



# **”Commissioned officer profession in French Air Force: selecting an elite for Airmen or for political military decision processes?”**

Christophe Pajon

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**RC02 POLITICAL ELITES Power relations, dominance and networks among elite groups**

***Commissioned officer profession in French Air Force: selecting an elite for Airmen or for political military decision processes?<sup>1</sup>***

Dr. Christophe PAJON  
French Air Force Academy  
French Air Force Academy Research Center  
Christophe.pajon@ecole-air.fr

*The contents of this chapter are the sole responsibility of the author and do not represent the opinion of the French Ministry of Armed Forces or the French Air Force*

## **Introduction**

At the end of July 2021, a new Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces will be appointed by the President of the Republic. Once again, it will be a general from the Army. Since 1995, none of the 7 generals who have held this position, none was a general from the Air Force. Using an interactionist approach to professions and concept of social spaces developed by Pierre Bourdieu, this paper will attempt to shed light on how the French military elite is partially selected through the case of the French Air Force, the elite that will be in contact with political elites and decision-making processes.

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Often applied to the medical and legal professions, the interactionist analytical framework has been much less applied to military activity. Widely present in military sociology, the study of the officer profession was for a long time dominated by a Parsonian structurofunctionalism (Evetts 2003). This is the legacy of two major founding figures in military sociology, Morris Janowitz and Charles Moskos, who define the profession as the sum of technical expertise, academic training, and shared professional values (Moskos 2010; Boëne 2010). This perspective makes it possible to highlight certain processes of transformation of the profession of arms, such as their "civilianization" (Moskos 1987). However, it does not reflect the diversity of the division of military labor.

From the 1950s onwards, the interactionist approach marked several breaks with the dominant functionalist current that founded the sociology of professions. Far from the homogenizing and peaceful conception of these intermediate bodies, Everett C. Hughes (1996: 175-185) and, following him, Rue Bucher and Anselm Strauss (1961) showed not only that there are not only "established professions", but also that a "profession" has divisions and that it can be broken down into professional groups or "segments". While these groups remain interdependent in the wake of the Durkheimian vision of the division of social labor, their relationships are dynamic in that they "form a system" (Hénaut 2011: 72). Even if professional groups (understood also as intra-professional) are led to cooperate within the same organization or the same "social world" (Strauss 1978; Cefaï 2015), their relations can be competitive. Indeed, in this structural perspective, the position of a group, its status, its prestige, in terms of authority, depends on those of the others: the conquest of some can lead to the loss of others.

Without discussing in this communication the conditions of emergence of an interactionist model of a sociology of professions applied to the military world, this perspective highlights the importance of the dynamics of professional relations. Their analysis allows to understand the logic of the professional trajectories of air force officers, but also military elite production process. Some of them, after a first part of their career within the social field of the Air Force, will integrate a joint professional environment. Within this sphere of activity, which we will call a "social space" (Bourdieu 1984; Lenoir 2004), the different components of the armed forces and their officers are in competition for access to the "best positions", to the dominant and prestigious positions in the hierarchy of the military institution, and even of political

power. The Air Force is reported to have modest success in this inter-service competition compared to other armed forces.

### **1 - Domination and elite within French Air force Officer Corps**

The air force officer corps is subdivided into different groups. As soon as they enter the Air Force Academy, cadets are faced with three options: to enter the Air Officer Corps (Pilots), the Weapon Systems Officer Corps (Mechanics Support) or the Base Officer Corps (all other specialties), the latter also being called "basiers". Entry into one of these three corps opens up to different professional "specialties": fighter pilot, example for the first; not embarked in the aircraft (mechanics), example for the second; and air controller, air infantry (Commandos Parachutiste de l'air, CPA) or administrative, example for the third. Thus, a good number of cadets enter the Air Force Academy not because they are attracted to command or to become military leaders, but because they are interested in flying (Pajon 2009). These specialties structure the professional world of air force officers and establish dividing lines between different sub-groups. They direct them towards different professions, are learned through different curricula, determine assignments and opportunities for promotion, and consequently open up distinct career perspectives.

Corps (air force officers, weapon systems officers, base officers) and specialties do not constitute segments in themselves, but the principles of division they embody structure relatively distinct professional groups that are more or less close to each other, materially and symbolically. In any case, these divisions organize and model different professional identities among air force officers. Air force officers and some of the weapons system officers (those on board the aircraft) form the family of "aircrew", the "PN" (for "Personnel Navigant"). They constitute a sort of elite and embody the ideal figure of the aviator, with fighter jets pilots at the top. They are the focus of prestige. The others are the "non-embedded personnel", or "PNN" (for "Personnel Non Navigant"), who remain on the ground. It should be noted that this negative definition is in itself indicative of an initial hierarchy, which places the PNN above the PN, both literally - up in the air and down on the ground - and symbolically in the representations associated with them. Belonging to these different "corps" or to different specialties is objectified by the uniform, whether by means of different colored nameplates (red for the first officers of the air force, purple for the officers of the weapon systems and blue for the officers of the bases) or by distinct insignia: the aircrew wear the two wings with

a star in the middle, the mechanics a wheel and the basemen a crushed "U". The place of each in the division of labor and in the symbolic hierarchies is almost always legible.

Thus, among the air force officers, multiple dividing lines between different groups and sub-groups quickly emerge, some of which are instituted and serve as supports for identities and forms of confraternity that indicate the existence of a professional segmentation.

*An elite based on professional prestige among air force officers*

Following the example of what Christel Coton (2017) was able to highlight regarding the existing symbolic hierarchies between officers from the different arms of the army (infantry, cavalry, artillery, transport, etc.), there is a hierarchy between the different segments that make up the group of air force officers. This hierarchy takes symbolic and material forms, and is expressed through a struggle for the prestige associated with each segment.

The prestige of air officers was established according to their proximity to the weapon system, the aircraft. The commitment to aerial combat and the possibility of performing feats in flight make the group of pilots the emblematic figure of the air force and the holder of the monopoly of social representation of the entire professional group. The intimacy with the aircraft, but also the possession of an expertise in a field of activity of which they have a complete monopoly, make the air officers the group that symbolically dominates all of their peers. They are, to use Christel Coton's expression, endowed with the best resources to "shine under the epaulette". They share the prestige of combat with another segment, long underrated for historical reasons: the air force paratroopers (CPA, for "Commandos Parachutistes de l'Air"). The latter are certified and represent a segment within the base officer corps. These "other" combatants, although far from the aircraft, derive their prestige from their place on the battlefield and have gradually earned their rank since the late 1990s through the multiplication of overseas operations. The sharing of combat experience, although differentiated between pilots and CPAs, nonetheless brings these two segments closer together, to the point where they sometimes establish a sort of confraternity between aircraft and paratrooper fighters. As one air force officer explained during an interview: "we see it: we [the pilots] are closer to the commandos. In 2004, General Richard Wolsztynski, then Chief of Staff of the French Air Force, stated: "my CPAs are as good as a fighter jets squadron" (Tanguy 2009). This equivalence established by the highest authority in the Air Force, speaking with

all his authority, places the members of these two segments on an equal footing (associating the prestige of the pilots with that of the commandos) while reminding us of the dominance of the air officers segment (the pilots), which remains the standard of prestige for airmen.

Although they were not PNs, and admitted that their functions were less "noble" than those of pilots, and also dirtier (due to their frequent use of workshops), the mechanics claimed that they were indispensable to the accomplishment of missions. The immediate proximity to the aircraft and the maintenance they are responsible for to guarantee the safety of the pilots give them a certain professional importance. Although always in the shadow of the pilots, they proudly take on the "dirty work" (or the dirty job) that falls to them (Le Floch 2008).

#### *Unequal segmental competition for access to dominant positions*

Therefore, one of the last issues that sheds light on the dynamics of professional relations from an interactionist perspective is that which concerns the "careers" of officers according to whether they belong to one or other of the segments mentioned. Everett Hughes defines a career as "the course or progression of a person through life (or a given part of it)" and, in a more restricted sense, as a course within "an occupation offering opportunities for promotion" (Hughes 1996). It therefore appears that the dynamic and structural hierarchization of the different segments that make up the air force officer corps conditions their chances of access to the highest ranks and responsibilities. In a reciprocal manner, the relative importance of a segment can be reconsidered by the evolution of the number of its members who reach high ranks and responsibilities, previously monopolized by another segment.

The first half of the career of air officers coming from the direct route is entirely dedicated to the profession of pilot, while the second half is mostly, if not exclusively, dedicated to positions of responsibility in the staff or at the head of services. The passage through the pilot career path ensures the best chances of having a "good career", i.e. to obtain positions of high responsibility and a faster evolution in the hierarchy during the first part of their career, even for access to positions that do not require piloting skills.

In the career of officers, whether they are airmen, sailors or those from Army, obtaining the War College certificate is a determining factor. While the proportion of air officers is stable and roughly equivalent to that of mechanics and base officers, the proportion they represent

among commissioned and general officers is much greater, as if the War College filter favored air officers to the detriment of those in other specialties. Thus, they represented 78.1 percent of Air Force generals in 2012, compared to 12.3 percent from the weapon systems officer corps and 9.6 percent from base officers. While the 2015 figures confirm this picture (air officers: 79.7 percent; "mechanic" officers: 10.9 percent; base officers: 9.4 percent), the 2018 figures reveal a significant shift to mechanic officers. The latter represented 18.1 percent of air force generals, even though those from the ranks of air officers still made up 72 percent (the share of base officers remained stable at 9.7 percent). However, it would be risky to see this as a trend towards a rebalancing of relations between the segments, resulting either from organizational transformations or from a proactive policy by the Human Resources Directorate. On the other hand, these figures confirm the dominance of the air officers' segment in the capture of the most favorable positions and promotions.

It seems that there is a "glass ceiling" (Cappelin 2010; Billing, Alvesson, 1994) for base officers and mechanics, i.e., unofficial barriers that actually reduce their chances of access to the highest positions. The same type of asymmetry can be observed at finer scales, even within the pilots group. Although all the chiefs of staff of the French Air Force since 1958 have been pilots, only one of the twenty-two chiefs of staff went through the "transport aircraft" stream before becoming a bomber pilot. All the others came from the "fighter" curriculum.

## **2 - An airman at the head of the armed forces?**

The French Ministry of the Armed Forces has a number of permanent or temporary joint structures. Although they may be populated by military personnel of different ranks, a certain number of positions within them are reserved for senior officers or general officers. Some positions can only be held by representatives of one or other of the components (Army, Navy and Air Force). On the other hand, other positions do not require a specialist in any of the components. In these cases, the appointment is made from among all the officers proposed by the human resources departments of the various services. Some of these positions - structural management, or positions that involve contact with high political authorities - represent a new stage in the career of the officers who are transferred there. These officers most often belong to the dominant segment of the officer corps of each component and are part of the pool of high potential within it. However, these officers will not abandon their

original component and their genuine uniform, and it is difficult to consider those occupying these positions as constituting a new specific segment of joint officers.

However, access to these “high valuable” positions does seem to be an area of competition within the senior military hierarchy, which is part of the internal dynamics of professional relations within the group made up of all officers in the French armed forces. Since the group of officers occupying these joint positions cannot be described as a segment, the sphere in which these professional relations take place can be considered a social space, that is, “a space constructed as a structure of positions defined by the place they occupy in the distribution of a particular kind of capital” (Lenoir 2004: 395). In this Bourdieusian perspective, each component and, more precisely, its body of officers, constitutes a field within which each agent has accumulated resources in the form of capital. Two types of capital come into play and combine: symbolic capital “commonly called prestige, reputation, fame, etc.” (Bourdieu 1984: 3) and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979: 3), of which we shall retain above all the embodied state, “in the form of durable dispositions of the organism”, and to a lesser extent the institutionalized state, understood as a “form of objectification”, the illustration of which is the school title or professional certification.

The position - the positions held - of French Air Force officers would thus reflect not only the relative importance of their resources (cultural and symbolic) but also their effectiveness for the dominant segment towards the joint social space, the effectiveness evoked being measured by the yardstick of a dominant “officer” “know-how to be” and “know-how”.

*But where has the air force gone?*

The press specializing in military issues regularly reports on the “mercato” of new generals (Merchet 2017) and their appointment to the most prominent positions, including that of Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces. This would indicate the increase or loss of influence of one or another of the components of the armed forces. The appointment of a representative to a major joint command or to certain more discreet positions of influence (chief of staff, aide-de-camp) can be interpreted as an expression of the relative importance of the cultural and symbolic capital of his or her elite compared to those of his or her competitors from another component. Seven of these positions, the most observed, can be used to identify which component of the armed forces is favored by the politician: Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces



(CEMA), Chief of the Private Staff of the President of the Republic (CEMP), command of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DRM), command of the Directorate of Defense Intelligence and Security (DRSD, formerly DPSD), director of operations of the Directorate General of Intelligence Services (DGSE), chief of the military cabinet of the Prime Minister, chief of the military cabinet of the Minister of Defense (and later the Minister of the Army). The appointment to one of these positions is, in the eyes of observers, the sign of a message of confidence sent by the politician to this or that component.

On March 3, 2019, a former Chief of Staff of the Air Force (from 1991 to 1994), Vincent Lanata wondered in the columns of French Magazine "L'Express": "But where has the Air Force gone? Noting the weak presence of airmen in positions of influence, he emphasized "the imperative need to maintain a good balance between the armed forces components in their distribution. This opinion has been widespread in the French Air Force for the past ten years. The specialized press supports it (Merchet 2010, 2016).

An analysis of the positions to the seven selected ones for our inquiry since 1991 (or since the date of creation of the structures considered) and up to the first half of 2018, reveals that out of sixty nominations, thirty-eight concerned general officers from the Army, eleven from the French Navy and eleven from the Air Force (i.e., 64 percent, 18 percent and 18 percent respectively). This balance is largely in favor of the Army, reflecting the demographics of the French armed forces. However, if we look at the recruitment pool for these positions, the group of general officers in activity, there is a slight under-representation of air force generals.

In addition to the fact that no airman has been appointed to the position of Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces since 1995, no airman general officer has been appointed Chief of the Private Staff of the President of the Republic (five from the Army, two from the French Navy). With two exceptions during the period under consideration, none were appointed to head an intelligence structure (once to head the DRM, once for the DRSD, and only army generals were appointed director of operations at the DGSE). Among the joint positions considered here, those entrusted to airmen are mostly those of chiefs of staff either to the Prime Minister (four times out of eleven appointments) or to the Minister of Defense (three times out of ten appointments).

The most prestigious positions, supposedly the most "influential" or the most "operational," seem to elude air force generals (as well as, to a lesser extent, admirals, two of whom were nonetheless appointed Chief of Staff during the period under analysis).

*The air force elite in the joint forces: insufficient capital?*

First, we pointed out the domination of the Air officers' segment among air force officers. This domination is legitimized by the prestige of battlefield engagement and the proximity to aircraft that confers aeronautical expertise. This combat function justifies and legitimizes the capture of positions of authority within the air force. Moreover, operational and combat experience is a prerequisite for the exercise of the highest military responsibilities, and in particular, operational commands.

The symbolic and cultural capital of air force officers acquired during their career within their component seems insufficient to impose themselves and reach the highest positions in the joint space. In an article already cited, Christel Coton, applying the Bourdieusian concept of specific capital to a field, develops the idea of a "combatant capital [...] that governs the placement strategies engaged by officers, its possession ensuring a foundation that is both hierarchical and symbolic in the corps" (Coton 2012: 23). Attractive, the proposition could lead to the postulation that the combatant capital of airmen would be less effective than that of, for example, army officers. However, the hypothesis of combatant capital is weakened and questionable because of the imprecise and fluctuating nature of the term combatant. Indeed, constructed from the case of the army, it refers to a culturally constructed reality of the battlefield and seems to reproduce without distancing the criteria of distinction promoted by the actors in the field (melee, support, sustainment). Therefore, symbolic capital seems more appropriate to apprehend the prestige and domination generated by proximity to the battlefield and risk-taking. This being the case, the use of a particular weapon system (aircraft), which distances combatants from the battlefield, may legitimize the low number of airmen with the highest responsibilities. Although they are based on comparable principles (prestige and nobility of combat activity), the cultural and symbolic capital built up by general officers of the air force appears less effective in the joint field and in relation to officers from the army's melee arms. Proximity to the aircraft even appears counterproductive, whereas it is decisive in the air force domain.

This interpretation is confirmed by the qualitative analysis of several dozen (anonymous) comments posted following various online articles, and testifying to this mechanism of symbolic hierarchization. These discourses also reveal the archetypal profile of the military leader and his skills, which are essentially referred to army officers, and in particular those from the ranks of the melee arms (infantry, armored cavalry). This representation is also the one that can be found developed in a whole classical military literature (from Marshal Lyautey's famous "Rôle social de l'officier" to General de Gaulle's more contemporary "Fil de l'épée"), often written by army officers, and which confirms the effectiveness and the domination of a fighting capital in the field of the army or the navy, which are established to the detriment of the air force. The know-how and cultural capital of the airman seem to be ineffective in a space dominated by this representation. The pilot does not appear as a possible leader, as he remains associated with the individual exercise of piloting or commanding peers in a squadron. He appears to be far from the image of the leader who has been in command of a section or a company, managing some 150 soldiers and the equipment provided. The distinctive know-how required to master a fighter aircraft represents a relatively inoperative capital in the joint space.

This supposed distance of airmen from a dominant model marked by the influence of the army leads some of them to want to convert a specifically air capital. This is illustrated by General Vincent Lanata's comments when he points out the lack of fairness towards the air force in the allocation of positions of responsibility. The absence of airmen in the highest positions of influence is detrimental, especially because they cannot make the "voice of the third dimension" heard. The use of this "third dimension" specialization, a form of "technicality", was mentioned during interviews with senior officers and generals of the air force who had worked in a joint context. According to them, it would partly explain why air force officers "marked by a 'cockpit mentality' are less often chosen than army or navy officers for 'nice jobs'.

Finally, and even though the institutionalized form of cultural capital held by the so-called "direct" officers belonging to the different components is quite comparable, it seems that the majority of airmen's training in engineering sciences prepares them less well for the second part of their career, putting their writing and oratory skills to greater test. This sometimes difficult relationship to the written word among airmen officers, highlighted in a study on

strategic air thinking (Pajon 2016), may also explain the lower effectiveness of their cultural capital in a space where literary practices seem more effective and dominant. Locked in a kind of symbiotic double "technicality," that of third-dimensional expertise and that of engineering sciences, the air force officer would not have the resources necessary to legitimately compete for the highest positions in the military hierarchy. This weakness seems to be attested to, in addition to the diversification of recruitment and training (the development of the Political Science stream), by the reinforcement of general culture training over the last ten years at the Air Force Academy, reminding us that an officer must be a "generalist". During an interview, a former commanding general of the Air Force Academy linked this culture to the ability of students to communicate and exchange ideas in social salons, taking the example of Naval Academy cadets at each port of call during their training.

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