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Military Identity in French Air Force: A Paradoxical Trend to the Militarization

Christophe PAJON (Ph. D)

Head Deputy of the Research Center of the French Air Force Academy

French Air Force Academy - Ecole de l'Air, France

christophe.pajon@ecole-air.fr

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Panel: Developments within the Military Profession I

The contents of this article does not commit anyone else but its author and does not account in any way for the opinion of the French Ministry of Armed Forces or for that of the French Air Force.

This paper presents results of an on-going 10-years-project based on several researches: Commitment by the French Air Force Cadets (2008), Airmen and Overseas Operations (2009), French Air Force and Jointness (2013), Women by the French Air Force (2015), Airmen by Special Forces (2015), Militarization of the training at the French Air Force Academy (2018), etc. All these inquiries (and average 100 semi-structured interviews) have contributed to one major topic: The airmen identity as a Professional Identity. Within transformation context (organizational reforms, missions transformation, Manpower decrease, new technologies), this question became even strategic in 2013 according the Official Strategic Review of the French Air Force « United Against ». Beyond the communication campaign on « Proud to be an Airmen », its reveals an old, deep and non-resolved identity crisis. To use the concept of « militarization » or militarizing, generally reserved to description of civil-military relations, tends to qualify a process which leads to a reinforcement of the military (« militarism ») as part of French Air Force members.

In order to resume this long-term work and to catch this multiscale issues, we have chosen to examine first how the classical approaches enlighten the French Airmen case, then how the French airmen deal with their (new ?) military identity.

1 – French Air Force: a classic industry and occupational model.

Air Force is considered as a perfect example of an industry and occupational model according the old and ever quoted Moskos/Janowitz paradigms. This trend to civilianization would be confirmed through the full-filling of several indicators:

- The high ratio combat units/support units
- The proximity with civilian jobs
- Part of military women: Air Force have the highest rate of women by French Armed Forces (Almost 22 %)
- Well-educated People Recruitment;
- Civilian Lifestyle (Private Life, Working Partners, Number of children)

In fact, Air Force is professionalized from long time ago, due to its « technical » nature. This professionalization considered here as a kind of civilianization, would be increased thanks to the technological performances. The last air campaigns prove that airpower can be used without Overseas deployments.

Then, it is easy to conclude that the Airmen Identity is far away from the Institutional Model, embodied by Army members in France.

Numerous interviews and empirical observations in different contexts confirm this assertion built on theoretical aspects. This statement can be illustrated by three thematic: Relations to military duties, Women by Air Force, Enlistment Motivation.

Enlistment motivation: Built around the Fighter Pilot Myth, the young cadets declare spontaneously their motivation for flying, speed and their passion. The other aspects of the career - military duties, Officer responsibilities- are projected in a further future. Those who will constitute the future Air Force elite express individualistic motivations. Despite the strict

motivation interviews during the selection phases, these attitudes are generally widespread. We find out such individualist behavior through lower ranks too. Some Airmen express frankly their « non-military » interest for enlistment. The short-term enlistment (3 – 6 years) is motivated sometimes only by the possibility to obtain a free-training (Bus driver license for example) or by geographical reasons (proximity with family).

Women into the Air Force: Most of interviewed military women declare that they choose Air Force career because this professional environment « fitted » better with their women Identity and their family projects. It can be argued that this decision was founded on perceptions, and not on the experience, but we have stated that femininity seems more accepted (or tolerated). Symbolically, while Army tries to neutralize femininity with combat uniform, women into Air Force are wearing the one with a skirt. This uniform question, combat uniform versus work uniform, opens up the debate with regard to military aspects of airmen profession.

Relations with military duties: Airmen are considered sometimes in a funny way as "not-practicing military" (related to "practicing Catholics"). During interviews, meetings or discussions with military colleagues, we could often state this distance to « military matters ». As military, they consider themselves that some activities, some behaviors are « mili » (« mili » for military), often referring to Army. Sport, Combat Training, Shooting Exercises are in opposition to their professional duties. Unconsciously, they distance themselves from what characterizes a soldier in their own eyes.

All these different elements are confirming the industrial character of the Air Force and the occupational / professional nature of the airmen's identity. Once this ambiguous relation to a “dreamed” military identity (related to Army) is established, what can mean a militarization of this professional identity.

2 – Militarizing Airmen: paradoxical and risky?

Discussing military militarization may already seem paradoxical. The previous developments made it possible to better understand this use. It is a question of bringing together the identity of airmen with an “institutional” model, embodied by the Army in the French case. We will first seek to define more precisely how we apprehend the military identity. Next, we will seek to identify some of the causes of a possible militarization of the Air Force. Finally, we will seek to highlight the paradoxes and the risks of this evolution.

First, military identity is most often defined in the classical literature in a positive way. It attempts to identify the components, the values of the military. Normativity is sometimes present. Huntington poses what the officer must be. This approach is, in our opinion, relatively sterile, because it forgets the dynamic character of an identity, and supposes the existence of an eternal model. Moreover, it tends to deny the plurality of professional identities associated with military identity. The use of the most general approaches to the processes of identity construction leads instead to consider identities as plural and dynamic. They are the product of simultaneous and constant process of differentiation and identification. Applied to the military profession, it is possible to schematically distinguish different stages. The first and most important is common to all personnel of the armed forces is the civilian / military opposition. Then, the different components of the armed forces seek to distinguish themselves. Finally, we observe the same process within the components between the different units or professional fields.

Military identity then appears as the fruit of a permanent process of construction linked to an infinity of interindividual interactions. What is military is then a social construct made of cultural representations, individual trajectories and socio-technical uses.

Then, for a very long time, Air Force built its place within the armed forces around two missions: the nuclear deterrence and Air defense of the national territory, forgetting culturally its missions of Close-Air support during the decolonization wars. The situation has changed significantly since the 2000s and the evolution accelerated in the early 2010s. Since the intervention in Libya, the Air Force has not lowered its operational level. The number of war missions performed by pilots has increased dramatically. Besides, the longtimes-neglected air force combat unit, the air infantry, especially those integrated to the special operations forces, have acquired a strategic role. The 2015 events finally led to the involvement of all Air Force personnel in missions to secure the national territory, traditionally performed by the Army personnel (Sentinelle, Proterre). If we add to this, a 30% decrease in the number of air force personnel since 2008, we can easily understand that all airmen are generally more impacted by operational missions that are part of a military activity. Airmen must now have an up-to-date fighter's passport (a sort of professional certification logbook: physical abilities, shooting certificate, etc.), while there was a real tolerance before.

Finally, we understand better the strategic character of the identity of the airman for the air force. This identity is in fact, according to the air force chiefs, one of the conditions of its ability to carry out its missions. However, this identity evolution can make more sensitive the paradoxes of the identity of the airman. According to the perspective adopted, identity is constructed through a process of identification and distinction. Like all members of the armed forces, it is first of all with civilians that airmen define themselves. So they are military because they are not civilians. However, they are not quite military, since the military is first and foremost, according to their own assessment, the members of the Army. We immediately see the emergence of the first and fundamental paradox of the identity construction of the airman: to be different from the civilian is to get closer to the Army.

The political and organizational factors that lead to increasing the operational level of all Air Force personnel further reinforce this paradox. Indeed, becoming "more military" can make people fear a loss of their own identity.

Interviews with some high-ranking Air Force officers reveal an old discourse highlighting a distinction between "military" and "combatant", which, however, does not seem able to relieve this tension.

Conclusion

Airmen are today at a crossroads. Part of their ability to fulfill the tasks entrusted to them, as well as to ensure a sufficient level of recruitment, is linked to a long process of identity recomposition. There was tension in those who chose a field of expertise rather than a military activity. It is difficult to assess today the effects of this possible recomposition of identity, even as the identity of the air force fighter, the pilot, is challenged by the arrival of new weapons systems, the Remotely Piloted Aircraft System.