

The Irish Legion or The 3eme Régiment étranger

by George F. Nafziger

The "Légion Irlandois," or Irish Legion, was raised as a light infantry battalion by the Decree of 3rd April 1803 from the almost endless stream of enthusiastic Irishmen that appeared any time there was an Englishman to be shot. The Legion was raised with the intention of using it in the proposed French invasion of Ireland, a project which was under very serious consideration in 1803.

Initially, only a single battalion was raised under the direction of Adjudant-général Bernard Macsheehey, a French officer of Irish birth and many years of service in the French army. The organisation of the battalion was completed on 31st August 1803 in Brest. It had a complement of five companies, each company having the following structure:

1	Capitaine
1	Lieutenant
1	Sous-lieutenant
1	Sergeant-major
4	Sergeants
1	Fourrier
8	Corporals
120	Chasseurs
2	Drummers
<hr/>	
139	Total

Eventually, the battalion was raised to the standard nine company organisation of all French battalions. This gave it eight chasseur companies and a single carabinier company.

Since the Irish Legion had only a single battalion it did not have a full regimental staff. Its staff consisted of:

1	Chef de bataillon
1	Adjudant-major
1	Chirurgien
1	Drum major
4	Master artisans

The Decree of 10 March 1804 ordered the raising of a second battalion and the title "regiment" was given to the legion. In February 1807, when the 1st Battalion had a strength of 900 men, the regiment received both a standard and an eagle.

After the French victories over the Prussians in 1806, a number Irish were released from Prussian captivity and added to the regiment. It appears that a number of Irishmen who were involved in the insurrections of 1798 had been sold by the British to the King of Prussia as miners. Many were recruited into the Prussian army and after the destruction of that army it was natural that many would pass into French service.

On 25th October 1807 the Irish Legion was directed to form a provisional battalion with six 140 man companies. This battalion did not last long and was quickly reabsorbed into the regiment.

On 1st January 1808 the 2nd Battalion of Irish Legion was serving in the 2nd Division of the Corps d'observation des Côtes de l'Océan in Spain and it contained of eight officers and 518 men. By 1st June it's strength had risen to 654 officers and men. On 15th November it was serving as part of the garrison of Pampalona and had a strength of 556 men.

The Decree of 17th December 1808 reorganised the 2nd Battalion, then serving in Spain to the six company formation becoming standard in the French army because of the Imperial Decree of 18th February 1808. The 2nd Battalion now had one carabinier, one voltigeur and four chasseur companies. The staff of the regiment consisted of:

1	Chef de bataillon
1	Adjudant-major
1	Adjudant sous-officier
1	Drum corporal
4	Master artisans

Each company had:

1	Capitaine
1	Lieutenant
1	Sous-lieutenant
1	Sergeant-major
4	Sergeants
1	Caporal fourrier
8	Corporals
121	Soldiers
2	Drummers

140 Total

This gave the battalion a total theoretical strength of 848 men. The actual strength of the battalion was 556 when this reorganisation was completed in Burgos. However, despite the reorganisation of the 2nd Battalion, the 1st Battalion, still in Flushing, retained the original nine company organisation.

The 1st Battalion was reorganised with six companies identical to that of the battalion in Spain shortly after the reorganisation of the 2nd Battalion was complete. After the 1st Battalion completed it's reorganisation it was renamed the 2nd Battalion and the battalion in Spain became the 1st Battalion. After this redesignation was complete, the new 2nd Battalion received a reorganised staff that consisted of:

1	Chef de bataillon
1	Adjudant major
1	Quartier-maître
1	Chirurgien-major
1	Chirurgien sous-aide
1	Adjudant sous-officier
1	Drum corporal
1	Master tailor

carabiniers, but their bearskin had a primrose patch with a red grenade, plume and cords.

Commanders

The regimental commandants and colonels of the Irish Legion were as follows:

Commandants:

April 1803 - Macsheehy

December 1803 - Petterzzolli

Colonels:

3 April 1803 - Daniel O'Meara

8 February 1812 - William Lawless

19 August 1813 - Mahony

Of the regimental colonels, William Lawless lead a most interesting career. He was born in Dublin Ireland on 20th April 1772. He entered French service as a chef de bataillon in 1799, no doubt one of the many Irish seeking an opportunity to fight the English. He served as part of the Légion des Francs du Nord, a light infantry formation. In 1800, however, he was subjected to a mandatory retirement. In 1803 he was returned to service and appointed as a captain in the Irish Legion. On 10th July 1806 he became a Chef de Bataillon, probably commanding the regiment's 2nd Battalion. He particularly distinguished himself during the 1809 British invasion of the Scheldt at Flushing, where he was grievously wounded. On 10th February 1810 he was promoted to Major in the Legion. He became regimental commander on 8th February 1812. During the battle of Löwenberg, in 1813, he was wounded again and his arm was amputated as a result. He was retired for a second time on 26th October 1814.

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| 51ND | Kings Life Rifle Standing Firing |
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| 45NDC | Mounted Jager |
| 46NDC | Bosniaks |
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1	Master armourer
1	Master gaitermaker
1	Master cobbler
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11	Total

On 13th April 1809 a further three battalions were ordered raised. The 3rd and 4th Battalions were given the same organisation as the first two battalions. The 5th Battalion, being the depot, had only four chasseur companies.

The 3rd Battalion was formed on 1st June 1809 in Landau and the 4th began organising on 16th August 1809 in Antwerp. When formed, the 4th Battalion went to Flushing where it became part of the garrison. The 5th Battalion was also formed in Antwerp. It became the depot battalion. All three battalions were formed principally of foreign deserters of every nationality.

When the five battalion organisation was completed a full regimental staff was established and consisted of:

1	Colonel
1	Major
5	Chefs de bataillon (1 per battalion)
5	Adjutants majors (1 per battalion)
1	Quartier-maître trésorier
1	Officier payeur (paymaster)
3	Porte étandards (standard bearers)
1	Chirurgien major
5	Chirurgien sous-aide (1 per battalion)
10	Adjutant sous-officiers (2 per battalion)
1	Drum major
1	Drum corporal
1	Chef de musique
7	Musicians
1	Master tailor
1	Master cobbler
1	Master gaitermaker
1	Master armourer

This set the strength of the regiment at five battalions, one being the depot. It had 108 officers and 3,862 men, 3,970 total.

With the capture of Flushing by the British on 16th April 1809, the 4th Battalion was taken prisoner along with the 2nd Battalion of the Régiment de Prusse. Though the 2nd Battalion of the Régiment de Prusse was quickly reestablished from its depot, the 4th Battalion of the Irish Legion was not.

Records indicate that in January 1810 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Irish Legion were serving in the 3rd Division Junot's 8th Corps. In the 3rd Division, under the command of Général de division Solignac. As at Flushing, the Irish Legion was serving with its sister regiment, the Régiment de Prusse. The Irish Legion served in the siege of Astorga during April 1810, suffered a small number of casualties and lead an otherwise undistinguished life.

During June 1810 the Irish Legion found itself assigned to the Army of Portugal. It was still in Junot's 8th Corps and was assigned to the brigade of General

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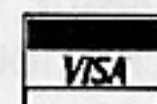
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Thomières. Its next major combat effort was to be the siege of Ciudad-Rodrigo as Maréchal Massena began his advance into Portugal.

The order of 1st May 1810 ordered the 4th Battalion reformed in Landau, but the strength of the regiment was so low that it was decided to reduce the strength of the regiment to two battalions. The Decree of 28th June 1810 reorganised the regiment and the 1st and 4th Battalions became the new 1st Battalion. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions, then serving in Spain, became the new 2nd Battalion.

On 1st January 1811 the 2nd Battalion, in Thomière's brigade of the Army of Portugal, mustered 23 officers and 525 men. However, by 1st March its strength had fallen to 273 men. Reinforcements appear to have arrived in the following weeks because by 15th March its strength had risen to 21 officers and 462 men.

On 4th and 5th May 1811 the Irish Legion was engaged in the battle of Fuentes de Oñoro. Though the Irish Legion's division was not on the field in the first day of battle, during the second Solignac's division formed the reserve for the flanking manoeuvre that was to strike the British Light and 7th Divisions. However, as Solignac's division was not engaged, losing only two officers killed, the Irish did not have an opportunity to display their military prowess.

After the battle Marmont assumed command of the Army of Portugal. The Irish Legion's division was now commanded by Général de division Brenniers and its strength formally recorded as a single battalion.

On 5th August 1811, as part of a general reorganisation of foreign regiments, the Irish Legion was renamed the 3eme Régiment étranger. During February 1812 the 3rd Battalion was reestablished. In addition, the 2nd Battalion was withdrawn from Spanish service. It was sent north to rebuild and refit.

In 1812 the 1st Battalion occupied the islands of Goeree and Overflanke, the 2nd Battalion was in Berg-op-Zoom and the 3rd was in Willemstadt. On 2nd February 1813 the first two battalions joined Lauriston's corps of the reforming Grande Armée in Germany and returned to their depot in October 1813.

During 1813 the Irish were finally able to come to grips with the enemy. Two of its battalions were assigned to the V Corps (Lauriston), 17th Division (Puthod), 1st Brigade (Vachot). On 19th August 1813, facing the Army of Silesia, they were heavily engaged in the battle of Löwenberg, losing ten officers. It appears to have been engaged with Langeron's corps. On 23rd August 1813 they were engaged again in the Battle of Goldberg where they lost 5 more officers engaging the Prussians under Prinz Carl von Mecklenburg. The Legion was not engaged at the Katzenbach, which occurred on 26th August, but on 29th August it was engaged in a savage skirmish on the Bober River. Its commander, Général de division Puthod, had pushed his division across the Bober and was quickly trapped by a superior allied force. The two battalions of Irish Legion were destroyed, losing 20 officers and all of its enlisted. Many of these casualties were the result of combined attacks by the Russian General Emanuel's cavalry of the Russian advanced guard and a detachment of the Prussian Leib Hussars of Major von Schenk and later infantry assaults, including a bayonet charge by five Russian Jager battalions. The battle went poorly for Puthod's division, and according to Prussian sources, of the 11,885 men he led over the Bober that morning, only 254 escaped. The rest were either captured or killed. Martinien indicates the wounding of an officer of the Irish Legion serving with the Grande Armée in Saxony that September, but the remaining field battalion and the depot were still in the Netherlands.

The portions of the Irish Legion that survived the Bober disaster also escaped the Decree of 25th November 1813 that disbanded most of the foreign regiments. However, this decree directed it to absorb into its ranks the Régiment de Prusse, also known as the 4eme Régiment étranger. The result of this merger was the reestablishment of the Irish Legion as a regiment with five battalions, four field and one depot. The decree stipulated that there be no Russians or Prussians in this force and those that were in this new regiment were sent to join the newly forming battalions of "foreign pioneers."

This reorganised regiment went to Antwerp where it participated in the spirited defence of that city. On 19th December 1813 the regiment still had four battalions and a depot battalion, though its strength was reduced by combat and attrition.

When Napoleon abdicated Louis XVIII began a general reorganisation of the French army. The regiment was technically disbanded 26th May 1814, but the disbanding went slowly. By 1st September 1814 the

regiment still consisted of three companies of chasseurs and a train unit.

Before the legion had totally disbanded Louis XVIII issued the Royal Ordinance of 16th November 1814 which raised a successor to the Irish Legion using the veterans of the original legion. This newly organised regiment had a theoretical staff organisation of:

1	Colonel
1	Major
3	Chefs de bataillon
3	Adjudants-majors
1	Quartier-maître
1	Porte drapeau
1	Chirurgien major
1	Chirurgien aide-major
1	Chirurgien sous-aide
3	Adjutant sous-officiers
1	Drum major
1	Drum corporal
1	Chef de musique
7	Musicians
1	Master cobbler
1	Master tailor
1	Master armourer
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29	Total

Each company was to have:

1	Capitaine
1	Lieutenant
1	Sous-lieutenant
1	Sergeant-major
4	Sergeants
1	Fourrier
8	Corporals
56	Soldiers
2	Drummers
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75	Total

This Royal Irish regiment was disbanded by Napoleon's Decree of 2nd May 1815. The Irish soldiers in it were assigned to the new 7eme Régiment étranger, but this unit never grew to a significant size under Napoleon and did not engage in any combat during the One Hundred Days.

Uniforms

During the period 1803 to 1814 the Irish legion wore the basic French infantry uniform which was a striking light green colour. The facing colours were yellow and the breeches were the green of the jacket. They wore knee length black gaiters, black shoes and white belts.

Initially the carabinieri wore a bearskin bonnet with red cords, patches and plumes. This was eventually replaced by a shako with the same accoutrements. The chasseurs wore a shako with white cords and pompons of the company colours: yellow, green, violet and light blue. The voltigeur shako had a yellow over green plume and green cords. All shakos had the Imperial Eagle plate.

The regimental sappers wore the same uniform as the