

'Ces Pauvres Enfants'¹

Napoleon's Marie-Louises of 1814

by Major AW Field

INTRODUCTION

In the two years prior to 1814, in the terrible retreat from Russia and the debacle of the Campaign in Germany, the *Grande Armée* had suffered catastrophic losses. The energy and single-mindedness that Napoleon had shown in raising a new *Grande Armée* after Russia had been nothing short of miraculous. For the Campaign in Germany he fielded an army of well over 400,000 men, which despite its losses in the battles that led up to the Armistice in June 1813, numbered over 437,000 men by mid August. Despite their impressive numbers however, a large proportion of these troops were hastily trained and often poorly led conscripts, many called up before their due date. The cataclysmic defeat at Leipzig and the subsequent retreat to France saw this army reduced to just 74,800 effectives - a loss of 83% in only 90 days!²

As 1814 approached, Napoleon once again faced the prospect of raising a new army to face the 250,000 largely veteran allied troops which were massing on France's Northern borders. These had another 150,000 echeloned behind them! Napoleon had already gone some way to

exhausting France's manpower pool the previous year, including the call-up of 90,000 men who would not have been eligible until 1814: he had therefore already started mortgaging France's future resources. The thousands of immature teenagers who were hastily called to the Eagles were to be known as *Marie-Louises* and by their courage and fortitude were to earn themselves a glorious chapter in France's military history.

The aim of this article is to examine the raising, training and performance of these young men and also perhaps to expose a few myths which have grown up around them.

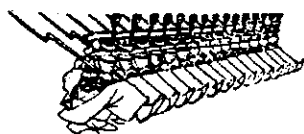
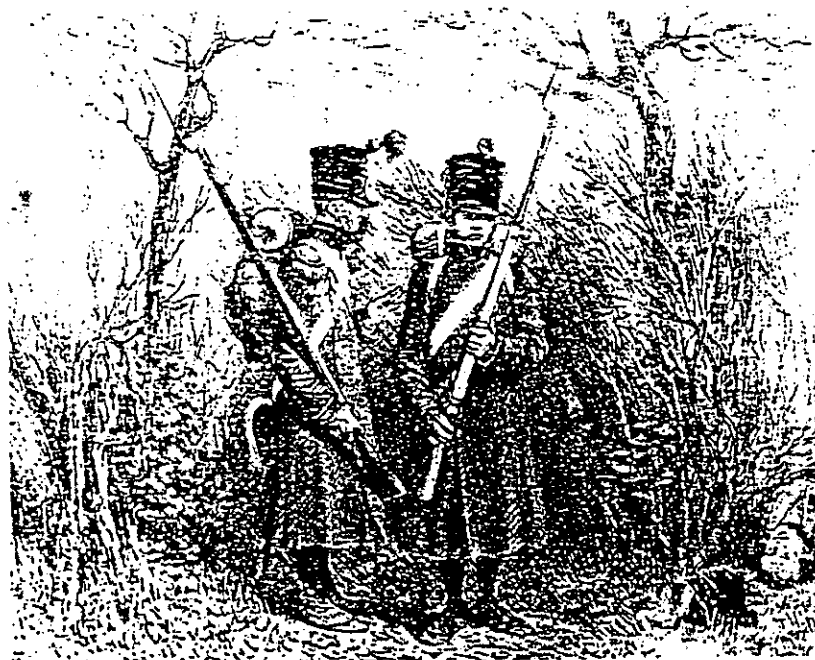
CONSCRIPTION IN THE FRENCH ARMY

The Revolution had seen France become the first modern army to introduce universal military service; the famous *Levée en Masse*. This was enshrined in Jourdan's Conscription Laws of 1798 on which were based the Imperial Legislation of following years. Under these laws all men between the ages of 18 and 40 were expected to register, and those between 18 and 25 (subsequently 30) were liable for call-up by the drawing of lots until sufficient men were found. Conscription was to be limited to unmarried men and childless widowers. The total manpower available each year was known as a 'class' of that particular year. In 1805 Napoleon secured for himself the power to fix the proportion of each class that was to be called to the Eagles. This allowed him to call-up men not

only from the due class, but also those **before** their due date and to draw repeatedly on those classes who had already contributed to the army. It is no surprise that after Napoleon's great victories of 1805-7, military service became increasingly unpopular and the numbers of 'refractaires' (those deliberately avoiding service) rose steeply. It must be pointed out however, that even during

the punishing drafts of 1813 and 1814 the number of men actually serving did not exceed 41% of the **eligible** male population.³

The conditions governing the drawing of lots, which took place in each commune, was strictly laid down in legislation. It must have been an atmospheric event filled with tension and a certain amount of nervous excitement. Families would accompany the prospective conscripts, all no doubt praying to avoid the call-up. The draw would be administered by local officials and supervised by gendarmes and military recruiting officers. A numbered ballot for each eligible man was placed into an urn and each potential recruit drew one. If the man was not present then the Mayor drew for



him. The drawn number was announced by the subprefect and the higher the number the better the conscript's chance of not being included in the number of recruits that the commune was required to furnish.

Those who were unlucky enough to draw a low number were then given a rudimentary medical. If they passed this and were over 1.54m they were fit to serve. A conscript declared fit to serve could only escape officially by paying a substitute. This could be a very costly affair, the price varying between regions and the military situation from year to year. A formal contract was drawn up between the parties and the cost, generally between 1,500 and 4,000 Francs, was often paid in instalments. If the substitute was killed then the conscript had only 14 days in which to find another. In the later years of the wars it is no surprise to find that the pool of potential substitutes was ever diminishing and the price beyond the means of many peasants.

There were of course a number of illegal ways of avoiding service; the two most common were desertion and self-mutilation. Unsurprisingly, absconding became more prevalent as the wars went on; sometimes individuals were hidden by family or friends from the gendarmes whose responsibility it was to round them up. However, as the number of 'refractaires' grew, so they formed bands who lived in the forests or mountains, turned to robbery to survive and encouraged others to join them rather than serve. Self-mutilation included the amputation of fingers or thumbs so individuals were unable to hold a musket or the breaking of the front teeth so they were unable to tear open a cartridge.

THE CONSCRIPTION OF LATE 1813 AND 1814

In order to concentrate wholly on military operations whilst he was on campaign in Germany in 1813, Napoleon entrusted the government of France to his wife, the young Marie-Louise, assisted by a Council of Regency directed by Cambacères. The Decree calling the new conscripts to the Eagles was therefore signed by her and it is for this reason that these young soldiers were known as *Marie-Louises*.

From early in October 1813 (even before Leipzig) Napoleon issued a series of *Senatus Consulte* calling for the raising of new conscripts. If these had all been realised they would have produced 936,000 men under arms. However, there would prove to be only sufficient time, political will and equipment to deploy between 120 and 175,000 men to the various armies before the war ended in April the following year.

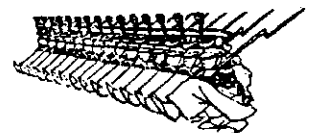
The first levy in Autumn 1813 called for 160,000 men from the classes of 1808-14: ironically 184,000 reported! The second levy called for 150,000 from the class of 1815 (ie 18 year olds). This levy also met little resistance except in the more Royalist departments where it was not

pushed too hard. Anyway, by this time the administrative services, recruiting stations, clothing factories and arsenals were unable to cope with the influx of such numbers. Even this levy did not all find its way to the front before the fighting was over. However, Napoleon then called for a third levy of 300,000 men, these were to come from the classes of 1800-07 for the second time, 1808, 1813 and 1814 for the third time and 1809-12 for the fourth time! It is hardly surprising that this final levy met substantial resistance from all parts of the country as it forced some areas to conscript supporters of families and even some married men. It is reported that only some 63,000, of the 300,000 called for, actually reported and it is doubtful if any of these had been processed before Napoleon's abdication. As if this was not enough, married and older men were still liable for service with the National Guard, although this organisation experienced even more problems in equipping and training the few men that answered the call.

The Allied invasion of France in 1814 struck terror into the hearts of the French, but initially at least there seemed little public will to resist. The nation was clearly weary of war and wished for peace. However, this apathy, particularly in the districts which were occupied or directly threatened by the invasion, was quick to be dispelled as stories of the behaviour of the Allied armies began to circulate. The poor discipline of the allied troops, however understandable, motivated the populace into action. Regrettably for Napoleon, this spontaneous reaction of the occupied areas came too late: the damage done by the initial apathy, particularly the reaction to the punishing levies, could not be repaired in time.

After the general compliance of the early drafts, public feeling against those that followed became increasingly aggressive. Many officials put off as long as possible the enforcement of the conscription and when put under pressure carried it out without energy. In some departments the drawing of lots was the signal for a riot and in Toulouse a notice appeared threatening to hang the first man who came forward to draw his number.

No one seemed willing to serve and the later conscriptions made slow progress. The registers proved faulty and out of date and despite the gendarmes, bailiffs and mobile columns, the numbers of defaulters and deserters rapidly increased. The forests filled with those avoiding the draft and bands of up to a thousand young men formed in various departments. These were able to arm themselves and there were skirmishes with the local troops and gendarmes. A detachment of conscripts from the Lower Seine started from there 177 strong but arrived at the training depot with only 35.⁴ It seemed that the only ones who stayed with the later drafts were those who had either not dared or been able to follow the deserters. Substitutes became beyond the means of all but



the well-off and almost impossible to find even if the money was available.

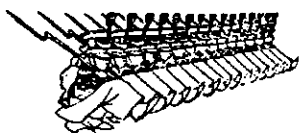
Stories began to circulate; a detachment of infantry crossing the bridge over the Gironde at Bordeaux had thrown their arms into the river, others said "at the first shot we shall go over to the enemy".⁵ But most of these type of stories are unsubstantiated and were probably spread by Royalists who became more overt in their opposition to Napoleon. Not everyone was against the Emperor; whilst the upper classes blamed him for not making peace, many of the working classes still supported him and did not necessarily blame him for the war. To many of them he still seemed invincible, despite his defeats.

In his book 'The Campaigns of Napoleon' David Chandler claims that "mere boys of 15 or 16 found themselves carrying muskets". Records show that no one from the classes of 1816 or 17 were called up so it is unlikely that anyone of this age was serving **against his will**. However, it is possible that boys of that age volunteered for service, particularly from those departments that had been ravaged and occupied, or threatened by the allies. Napoleon also called up for service some of the *Pupilles*; made up from the orphans of soldiers killed on campaign these were brought up in a military environment, well trained and probably had more combat value than many of the older conscripts. Only the depot battalion with the youngest *Pupilles*, 13 to 16 years, was in Paris when the Allies attacked the capital. Marshal Moncey found these youngsters reluctant to stop fighting and even when ordered to withdraw they cried "just one more shot!"⁶

However unwilling the conscripts were when they drew their number or left their family behind, there can be little doubt from the reports on their performance that for many their attitude changed as time went by. Many were from small, forgotten, dirty villages and bleak city slums, illiterate and completely ignorant of the world. They had been poor, ill-fed on little but bread and potatoes, and overworked at monotonous, sometimes dangerous work. So, despite the lack of equipment, food and training, the appalling weather and the rigours of campaign, each step away from their previous life and closer to the nervous excitement of action, the need to protect *La Patrie*, the comradeship of a shared adventure and the magic of the Emperor, combined to generate a courage and motivation that no one, except perhaps Napoleon, could have reasonably expected.

From all this evidence it is clear that the levies made for the campaign in France were extremely unpopular and widely evaded, particularly later on. But we must be wary of tarring all the conscripts with the same brush, for many of them fought with outstanding fortitude and courage in the most trying of conditions.

RECEPTION AND EQUIPMENT



Whether they were enthusiastic volunteers or reluctant conscripts, for those that arrived at the depots there is no doubt that a nightmare was about to begin. Their reception took place in even worse conditions than those called up in 1813. Like the latter, assembled by an NCO at the principle town of the department, they were taken to a regimental depot, and from there by forced marches to the towns and villages near the front. They were most likely dressed as they left home; in peasant blouses, round hat and sabots, as many of the depots had no uniforms and in some cases not even arms for them. Sometimes they got second hand uniforms from various sources just behind the front: if they were lucky they may get a greatcoat (*capote*), a shako and an ammunition pouch, but many went into action with just a forage cap, belt and cartridge box. Many contemporary accounts verify this situation: De Ségur reports that the 113th Line at Champaubert 'was composed of new recruits, their uniform consisted of a grey greatcoat and a *bonnet de police*'.⁷ On 27 Jan, La Hamelinaye's division of the Paris Reserve was sent to defend Troyes even though it was still awaiting ammunition and 'the rest of its arms'.⁸ General Preval who commanded the cavalry depot at Versailles reported, "There has just arrived here a squadron of light cavalry who are deficient of everything except waistcoats and breeches".⁹ Even the Guard did not escape these shortages; on the 6th Feb, Napoleon wrote to General Ornano who commanded the Depot of the Guard: "There should be plenty of muskets and cartridge pouches. There are enough shakos in Paris. You will have to scratch for the rest... under present conditions you can dress a soldier with a shako, greatcoat and pouch".¹⁰ Napoleon ordered the National Guard to be dressed in the greatcoats and shakos of allied prisoners but it transpired that these were unwearable due to the vermin!¹¹

But if only two out of three had any uniform the most critical deficiency was in arms. The poorly maintained muskets of the National Guard had already been called in and after the need to re-equip a huge army in 1813, the production of muskets could not keep pace with demand. In the depot of the 1st Military District there were 9,135 men and only 6,350 muskets, in the 16th, 15,789 men and only 9,470 muskets. In some of the formed regiments the shortages were even worse; the 153rd Line Regiment boasted 1,088 men and only 142 muskets and the 115th Line, 2,344 men and 289 muskets.¹² To what extent these deficiencies were made good during the war it is impossible to say but after French victories special attention was given to collecting the muskets from the battlefield and prisoners.

The cavalry too suffered severe shortages. The dragoons had been stripped of their muskets to supply the infantry and all were short of sabres; the 17th Dragoons had 349 men with only 187

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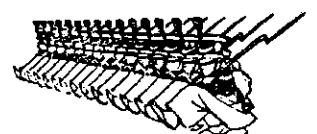
has 6,284 horses for 9,786 men.¹⁴ This shortage also meant that cavalrymen at the front were unable to find remounts when their horses were lost for any reason: the Regimental History of the Carabiniers tells of 80 dismounted troopers who were sent back to Liège to find horses. Finding none there they were sent first to Namour, where they met the rest of the regiment. They followed them to Rhiems from where they were sent back to the Versailles depot before finally being remounted.¹⁵ What a waste of trained manpower.

TRAINING

Proficiency at drill was immensely important on the Napoleonic battlefield. It gave the troops the confidence and tactical flexibility which distinguished good troops and allowed them to manoeuvre quickly, a telling advantage during a battle. However, to acquire this skill required one vital commodity which was not available to Napoleon in 1814; time. Napier estimated that it took three years to make infantry completely disciplined - as opposed to just fit to take the field which may take only a few weeks,¹⁶ and Napoleon considered a soldier trained after two months campaigning.

The Emperor's greatest victories were won after a concentrated period of training in Boulogne whilst awaiting the invasion of England. He was never again to have such a long period of peace in which to train his troops.

Consequently, from the time that *La Grande Armée* marched off towards Ulm and its subsequent run of victories,



them in close order, guided by veteran NCOs. This situation is amply illustrated in this passage from Houssaye, describing a moment in the battle of Craonne: "The conscripts were already much shaken and would have broken on the slightest provocation. The general did not even dare to deploy his division, but kept his battalions in mass under the close fire of the Russian guns. The young soldiers behaved better than could be expected but they lost terribly; the 14th Voltigeurs lost 30 of their 33 officers and the regiment was mown down like a field of corn."¹⁸

As if the inability of the conscripts to manoeuvre in formation was not bad enough, it seems that in some cases even the most rudimentary aspects of training had been ignored: seeing a conscript standing inactive under Russian musketry at Champaubert on the 10th Feb 1814, Marshal Marmont asked him why he did not fire back; the young man replied that he did not know how to load his musket!¹⁹ Another conscript approached his lieutenant and said, "sir, you have been at this a long time. Take my musket and fire it and I will pass you the cartridges."²⁰ Given such episodes it is no surprise that the tactical employment of such troops was limited.

In the absence of a good proportion of veterans in a unit to help to guide and educate the conscripts there was a vital need for an experienced and professional cadre of officers and NCOs. Inevitably however, just as the previous years had seen the destruction of the veterans so they had seen the decimation of the existing cadres, Napoleon had struggled with a desperate shortage of these invaluable men as he raised his new army in 1813, and as he had been forced to scrape the barrel then, so the cupboard was now virtually bare. The more inexperienced and poorly trained the troops, so it is even more important to have strong cadres. Therefore the burden of training and leading green troops fell even harder on those available and demanded even more sacrifices, particularly in battle. Napoleon was therefore forced to depend on older men, reservists or volunteers and even mutilated veterans who controlled the drafting of the troops, and one armed



A veteran grenadier recalled from Spain briefs two Marie-Louises. These two conscripts are comparatively well equipped compared to many of their contemporaries

pensioners from *Les Invalides*.

To replace losses retired officers had to be recalled, and many old NCOs, most of them illiterate, were promoted to sub-lieutenant. Napoleon wrote to Clarke (the Minister for War): "I am told that there are between 700 and 800 individuals in *Les Invalides* whose disabilities are slight and would serve again with good grace. If this is true they would form an admirable source of junior officers."²¹ Bouvier-Destouches, ex-lieutenant of the mounted Guard Grenadiers had lost most of his fingers in Russia but had the stump of one hand fitted with a hook to hold his reins, the other with a strap to hold his sabre and was wounded twice more at Craonne!²² To graphically illustrate the state the army was in we need only return to the gallant 113th Line at Champaubert. De Ségur tells us that they had hardly any commanders or cadre and when Marmont inspected them, seeing most of their platoons without officers, he demanded of one of the conscripts where was their lieutenant, "our lieutenant?" replied a weak voice, "but we never had one", "and your sergeant?" replied the Marshal, once more the



sergeant?" replied the Marshal, once more the same voice, "but it is the same, we fear nothing, we are fine!"²³ Although this story may have been somewhat romanticised the point is well made.

The large number of conscripts incorporated into the cavalry presented even more of a problem than in the infantry. Cavalry troopers required far more training than the infantry before they were fit to take the field. One French expert, admittedly overstating his case, declared in 1793 that cavalry needed three or four years of drill before they could be risked in action, whereas infantry recruits could take their place after only six weeks providing they were mixed with veterans.²⁴ There were several reasons for this; a cavalry trooper had to learn not only how to look after himself and perform the intricacies of mounted drill amid the noise and confusion of the battlefield but also how to ride and care for his mount. By this time in the wars around 80% of recruits had never ridden a horse and complicating the situation was the acute shortage of trained horses. Most had previously come from Germany but now of course this source had dried up. So although there were many tough old cavalymen to meet the invasion - the Guard cavalry, the now veteran survivors of the campaign in Germany and the magnificent dragoon regiments recalled from Spain, there were also raw boys, mounted on whatever horses could be found for them and gathered up into provisional regiments as their depots got them more or less uniformed and equipped. In August 1813, General Lauriston describing this type of cavalry, wrote to Berthier; "These young men are well intentioned but so inexperienced that they are always defeated because they fall off their horses!"²⁵ In 1814 the situation would have been no better.

Pajol's command at Montereau consisted of such troops; "many men and horses had not been with the army more than 15 days. Not only were the riders incapable of handling their horses and weapons properly, but even holding the reins in one hand and their sabres in the other; some even needed both hands to turn their horses left or right".²⁶ General Delort who commanded one of Pajol's brigades commented that "only a madman would order me to charge with such troops?"²⁷ However, at Montereau the order was given and ironically it was Pajol's charge which turned the Wurttemberg defeat into a rout: despite charging "like a herd of stampeding cattle"²⁸, after the battle Pajol's ADC admitted that "veteran cavalry on well trained horses could never have done so well".²⁹

Given the poor quality of the infantry the importance of a strong artillery was well understood by Napoleon. He was careful to build up a strong Guard artillery and they were to play a pivotal role in most of his victories. At least in this area there were less problems; there remained a large pool of trained officers and there were a number of

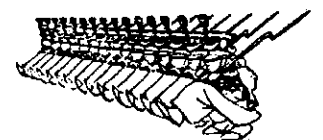
sources from which the army could draw trained artillerymen. Technical training was only required by a small number of each crew, the majority of whom were mere labourers to manhandle the gun and carry ammunition. Generally there was not a shortage of guns but a full divisional complement was rarely achieved and there was often a logistical nightmare of supplying a number of different calibres in a single battery. Lack of trained horseflesh to draw the guns and supporting caissons and wagons was more of a problem and this was exacerbated by the poor weather, the terrible mud through which the guns had to be drawn on this campaign and the shortage of trained drivers who really knew how to care for the horses.

THE YOUNG GUARD

Recruits for Napoleon's Young Guard were selected from volunteers and the biggest, strongest and best educated men from the current class of conscripts. Needless to say, volunteers, by definition, were generally better motivated than most of the conscripts and despite the strength of feeling against the later levies there were many who were prepared to volunteer for the defence of *La Patrie*, irrespective of their personal attitude to Napoleon. By having the luxury of being selective the Guard was able to choose those conscripts who by age or physique were best able to withstand the rigours of campaign. The building up of the Guard may be seen as a deliberate attempt to throw a more glamorous light onto the hated duties of compulsory service but there is no evidence to support this; Napoleon never clearly stated his purpose in establishing the Young Guard, but there is no doubt that if the Old Guard was raised as the ultimate reserve to be committed only at the critical moment of battle, the Young Guard was raised to fight: Napoleon wrote of his Guard; "In war I profit more from the fusiliers and conscripts than from the grenadiers and chasseurs".³⁰

Although their mental and physical maturity were likely to improve their combat effectiveness, their greatest advantage the high quality of the officer and NCO cadres that were provided for them by the Old and Middle Guards. With these veterans to guide them and inculcate the best traditions of the Guard into them, their battlefield performance exceeded all expectations. Another spin off from the building up of this *esprit de corps* was the reducing of the chances that the conscripts would desert; out of the 43,000 conscripts who were accepted for the Young Guard, Lachouque reports that fewer than 100 had deserted from the depots.³¹

Napoleon clearly realised that an elite Young Guard of mature, well led conscripts with high morale would be the most combat effective part of his army. He therefore went to much trouble to increase their strength by exploiting all available resources and took great personal interest in their raising and organisation. By the end of the cam-



campaign there were 19 regiments each of Voltigeurs and Tirailleurs and he had increased the establishment of many of these from two battalions to three. As the campaign went on 'processed' conscripts were sent to the new regiments and divisions rather than to reinforce those already organised and at the front. The result was that the front line divisions continually shrunk in size whilst entirely new and untried divisions were hastily organised and sent forward to join the fighting. Ultimately, when these older divisions became non-effective due to their losses they were merely merged with another in a similar situation.

It is worth briefly following one of these divisions to illustrate this: the 1st Voltigeur Division commanded by *General de Division* Meunier was one of the first to be raised after Leipzig and was thus reasonably well equipped, armed and organised with "excellent cadres". In December 1813 it numbered 117 officers and 4,700 men and in the first skirmishes with the allies one of the brigade commanders (Rousseau) reported; "I have nothing but praise for our youngsters; they fought well".³² By the 26th January when the army concentrated at Chalons, before any battle had been fought, their strength was down to 3,830. Having fought at Brienne and then La Rothiere, the first major engagements of the campaign, they were reduced to a strength of approximately 3,000. After the terrible retreat that followed that defeat they fought again at Montmirail, were present but saw little or no fighting at Vauchamps and Montereau, by which time they mustered hardly 2,000 men. By the time of the battle at Craonne (7 Mar) the division was only about 1,000 strong; involved in heavy fighting, that day cost them over 50% of their remaining strength, 540 men becoming casualties (including the colonel of the 1st Voltigeurs, six out of the eight unit commanding officers and 30 other officers)! With the division reduced to the strength of a single battalion they fought again at Laon two days later. It is little surprise that Napoleon wrote after this battle; "The Young Guard is melting like snow in the sun".³³ After Laon, Meunier's division was merged into the 2nd Voltigeur Division in the reorganisation that saw four Young Guard divisions amalgamated into two.

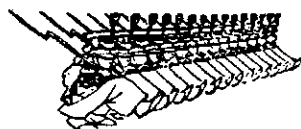
A total of nine Young Guard divisions were raised for this campaign, but although those raised early on were filled with the right calibre of men, reasonably well equipped and with a strong cadre this was not true of all of them. The Guard began to suffer the same sort of shortages of equipment and uniforms as the line troops, General d'Ornano writing; "we have no credit".³⁴ The Guard's funds were exhausted. Despite this Napoleon continued to write optimistic letters to d'Ornano "You must have at least twenty battalion cadres...when filled up these will make a fine reserve of 16,000 men...announce these divisions today and organise them tomorrow".³⁵ But cadres

became increasingly hard to find even for the Guard and a number of sources had to be used; officers were appointed from the Royal Guards of Naples and Spain and retired veterans were recalled - two NCOs posted to the 9th Tirailleurs had each lost an arm! Even the quality of the conscripts sent to the Guard fell: Napoleon had some that were allocated to VI Corps (and had therefore originally missed selection to the Guard) sent to Curial's 2nd Young Guard Division because he "would make better use of them than Marmont".³⁶

The fact of the matter was that whatever handicaps the Young Guard were working under, as the campaign progressed they became the principle component of the army and Napoleon relied on them to do the lion's share of the fighting, supported increasingly by the Old Guard. As the Emperor advanced against Blucher with nearly 40,000 men in March, 27,000 were of the Guard and at Craonne they accounted for 90% of the French troops present at that bloody battle.

FOOTNOTES

1. 'These poor children'. Expression used by De Ségur to describe the 113th Line at the battle of Champaubert, 10th Feb 1814.
2. Figures given by Scott Bowden in 'Napoleon's La Grande Armée of 1813' p201.
3. Rothenberg, 'The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon', p135.
4. Houssaye, '1814,' Worley Publications reprint, p19.
5. Ibid, p23.
6. Lachouque, 'Anatomy of Glory', p398.
7. De Ségur, 'Du Rhin à Fontainebleau', p67.
8. Lachouque, Op Cit, p344.
9. Houssaye, Op Cit, p10.
10. Lachouque, Op Cit, p350.
11. Houssaye, Op Cit, p11.
12. Ibid, p10.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Unknown, 'Le Manuscrit de Carabiniers', p265.
16. Quoted in Muir, 'Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon', p75.
17. Quoted in Bowden, Op Cit, p62.
18. Quoted in Houssaye, Op Cit, p151.
19. De Ségur, Op Cit, p68.
20. Quoted in Blond, 'La Grande Armée', p424.
21. Napoleon to Clarke (War Minister) quoted in Hamilton-Williams, 'The Fall of Napoleon', p60.
22. Elting, 'Swords Around a Throne', p328.
23. De Ségur, Op Cit, pp67,68.
24. Lynn, 'Bayonets of the Republic', quoted in Muir, Op Cit, p111.
25. Quoted in Bowden, Op Cit, p141.
26. Col Biot quoted in Elting, Op Cit, p245.
27. Johnson, 'The French Cavalry', p138.
28. Ibid, p141.
29. Elting, Op Cit, p246.
30. Lachouque, Op Cit, p145.
31. Ibid, p373.
32. Ibid, p336.
33. Ibid, p372.
34. Elting, Op Cit, p.
35. Lachouque, Op Cit, p350.
36. Ibid, p342.



'Ces Pauvres Enfants'¹

Napoleon's Marie-Louises of 1814

Part 2

by Major AW Field

ON CAMPAIGN

The young men of 1814 were not physically ready for war, nor were most of them able to contend with the deprivation and demands of life on campaign. In his Military Maxims Napoleon wrote "*The first qualification of a soldier is fortitude under fatigue and privation, courage is only second; hardship, poverty and want are the best school for the soldier.*"³⁷ *Inadequate training for the hardships of campaign and lack of discipline to overcome them are the chief reasons for the failure of hastily raised and trained armies. Clausewitz wrote: "War is the domain of physical exertion and suffering. If one is not to be overcome by these features, he must possess a certain physical and mental strength, native or acquired, which makes him indifferent to them."*³⁸

Thus it was in their conduct off the battlefield that the young conscripts would be tested most severely, and there that they would fall woefully short. It is ironic that courage was an attribute in which they lacked nothing and repeatedly displayed beyond what could be reasonably be expected of them. But Napoleon's method of warfare always emphasised rapid manoeuvres at the strategic and grand tactical levels as well as on the battlefield. And it was this demand, along with the atrocious weather, that was bound to bring fatigue even amongst the most mature, well-conditioned and well officered body of troops.

Frederick the Great wrote: "*It is only absolute necessity and great advantages which can excuse winter operations. Ordinarily they ruin the troops because of sickness by which they are followed and because, remaining constantly in action, there is no time to either recruit troops nor to equip them.*"³⁹ Yet a winter war was exactly what the allies forced on Napoleon by crossing the Rhine on New Years Day. Consequently the campaign was fought through a series of snow storms, freezing rain and alternate frosts and thaws which turned the roads into quagmires and tested the endurance of the *Marie-Louises* to the very limits.

Given these challenging conditions the most demoralising scenario was to endure them in retreat after significant defeat in the first major battle of the

campaign. This is exactly what the young conscripts faced after Napoleon had been beaten by Blücher at La Rothiere on the 1st February. Having courageously resisted the attacks by superior numbers all day in snow storms and freezing temperatures, the French were forced to retire during the night or face inevitable and overwhelming defeat the next day. The conscripts had fought well and on some parts of the battlefield were entitled to think they were winning; here the order to retire must have been doubly depressing. The snow continued to fall and the roads were swamped but the retreat started in fairly good order. However, after a few hours marching in these conditions it changed into something of a rout; the ranks quickly began to thin out, most of those who disappeared being youngsters who had escaped the control of the veterans in the dark. This control was needed to ensure march discipline and to avoid the temptations of marauding and desertion. Considering the shortages of officers and NCOs, coupled with the immaturity of most of the conscripts, it is of little surprise that so many left the ranks, draining away vital manpower from an army that was already at a considerable numerical disadvantage. In order to keep up, some of the *Marie-Louises* were seen to throw away first their knapsacks, then their equipment and then their muskets. The demoralising retreat continued throughout the 2nd and

3rd of February and to make matters worse as the army entered Troyes it found the doors and shutters closed on them. No help was volunteered from their own countrymen and some accounts claim that not only were they encouraged to desert but that some soldiers actually died of hunger! After their poor reception in Troyes the retreat continued until they arrived in Nogent on 6th February. The snow had stopped but had been replaced by icy rain and violent winds; after stumbling through the mud for five days the conscripts dropped in their tracks, too tired even to seek shelter. By this time the army was described as a "confused mass" and Baron Fain, in his 'Memoirs of the Invasion of France' says "*the troops were dispirited to an indescribable degree*". The conscripts were worn out with fatigue, hunger and defeat, and throughout the retreat the numbers deserting began to grow despite the efforts of the veterans and gen-



"L'enseignement mutuel", A Grenadier à pied with a student of the Garde. (de Charlet).



darmes. By the time order had been restored in Nogent it is estimated that no less than 6,000 had left the army.⁴⁰

LEADERSHIP

"There are no troops so bad that good generals cannot fire them. Perhaps the value of the leader outvalues all others", so wrote Commandant Colin.⁴¹ During this campaign more than any of his others, Napoleon realised the importance of strong leadership and setting the example. The old magnetism was still working and the mere sight of the Emperor transformed the *Marie-Louises*: At the battle at Brienne Captain Coignet describes how Napoleon put himself at the head of a regiment; "*Soldiers, I am your colonel, I shall lead you. Brienne must be taken*", our troops were so transported that the Emperor could not control them; they rushed past the staff...all obstacles were surmounted.⁴² But Napoleon also made efforts to encourage his generals to set their own example; leading a similarly inexperienced army the year before he had written: "*The campaign which we are about to undertake will make it necessary for you to show the best example for all the officers and men...His Majesty believes that leadership will overcome our deficiencies*".⁴³

However, the campaign of 1814 is well known for the flagging enthusiasm and lack of energy of many of Napoleon's Marshals who have been described as tired of war and keen to be given the opportunity to enjoy some of the rewards they had earned after many years campaigning. But if this was true of the Marshals then it is not so for the younger, up and coming generals who aspired to the baton. Time and again they led the young conscripts from the front and often paid a high price. The battle of Craonne has already been noted for the high officer losses of the 17th Voltigeurs but the battle also saw many other examples of this kind: Marshal Victor and Generals Grouchy, Sparre, Laferriere, Rosier, Cambronne, Bigarre, Le Capitaine, Boyer de Rebeval and Guye were all wounded. The conscripts of the Young Guard suffered very heavy casualties and General Drouot, commanding the Guard Artillery, was seen with "*swab and range finder in hand*" going "*from gun to gun, coaching his green and ill-clad gunners who were being pounded by the enemy*".⁴⁴

All in all, considering the relative inexperience of the army, their combat performance was remarkable and much of this was due to the leadership and skill of the younger, well motivated generals who seemed undaunted by defeats, the poor standard of many of the conscripts and the demoralising conditions in which the campaign was fought.

INTO BATTLE

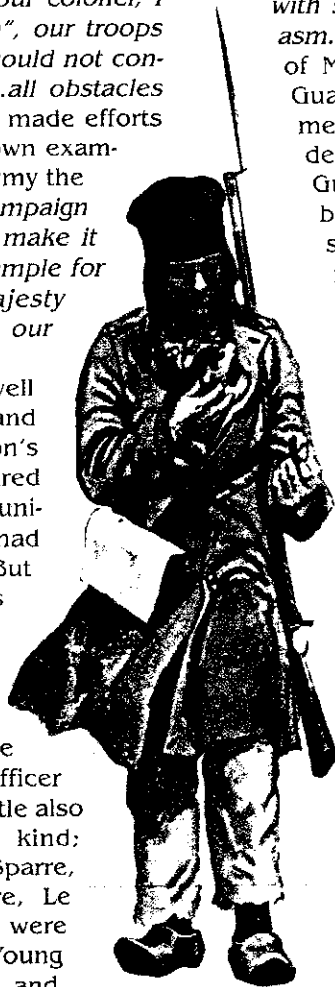
Ultimately, the true value of any troops can only be measured on the battlefield. Reading the various accounts of this campaign and the conduct of the *Marie-Louises* the same two words were used again and again by different authors to describe their bat-

tlefield performance; 'enthusiastic' and 'courageous'. Even on the 27th March as the Allies marched on Paris General Henrion reported; "*The Young Guard are full of enthusiasm*".⁴⁵ After the battle of Montmirail during which Ricard's division of conscripts suffered 900 casualties out of a strength of 1,800, Napoleon wrote; "*the efforts, the heroism, the enthusiasm of the Marie-Louises of Ricard, pulled from their families, dressed in greatcoats which are too big, wearing shakos which are too heavy, without bread, in the greyness of February, after their brilliant victory yelled 'Vive l'Empereur' like veterans*".⁴⁶ However, in his famous book 'On War', Clausewitz writes; "*Military virtues should not be confused with simple bravery, and still less with enthusiasm...*": we must not fool ourselves; the victory of Montmirail was really a victory of the Old Guard cavalry and infantry. Although Ricard's men fought well, their final attack was only delivered because of the support of two Old Guard battalions, for as Colin suggests, the best way to encourage untrained troops is to support them with veterans. Napoleon did not blind himself to their true worth for after the partial victory at Brienne he wrote; "*with older troops it would have been possible to have done better...but in the circumstances, and with the type of troops we had we should be content with what occurred*".⁴⁷

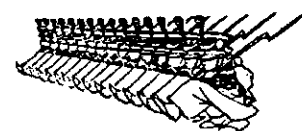
Commandant Colin wrote; "*Newly raised levies generally only achieve decisive results when they have a great superiority in numbers. Especially without well trained officers, they become masses with which it is difficult to perform evolutions, cannot achieve decisive results by manoeuvre and consequently, are incapable of bringing off a decisive success. Well officered troops on the contrary, compensate for their numerical inferiority by the quickness of their manoeuvres*".⁴⁸ We have already seen how Napoleon's generals were unwilling to deploy or manoeuvre their troops at Craonne as they feared that the slightest confusion would result in panic; so they valiantly stood motionless under a terrific

fire and suffered appalling casualties.

The first major battle of the campaign was at La Rothiere on the 1st February and it was here that the *Marie-Louises* had their real baptism of fire. The accounts of the fighting and their performance are instructive: the French right under General Gerard's Reserve of Paris, held the village of Dienville. Gerard's troops consisted almost exclusively of conscripts but all day this small corps gallantly resisted all the allied attacks and kept possession of the vital bridge over the Aube. It is true that they were well



The individual depicted above typifies the poor standard of equipment and uniforms issued to the young conscripts. Many only received a *bonnet de police* and a *capote* at most.. This young gentleman has been fairly lucky to receive a beige *capote*, cloth shortages led to capotes of every conceivable colour being worn by the Marie-Louises. Thanks to the artist, Gerry Embleton for the use of this image.



dug in and the snow concealed the masses of the enemy but you can still well imagine their disappointment when told to withdraw. However, perhaps more telling is an account of Rottembourg's division towards the end of the battle. Rottembourg commanded a division of the Young Guard which was part of Marshal Ney's Young Guard Corps. Until Napoleon's decision to withdraw they had taken no part in the battle; but to cover the retreat Napoleon ordered them to retake the key village of La Rothiere. Rottembourg formed his weak division (5,000 men) in three columns and advanced with determination; De Ségur takes up the story: "the village was retaken as far as the church. But there, the two columns of the right and left were struck by the Russian reserves; the shock pushed them back...the centre column, that of Rottembourg, nearly all recruits, penetrated into the village, there it was met with such a violent and sudden fire that it stopped confused. In their surprise the green soldiers mechanically fired their muskets harmlessly into the air; then, heads lowered, they pressed together and became incapable of action". The Russians believed they wished to surrender and it was only through the efforts of Rottembourg who disavowed the Russian commander of his assumption that gave the officers the opportunity to reorder their ranks and enable the division to withdraw.⁴⁹

After the demoralising retreat from La Rothiere the conscripts fought well at Champaubert, taking heart from the fact that they were again attacking; the Russian general Olsufiev was captured at sword point by a 19 year old chasseur with less than six months service and during the storming of the village, Marmont's young troops actually crossed bayonets with the Russians, a rare occurrence which proves their determination to close with the enemy. But the morale of these young troops grew more and more brittle as the campaign went on and there were more and more instances of failed heroic attacks that were followed by panic and rout. At Craonne, Laon and Fère Champenoise whole divisions of conscripts broke and fled after suffering terrible casualties, usually after launching almost suicidal attacks or being caught by surprise.

And so the pattern of behaviour of the *Marie-Louises* on the battlefield was established; in the face of the enemy the young soldiers fought with courage and tenacity but often outnumbered and outgunned what often started as stiff resistance deteriorated into panic and rout as units lost cohesion, broke ranks

and fled.

Perhaps it is only fair to finish with a quick account of what is possibly their finest hour, albeit one that has to be shared with the National Guard. On the 25th March, whilst Marshals Marmont and Mortier were receiving a thorough thrashing at the hands of the main allied army at Fère Champenoise, a convoy of 200 carts of provisions escorted by a weak division of young conscripts commanded by General Amey and one of National Guards commanded by General Pachtod were moving to try and join them. These two divisions totalled only 4,300 men, many still dressed in civilian clothes, and 16 guns. Attacked by 4,000 cavalry and 1,500 cossacks Amey formed his division into a single square and with the National Guard repulsed continuous assaults until forced to abandon the convoy. The allied cavalry grew in number until there were 20,000 horsemen supported by 50 guns. The gallant French conscripts refused a number of

offers to surrender despite being decimated by artillery and charged repeatedly by cavalry. General Delort reported; "they closed their ranks and marched the more proudly, as if their energy increased with the danger".⁵⁰ For four hours not a square was broken and they resisted all assaults until artillery barred their way and they realised there was no hope of escape. It was only the intervention of the Czar himself, impressed by their heroism, that persuaded them to surrender: 1,400 were taken prisoner, over 2,000 were killed or wounded and 500 escaped. Tactically the *Marie-Louises* may have been a blunt instrument but they could never be accused of lacking courage.

CONCLUSION

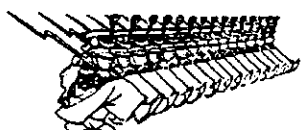
Young, inexperienced and lacking even the rudiments of training, in most cases the *Marie-Louises* fought

magnificently but forlornly. Yet while we must question their true combat value they were certainly not useless. It is perhaps a statement of the blindingly obvious to say that the most seasoned troops are the best, but in the absence of fighting experience it is the cohesion, mutual confidence, the habit of shared hardships, military training and education, and above all, the officers and NCOs that impart real value to the troops. In the line formations the young conscripts were lacking these in virtually every department, whilst most of the Young Guard formations at least had quality cadres, and this was amply reflected in their performance in battle.

The *Marie-Louises* had only their enthusiasm and courage to qualify them as soldiers. On some occa-



Marie-Louises in the French campaign. Artist: Job.





Napoleon haranguing some conscripts on the way to the battle of Arcis-sur-Aube

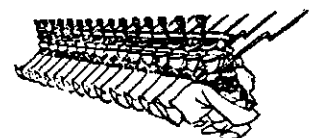
sions these were sufficient to see them to victory for as Wellington once suggested, while such troops were inferior to veterans in manoeuvring, they were superior in fighting because they had not yet learned caution.⁵¹ But this lack of fear in their first engagements cost them fearful casualties and, as a consequence, a tendency to suffer from brittle morale later in the campaign. Camille Rousset, a French military historian summed it up nicely; *"A single day is not enough to make a veteran soldier out of a conscript...intoxication of the first engagement cannot be confused with the sustained, cold, reasoned courage of every day and every hour: this courage does not make the complete soldier, other military virtues must be added to it: patience, perseverance, especially obedience and respect for discipline, and that barring a miracle, these virtues are not innate in a conscript and cannot be acquired in a day"*.⁵²

As a rule the young *Marie-Louises* always seemed capable of accomplishing feats on the battlefield which, though generally not sufficient to gain victory, were well above those which could reasonably have been expected of them. A significant proportion of Napoleon's greatest victories were invariably due to the rapid marches which unhinged his enemy's strategic plans. In 1814 the Emperor returned to a strategy of manoeuvre: he was no longer able to field larger armies than his opponents and rely on mass for victory as he had done between 1809 and 1813. However, whilst the *Marie-Louises* were capable of heroics on a single day, the demands these marches made were beyond the physical capabilities of his young, weak, improperly trained, inadequately officered and improperly equipped and nourished conscripts. As Napoleon exclaimed after Leipzig; *"I need*

men not boys...men are needed to defend France",⁵³ I suspect that no one had the courage to remind him that he was the reason there were none left!

37. Translation of *'The Military Maxims of Napoleon'*, Greenhill Books, Maxim LVIII p204.
38. Clausewitz, *'On War'*, Book 1, Chapter 3.
39. Frederick the Great's *'Instructions to his Generals'*, translated by Chris Hayes and published by Partizan Press, p78.
40. Houssaye, Op Cit, p53.
41. Comdt Colin, *'Transformations of War'*, p351. 42. Coignet, *'The Notebooks of Captain Coignet'*, p261.
43. Quoted by Bowden, Op Cit, p204.
44. Lachouque, Op Cit, p371.
45. Ibid, p389.
46. Tranie & Carigiani, *'Napoléon 1814, La Campagne de France'*, p113.
47. Lachouque, Op Cit, p345.
48. Comdt Colin, Op Cit, p146.
49. De Ségur, Op Cit, p51.
50. Houssaye, Op Cit, p308.
51. Rothenberg, Op Cit, p136.
52. Quoted in Bowden, Op Cit, p78.
53. Quoted in Bowden, Op Cit, p204.

(The Partizan Press production team apologise for the cock-ups in last issues segment of this article. It was our fault, don't blame Richard! In the Reception and Equipment section the text ending on page 15 carries on in the last paragraph of the left hand column of page 16. The section that got chopped accidentally, linking page 16 to 17, has been included on page 36.)



uncovered at least 31 skeletons that historians believe are those of British, Spanish, German and Dutch soldiers who died in a military hospital after serving in the Peninsular War.

The remains were found in the village of Lahonce, several miles northeast of Bayonne when a building site was being excavated. Scientific analysis revealed that the bones belonged to men aged between 15 and 40 buried between the 17th and 19th centuries. It was not until investigators unearthed a civil register dating from the early 19th century that the origin of the skeletons was revealed.

The document described a military hospital that had been created in the village between 1811 and 1814 to care for mainly Spanish, but also British, Dutch and German soldiers wounded during Wellington's campaign in the Peninsular. The report makes no mention of what has happened to these skeletons since their origin was discovered.

Forthcoming Books from Chatham Publishing

This publisher has some exciting forthcoming books available for the naval historian. The Illustrated Companion to Nelson's Navy by Nicholas Blake and Richard Lawrence (November 1999, £20 hardback) will look at every aspect of the navy of Nelson's time, from the workings of the Admiralty, the ships and men who manned them, through to the merchant fleets and the opposing navies. HMS Victory: Her Construction, Career and Restoration by Alan McGowan (October 1999, £40 hardback) will examine the ship as she was in 1805, including looking at life on board for the officers and crew. There will also be an examination of the processes involved in her

restoration. Warships of the Napoleonic Era by Robert Gardiner (November 1999, £30 hardback) reproduces original plans of all the principal types of warship employed during the Napoleonic Wars, explaining the often confusing variety of rates used in the Royal Navy.

The Most Famous Names in History

Here is an item I gleaned from The Guardian of 14th September. Peter Dickson, a former CIA analyst, has spent his time surveying the books in the Library of Congress in Washington, to produce a top 30 list of famous names who have inspired books to be written about them. This list was compiled using the Library's computerised cataloguing system. Napoleon is there, and here is the Top 10 Most Famous Names In History as compiled at The Library of Congress:

1. Christ (17,239 books)
2. William Shakespeare (9,801)
3. Vladimir Lenin (4,492)
4. Abraham Lincoln (4,378)
5. Napoleon Bonaparte (4,007)
6. Karl Marx (3,817)
7. The Virgin Mary (3,595)
8. Johann von Goethe (3,431)
9. Dante Alighieri (2,878)
10. Plato (2,894)

The only other Napoleonic period names in the Top 30 were Simon Bolivar (1,467) and Jane Austen who came in at number 3 in The Top 10 Women, with 544 books (Number 1 in the Womens's Chart was The Virgin Mary at 3,595, followed by Joan of Arc at 545).

Missing Text from 'Ces Pauvres Enfants', Napoleon's Marie-Louises of 1814 by Major AW Field.

This text should have been included between pages 16 & 17 last issue.

Our apologies to Major AW Field and our readers for this unfortunate oversight.

... Consequently, from the time that La Grande Armée marched off towards Ulm and its subsequent run of victories, the average French fantassin received little formal instruction. Recruits were now normally assigned to their regiments at once and departed for the front without more than a weeks instruction, receiving uniforms, arms and equipment en route with drill in the afternoon. The officers and NCOs of the regimental depots were responsible for this process until the conscripts arrived at their regiments.

However, this rather makeshift system worked only as long as there were enough veterans available to absorb the recruits into their units without an appreciable drop in their combat effectiveness. As the wars went on and the proportion of veterans reduced through battle casualties and sickness, so this proportion shifted to the point where the hardcore of veterans were unable to maintain this effectiveness. By 1814, because of this lack of training and experience, the choice of formations the infantry could use was reduced as there was no time to teach multi-battalion manoeuvres and increasingly no units anywhere near full strength with which to do it. In Feb 1814 many battalions numbered less than 100 men and only the Old and Middle guard and veterans of Spain were capable of manoeuvring at above battalion level. In the golden years of 1805-7 most infantry were able not only to deploy in many more tactical formations but to deploy more rapidly and by brigade and regiment. This offered significant tactical flexibility and potentially enormous battlefield advantages.

Napoleon understood the limitations of the lack of training and experience, and this explains why, in the rebuilding of the army in 1813, he wrote to his corps commanders, "They should deploy in columns of attack (two or one company frontage) by battalion; they should conduct charges in columns of attack and to deploy with the front division issuing fire as soon as they arrive in the battle line..." 17 Here the Emperor was laying down his priorities for training but in 1814 there was even less time to train, as unlike 1813 there was not even the lengthy march to tyne front during which to practice. The result was that the battalions of Marie-Louises were restricted to columns by division, as these were easier to control and less likely to become disordered then line. They were also psychologically good for the morale of the soldiers in it who took comfort from the close proximity of others sharing their ordeal. Napoleon's commanders appreciated that if deployed (in line) the conscripts would fall apart in minutes, less from cowardice than from lack of training and combat experience: it was essential to keep them in close order, guided by veteran NCOs. ...

