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## **Title : Bents for Risk ? The Cadets of the French Air Force Academy**

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

Abstract : The social representation of the fighter pilot generally leads to consider it as an high-risk profession. The importance of danger in the fighter pilot - related Training at the French Air Force Academy can nowadays not be denied. As both a military and engineering School, this institution has developed reinforcement mechanisms of bents for risk. (Lahire, 2002). Observations and interviews with cadets has revealed assimilation processes built on three kind of legitimacy. We use a typology inspired by L. Boltansky and L. Thévenot' hypotheses (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991), then three distinguished universal systems of reference : the “transcendence”, the “civic” and the “industrial” cities. These correspond for us respectively 1 : “to deal with the death” with “grace” and to develop a fatalistic attitude ; 2 – to sacrifice one-self because of a patriotic and altruistic feelings; 3 – to strengthen confidence in a scientific logic, peculiar to the Engineers Culture. This last system of reference is characterized by a minimization of perception of risk. It results from a process of “embedding” (“enchâssement”; Peretti-Watel, 2000). By adopting such analytical framework, we can already underline a paradox : the coexistence of a scientific rationality and the “ordeal” dimension.of the aerial combat.

These three articulated dimensions reinforce themselves in a diachronic way during the training relaying fighter pilot (Darmont, 2006). While the practice of risk take place progressively in training, the institutional discourses “operates vacuously”. During first years at the French Air Force Academy, the Cadets will adopt the Fighter Pilot Ethos, which is partially based upon the learning of a specific professional ethic.

If flying a plane is the first motivation expressed by the Air cadets who want to join the navigating crew of the French Air Force<sup>1</sup>, moving, - getting away from everyday life, having a non-routine job, geographic mobility -, is also part of the motivations justifying their military commitment. Yet, as D. Le Breton points out, « taking a risk is not only about the hypothesis of dying or being physically injured because of an evaluation error or because of lack of attention. There are so many faces of danger. They do not only belong to the physical part, but they also relate to the identity feeling of the individual.» [2004, 17]. For the cadet, the risk perception is not only about death in combat; it also includes fear of failure to selection tests, to medical examinations, or in his family life... Finally it has a role in the genesis of perceptive schemes: dispositions to act and to believe.

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<sup>1</sup> A year group of cadets at the French Air Force Academy includes between 70 and 80 individuals, registered in several courses of study that would prepare them for various jobs: navigating crew, officers mechanics, base officers.

It is the uncertainty that, perceived as a form of adversity, has generated the production, by social organization, of instruments meant to protect its members. The function of these rules of conduct and safety is to eradicate any danger as well as to predict the individuals' behaviors. Presuming individuals have an attitude of aversion towards the risk [Kahneman, Tversky, 1975], this approach involves a pejorative vision of the risk, and the risky conducts are regarded as deviant. As certain interviews have shown, that is how entering this military school is perceived by the entourage, especially by the parents.

The risk is a socially created notion that varies according to space, time and individuals; there is no objective perception of the risk. Thus, certain individuals or professional groups may give a positive connotation to risk. In the way he sees life, an individual can think that living life to the full means adopting ways of life, physical practices (high level sports, extreme sports), a professional activity allowing him to live certain emotions, to live «*his passion*» - this expression being frequently used by cadets within interviews.

Based upon semi-directive observations and interviews with cadets of the French Air Force Academy, the ideas presented within this paper rely on a double exploratory inquiry aiming to describe certain risk socialization processes. On the one hand we are trying to describe the « risk culture or cultures» [Douglas, Wildavsky, 1984 ; Giddens, 1994] that cadets have adhered or adhere to. This risk culture, specific for the social group we have studied, relies on various legitimacy registers. We will define the risk culture of the cadet by his dispositions to perceive risk (via 40 interviews) and his dispositions to act with or against this risk (via direct observations also called participative). These two registers do not form, a priori, a coherent disposition system. Indeed, an individual may have passed through various social spheres having their own risk perception (family, school, friends, sports clubs).

From a synchronic point of view, he can live in various « worlds » or « cities » [Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991], each of them having its own form of general notions, of « grandeurs », its own way of explaining the social relation and its own hierarchy of values. The cadet can legitimate the sacrifice of his life as a military in the name of a « better cause » - defending his Motherland or the Peace in the world; being concerned by the impact of his professional activity on his future family life; he may also fear the failure of not becoming a pilot. Therefore, these multiple environments allow us to presume, on the other hand, a mosaic of « dispositions » for risks generated by various socialization processes.

### **Theoretical framework and conceptual precautions**

We shall adhere to the theoretical and empirical framework of the disposition analysis [Lahire 2002] and its correlates: every disposition has a genesis that we should at least put into context, if not reconstruct. One disposition can only be deducted starting from a series of coherent behaviors, attitudes, practices. One disposition appears within the repetition of relatively similar experiences, having a measurable intensity and systematicity.

Our approach intends to analyze internalization and appropriation of risk justification logics during a socialization process at the French Air Force Academy. We would like to define our position towards the precautions Lahire [2002, 274-275] brought up, by trying to answer the following question: how do certain referentials get internalized, in such a way that they « are all shared by all normal members of the same society » [275] ; Can we rebuilt the social genesis of the discourse legitimizing the taking of a risk to the French Air Army cadets?

### **Pilot and military: the risk as a professional project?**

The cadets observed and interviewed within the French Air Force Academy were in their first year of study in 2006. After an intensive integration period of several weeks, they would follow an academic and military education for two years and a half, before starting their aeronautical education. It is only after three years that, having an engineer diploma delivered by the French Air Force Academy, they will begin their military pilot instruction (fighters, transport, helicopters). Therefore, describing a risk culture or cultures relies on transmission situations apart from the really risky situations or before they entered the Air Force. So the cadets' opinions regarding their future occupation reflect either representations created during their adolescence or discourses delivered by the military institution.

These representations allow us to point out the heterogeneity of the risk-related discourses, as well as a certain number of dispositions related to multiple socializations. In this last case, certain propositions will be made without any micro-sociological inquiry that could validate such hypothesis.

**The risk of death in combat is justified by the common interest: defending his motherland and its related values. The sacrifice is a risk favorable to his community, his family, his peer group.**

If cadets associate death within a conflict or an overseas operations to the military activity, they do not always do it directly. Thus, the military career is firstly and mainly associated to its social function.

*« Today a military serves his motherland, his head of State and his government, but takes some distance in order to know what is ethical and what is not. He has to defend his territory and Peace, because today this is mostly about peace in the world than about defending his territory. As for the functions, for the military, the pride of the three colors of the tri-colored flag. »*

Focused on their social legitimacy, these discourses reveal a feeling of responsibility and devotion towards a community, « the Motherland », the « Nation », or its representatives. Thus, they refer to a set of rules and values characterizing the « civic world », where we « reach the grandeur by sacrificing personal and immediate interests, by going beyond ourselves » [Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991, 237]. Serving the community, defending or protecting the others often seems to conceal the notion of sacrifice. The values we adhere to prevail: the cadet accepts to risk his life for the community inasmuch as the values of his community match his own.

An optimistic evaluation of the international situation could also show that the menace of a conflict is far away, as well as, therefore, the probability of a military involvement of France. Danger can be put into perspective according to the symbolical means observed to certain « professionals of risk » [Peretti-Watel, 2000, 204]

Most often, the risk, the death danger involved by the military dimension appears only when cadets are directly questioned on the danger issue. Thus, it is ambivalent, because it is often associated both to received and given death. This latter can therefore be regarded as a source of moral tension as well as a risk-generating factor.

*« I think sacrifice is intrinsic to the profession of arms. I was aware of it before I entered the French Air Force Academy, even being there I don't know if I really was aware of it in the fifth grade but I have never cheated on myself saying that I wanted to be a fighter pilot in the "Patrouille de France" [acrobatic team] . And even there, in the "Patrouille de France", they die. So I think I have always known where I was going to,*

*I knew it was a risky job. It is death, death that we are going to give to others and death that we are going to receive. I think one must be aware of both aspects. [My parents] no, they were not happy because they didn't want to lose a son before they die, but they accept it, it is my decision. »*

Even if it is not obvious, or it is far away, the risk involved by a military job plays a role in the way individuals build up their professional identity. Indeed, « we then presume that greater the risk, higher its contribution to the cadet identity » [Peretti-Vatell, 2000, 208-212]. Risk then acquires a positive connotation. Thus, the fear of not being good enough when the moment comes, plays a great role in the acute awareness of common safety; The difficulty of projecting oneself in a possible sacrifice could be generated by the absence of a training for putting one's life in danger.

*« Frankly what scares me the most is not getting killed, but knowing how I will react to it, because the risk of getting killed is greater than for other jobs, that's for sure, because this is part of the war profession. »*

*« For the moment, it is easy to say it, we are in a time of peace, I'm going to School, and it's easy to say: « if I have to give my life, I'll do it ». For the moment, this is what I think. Now, this is my way, and the day I'll have to do it, I will do it. Well, maybe on the D Day I will hesitate. But well, when you're in, you're in. »*

If it is sometimes underestimated/reduced, the risk taken within a military situation can be used when one declares he belongs to a group, in the form of a rite of passage: « *I want to serve, to go on overseas operations, to live the experience of fire, to see if I am able to do it* ». But most often it appears as one of the dimensions of an activity that already involves intrinsically a high “dangerness”: flying a plane. Individuals will then care more about performance than about risk. [Loirand, 1989 : 43] pointing out that « *not everyone can fly a fighter plane* ».

**The risk is perceived through the joint efficiency of man and machine. The cadet creates an instrumental rationality in order to attain the ultimate goal: the military operation. The risk perception is soften/reduced by the fact that dangers are being rationally undertaken (from both a human and material point of view).**

There is a connection between performance and the industrial city: the risk is reduced by the technique and by mechanical engineering. Hazards are taken into account within the training process. Moreover, in parallel with his military education, the cadet goes to an engineering school. The mechanical performance means that if one observes the safety rules established by the institution, one is protected from the piloting risks. We can compare planes to Formula 1 cars: mechanical performance is allowed by a group of specialists. Breaking these rules exposes one to piloting dangers. This justification promotes a strict observation of flight procedures. The reality of the taken risks, even if everyone is aware of it, « seems to have been eliminated by the answers given by education and by shared representations » [Raveneau, 2006 : 614] For example, according to the manuals, all one has to do « in order to avoid dangers is to strictly observe the safety rules » [615] Thus, in the way training is done, risk becomes commonplace and the risk control is recoded as safety. Examinations (both theoretical and

practical) « submit the cadet to more and more dangerous practices » providing him with the apprenticeship of answers facing these new situations.

Performance is gained throughout training stages that are not related to a civic logic, but to an industrial one: these repetition stages put one's life in danger just as the real combat. That is a mandatory transition for a « high level performance. » Of course, training is identified as a danger, but it allows eliminating risks by repeating the gestures to be done in case one needs to do them.

*« Yes, the risk is there because during each flight there might be an accident, that is not necessarily... even in general accidents do not occur during times of crisis, they may occur during training, a lack of attention and then it's over. »*

*« And then we are trained... if one day we have to eject from the plane, we know we take some risks if we are in an enemy country, we are trained to this: what to do ... in case a problem occurs... »*

Indeed, the other risk pointed out by the cadets during interviews is related to the air « accident »/plane crash. This spontaneous association lets us point out a grandeur dimension and a « modern » vision of the risk.

*« The danger, it occurs during a flight: an engine failure, a pilot error »*

*« On a flight, an engine failure, stalling because you pay no attention...things like that, either mistakes due to lack of attention, or an engine failure...».*

The accident is not the result of a divine intervention or of a transcendent fatality; it is the consequence of a professional activity and of induced social interdependencies (engineers, industrialists, mechanics). With rare exceptions, cadets believe the risk of losing their life is higher for them – due to their aeronautical activity – compared to what most people risk. However, they find it normal and accept it for two reasons: on the one hand, because they don't find it very reasonable to avoid it and still want to have that job and on the other hand, because they seem to subscribe to a « pact » with modernity, which characterizes contemporary societies and their risk culture [Giddens, 1994, 96]. Accepting the risk is about confidence. The technical universe is fully shaped by *expert systems*: the plane design and maintenance, the air control management, technological/logistic tools on board of the plane... The individual counts on their reliability, « even if he knows the safety provided by such systems is limited and does not fully eliminate the risk ». The cadet gets to admit his ignorance, his incapacity to « control all details of a technique ». [Peretti-Vatell, 2000 : 88-90]. This “dis-embedding” phenomenon is based on the greater and greater confidence in machines and not in persons. This anonymous confidence relation would not be enough because « it excludes intimacy and reciprocity ». There are *points of access* participating in the punctual “re-embedding”: the mediation of professionals representing the *expert system*. So these specialists try to prove their reliability and integrity; this dramatization often means that they « reduce/underestimate inevitable hazards (...) in order not to affect the safety feeling of the profane ». [Peretti-Vatell, 2000 : 88-90].

*« [Risking] my life, yes, just by getting on a plane one risks his life more than... even if now when one gets into a car...well, I think I would risk my life if I went on an overseas operations and I'm ready to do it. »*

Without being denied, the confidence, the reference to science and technique according to a discourse that may be similar to the one of the industrial City, tends to make acceptable the risk related to machine fallibility.

**Internalizing the perception of a performance-related risk promotes dispositions to act in a rational way in order to reach the wanted performance.**

The selectivity of the cadets' career refers to a logic of rational selection of the most fit/suitable. This ability may depend on the cadet's health (« physical ability »). Here, the accepted risk is him being downgraded to other jobs than piloting.

*« And, most of all, there is a selection, we cannot ignore it. We won't have all we want, so that would probably be our first concern. For example, here's what I think about in case I had to be put away for a medical reason, everything I have been doing for the last 4 years, all your plans you can forget about them, and that's a quite worrying context. »*

So we can now see a rationality of conducts with an appropriate lifestyle and frequent interactions with doctors in order to watch one's physical skills. One of the main dangers perceived by the cadets of this institution is that of being eliminated from the path of excellence.

*« It is something that does not depend on me, losing physical skills, the incapacity to fly, if I'm not feeling well, there is nothing I can do, but what worries me is losing physical skills ».*

Thus, there would be a double medical competence: first the body intelligence or the management of the *body capital*. This is about preservation, maintenance and finally about the rationalization of this work instrument. We are interested in how cadets learn to manage their *body capital* and, thus, their career: it involves « a meticulous maintenance of each of its parts » [Wacquant, 1989 : 62-67].

*« And I was afraid to touch my knee or something that made it difficult what I wanted to do next. So, I stopped, but as for the sports I continued with other stuff, ping-pong, tennis, sports with less injuries. »*

*« The doctor told me to put ear plugs when I go to a nightclub »*

The knowledge on one's own body can be assessed during the cadet's evolution: self evaluation of limits not to be crossed, finding physiological strengths and weaknesses, creating a sporty lifestyle and an appropriate diet. Maintaining one's body involves daily practices, diet, exercises, and all these are « protection attitudes, preservation strategies, predictive plans, making up what we call a lifestyle » [Detrez, 2002 : 131]. The experience of a wound would be a key-moment within the internalization process of this disposition: « we refused to see the early warning signs that did not affect physical force ». [Boltanski, 1971 : 222] This would encourage the individual to a rational approach of his body.

**The death danger eliminated: «the passion to fly», «searching for sensations», «adrenaline» prevail over the negative perception of risk.**

More centered on the individual, it reveals the desire to create a physical connection with the private world: surpassing oneself, the speed, trying to be exceptional in some way. Taking a risk is not identified in practical terms: piloting, going on war missions. The pilot activity is perceived through « classical » works, like *St Exupery*, TV series (« *Band of Brothers* ») or cinema. It is the extraordinary achievement of the individual that legitimizes the pilot's endangering. His passion for flight prevails over the war missions. The achievement is similar to the knights' tales. The heroic dimension conceals the military aspect.

Away from the material and trade dimension (money, pay), individuals seem inclined to build a meaning for their life. « Provided that he's exposed to the risk of losing his life, the individual hunts on the territory of death and brings the trophy that is not an object, but a period of time marked by the intensity of being, bearing the strong memory of the moment when, due to his courage or initiative, he managed to achieve the guarantee of a really tough life » [Le Breton, 2004, 152-153]. The risk then becomes the counterpart of a lifestyle fulfilling the search for a meaning, without really waiting for an ordeal. The grandeurs, values of such a discourse, are based on the desire to pull away from daily routine, from habits and are defined by passion and fascination. Within this « inspirational world » [Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991], the experience is an inner journey that makes individuals pull away from social devices of another kind. They may even pull away from it from a physical point of view, like when they are flying alone, « *being alone in the sky* ».

*« You feel extraordinary things. In fact, when you fly, you have a feeling that is really.... »  
(...) « There is also the pleasure of flying, the sensations, and the fact that your job will be rather unusual. »*

For some cadets, passion is related to a risky practice: there is a certain disposition for putting their life in danger. In such situations, cadets speak about addiction to strong sensations, to adrenaline, or to the « *sparkling side* », to the « *panache/bravery* » of piloting; these pleasure sensations prevail over the risk they take. For others, this risk is not necessary, but it is generated by a choice in life.

*« I think risk is part of the things we want: adrenaline. »  
« The risk occurs while flying: an engine failure, a pilot error. It is true that it is what drew me a little towards this job, let's say it was its panache/bravery .»*

Thus, during interviews risk appears in various, legitimized forms, reduced, but accepted according to various principles, associated to three « worlds » or « cities » referring to various value systems: the civic city, the industrial city and the inspired city. Nevertheless, all three discourses reveal the shared awareness of risk. But this awareness and expressing it involve – especially for individuals who are still training - socialization processes or the activation of dispositions acquired in childhood or during their adolescence.

The interviews reveal, in various forms, both the awareness of risk and the fact cadets accept it. But at this stage of their career, this attitude cannot be built on a personal experience of their future activity. Moreover, when these interviews have been made (6 to 12 months after the cadets entered the French Air Force Academy), they are just beginning their education. Internalizing the values and perceptive schemes that generate the various discourses we have highlighted refers to a socialization process within the French Air Force Academy. But, there often seems to be an activation of dispositions to think, acquired before the cadets entered the French Air Force Academy.

## **The French Air Force Academy as a training structure or one that eases expressing previously incorporated dispositions.**

In that stage of training when the cadets have been interviewed and observed, several components of their instruction seem to generate the realization and production of their discourse on the risk. In broad outline there are three of them. On the one hand, the military training includes the apprenticeship of a lifestyle (uniform, body position, rank, and attitudes), elementary know-how (command, shooting, orienteering, sport) and a military culture (history, traditions, ethics). On the other hand, with an academic education, predominantly scientific they could have an engineer diploma at the end of their education. Finally, they can do some gliding and fly on motor aircraft or on jets.

The interviews and observations made within a year group of pilot cadets reveal an assimilation process based on a triple set of rules. Indeed, based on L. Boltanski et L. Thévenot' typology, there are three universal references legitimizing risk: the « inspired », the « civic » and the « industrial » city. They refer to the following dispositions 1 : to « defy death » with « grace » having a fatalist attitude, 2 : to sacrifice oneself having a patriotic and altruistic attitude, and 3 : to trust a technical-scientific logic defining the engineer culture. During training/education, these three components appear diachronically.

The following stages of this work shall point out the internal structure of the three ways risk is perceived during activity. These dispositions to perceive cannot form a coherent system. For example, the sacrifice for the other opposes to the self-centered achievement; the rationality of behaviors is opposed to a form of adrenaline addiction...

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