

## **NAPOLEON'S CAVALRY by Michael Neylan 2012**

The purpose of this article is to provide a foundation for understanding Napoleon's three types of cavalry. By understanding how they were each organized, equipped, and employed, it will be possible to gain a greater understanding as to how cavalry impacted Napoleon's battles and campaigns. This article will also set the conditions to better grasp at which level of war and which type of military operation cavalry units made their greatest contribution.

### **The Beginning**

In order to appreciate the impact the French cavalry had on Napoleon's campaigns, one must first know what Napoleon had to work with and how he planned to use it. When he rose to power in 1799 as First Consul, Napoleon inherited eighty-five regiments of cavalry. While this may initially appear to be a substantial number of mounted units, his French forces did not compare to the quality of Prussian or Austrian cavalry. The eighty-five regiments were grouped into three different categories: thirty-eight light regiments, twenty medium regiments, and twenty-seven heavy regiments of cavalry, each type being employed in various manners. As Gunther Rothenberg described: "Convinced that it was not possible to fight anything but a defensive war without at least parity in cavalry, Napoleon made great efforts to turn this branch into a powerful striking force, capable of rupturing the enemy front, while retaining its ability for exploitation, pursuit and reconnaissance." By the end of the Napoleonic era, the quality of the French cavalry would be greatly improved compared to its modest beginnings.

### **Light Cavalry**

Napoleon's light cavalry consisted of hussar, chasseurs-a-cheval, and lancer regiments, although the lancers were not formed until later. The Lancer's greatest increase in size occurred in 1811, just before Napoleon's impending invasion of Russia. The most extravagant of the French line cavalry were the **Hussars**. Prior to the French Revolution, the hussar regiments consisted primarily of foreign soldiers and were based on the Hungarian light cavalry, from whence they derived their name. By 1800, however, the hussar units no longer relied on mercenaries and consisted mostly of French troops. When Napoléon Bonaparte became Emperor of France on 18th May 1804 his army included 10 hussar regiments. The 11th (Dutch) regiment joined in 1810 when the Dutch provinces were annexed. That same year, several squadrons of the 9th regiment were used as cadres to form a new 12th regiment in Spain. In 1813, following the disastrous campaign in Russia, a 13th regiment was recruited in Rome and Florence. It was amalgamated with the 14th (Croatian) regiment later that year.

The primary missions given the light cavalry were reconnaissance, screening, advance guard, and pursuit missions. They could also be subdivided into smaller-sized units for use as pickets and vedettes (mounted sentinels deployed forward of an outpost). As British historian Sir Charles Oman describes, the hussars were, "Intended to be the lightest of light cavalry, and were to find their proper sphere in raids and reconnaissance rather than in pitched battles." Napoleon relied on his light cavalry to gain and maintain contact with the enemy and to screen his movements. A successful screen would deny the enemy valuable information with regard to the location, size, and composition of Napoleon's forces. The light cavalry was also employed as couriers and used to secure the French lines of communication. Along with reconnaissance, however, one of the most significant

contributions the light cavalry made to Napoleon's campaigns was in the role of pursuit. Often it was the use of the light cavalry, pursuing a defeated and retreating enemy, which proved decisive in completing the destruction of the enemy force.



4<sup>th</sup> Hussars Charging at Freidland by Detaille

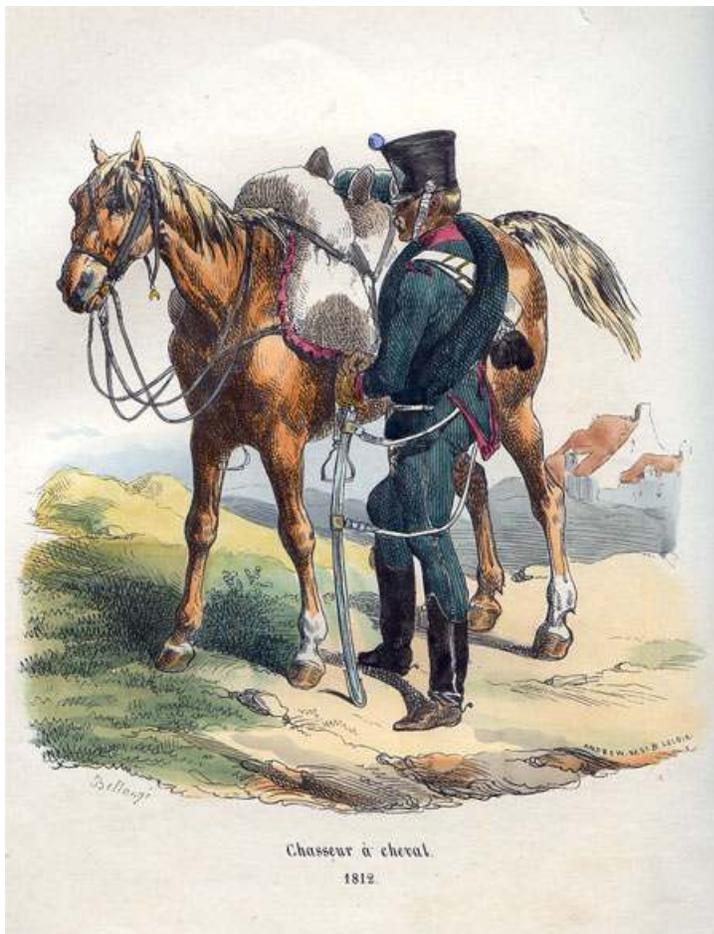
A classic example of this was the French pursuit of the Prussian army following the battle of Jena in 1806. This is what Napoleon was referring to when he said, "It is for the cavalry to follow up the victory and prevent the beaten enemy from rallying."

Light cavalry units, particularly the hussars, were also known to have an extremely bold and audacious reputation. The Hussar considered himself as better horseman and swordsman than everybody else. Bragging, smoking a pipe, drinking, and dueling were his habits. There was a saying: "The hussars were loved by every wife and hated by every husband". The hussars liked to sing songs that insulted dragoons and considered themselves distinctly more dashing than chasseurs. To further enhance their mystique, the hussars were the most flamboyantly dressed cavalry units of any. They based their uniforms on the Hungarian light horse units and wore Hungarian cut breeches, braided uniform shirts, and braided dolmans (jackets) often worn over one shoulder. All units wore shakos for headgear

with the exception of the Compagnies d'Elite that wore fur busbies instead. They were lightly equipped with a heavy, curved saber for slashing, and carried one or two pistols, and a carbine.

Senior officers and colonels of hussar regiments who attained the rank of general of division (1804-1815): de Gau Fregeville and Gerard (2nd), Houssaye, LeBrun, and Le Ferriere-Levesque (3rd), Merlin (4th), Grouchy, Lagrange, Kilmaine, Roche and Pajol (6th), Rapp and Pierre Colbert (7th), Marulaz (8th), Mermet, Beaumont and Lasalle (10th), and Fournier-Sarloveze (12th).

The least glamorous but most numerous of the French light cavalry were the **chasseurs-a-cheval** regiments. Chasseurs a Cheval carry swords, carbines and pistols, but they are not expected to charge home against formed infantry, merely harass and pursue enemies. This makes them effective against skirmishers and artillery. Their horses have good endurance and are fast. Properly looked after, these mounts could survive where the horses of the heavy cavalry would struggle They are vulnerable when matched against heavier cavalry and well-trained infantry in square.



Chasseur a cheval by Bellange

At the start of the wars of the Revolution there were but 12 regiments (1789), but their numbers rapidly increased, reaching 26 regiments by only 1793. At the start of the Empire in 1804 there were 24 regiments, numbered 1 to 26, with the 17th and 18th being vacant,

those regiments having been disbanded under the Republic for "acts of indiscipline". Under the Empire, the 22nd - 26th regiments were evidently habitually broken up and assigned as staff troops or guides to the various Army Corps and their commanders. Later, the 27th (1808), 28th (1808), 29th (1808), 30th (1811) and 31st (1811) regiments were raised from various sources. The 31st regiment had an evanescent existence, being converted almost immediately to the 9th regiment of Chevau-Leger Lanciers, wearing a dark blue Polish style uniform completed with czapska, and sporting buff colored facings and Czapska top.

Under the Republic, the Chassuers wore a dark green dolman akin to the hussars, but generally without the pelisse, decorated with copious white (silver for officers) lace/braiding. Officially the dolman was abolished under the Empire, but its use persisted for quite some time in certain regiments. Regiments known to have been at least partially clad in the dolman include the 1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and 10th, 12th, 15th, 16th, 19th, 20th and 24th in the early years of the Empire (1804 - 1806), the 4th in 1808 and the 5th as late as 1811. Trousers were generally dark green with white lace on the knots and seams when worn with the dolman, otherwise the seam only was usually piped in the facing color of the regiment. In 1809, most units would have been wearing the habit Kinski, which was replacing the older habit long. The facing colors appeared on the turnbacks, collars, and cuffs as well as piping the lapels or seam of the jacket. Waistcoats were worn, and could be seen below the lower V-cut of the jacket. Officially there were white, but green, red, yellow, orange and facing colored versions were all known, often laced in imitation of the dolman.

Theoretically, a regiment consisted of 4 squadrons of 2 companies each, the first company of the first squadron being the *compagnie d' elite*, more or less corresponding to the grenadiers of the infantry of the Line. On paper, each company had 82 troopers, 1 trumpeter, 14 NCO's and 3 officers, with a regimental staff of 21, thus totaling some 821 men; in practice such numbers were rarely if ever achieved, especially in the field, with 600 men probably being a regiment in very good shape.

Colonels and seniors officers of chasseur regiments who attained the rank of general of division (1804-1815): Montbrun (1st and 7th Regiment), Sahuc and Excelmans (1st Regiment), Laboissiere and Le Marois (2nd), Latour-Maubourg (3rd), Hautpoul (6th), Pire and La Grange et de Fourilles (7th), La Baroliere (9th), Ordener and Subervie (10th), Treillard, Bessieres and Jacquinot (11th), Defrance (12th), Lepic (15th), Durosnel (16th), Colaud and Murat-Sistrieries, La Coste-Duvivier and Castex (20th), Latour-Mauborg and Bordesseoule (22nd), St.Germaine and Bruyeres (23rd), Pierre Soult (25th), and Digeon (26th).

The other type of light cavalry unit Napoleon employed was the **lancers**. Although he did not have any organic lancer units when he assumed the throne, he did employ Polish volunteer units, the Lancers of the Vistula, who fought for the French during the Battle of Wagram. Napoleon was so impressed with the lancer's capabilities that he eventually stood up nine regiments of his own. The greatest increase in their numbers occurred 1811 during Napoleon's buildup of forces in anticipation of the impending war with Russia. The French line Chevau-Leger Lanciers were created by an Imperial decree of July 15, 1811. The first six regiments were formed by converting the 1st, 3rd, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 29th Dragoons into lancers. Quite differently uniformed, the 7th and 8th Lancers were formed from the Poles of the two regiments of lancers that were part of the Vistula Legion, and the 9th from the 30th (some say 31st) Chasseurs, who were largely German.



Lancers escorting capture Austrian Cuirassiers by Detaille



Lancer 1812 by Bellange

Typically, these units were armed with a lance, a saber, and a pistol. The lance was approximately nine feet long, one inch in diameter, made of a hard wood, such as ash or walnut, and weighed approximately seven pounds. With its extended length, the lance also

afforded its owner three distinct advantages over the saber. First, during cavalry on cavalry melees, the lance increased the shock effect on the opponent by being able to engage the enemy before he could effectively use his saber. Second, the lance proved superior to the saber when attacking the infantry squares. The infantry would typically form into squares to defend themselves against cavalry charges and relied on their bayonets once they had expended their rounds. Because of the lance's extended reach, lancer units were sometimes employed as the breach force unit to penetrate the infantry squares. This was especially true in the case of foul weather.

During the 1813 battle of Dresden, heavy rains dampened the gunpowder, thus decreasing the chances for discharge. Consequently, the Austrian infantry formed in squares and was able to withstand initial French attempts at penetration. To overcome this, the French cavalry commander, Marshal Murat, effectively used his lancers as the breach force element to successfully penetrate the enemy line. He then followed through the penetration with his heavy cavalry, the cuirassiers, as the assault force to destroy the infantry squares. Last, the extended reach of the lance proved far more effective than the saber during pursuit missions when it was the cavalry's role to chase down and destroy enemy units attempting to escape. Although the lance did provide a significant advantage over the saber, its one drawback occurred during extremely close combat. Because of the extended length of the weapon, the lance often became too awkward and cumbersome for close-in fighting. The addition of the lancers to French cavalry organizations was one of the more-significant contributions Napoleon made to the mounted combat arm of decision.

### **Medium Cavalry**

Napoleon's next category of cavalry was his medium cavalry, better known as **dragoons**, of which he inherited twenty regiments. The dragoons were equipped with a long straight sword (for thrusting), pistols, a dragoon musket (which was shorter than the infantry models), and a bayonet. They typically wore brass helmets and tall boots, which were unsuited for dismounted action. Because of their mobility and increased firepower, as compared to other cavalry units, dragoons were used to seize key terrain for the main body or employed on the flanks with security force missions. Dragoons were also employed as battle cavalry for charges and were used extensively as mounted infantrymen in Spain.

Napoleon found himself in the middle of an age-old debate of whether the dragoons were mounted infantrymen or cavalymen with increased firepower. During the 30-Year War, dragoons were primarily mounted infantrymen. As Sir Charles Oman describes, "They were men with firearms who had been provided with horses in order that they might move rapidly, not light cavalry furnished with a musket for skirmishing purposes." By the eighteenth century, however, dragoons became more like cavalry and less like mounted infantry. For example, Frederick the Great employed his dragoons as cavalry with carbines or muskets. Because of their speed of mobility and firepower, Frederick's dragoons were expected to seize ground when infantry units were unavailable, and take charge of the skirmish line. Thus Frederick capitalized on the cavalry trait of mobility to shore up a potential weak point on the battlefield.

As Napoleon considered the force structure of his military at a junction, he turned the role of the dragoon back to that of mounted infantry. As such, he ordered the replacement of the knee-high boots with gaiters to aid in dismounted operations. Napoleon even went as far as planning to use dragoons as mounted infantrymen for his cross-channel invasion of

England. One interesting side note, however, was that due to the lack of horses Napoleon's invasion plan called for two divisions of dismounted dragoons to utilize captured horses once in England. Fortunately for both sides, the invasion never occurred.

One drawback of Napoleon's dragoons was that as they ceased to be effective cavalry, they degenerated into mediocre infantry as well. Because they had horses, they tended to stay mounted and their dismounted skills waned. But because they were also expected to perform as dismounted infantrymen, their performance with cavalry and maneuver skills suffered. Consequently, after 1807, Napoleon abandoned the idea of using dragoons as mounted infantry and decided to return the dragoons to their original role of medium cavalry.

After Napoleon seized Spain in 1808, twenty-four of the thirty dragoon regiments were transferred to the peninsula. This was where the majority of the dragoon regiments remained for the rest of Napoleon's reign. As a result, only six of Napoleon's thirty dragoon regiments were available in 1809 for the war with Austria, and only four dragoon regiments accompanied him into Russia in 1812. After the disastrous results in Russia, where he lost fourteen cuirassier regiments, Napoleon was forced to start pulling dragoon regiments from Spain and refit them as heavy cavalry units for the Leipzig Campaign of 1813.

Colonels and senior officers of dragoon regiments who attained the rank of general of division (1804-1815): Arrighi (1st Regiment), Grouchy (2nd), Wathier (4th), Beaumont, Milhaud and Louis Bonaparte (5th), Tilly and Fauconnet (6th), Sebastiani (9th), Dejean (11th), St. Sulpice (12th), Roget (13th), Tilly and Blaniac (14th), Landremont (17th), Lefebvre-Desnouettes (18th), Caulaincourt (19th), Bousart and Corbineau (20th), Delort (24th), and Ornano (25th).



Dragoons charging by Rocco



Dragoons at Montmirail 1814 by Rocco

## Heavy Cavalry

The final category of cavalry Napoleon inherited was the heavy cavalry. There were as many as 27 regiments of (Heavy) "Cavalerie" in the early years of the Republic, slowly decreasing to 25 and then 24 when Napoleon became First Consul. In 1802 he reduced the number of "Cavalerie" regiments to 18, the surplus troopers from the disbanded regiments serving to increase the number of squadrons in the remaining regiments. The 8<sup>th</sup> regiment had retained its Cuirasses from the old Royalist army, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment had adopted them in 1801; as First Consul, he initially decreed that the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> should also be equipped with the Cuirass; gradually the number of Cavalerie regiments was reduced to 12, and all were equipped with Cuirasses by 1804, thus forming the new arm of Cuirassiers. A 13<sup>th</sup> regiment was added in 1808, formed from the 1<sup>st</sup> Provisional Heavy Cavalry regiment, and in 1810 the 14<sup>th</sup> regiment was formed from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dutch Cuirassiers.

These were the big men on big horses who were held in reserve exclusively for service in battle. Due to their large size and heavy armor, which increased their protection and survivability, the heavy cavalry was Napoleon's decisive combat arm that could deliver a devastating blow upon enemy units when properly employed.

Typically heavy cavalry charges were used in conjunction with the artillery. Following an artillery barrage, the heavy cavalry charged forward in mass in order to penetrate enemy lines and exploit any tactical success. Napoleon also used his heavy cavalry to counterattack any enemy cavalry assault.

In order to preserve the combat effectiveness of the heavy cavalry in battle, the tasks of courier duty, screening, reconnaissance, and pursuit typically fell to lighter cavalry units so that the heavy cavalry could be employed with maximum effectiveness at the critical time in battle. Napoleon was even quoted as saying, "Under no consideration shall cuirassiers be detailed as orderlies. This duty shall be done by lancers; even generals shall use lancers. The service of communications, escort, sharpshooters, shall be done by lancers."

The cuirassiers were also uniquely equipped. Their name derived from the metal breastplate, cuirass, they wore. To further increase their survivability, Napoleon ordered that a back plate be added to the cuirass as well as equipping these units with steel helmets. The structural criterion for the breastplate was specified to be able to withstand one shot "at long range." While the cuirass did not necessarily prove effective against musket fire at short range, it could withstand shots from pistols as well as attacks from lances, sabers and bayonets. For offensive weapons the heavy cavalry troopers were issued a longer straight sword for thrusting, two pistols, and either a musketoon or carbine "so they could deal with small bodies of enemy infantry in villages or defiles."

"One of French cuirassier regiments developed a unique test for newly assigned officers. You were given 3 horses, 3 bottles of champagne, and 3 'willing girls' and 3 hours to kill the champagne, cover the girls and ride a 20-mile course. (Of course you could draw up your own schedule of events" :-)).  
- Colonel John Elting, US Army

There were several cuirassier colonels and senior officers who attained the rank of general of division (1804-1815): Margaron and Berckheim (1st Regiment), Pully (8th and 10th), Murat-Sistrieres ?? (9th), Espagne (8th), Nansouty and Doumerc (9th), l'Herithier (10th), and Fouler (11th). The most known cuirassier commanders were Generals Nansouty and d'Hautpoul



General d' Hautpoul by Detaille



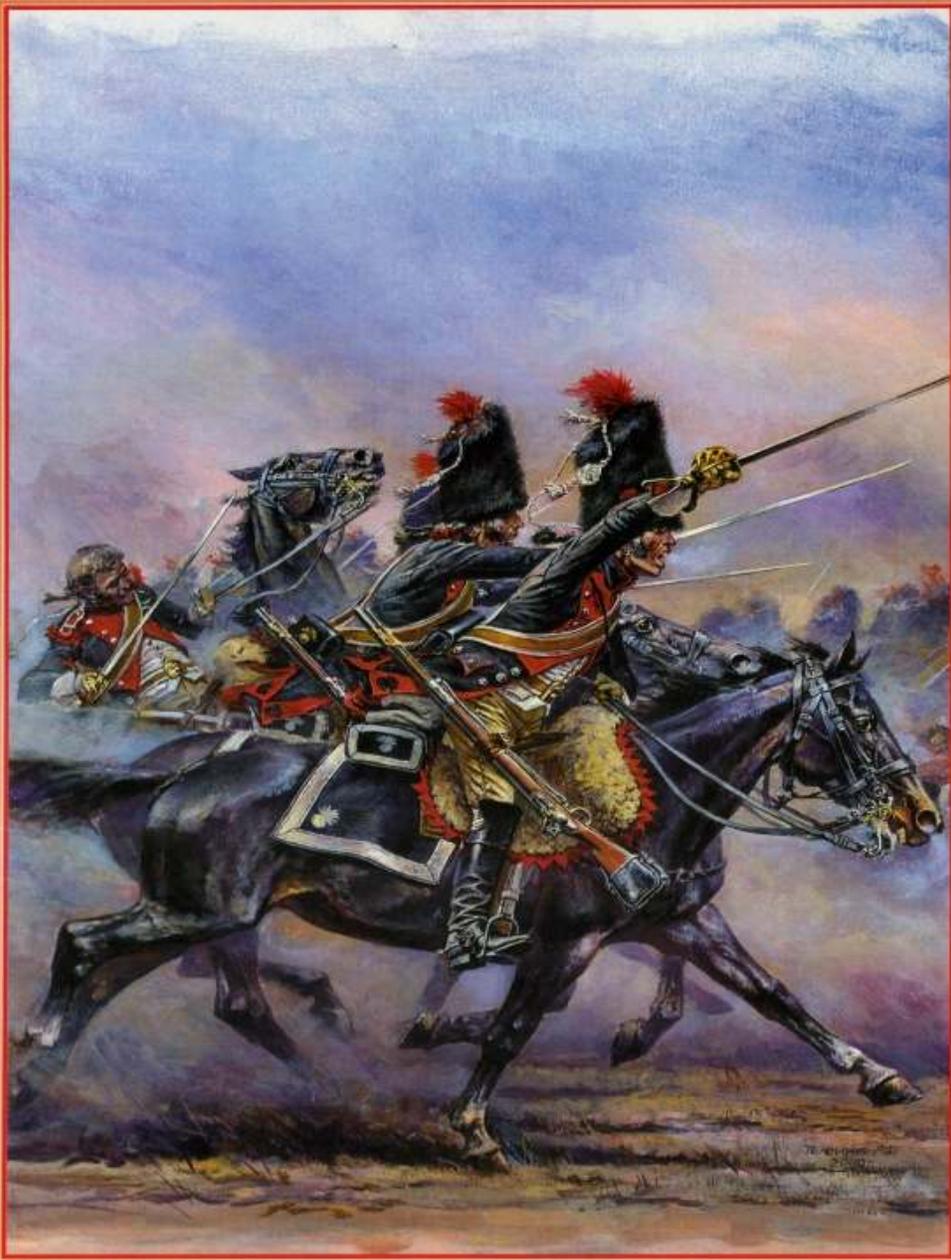
12<sup>th</sup> Cuirassiers at Freidland by Detaille



Wounded Cuirassier Russia 1812

The **carabiniers a cheval** were similarly equipped but did not wear armor, like the cuirassiers until 1809. Originally known as the horse grenadiers there were two regiments, they were fitted with carbines instead of pistols for the Danube Campaign of 1809. They did, however, have the reputation of being handpicked and, therefore, the favored force. Their famous participation in the successful charge of the Great redoubt at Borodino insures their place in Napoleonic lore.

The decree of 24 December 1809 altered the uniform of the carabiniers: white costume, double steel cuirass (breastplate and backplate) covered with brass sheathing (copper for officers), helmet with a peak and which covered the back of the neck, with a golden-yellow copper crest decorated with a chenille made of scarlet bristle. Their armament included a carbine, a sabre (straight-bladed before c. 1811, then "*a la Montmorency*" - with a very slight curve) and a pair of pistols.



13

А. Теленик. КАРАБИНЕРЫ ПОД АУСТЕРЛИЦЕМ.

ИМПЕРАТОР №1

Carabiniers at Austerlitz in pre 1809 uniform by Tannick



Carabinier Officer by Bellange



Carabiniers at Borodino by Tannick

### **The Horses:**

The northern part of France called Normandy was one of the world biggest horse-breeding areas (Studs of Le Pin and St. Lo). Napoleon valued these mounts highly and during reviews often asked colonels how many horses from Normandy they have in their regiments. In 1810 the horse grenadiers of the Guard rode on black horses, 14 1/2 - 15 hands tall, between 4 and 4 1/2 years old and bought in the city of Caen (Normandy) for 680 francs apiece. The German horse breeders from Hannover and Holstein and traders made fortunes

as Napoleon purchased huge amounts of horses for his heavy cavalry. The Prussian large mounts were also accepted.

Although Napoleon's heavy cavalry had the reputation of being well equipped and provided for, they did have their drawbacks. With regard to cuirassiers, Napoleon once stated, "One result of having men of large stature, is the necessity of large horses (at least 15 hands high), to carry the weight of these armored men which doubles the expense and does not render the same service." Because of the size requirements for the horses, only large breeds were accepted into the regiments. As a result, Napoleon's resource base was limited to Normandy and parts of Germany where large, powerful horses were bred. The necessity for large horses also increased the time required to produce another mount to replace one lost in battle. In conjunction with this limitation, these horses were also vulnerable to severe weather and were not particularly well suited for winter campaigning where foraging became a challenge for the large quantities of food required.

The highest quality horses for light cavalry came from Hungary, southern Russia and Poland. These countries dominated light horse breeding in Europe in XVIII-XIX Century. For light cavalry Napoleon purchased horses from almost every province of France but especially from Ardennes, Taubes and Auvergne. In 1806 many Prussian (Mecklenburg), Syrian and Turkish horses were purchased.

After the victorious war in 1806 Napoleon dismounted Prussian cavalry, and in 1805 and 1809 dismounted the Austrian cavalry. Thousands of horses were also taken from Saxony, Hannover and Spain. Many horses were purchased or simply taken from Polish farms. After the disaster in Russia in 1812, several Polish cavalry regiments were still in good shape, especially the Lithuanian uhlans. Napoleon stripped these regiments of all their horses in an effort to remount the cavalry of Imperial Guard. (Nafziger - "Lutzen and Bautzen" p 9)

John Elting wrote about the horse care in French cavalry: "Too many French were careless horse masters, turning their animals loose at night into fields of green grain or clover without supervision. Thousands overate and died of the colic. Germans and Poles were more careful."

Britten-Austin described the situation in 1812: "Without a drop of water to drink and only an occasional nibble of wayside grasses, they arrive at the first bivouac utterly spent, collapse, and have to be shot by their riders, who, adding horsemeat to a soup of uncut rye, promptly go down with diarrhea, an affliction not conducive to brilliant exploits on horseback." (Britten-Austin - "1812 The March on Moscow" p 125)

Graf Henkel von Donnersmark writes after the battle of Leipzig: "The captured [*French*] horse was big but in poor condition, so I exchanged it with a Russian officer for a strong Cossack horse; now I owned 3 such Don mounts. They are excellent for use on campaigns where there are lots of hardships, but they do have some beauty defects."

## Colors of Horses:

During peacetime the regiments of light and line cavalry had color of horses according to squadron:

- I Squadron: 1st 'elite' company rode on blacks, 5th company on browns nad blacks
- II Squadron: 2nd company rode on bays, 6th company on bays
- III Squadron: 3rd company on chestnuts, 7th company on chestnuts
- IV Squadron : 4th and 8th company on grays and whites

But already after the first campaign (1805) only some colonels insisted on keeping up these peacetime practices. The heavy cavalry rode on black horses. (Prussian king Frederick the Great insisted that the black horses should go to the cuirassiers. He considered the black of the coat as a sign of quality.)

## Height of Horses:

According to order issued on October 28th 1802 the horses for French cuirassiers and dragoons were to be between 15 1/4 and 15 1/2 hands tall (154.3cm-158.3 cm or roughly 10.1 cm per hand). After war in 1805 the minimum height for horses was relaxed, even for the cuirassiers. But when Prussian and Austrian horses were captured and new territories annexed the requirements were heightened. In 1812 the height of horses was as follow:

Cuirassiers and carabinieri - . . . . 155 cm - 160 cm  
Dragoons and artillery - . . . . .153 cm - 155 cm  
Chasseurs and hussars - . . . . . 149 cm - 153 cm  
Lighthorse-lancers - . . . . . 146 cm - 150 cm  
Polish uhlans - . . . . . 142 cm - 153 cm  
Polish *Krakusi* - . . . . . 137 cm - 142 cm (nicknamed by Napoleon "my Pygmy Cavalry")

## Types of Horses:

The Arabian mounts were not as fast as European warmbloods but they were sure-footed. They were famous for elegance, toughness and almost legendary endurance. Arabian horses were very popular among officers and generals. Napoleon usually rode on Arabian ("Taurus" at Leipzig and "Marengo" at Waterloo). Napoleon encouraged the use of Arabians at the French national studs. Almost all European countries mixed their native mounts (coldbloods) with Arabians and getting new breeds (warmbloods). In 1800s the biggest studs of Arabians were founded in Hungary and Poland.

The Andalusian horse was called "the royal horse of Europe". Many war-leaders rode on the Spanish horses. This is friendly, docile, strongly build, brave (used for bull fighting) and of catlike agility.

The French horse Comtois of Burgundy was used by the army of King Louis XIV and by Napoleon. Characteristics: hardiness, endurance, good nature and easy to train.

The French horse Auxois of Burgundy was a powerful one. This mount was a quiet and good natured, used also by artillery.

The French horse Ardennais was a very popular horse in French cavalry.

The French horse Percheron was a powerful mount used by heavy cavalry. By XVII Century it attained wide spread popularity. In early XIX Century the French government established a stud at le Pin for the development of army mounts. The horse was docile, energetic and of big size.

The French horse Boulonnais of Flanders enjoyed a great popularity in every European heavy cavalry and among horse dealers. Napoleon purchased thousands of these horses for his cuirassiers.

The German horse of Frederiksborg enjoyed numerous exports which seriously depleted the stock.

The Hannoverian horse was used by light artillery and heavy and line cavalry. It was probably the most successful warmblood in Europe. The Hannoverian breeding industry has existed for 400 years. Even today this horse excels in equestrian disciplines of jumping and driving.

The Holsteiner horse was developed in northern Germany. Their reputation was such that in 1797 approx. 100.000 horses were exported! This horse has a good character, is fast and strong. Napoleon purchased very many Holsteiners. The famous Saxon heavy cavalry and guard rode on Holsteiners.

Another drawback to the heavy cavalry regiments was the cost required to produce and maintain them. During the early nineteenth century the price for horses was approximately 500 francs for a cuirassier's horse, 200 francs for a dragoon's horse, and a horse for the light cavalry would cost around 100 francs. The horses for the officers and guards, being of the highest quality, could run as much as 2000 francs or more. As a reference the pay for a Colonel was 500 francs per month and he was expected to have 4-6 horse with him on campaign. A captains pay was around 200 francs per month and he had at least 2 horses. This did not include pack animals or even small wagons to carry their personal belongings, plus servants and food. In 1806 cost before the campaign started for basic food stuff ran to 1lb of sugar at 6 Franc, a pound of butter or rice was 2.5F and a pound of bread 1.35F. For the trooper things were even worse his pay was around 10F per month! As officers generally paid for their own mounts so losing horses on campaign could be very expensive.

With mounts for the men and extra mounts for replacements a cuirassier regiment could cost almost 500,000 francs just for its horses or Napoleon could mount 5 regiments of chasseurs-a-cheval. Napoleon being one to watch the purse strings, kept the number of heavy regiments down. These drawbacks became painfully clear following the Russian Campaign of 1812 where Napoleon lost fourteen cuirassiers regiments and re-mounts could not be found in any quantity. As historian Hew Strachan states, "The loss of horses on the 1812 campaign so crippled the cavalry that it never fully recovered." This had a direct impact on the results of Napoleon's campaign in Saxony during 1813.

## **Employment of Cavalry**

Understanding the types of cavalry units Napoleon had is important, but it is only part of the issue. The other part is to understand how the cavalry was employed in battle. According to British historian David Chandler, Napoleon's tactical methods involved three phases during which the cavalry played a critical role in each. The first phase was the movement to contact in which the light cavalry, performing reconnaissance missions forward of the advancing main body, would establish contact with the enemy forces. This would set the conditions for the advance guard to fix the enemy, phase two. The second phase began as

the main body's advance guard began to engage the enemy. While this was taking place, the light cavalry would then position themselves off to a flank in order to establish a screen line that would conceal the maneuver force's positioning from the enemy, prior to the impending flank attack. The third phase involved the reinforcement of the advanced guard's fight as they engaged the enemy in a battle of attrition. Once the enemy was fixed, Napoleon would then launch a flanking attack to cut off the enemy's line of retreat and force him to extend and fight in two directions at once. It was then at this apex of the line, where the enemy was typically weakest, that Napoleon selected for his point for penetration. A massed artillery bombardment would devastate the weakened enemy line, and the heavy cavalry would be committed to penetrate the line and exploit the enemy. Once the artillery and heavy cavalry created the gap, the light cavalry would then be committed to follow through and begin the pursuit.

As Sir Charles Oman writes, "The main duty of Napoleon's cavalry then, was to make its weight felt in battle, urge pursuits to the extreme limit possible, and to screen the advance of the main columns, which it covered, on each road that they were using, at a moderate distance to the front." To do this Napoleon kept his cavalry massed together as a "cavalry reserve" consisting primarily of dragoons, cuirassiers, and carabiniers a cheval to be committed at precisely the right time and place to exploit tactical success on the battlefield. This is how the cavalry contributed to massing the effects of combat power. The light cavalry then, was the force used for screening and pursuit missions. This cavalry reserve force typically stayed with the main body or striking force of the army so they would be ready to assist in the annihilation of the enemy force once brought to battle.

As Napoleon wrote, "Cavalry charges are equally as good at the beginning, during, or at the end of a battle; they ought to be undertaken whenever they can be made against the flanks of infantry, especially when the latter is engaged in the front." The technique used during the cavalry charges would be to charge forward as closely as possible in order to concentrate the massed effect on the enemy. Often the charges would be made in successive waves in order to achieve the full shock effect against the enemy.

It was through this sequence for battle and execution of the charge and pursuit, that the French cavalry became a formidable European force. By 1807 the French heavy cavalry regiments had the reputation of being known as "the dread of Europe and the pride of France" while the light cavalry regiments were known for their "panache, daring, and gallantry."

## **FRENCH CAVALRY ORGANIZATION**

The regiment consisted of a regimental staff (*état-major*) and four squadrons (*escadrons*) each of two companies (*compagnies*). The 1st Company of the 1st Squadron was the Elite Company (*compagnie d'elite*) and all officers and men wore a fur busby (hussars & chasseurs), a fur bonnet (dragoons), or the headgear unique to their regiment (cuirassiers, lanciers). All of the other companies were called center companies (*compagnie du centre*) and they wore the shako. Each company was further divided into two platoons (*peletons*).

The *état-major* had a strength of nineteen men: colonel, major, chefs d'escadron (2), adjutant-majors (2), quartier-maître, surgeon-major, surgeon aide-major, surgeon sous-aide(2), adjutant sous-officiers (2), brigadier-trompette, veterinerian, master tailor, master

saddle maker, master boot maker, and master armorer/sword maker, plus eight sappers (sapeurs) and a corporal sapeur (brigadier-sapeur).

Each company had a total war-time strength of 116 officers and men as follows: captain, lieutenant, sous-lieutenant, sergeant-major (maréchal des logis chef), four sergeants (maréchal des logis), a fourrier, eight corporals (brigadiers), 86 mounted troopers (soldats), 10 unmounted troopers, and 2 trumpeters (trompettes).

Total authorized war-time strength of a line cavalry regiment was 947 officers and men. In reality, when on campaign, a regiment of four squadrons probably averaged about 450 men due to casualties, illness, leave, and availability of mounts.

George Nazfiger supplies the leadership ratios of Napoleonic cavalry, that is, number of troopers per leader. The French consistently have the lowest ratios of the major powers and of the French cavalry, the cuirassiers have the lowest: from 4.6 to 6.3. Other nations have far less leadership: Russia-7.8, Britain- 6.1, Austria- 8.1, and Prussia- 6.5. Numbers are not all, however. Nazfiger also analyzes the position of the leadership within the squadron on the move. The command element of the French Squadron was in front of the squadron with NCOs on the flanks. As Nazfiger correctly points out, "the French system provided a large degree of control on every flank and face of the squadron, thereby ensuring that it should behave as desired in battle and that, once it had completed a charge, it should rally more quickly." The positioning of leadership and their large numbers demonstrates that the French cavalry was destined for the more complicated and dangerous charge against a fixed position than for foraging and flank security operations. The combination of abundant leadership, excellent battlefield control, and homogenous heavy units made the French cavalry a force destined for the charge and the shock attack. Other nations do not show this degree of control and leadership.

However in August 15th 1813 in the French army stationed in Germany had the following numbers of cavalymen and officers:

12,818 chasseurs were in 67 squadrons (on average 9.1 officers and 182 other ranks per sq.)

7,203 hussars in 38 squadrons (on average 8.5 officer and 181 other ranks per sq.)

3,546 lancers in 20 squadrons (on average 10.75 officer and 166 other ranks per sq.)

7,019 dragoons in 45 squadrons (on average 8.33 officer and 148 other ranks per sq.)

5,789 cuirassiers in 40 squadrons (on average 8.6 officer and 136 other ranks per sq.)

As you can see the leadership advantage has dropped significantly by 1813. When, coupled with the fact that over 150,000 horses had been lost in Russia, the French cavalry was simply unable to fully recover from the devastating Russian Campaign of 1812. Also by 1813 Napoleon's enemies began adopting his methods of warfare and used them against him. By 1814 Napoleon had to rely on his Dragoon regiments that he brought back from the Spanish frontier to help him save France. While his cavalry performed with great gallantry the overwhelming number of the allies gave them victory. The French cavalry arm was critical in the success of Napoleon but nothing could replace the men and horses lost in Russia. Tactical victories were now the norm and without trained cavalry for pursuit Napoleon could never defeat the masses of allied armies.

**Sources:**

There are dozens of excellent books on the subject of Napoleons cavalry. Those listed below are a good starting point.

John R. Elting, *Swords Around a Throne* (New York: The Free Press, 1988)

Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon*  
(Bloomington,Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978)

Nazfiger, George. *Imperial Bayonets: Tactics of the Napoleonic Battery, Battalion and Brigade as Found in Contemporary Regulations.* (London: Greenhill Books, 1996)

Sir Charles Oman, *Studies in the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1914)

Cdt Bucquay, *Les Uniformes du Premier Empire Les Cuirassiers*

Emir Bukhar, *Napoléons Cavalry*

Steve Maughan, *Napoleons Line Cavalry in Pictures* (an amazing collection of pictures of uniformed re-enactors in period uniforms)