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**The NCOs Careers and Jobs in the French Army:
Between Specialization and Polyvalence.**

Christophe PAJON

Ph. D.

Abstract:

**The NCOs Careers and Jobs in the French Army:
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The end of the Draft in France is often presented as the main modernization process of the French Armed Forces. The change to an All-Volunteer Force would be the cause for all the military evolutions. Even, if this decision has had several consequences (for example a forces reorganization and a size reduction), it doesn't explain all. So, the evolution and the application of modern human resource management methods in the French Army are older than the political decision which leads up to the All-Volunteer Force. Based on the look-forward management principles, this management reform should already improve the professionalism of the French soldiers.

One of the solutions was the reinforcement of the jobs definition. The training programs should be more specialized too. Based on a ground inquiry, this paper proposes to analyse these methods in the Army NCOs case. In fact, the two official goals of the management policy were the specialisation of the jobs and the relaxation measures - which are both conflicting. This can be underlined through the NCOs careers and jobs. On one side, these examples reveal the careers over-rigidity. On the other side, it shows the limits of the job specialization principles.

The NCOs Careers and Jobs in the French Army: Between Specialization and Polyvalence.¹

The modernization process of the management methods in the French Army is previous to the decision to change the French Armed Forces in an All-volunteer force. In a way, this last mutation can be very well considered as a context: format reduction, end of the draft, projection. The introduction of new rules of management date from the end of the 80's. The audit produced by a civilian consulting-office marked the passage to a new philosophy of management: from a staff administration to a human resource management, from the quantity to the quality, from a "savoir-être" (how to be) to a "savoir-faire" (how to do).

A formal proof of this evolution can easily be found in the new names given to the offices (human resource offices) but also in their new organization. Until 1990, the Central Human Resource Management Department (DPMAT, Direction du personnel de l'Armée de Terre) was divided in different "Bureaux des Armes". Schematically, each office rooted on the classical and functional parts (Cavalry Corps, Infantry corps, Engineers Corps) of the Army which were in charge for all their members, whatever were their jobs or skills. One of the goals of this reform was to introduce more rationality, efficiency, and tighter management. After a period of a "so-called" crossed management (1990-1994), a management by "specialities" took place.

There is two ways to analyze this evolution. First, it can be seen as a normal trend to the modernization of the military administration. Secondly, we can also read it as the result of the

¹ This paper is based on a research financed by the French Ministry of Defence 2002-2004.

well-known process of professionalization announced in the 1960's. According to this theory, the professionalization doesn't only imply the end of the draft, but also an improvement of the skills and the formation of the soldiers under a technological pressure.

Beyond the theoretical and official discourses based on the principles of rationality, tight division of labour and high specialization, a ground inquiry among the NCOs revealed the limits of these new management methods. If it's true that a big diversity of jobs and situations of professional activities seem to reflect the principle of specialization, the NCOs careers patterns and the all-day activities show many divergences. Because what must do and know a NCO in his/her professional life often mobilize more or different skills than foreseen in the formal definition of his/her job. If, according to the new management methods, all NCOs (and also soldiers) are specialists, some elements of the jobs seem to be essentially not specialized. In some cases, the fulfilling of the tasks is only possible with a large polyvalency of the NCOs. This inquiry, paradoxically, shows that if the professionalization implies the end of one symbol of the military amateurism – the Draft– it doesn't imply the disappearance of the military adaptation capacities.

After a brief description of the human resource management's tools, we will first try to evoke their impacts on the NCOs careers. Secondly, this paper will underline the limits of the specialization principle introduced by these methods of management. This will be made by the analysis of the remaining – and necessary - forms of polyvalency among the NCOs.

1 – The professionalization by the specialization: the new human resource management methods.

The methods of human resource management introduced in the 90's correspond to the modern theories of the forward-look management. They all try to adapt the needs of the firm to its available resource. One of the most important steps of these methods is the analysis of the available resource (characteristics of the population: demographic data, skills) and a good, precise, prospective knowledge of the jobs.

This kind of research should lead to the creation of an inventory of job types. Each job type represents professional families which gather jobs of the same activities or of the same technical fields. In the French Army, this document is the TTA 129. It is a listing of all the military and civil jobs, and it also contains the relating training courses, diplomas or certificates. In the TTA 129, these professional families are called “specialities domains” (30 in the 2003 edition).

Each one of the specialities is divided in paths, “under-specialities”. These represents also professional ways within it's possible to progress: the NCOs can change job and increase their

responsibility level throughout their careers (7 levels for all the Army, from NR2 to NR3 for the NCOs). These responsibility levels imply a horizontal distinction among the specialities. The three main levels are the conception, the implementation and the execution. The NCOs careers belong to the second level. Along his/her career, a NCO will hold different professional activities. According to the TTA 129, a job is characterised by its functions: the function is the more precise element of the job description. Each NCO and his/her job type are identified by a code number which indicates the NCO's origins (direct or semi direct recruitment), his/her speciality, the progress in his/her career (certificate, responsibility level).

**Listing of Specialities
(TTA 129 – edited in 2003)**

- 1 –Administration et soutien de l'Homme
- 2 – Aéromobilité
- 3 – Combat de l'Infanterie
- 4 – Combat des Blindés
- 5 – Combat Génie
- 6 – Communication
- 7 – Conception & coordination soutien logistique des forces
- 8 – Défense nucléaire biologique et chimique
- 9 - Défense sol-air
- 10 – Emploi des forces
- 11 – Emploi communs
- 12 – Emploi interarmées : Aumônerie. Poste. Trésor. Essence.
- 13 – Entraînement physique militaire et sportif
- 14 - Feux dans la profondeur
- 15 – Finances et techniques budgétaires
- 16 - Formation
- 17 – Gestion des ressources humaines
- 18 – Maintenance
- 19 – Management et systèmes d'information
- 20 – Mouvements-Ravitaillement
- 21 – Musique
- 22 – Recrutement de formation initiale
- 23 – Réglementation et Activité juridiques
- 24 – Renseignement

- 25 – Santé
- 26 – Sciences humains
- 27 – Sécurité
- 28 – Systèmes d’armes
- 29 - Techniques d’opérations d’infrastructure
- 30 – Télécommunication

On the other hand, each unit (generally regiment) of the French Army has its own DUO (Document Unique d’Organisation, Unique Document of Organization). The DUO shares the strength between offices, companies, platoons or workshops. For each position, it corresponds to one or several careers code numbers. That naturally offers the managers a certain room for manoeuvre for the managers. It is the task of each regiment human resource offices with the help of the two documents to fit resource and needs. Special software are used to underline the needs or the wrong affectations. The system is centralized at the national level.

Despite these new tools, the human resource management problems didn’t all vanished. First, the Army as employer encounters problems to attract enough candidates in some specialities (especially in computing maintenance). The next table shows the lacks and the overabundance in different specialities. Even in a depressed labour market, the careers opportunities seem insufficient for some qualified young people in comparison to the ones of the civilian sector. Today, the selection rate of candidates to a military career has fallen to 1,1 – 1,5.

Realization Rate of the NCO Strength according to the DUO (November 2002)				
Specialities Domains	> 105%	Specialities Domains	< 95%	
Sport Training	145.23	Computing Maintenance	80.61	
Health	119.51	Communication Management	81.44	
Nuclear, biological, chemical Defence	117.95	Transport	86..95	
Infantry	115.81	Intelligence	87.18	
Administration	115.49	Music	89.07	
Engineers	109.47	Human ressources Management	94.68	

Armoured	107.88			
Signals	107.62			

Sources : Emat, Orh.

Secondly, in a context of size reduction, reorganization, and superactivity, our inquiry among four different regiments revealed maladjustments of the different DUO. The Units Commanders denounced a “tighter suit”.

“My principal problem ? The under-strength...I must take some people from my companies for the support”. (Regiment Commander)

“Some made us a costume that is too tight and we must fit in” (Regiment commander)

In two cases, the under-strength of NCOs was 5%. Then, the human resource office must adapt the DUO for the all-day running of the unit. The strengths of useless or non-essential offices or services is dispatched through other services. Once a year, the human resource office of each regiment proposes adjustments to the national level. Another solution favoured by the French Ministry of Defence is the outsourcing. But, this way is still experimental. On the national territory, each garrison evaluates its needs and considers to its budget and its operational priorities: some outsourcing concerns green spaces management, sometimes the garrison security (essentially the Support units). The goal is always to free soldiers for operational purposes.

2 – The Speciality: between individual professional strategies and career patterns.

One of the 1990’s reform’s goal was to relax the career management. In one hand, the administration had to be more adapted to respond to the demographic evolution of the human resource, but also had to offer the possibility of an individual management. This means that a NCO should have the possibility to change his/her speciality in the course of his/her career.

A high labour division and the desire to respect the individual professional choices seem to indicate a great differentiation among the NCOs in the French Army. A first approach to the careers can prove this assertion. But this impression can however be shaded pretty easily by a deeper analysis.

2.1 – The heterogeneity of recruitment and careers

One cause of the heterogeneity in the NCO's rank can be found in the recruitment origins. There's two ways for young people to become a NCO.

- The external way or "School way" concerns the 18-25 old peoples. With a minimum of a Secondary School Examination which allows university entrance qualification, they are coming directly from the civilian world and are recruited by files after a medical examination and physical/psychological tests.
- The internal way: the recruitment is realized among the best servicemen without diploma requirements. The servicemen are proposed by their superiors after 3-5 years on-duty.

The NCOs corps are composed, in equal parts, of people recruited according to both the internal and external ways. They will then all pursue their formation at the ENSOA (Ecole nationale des sous-officiers d'active, National School for the NCOs), but the training period is shorter for internally recruited ones.

The interviews with the NCOs seem to show that the motivations for the enlistment are the same for the NCOs and for the servicemen. The desire for change is the idea expressed more widely by the NCOs to justify their professional choice: desire to move, desire for adventure or desire to break the monotony of the daily routine... But "to move" also means to practice sports. Lastly, the search for a structuring social environment (discipline, rules, fellowship) is another reason given by some NCOs.

The choice of a speciality as enlistment motive was rarely mentioned in the interviews. The sentence "I wanted to become a soldier" gathers all the motives listed above, but doesn't refer to any specific professional choice. However some of the NCOs that were interviewed said that they wanted to become paratrooper or fireman.

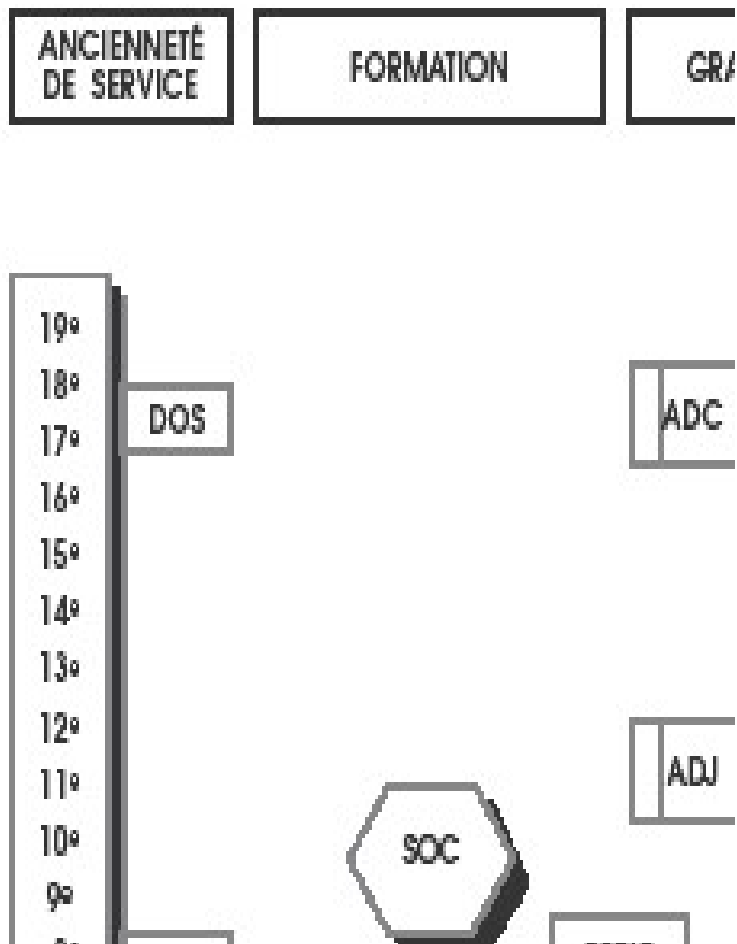
The choice of a speciality for the NCOs recruited the external way is made during the integration at the ENSOA. During the first steps of the engagement, the Officers or the NCOs in charge of the recruitment in the different Recruitment Centres can also be advisers. They know the lacks in some specialities, and can sometimes attempt to orientate the candidates towards these fields of speciality. Nevertheless, the advices can also come from relatives or friends, with a military past. These candidates need to successfully achieve a Secondary School Examination which will give them the university entrance qualifications. Some only use the diploma as an entry ticket to the career and will normally choose the fighting specialities. We're meeting a patrol leader who had a diploma of "industrial management" in the Wood Industry. The choice of a speciality sometimes linked to the civilian diploma (for example, a NCO in a workshop in charge of the Signals maintenance who had a certificate in electronic).

The interviews sometimes revealed that the TTA 129 is not working properly. A NCO, accountant in a company, with an academic diploma in “accounting and management” and a professional experience in the civilian sector, told us that there was no identity between the exercise of the both activities.

After the period at the ENSOA and after another training period, the young NCO will receive his/her first military certificate, the BSAT (brevet de spécialiste de l’Armée de Terre) - the Certificate of French Army Specialist. This diploma validates a general military formation, but also in a specialties domain. It means the inscription of the NCO career in a speciality.

After 7 or 8 years, the second important step of an NCO’s career – the BSTAT (Brevet supérieur de technicien de l’Armée de Terre), Higher certificate of French Army technician – will confirm this inscription in a speciality. With the rank of Staff Sergeant, the success in the achievement of his/her formation then determine the change of status, from a contractual status to a regular soldier status.

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If both these diplomas are common to all NCOs, the formation differs from one speciality to the other. In the course of his/her career, a NCO can also accumulate a lot of certificates, diplomas or training periods, which can take him/her from 2 to 8 weeks. The formations can be linked to the speciality of the NCO, but also necessary for the all-day garrison life. The first category of diplomas offers to the NCO the possibility to evolve in his/her speciality. That can be a horizontal mobility, to change the job while remaining in the speciality. For example, after obtaining his/her BSTAT – speciality “Fight by Engineer” - a young Staff Sergeant can obtain a certificate of Platoon chief. Or he can also attempt to integrate a Nedex team (Neutralisation et Destruction des Explosifs) which is a group of specialists present in each Engineer Regiment in charge of the

explosives destruction. Joining a Nedex team is a possibility if the NCO already followed several speciality training periods (including Minex 3 and Minex 4). However both paths are not exclusive : a NCO who is platoon chief can later become a member of a Nedex team. The second category of diplomas or training periods often corresponds to limited institutional needs like, for example, the need of a regiment for a NCO who would be formative for some particular job or for the utilisation of some specific equipment.

The Army may sometimes be compared to an enterprise dedicated to the diplomas production. This can also be considered as another proof of the institutional will to rationalize and specialize. Thus, it is not a surprise, if the number of certificates/diplomas/training periods, only in the speciality “Infantry Fight” and all ranks joined is higher than 180.

2.2 – The limits of the careers specialization and relaxation measures

A first contradiction can be seen through the official discourses’ analysis. We can consider that the wish for a tighter human resource management and for a careers relaxation are conflicting, in fact, with the current recruitment deficits in some specialities, the Army’s as best interest is sometimes to limit the change of speciality from certain NCOs. In addition, relaxation measures can be contradicting the Army’s will to make profitable the formations provided to the NCOs.

And effectively, when considering the possibility for the NCOs to evolve in their speciality, the transfer from one to another speciality seems to be a rare occurrence. Without official statistics, this analysis is only grounded on our qualitative research. Nevertheless, we tried to build three careers paths which will allow us to describe these concurrencies when a transfer between specialities is possible :

- The “Fighter Career”: it gathers all specialities’ domains which resemble the Army’s traditional functional divisions: “Infantry Fighting», «Armoured Fighting”, “Engineer Fighting”... There are possibilities to evolve within these specialities’s domains.
- The “Administrative Career”: it gathers all the military administration’s jobs (Human resource management, juridical services). The “Common Jobs” domain can be integrated into this category. These “Common Jobs” are particular since they require no specific certificates or diplomas. It is a matter of responsibility level. These jobs are generally occupied by the oldest 1st Class warrant officers or warrant officers. The number of “under-specialities” in these domains is weaker than this of the “Fighting Specialities”.

- The “Technical Career”: this category gathers the specialities domains which are characterized by their technical, and sometimes technological, dimension. In these specialities, the exercise of the professional activity mobilize professional skills which are often comparable to these of civilian jobs.

It appears that the NCOs whose speciality belongs either to the second or third category will often stay in the same speciality for their entire professional life. On the other hand; it seems that the general trend among the NCOs pertaining to the “Fighter Career” (who are becoming regular soldiers) is to eventually change for an “Administrative Career”; especially for the “Common Jobs” domain. This trend among the NCOs of the third category can be the result of accidental injuries, of the NCOs’ feelings of tiredness and will for a “quieter”, more “normal life”. In other cases, some NCOs, after 15 or 20 years on-duty; are simply unable anymore to fulfil the physical aptitudes required by their job. The transfer from the “Fighter Careers” to the “Administrative Careers” and more specifically to the “Common Jobs” domain doesn’t involve further training periods. Concerning the transfer to the “Human Resources Management” domain; the certificate can be obtain after two or four years in such job (Qualification U or Q).

If the process of relaxing career seems to be limited, the will of a high specialization through the different diplomas shows its limits too. If NCOs assert the necessity of a good theoretical formation, the ground experience remains essential according to them. The first training period at the ENSOA is often criticized, since it is considered to be too theoretical.

“There are skills which can be learned only on the ground” (Warrant Officer)

Sometimes, the apprenticeship is presented as the only way to perform in the job. A warrant officer asserted:

“When I was coming in the paratrooper commando team, I was with one of the oldest team member...today, he’s becoming captain...he took me with him during two years...during this period, I was his binomial, he trained me, he taught me all, the A.B.C. stage”

Lastly, the self-formation remains a widely spread method amongst the NCOs, especially in two domains: the new equipments and the computing. Despite strong efforts of rationalization in the career and formation management initiated in the 90’s, the old training methods seem to resist.

The few situations in which it is possible to change of specialities domains, the strength shortage context and the preservation of old techniques refute partially the official goals of the Army human resource management. But, the observations of the all-day activities of the NCOs and the interviews will raise other arguments.

3 – Speciality and Polyvalency by the NCOs

According to the official rhetoric of the Army, the NCOs already assume two jobs: soldiers and specialists. We can admit that a NCO is in charge of varied tasks: management, training, leading, technician. Beyond these statements, it is possible to distinguish several situations where the NCOs don't exercise the activities for which they are trained or accomplish tasks outside their speciality field. If the adaptation capacity is traditionally associated to the classical figure of the French soldier, we will now try to outline the structural phenomena which implies polyvalency activities in a synchronic way. We have distinguished two kinds of polyvalency : one permanent, institutionalized, the other limited, in some circumstances.

3.1 – The institutionalized polyvalency

Our observations and interviews through four Army regiments brought out several situations where NCOs had a secondary activity apart from their official and main job. The questions should be precise, because the NCOs seemed to consider these double-job as a professional normality.

Practically, your responsibility for the optical equipment is a full-time job?

No, no, my full-time job is patrol leader...No, really, I have two functions...it's that...I'm group leader and in charge of the platoon optical equipment. (Sergeant, Patrol Leader)

I'm the Sport-Trainer for the company too...it's just little things...

Do you have the diploma in this speciality?

No, no, I always had a good physical level...I was in the cross-country running team... (Warrant Officer 1st Class, platoon chief)

This secondary job is sometimes linked to the speciality of the first job, but not necessarily. Even if the certificates are not necessary for these tasks and even if they don't imply the creation of full time jobs, the tasks are essential to the regiment functioning. It appears that the kind of unit (fighting/support) don't explain the existence of these double-jobs. On the opposite, these mechanisms seem to belong to the old organisational empirical technique of management, in a strength shortage context or not.

However, in these previously mentioned cases, the first jobs of the NCOs are still listed in their speciality domain. In some extreme situations, NCOs are employed outside their specialities. The human resource offices post these situations called “job’s distortion”. In the visited units, about 5% of the NCOs were in the situation of “job’s distortion”. This shows the maladjustment of the DUO – the job of a NCO is not foreseen by the DUO, but he/she is officially the holder of another job which doesn’t belong to his/her speciality. The DUO can be adjusted, but the under-strength favoured the “job distortion”. For example, a Warrant officer who holds a lower responsibility level job.

These jobs adjustments can be considered at the individual level, but the polyvalency may be collective. With the increase of international military operations and domestic tasks, the situation of the Army can be qualified as superactivity. In fact, the kind of international (UNO or Petersberg missions) and domestic missions (overseas presence, strength reinforcement of the police forces – Vigipirate/Proterre) mobilize especially the Infantry Units. Because the needs are higher than the resource, it’s usual that Engineers or Cavalry regiments are used for the Infantry’s missions. We are at the boundary between institutionalized and limited polyvalency.

3.2 – The limited polyvalency

The polyvalency of the NCOs can be noticed from time to time. Through our inquiry, we have qualified as limited polyvalency three situations :

- The NCOs can temporally hold the position of his/her direct superior. Because of operational rules, this polyvalency is foreseen, and the NCOs are trained for this possibility. Again, we are at the limit between limited and institutionalized polyvalency.
- The equipment: in spite of the improvement of the Army’s equipment, there are still problems according to the NCOs. When the number is insufficient, the NCOs must try to obtain some in other platoons or companies; it is a kind of “equipments race”. Sometimes, if the equipment is available on the civilian market, they’ll bring to the garrison their own equipment (especially usual equipments as toolboxes, or a printer).
- On the field, during manoeuvres or operations periods, the NCOs can attempt to improve their own living conditions as well as those of their men. They are becoming handymen (they build field showers, walls, restore roofs), and sometimes cooks. For operational issues, they use for example their mechanical skills to fix a vehicle. These examples have been mentioned by the interviewed NCOs.

Conclusion:

Our goal was not to prove the inefficiency of the modern human resource management methods in the French Army. It was rather to show the management methods application limits to all the military activities. It would appear that there difficulties to definite precisely all the functions of the all-day or operational NCOs Jobs. In fact, the management reform was drove by the belief in an Armed Forces evolution to industrial model. This idea must be linked to the classical theories of the military sociology : the end of military job specificity. The profesionnalization would drive to a kind of military de-profesionnalization. The military jobs would become jobs as the others. Our developments seem partially prove the contrary: maintain of traditional professional uses and the difficulties to confine the jobs within an over-rigid definition, especially for the fighting careers.