

The French 18^e Régiment de Ligne, 1809

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Colour photographs by JEAN-LOUIS VIAU

We are happy to reprint here a set of striking photographs of a 'reconstructed' NCO of Napoleon's 18th Line Infantry by our respected colleague Jean-Louis Viau, which first appeared in the French magazine *Tradition*, of which M. Viau is the managing editor. Background information on this interesting regiment, and on uniform practice of that date, is provided by our regular contributor Philip Haythornthwaite.

The 18^e de Ligne of Napoleon's army bore the number of one of the most distinguished regiments of the old French Royal army, the *Royal Auvergne*, especially celebrated for its service in the American War of Independence. The 18^e Demi-Brigade was formed in March 1796 from several earlier *demi-brigades* and volunteer battalions, and in September 1803 resumed the title 'regiment', a term which had been prohibited in the Revolutionary era for political reasons.

The 18th served with distinction in Italy and Egypt, and was present at many of Napoleon's greatest battles. In the 1805 campaign it served at Ulm and Austerlitz, against Prussia at Jena, against Russia at Eylau, at Heilsberg and Eckmühl. In the 1809 campaign it fought at Aspern-Essling and Wagram; and in 1812 it served with III Corps of the *Grande Armée* in the attack on Russia. During this campaign it fought at Smolensk and Borodino, suffering heavy losses (including at Krasnyi the capture of a second Eagle, that of the 2nd Bn. having been lost at Eylau).

The regiment took the field again in 1813, when it fought at Dresden, Leipzig and Hanau. In 1814 it served in the defence of France, at La Rothière and Montereau. Almost the only campaigns of the Empire in which the 18th was not present were the Peninsular War and

the 'Hundred Days' campaign in 1815, in which year it formed part of the *Armée d'Alsace*.

ORGANISATION

At the period covered by the reconstructed uniform illustrated, the French infantry was organized according to a decree of 18 February 1808, which reduced the number of companies in a battalion from nine to six. According to this establishment each regiment comprised five battalions, one of which was designated as a depot battalion composed of only four companies (of fusiliers) and commanded by the battalion's senior captain; a major was in command of the depot itself. This formation served as a source of replenishment for the four 'active service' battalions or *bataillons de guerre*, each of which was commanded by a *chef de bataillon* and was composed of six companies. Four of these were of ordinary line infantry, styled fusiliers, and two were designated as 'élite': the grenadiers (theoretically the battalion's most stalwart veterans) and *voltigeurs* (light infantry, supposedly the most agile members of the battalion, most adept at skirmishing). In practice, although these com-

The appearance of a typical French infantryman of 1809, in a lithograph by Villain depicting a Conscript of the Imperial Guard. The ordinary Line infantry uniform had white lapels, unlike this example, and their grenadiers wore epaulettes.



panies did possess some of these characteristics, there was little difference in tactical ability between French line and light infantry: all were adept at fighting both in line and in skirmish order.

Each company was commanded by a captain and comprised in addition a lieutenant, a *sous-lieutenant*, a sergeant-major, four sergeants, a *caporal-fourrier* (quartermaster-corporal), eight corporals, 121 privates and two drummers. Regimental staff included a colonel, a major, the four *chefs de bataillon*, five adjutants and five assistants, ten sergeant-majors, a drum-major and drum-corporal (*caporal-tambour*), a bandmaster and seven musicians, four craftsmen, a quartermas-

ter, paymaster, surgeon-major and four assistants, an Eagle-bearer (*premier porte-aigle*, holding *sous-lieutenant* rank) and two escorts (*deuxième* and *troisième porte-aigle*, veterans whose illiteracy prevented ordinary promotion but who ranked as sergeants and received the pay of sergeant-majors). From 1808, due to the number of Eagles lost in action, it was decreed that only one should be carried per regiment, instead of one per battalion as before; the other battalions carried marker-flags instead. Each *bataillon de guerre* included four pioneers (*sapeurs*) in the grenadier company, with one *sapeur* corporal per regiment.

The total establishment of a regiment was thus 108 officers and 3,862 other ranks, but this number was rarely achieved: at the outset of the 1809 campaign, for example, the three battalions of the 18th which served in the campaign numbered some 1,902 men. In this campaign the regiment served in Massena's IV Corps, in Ledru's brigade of Legrand's 1st Division. The 18th's colonel, Baron Ravier, was promoted to *Général de Brigade* on 30 May after distinguished conduct at

Aspern; he was succeeded by Col. Pelleport, who commanded the regiment at Wagram and was created a Baron of the Empire after the battle.

UNIFORM

The appearance of the French infantry had altered in 1806 with the general adoption of the shako, an item which had hitherto been worn only by light troops. The 1806 shako had a felt or board body, widening slightly towards the top, with a leather crown, peak, bands around top and bottom, and often strengthening-chevron at the sides. At the front was carried a tricolour cockade, above a brass, lozenge-shaped plate bearing an embossed eagle over a voided regimental number, though even at this early stage regimental patterns of plate were used: for example, the Carl Collection shows the 18th c. 1809 using eagle-on-crescent plates. Brass chinscales were adopted by some regiments a considerable period before their official sanction (on the redesigned shako of 1810), and may have been worn by the 18th as early as 1807. Braided cords were worn by some regiments, coloured white for fusiliers, red for grenadiers and green and/or yellow for *voltigeurs*; the Carl Colln. shows the 18th's *voltigeurs* with green cords, and a red plume with yellow tip over a yellow ball. Grenadiers usually had red plumes, and pompons in company colouring were adopted by some fusiliers. Some grenadiers retained the bearskin cap for dress uniform (shown in the Carl Colln. as having a red plume, white cords and a brass plate bearing an embossed grenade). Waterproof covers might be worn on the shako in service dress, sometimes bearing painted regimental markings.

The ordinary uniform was a development of that introduced in 1793: a dark blue coat with red cuffs and standing collar, white lapels cut open to reveal the waistcoat, and white lining and turnbacks. Although regimental distinctions existed, there was no attempt until 1806 to introduce officially a

method of identifying the regiment in any way other than by the minutiae of insignia.

In that year a new coat was introduced, of similar cut but reverting to white, the traditional colour of the French infantry uniform, with a scheme of regimental facings which ensured that no two regiments would wear exactly the same uniform. This coat was probably introduced largely as a way of overcoming the shortage of indigo dye required by the previous blue uniform, but it was soon abandoned: ordered in April 1806, in October 1807 it was replaced by a return to the previous blue uniform — Napoleon supposedly being sickened by the sight of bloodstains, very visible on the white uniform, after the battle of Eylau. The issue of the white uniform was never widespread — perhaps only a dozen regiments received it — but among those was the 18th, which wore scarlet lapels and cuffs and white collars, though red collars may have been worn. However, the change to blue uniforms was not immediate as the white issue had to be allowed to wear out before being replaced, and not until late 1809 had it disappeared entirely.

Although a number of regimental distinctions were worn with the blue coat (some so ephemeral that they might not survive the periodic re-clothing of the unit), they were less evident than the company-distinctions which were universal in the French infantry. Although these also varied between regiments, in general fusilier companies wore turnback-badges often in the shape of a star, and plain blue cloth shoulder-straps; grenadiers had fringed red epaulettes and bursting-grenade turnback-badges. *Voltigeurs* often had yellow or *chamois* collars (shown for the 18th by the Carl Colln. with red piping), bugle-horn turnback-badges, and epaulettes in combinations of green and yellow: for the 18th, the Carl Colln. shows green with yellow crescents. Piping was generally red upon the lapels, turnbacks and shoulder-straps, and white upon the collar and

Below:

Loose trousers were commonly worn on campaign, over the gaiters, as in this lithograph depicting a Garde Nationale of the Imperial Guard, c. 1810.

Below right:

Typical elite company uniform of the period: a *voltigeur* depicted in a Villain lithograph. The chamois-coloured collar and plume and epaulettes in combinations of green and yellow are typical of the light company of Line battalions.



cuffs; buttons were brass. The cuffs might have a three-button flap (blue, red or white), or be without a flap but with a line of piping on the open seam; the Carl Colln. shows the 18th with red cuff-flaps piped white.

In addition to the lapelled coat, a single-breasted *surtout* could be worn, as favoured by officers for service dress throughout the Napoleonic era; and this is the garment worn by our reconstructed sergeant. Rank insignia was carried on the lower sleeve by non-commissioned officers: two orange lace bars for corporals, a gold bar on red backing for sergeants, and two such bars for sergeant-majors. Long-service chevrons, worn on the upper arm, were normally red or orange, or gold for senior NCOs (sergeants and above), who often had gold intermixed in their shako-cords, epaulette-fringes and edging.

Smallclothes

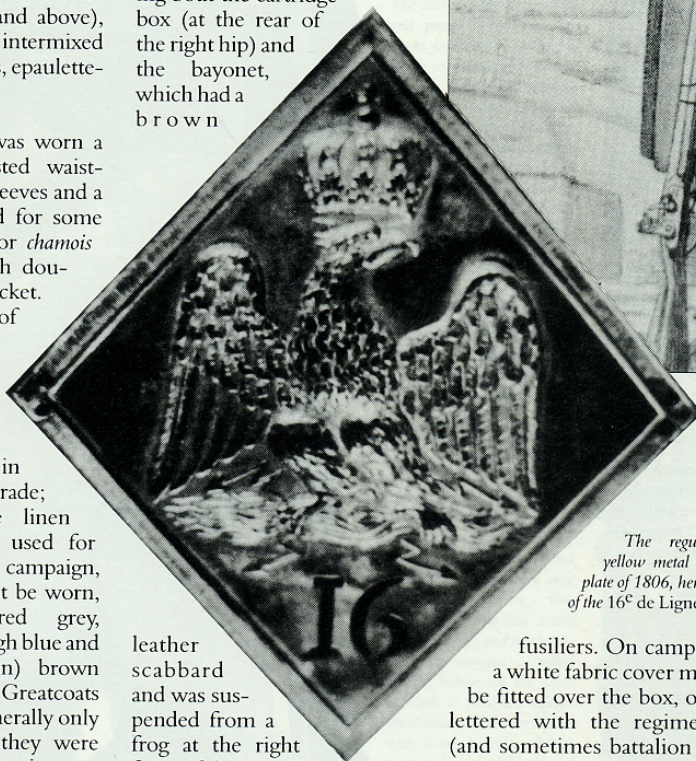
Beneath the coat was worn a white, single-breasted waistcoat, usually with sleeves and a standing collar (red for some regiments, yellow or *chamois* for *voltigeurs*), which doubled as an undress jacket. Legwear consisted of white breeches and black gaiters, non-regulation white gaiters being used by many regiments in summer or for parade; grey or off-white linen gaiters were often used for ordinary wear. For campaign, loose trousers might be worn, commonly coloured grey, white or beige, though blue and (especially in Spain) brown were not unknown. Greatcoats were introduced generally only from 1805, when they were issued to troops on active service and purchased from regimental funds. Although the issue was formalized in 1806, so that all members of *bataillons de guerre* received a coat, there was no universal pattern, both single- and double-breasted coats being worn, ranging in colour from grey through shades of brown from beige to brownish-maroon. For élite companies it was usual for the epaulettes to be transferred from the coat

Infantry sentry, in a print published by Pierre Martinet. The single-breasted greatcoat, to be considered as an item of campaign equipment rather than strictly as a piece of uniform, was made up from available cloth in a wide variety of shades; as in this case, it seems to have been quite common to smarten it by moving élite company epaulettes from the habit to the greatcoat. As a grenadier he also wears the sabre-briquet, and has red braid and cords on his shako; the latter has a tubular waterproof cover on the plume, and a non-regulation eagle-over-shield plate.

when the greatcoat was worn.

Equipment

Equipment remained reasonably standard throughout the period, belts being made of buff-leather, generally whitened. For those not armed with sabres a single belt was worn over the left shoulder, supporting both the cartridge-box (at the rear of the right hip) and the bayonet, which had a brown



The regulation yellow metal shako plate of 1806, here that of the 16^e de Ligne.

leather scabbard and was suspended from a frog at the right front of the belt. The cartridge-box was constructed of black leather, originally around a wooden block drilled with holes to accommodate cartridges, and later with a box interior; later patterns had two small straps underneath in which the *bonnet de police* (forage cap) was carried. The cartridge-boxes of élite companies usually bore a brass grenade or bugle-horn badge, and occasionally a regimental number for



fusiliers. On campaign a white fabric cover might be fitted over the box, often lettered with the regimental (and sometimes battalion and company) identification. Those armed with sabres wore a second belt, over the right shoulder, with a combined frog for both sabre and bayonet.

The calfskin knapsack, tanned with the hair on, was carried on the back by means of buff-leather shoulder-straps attached by wooden toggles, with the rear flap fastened by three leather straps with brass buckles; in 1806 it was provided

with three additional straps, one to encircle the knapsack vertically, and two upon the top to accommodate the rolled greatcoat, this having previously been tied on with string or privately-acquired straps. Other items of campaign equipment would include a canvas haversack (worn over the shoulder) and a canteen, the latter provided by the individual and ranging from gourds to wooden kegs, metal flasks, and glass bottles in wickerwork cases.

Weapons

The sabre — known as a *sabre-briquet*, a somewhat insulting title implying that its only use was to rake a fire! — was of the *An IX/XI* patterns, with a single knuckle-bow and a brass hilt cast in one piece (including the ribbed grip), with a short, slightly curved blade and a black leather scabbard with brass fittings. The sabre was

continued on page 26



Sergeant of Fusiliers,



(Left, top & bottom)

In campaign dress, the sergeant wears a blue-grey greatcoat (which could equally be any shade of brown or grey); white marching trousers over rough grey cloth gaiters; and a black oilcloth shako cover laced in place, with painted regimental number, and neck-flap tied up behind the exposed pompon. This bears the battalion number; its violet colour identified 4th companies by the February 1811 regulations, but there were unit variations both before and after that date.

Perhaps just promoted, the sergeant retains his old cartridge-box crossbelt with the bayonet scabbarded at the front — such variations would be common in the field. Again, he should typically carry the musket fusil d'infanterie modèle 1777 corrigé An IX; but has acquired here the fusil de dragon modèle An IX-An XIII, officially limited to voltigeur companies. The whitened buff-leather sling has a brass buckle.

Photographs and captions by
JEAN-LOUIS VIAU

Our young sergeant of fusiliers is recreated courtesy of 'Le 18^e de Ligne' — after the Dijon-based 'Grenadiers du 27^e' the oldest such group in France, formed in 1984. Under their captain Régis Surmont some 25 members (who seek recruits...) work to recreate the appearance and campaign life of 1st Empire infantry.



French 18^e de Ligne, 1809



The 1806 shako, of black felt reinforced with leather bands and chevrons, has a yellow metal diamond-shaped plate stamped with the Imperial eagle over a voided regimental number. The tri-colour cockade is painted leather; the white cords of fusilier companies end in double raquettes. Note adjustable headband buckled at rear. The hair was generally cut short after c. 1805 but individuals retained the queue.

A fairly common campaign alternative to the white-lapelled habit was the habit-surtout, single-breasted and often plainer in its details. This example is in Imperial blue cloth, closed by nine brass front buttons bearing the regimental number. The scarlet collar, lined white and piped blue, closes by hooks and eyes. The round scarlet cuffs have the first of the two buttons left undone — against regulation, but common. The plain blue shoulderstraps are buttoned close to the collar. The plain blue turnbacks bear red star ornaments — more typical of grenadiers; fusiliers commonly wore blue stars on the usual white turnbacks, but again, variation between units was wide. He wears the sergeant's red-backed gold stripes on his forearms.

The white waistcoat has brass buttons, as do the black cloth gaiters confining the white trousers.

The cartridge-box of blackened cow leather has no flap ornament; on campaign it is fitted with a white cover with a painted regimental number — battalion and company details were also often painted here. Two straps under the box secure the forage cap; and one lateral strap engages a rolled leather button on the sabre crossbelt to hold the equipment steady. The sabre-briquet is the An XI model, in a brass-furnished, blackened leather scabbard frogged to the belt.

(Right, top & bottom)

A convincing impression of the campaign pacquetage: cowhide knapsack with spare clothes, supporting rolled uniform coat, tools, spare shoes, a wooden mess dish, and a tinned tankard. Over his haversack hangs a gourd, and a bunch of onions.

'Mother Hulotte', the vivandière of the 18^e, is dressed in costume copied from a period engraving.



Right:

Sergeant-major of Line infantry, here with the 'Eagle' of the 12^e de Ligne in a print after P. & H. Lecomte. This typical uniform of c. 1809 includes the regulation white-lapelled habit with gold-on-red double rank bars on the forearms and a matching service chevron on the left upper sleeve.

restricted officially to grandiers, NCOs and musicians. Although *voltigeurs* were ordered to cease carrying sabres in October 1807, this order apparently had limited effect, and many *voltigeurs* continued to carry the sabre throughout. The sword-knot was red for grenadiers, white for fusiliers, and green and/or yellow for *voltigeurs* (but some regimental variations existed); it had gold intermixing for senior NCOs. The musket was based on the 1777 pattern, modified slightly to produce the *An IX/XIII* pattern, a smoothbore flintlock with iron fittings, buff-leather sling, a length of 151.5cm., 17.5mm. calibre, and weighing 4.375kg. *Voltigeurs* were often armed with the dragoon musket, 141.7cm. long and 4.275kg. in weight, which was regarded as more manageable for their skirmishing duties.

The 'head of the column'

One of the most obvious methods of asserting regimental individuality was in the uniform of the *tête de colonne*, the musicians and *sapeurs*, who often wore very distinctive uniform. This was especially true for the 18th, whose musicians c. 1805 wore dark blue coats with scarlet collars; sky-blue lapels, cuffs, turnbacks, lining and pocket-piping; and orange-yellow lace edging to the facings. Elite company musicians wore their respective epaulettes, but those of fusilier companies had sky-blue shoulder-straps and 'swallows'-nest' style wings, edged orange-yellow. The band wore gold lace and trefoil epaulettes, and officer-style boots. Head-dress ornaments were like those of their respective companies, with the band having the white plume indicative of regimental staff, and the drum-major and drum-corporal having tri-coloured plumes, white with red top and blue base. By about



1809 this uniform had changed to blue with crimson collar, lapels, cuffs and turnbacks, and mixed red/white/blue lace (gold lace for the band, shown by the Carl Colln. with gold-laced Hessian boots).

The *sapeurs*, who had previously worn a uniform coloured like that of the ordinary grenadiers, are shown to have adopted a most spectacular costume, of sky-blue with crimson facings and white piping and epaulettes.

References

The basic uniform-changes affecting the French infantry may be found in *Guide à l'usage des Artistes et Costumiers... Uniformes de l'armée française* (H. Malibran, Paris 1904, reprinted Krefeld 1972). The illustrations prepared under the aegis of Cdt. E.-L. Bucquoy are especially useful, those of the 18th Regt. reproducing material from the Carl, Würtz and Boeswilwald collections, and have been reproduced in *Les Uniformes du Premier Empire: L'Infanterie* (ed. L.-Y. Bucquoy & G. Devautour, Paris 1979). *Aigles et Shakos du Premier Empire* (C. Blondieau, Paris 1980) is a good coverage of head-dress and insignia. *Napoleon's Line Infantry* (P. J. Haythornthwaite, Osprey Men-at-Arms 141, London 1983) is also of use.

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