



The rise of the French army in 1813

1/2 - BRENNUS 4.0

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Histoire & stratégie

The main mission of the armed forces at rest is training. Training is used to prepare personnel (both officers and soldiers) and equipment for use in wartime.

The situation becomes more complicated when a country is carrying out several types of operational missions at the same time. In France, until 2015, the fight against terrorism was ensured by the Vigipirate plan. Today, Operation Sentinel, a complement to the aforementioned plan, is changing the pace of military activities by its scope and duration. In the past, the latter took place in a ternary cycle of training, intervention and rest. Today, the rhythm is quaternary: in addition to the three phases previously mentioned, the Sentinel mission is now fully integrated. Recently, the resumption of Joint Operational Readiness (POIA) has made it possible to resume training.

History teaches us that the French armies have been confronted in the past with the problem of inadequate, summary or deficient training.

Today in our institution, such importance is attributed to the "drill" that it is customary to say that difficult training is the sine qua non of an easy war. The following example, drawn from the "capital of experience" of our land forces in the nineteenth century, gives an idea of what can happen to an army that is struggling to train, in this case for lack of time.

Napoleon is no longer the master of time

We are in the aftermath of the Russian campaign. The decree creating the Guard of Honour of 4 April 1813 is part of the measures taken by the Emperor to set up a new army. Each of France's 130 departments is subject to the raising of a contingent corresponding to one ten thousandth of its population. The operation was entrusted to the prefects. They

had to carry out a recruitment operation at the same time as the parallel mission of contracting contracts to dress, equip and assemble their men. While waiting for the uniforms and mounts to be made, the young men are gathered in the capital of their departments where most of them receive training from officers for several weeks. It is easy to understand the training effect that this raising of the classes must have on the preparation for war, under the eyes of the popular classes, who are especially called upon to contribute to the national effort. But it is also to save time that our young phalanx, mounted and equipped from foot to foot, must go to its depots (Versailles, Metz, Tours and Lyon) to perfect its training. At the beginning of June 1813, the first contingents arrived in their respective corps. Obviously, the work carried out by the prefects was not always satisfactory, but the corps chiefs rubbed their hands. In two months they made a strong effort to form formidable regiments.

Napoleon had no time to wait. He had just won the battles of Lützen (2 May 1813) and Bautzen (20-21 May 1813), but due to a lack of light cavalry he was unable to exploit its advantages [2]. As early as June 7, 1813, he ordered that four squadrons (1000 sabres) join him in Saxony at the earliest. They obeyed as best they could. The Emperor then ordered new departures. In September, the sovereign of the French found that he had gone too fast and that he had demanded too much of this "young cavalry". Some 17 squadrons out of 40 were then in the army with him. On 23 September 1813, the Emperor decided that the second echelon (23 squadrons) would not cross the Rhine, in order to train on its banks. Unfortunately, from October onwards, the situation in Westphalia deteriorates, where there is an urgent need for troops, while at the same time, after the defeat of Leipzig, the Imperial Army, harassed in its retrograde march, retreats in disorder towards the river. The army concentrated on the Rhine must therefore take appropriate measures to protect its return (Hanau lock). Training is then no longer an issue. In mid-November 1813, the Imperial Army was distributed along the left bank of the Rhine in a sheltered and defensive position. Napoleon estimated that the next campaign would begin in the spring. The Guard of Honour therefore had three or four months, according to him, "to rebuild itself" and perfect its training. But on the night of 20-21 December 1813, violating Swiss neutrality, the coalition crossed the Rhine and entered Alsace. The training remains a pious hope.

Our guards, barely instructed, successively missed the opportunities they were given to train. The consequences are threefold and affect, at the same time, the supervision of the corps, the accustoming to the effort of the men and their mounts, and finally the operational capacity of the "tool".

"Command performance" and "understanding" in question

The officer corps did not come out of the last campaign unscathed, far from it. Accustomed to sharing the fate of the troop, the cadre endured with its men the cold and hardships of all kinds. The cadre melted [3]. The school of Saint-Germain, which trained cavalry officers, was unable to fill the gaps. Up to March 1813, it had already provided 126 students who took the road of all the cavalry regiments of France and Germany. Executives were withdrawn from the Spanish army and non-commissioned officers were promoted. Finally, one resolves to recall retired or retired executives [4]. Such is the wide range of services from which our four regiments will benefit. To sum up, the supervision concerns young men whose knowledge is theoretical, trained executives and officers who have, in the past, exercised a profession they have mastered. That's roughly the three-thirds theory, so most of the officers would need training.

Thus, there are several incidents recounted to us in their memoirs, officers consumed in amazement at the ingenuity or incompetence of their peers. For example, very young officers were abused by hay merchants during requisitioning. A 28-year-old guard observed that the inside of hay bales had been wetted to give them more weight. More serious: "I saw one of my comrades named Antin drop dead, killed by a second lieutenant from Ossonville [5] (sic) who was clumsily handling one of our rifles [6]," reported another guard. Some officers did not master the fundamentals of cavalry missions. Thus, on 16 October 1813, Colonel d'Autancourt [7], commanding the Polish Lancers regiment of the Guard, charged a lieutenant of the 4th Guard of Honour regiment with a simple reconnaissance mission. "Surprised by his lack of self-confidence, I tried to make him repeat my order; hardly had he understood [8]". 8] On January 2, 1814, as he was making a retrograde march and thought he was covered by 200 of his horses, General Philippe de Ségur, head of the 3rd Regiment of Guards of Honour, was surprised to see that his flanking detachment had beaten him to the punch! He explained: "their squadron leader, still a novice, had not understood his mission [9]". 9] This same general tells us that a little later, he ambushed General Seslawin [10]: "These Russians would have all been kidnapped, without a gesture from one of our own who, without waiting for my order, in his impatience, put the sword in his hand [11]..."... and the Russian general **managed to** save part of his troop. A few senior officers, called back to duty, give shelter. Thus, in Saxony, Colonel d'Autan court, having moved to the bivouac of a squadron of honour guards attached to him, was astonished to find no officers there. The latter, concerned about their personal comfort, took shelter in houses away from the troop. The troop settled indiscriminately. "I was obliged to make myself change platoons placed without any care in a damp meadow," **the** colonel revealed.

1] There is no question here of dealing with the "Marie-Louise", novice cavalrymen, who had to learn everything, that is to say, not instructed and raised in 1814. The corps we are interested in concerns children of well-to-do classes (10,000 men divided into four regiments), in principle sons of nobles or of the rich bourgeoisie who, from early childhood, were familiar with riding exercises. For this gilded youth this art is an integral part of education. In the 19th century, there was not a single landed nobleman who did not have a few horses in his stable. In fact, it was practically the only means of transport, as the roads were so rare and rough. However, the institution of the Replacement (law of 28 Germinal year 7) allowed, in a way, the setting aside of this elite, since it authorized the conscripts drawn by lot to present, in their place, volunteers of at least 18 years old and 20 years old at the most. In theory, therefore, it is a ready-made operational cavalry that is called into the Guard of Honour. It may be added that for at least some of these young men, the use of the sword is not unknown, as is the use of the pistol.

2] Indeed, the strategic context in which the troops evolved: this great plain of central Germany, where Napoleon had the slightest accident and where he had so often won, was conducive to maneuvering, and therefore to the abundant use of cavalry. According to him "the cavalry should be in an army in Flanders and Germany, a quarter of the infantry. However, at the end of the armistice, the French cavalry represented 10% of the army (34,000 men), while the Allied cavalry represented a quarter of its strength (85,000 men). Picard (E., Lieutenant-Colonel), "Précipices et jugements de Napoléon", Paris, Nancy, Berger-Levrault, 1913.

3] The 11th regiment of hussars and the 6th regiment of lancers, for example, left more than 50% of their cadres in Russia. Statistics taken from F.G. Hourtoulle, "Ney le brave des braves," Paris, Limoges, Charles Lavauzelle, 1981. On 26 March 1813, General de Lauriston, who commanded the Elbe observation corps, reported to the Minister of War that he was 83 captains and 73 lieutenants short (Vincennes archives C2 141).

4] According to Napoleon, the cavalry "needs more officers than the infantry" (Correspondances de Napoléon Ier tome XXV).

5] Dupont d'Aubevoye (Marie-Thomas-Eugène, Marquis d'Oysonville).

6] Wismes (baron de), "Journal du marquis Alexandre de la Roche Saint-André, gardes d'honneur de l'Empereur (1813-1814)", unpublished document, s. l. n. d.

7] Autancourt (Pierre, baron d'), future general.

[8\]](#) Archives of Vincennes, 1M 2331.

[19 \]](#) Ségur Philippe (Count of), "Du Rhin à Fontainebleau", London, Nelson, n. d.

[10\]](#) Leader of partisans.

[11 \]](#) Ségur (Philippe, Count of), "Du Rhin à Fontainebleau", London, Nelson, n.d.

[12\]](#) Archives of Vincennes, 1 M 2331.

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