiers, female suicide bombers, uncontrolled militias and so on. Preparing and then leading your soldiers in this new type of war fog gives the exercise of command a new meaning, in the "fire" a difficulty that few officers have experienced in the last century.

Yet it is precisely in the "heat of the action" that knowing how to protect your soldiers becomes both the most difficult and the most necessary. For it is precisely in these moments that emotions take over the minds: stimulating emotions of the feeling of power, intoxicating emotions of collective action that absolves the individual from his excesses, violent emotions born of stress, fear, the vision of horrors...

Subjected himself to these emotions, the Chief must maintain his capacity for discernment, aware that excessive caution and miscalculated risk make the difference between mission success and failure.

Protecting his men in combat means first of all protecting them from the effects of their individual and collective emotions. Obviously, it is above all a matter of charisma, knowledge of human feelings and passions, of "brotherhood of arms". But the ideal of a close-knit troop, strong of an esprit de corps patiently built and maintained, led in combat by Chefs known and loved is not easy to achieve, despite all the techniques and procedures that have been used to create it. The ideal of a cohesive troop, with a strong esprit de corps, patiently built and maintained, led in combat by known and beloved Leaders, is not easy to achieve, despite all the techniques and hard procedures put in place to limit the effects of the modularity of the units projected in operations, the practice of temporary reinforcements, the turnover of managers and soldiers, not to

mention the losses in combat or the integration of foreign contingents into our units.

Preventing and controlling emotions is therefore also a matter of concrete action: Having sufficient personnel in the theatre of operations to avoid operational and therefore emotional overload, having secure, comfortable and well-serviced parking facilities in the theatre of operation, and having a secure, comfortable and well-equipped parking area. The chain of command must be given time to evaluate and restore the morale of the combatants after each difficult action or event. In short, to ensure that living conditions "in anticipation of death given or received" are the best possible. This is a first illustration of the responsibility of the Chiefs towards their soldiers in operations, despite the false traditions of collective rusticity that we still sometimes see put forward within our army. It is a question of preventing both illegal behaviour and psychological trauma.

But, on the ground, protecting soldiers means above all limiting the number of those who will not return home, or who will return home with physical injuries. It is thus to know how to carry out the mission at the lowest cost, by being able to choose effective modes of action against the enemy, and protective for the friends! Vast subject... which is as much the responsibility of the Command, as that of the Leaders on the field.

We have seen what the Command must do to obtain the resources necessary for adequate equipment and training. However, when the time comes to commit, it must be possible to deploy the best performing or best-protected equipment. The systematic armouring of units in Africa was, at one time, a debate, which the question of the deployment of heavy tanks in the Sahel is a reminder. The same applies to the deployment of means of combating explosive devices or tactical observation drones.

The excellence of the equipment used to protect units and men is all the more critical since developments in international law have gradually deprived countries that comply with it of a range of means that are now prohibited: mines are the most striking example. It is true that their ban, when respected by all, will make it possible to avoid the tragedies they cause among the civilian population. But isn't it paradoxical to see our units confronted with the threat of explosive devices and unable to protect their areas of deployment by this economical means and without excessive risk if it is properly used and relieved? There is no doubt that the forthcoming arrival of automated means resulting from robotics and artificial intelligence will give rise to the debates referred to elsewhere in this dossier.

The means deployed to support the forces - and the men who make up the forces - are also a subject of discussion that is sometimes difficult to understand in view of the added value they bring in terms of the sustainability of the effort during an operation. Is it not paradoxical that the Chief of the Land Staff undertakes to provide the armed forces' health service with the manpower it needs to fulfil its mission in operations without an insurmountable overload?

These questions are often dealt with under the sole approach of costs, the display of an agile force, a good ratio between "fighting units" and support structures. In reality, however, the crux of the problem is to avoid the day when a leader is faced with the dilemma of sacrificing the execution of his mission to the preservation of his subordinates. A situation that has already occurred due to the lack of medical evacuation means, but which could also have its origin in the weakness of the intelligence means, in the restriction of the use of the most powerful support...

To conclude, there is indeed today a responsibility of the Soldier which is exercised

through the path to be found to achieve the goals set for military action while preserving the life or honour of those whom the Nation arms and launches into wars which, in order to be legitimate, are no less distant from the concerns and understanding of their fellow citizens.

Title : GCA (2S) Jean Tristan VERNA

Author (s) : GCA (2S) Jean Tristan VERNA

Release date 01/04/2019

[FIND OUT MORE](#)
