

Book Review: *Brothers of the Capucine* by Rob McLaren

Reviewed by Steven M. Smith on 6 April 2019

*“Brothers of the Capucine: The First Adventure in the Jobert Series”*

by Rob McLaren, 2019 Lulu Publishing

illustrations and maps by Matthew Lin

509 pages; 7 maps; 19 pages of appendices.

(Quotes from the book are in italics.)

The series explores the life and times of a fictional French cavalry officer in the French army during the French revolution and Napoleonic Wars. This book starts in March 1793 and ends in December of the same year, during the French revolution. Capucine in the title refers to the specific orange colour used in the uniform of the main character’s regiment.

I first heard of this series when the second book was on Kickstarter (coming out later in 2019). I pledged the level that provided the first and second books. The author was kind enough to send me early a copy of the first volume for this review. He also responded with thoughtful answers to my questions. With that said, this review reflects my opinions only.

The series owes more to Richard Sharpe than Brigadier Gerard and is hard into historical realism. Not many fiction books have a bibliography. Even fewer with a bibliography of real books as opposed to books that only exist within the fictional universe. The realism comes from the author’s experience in the Australian Army as an armoured cavalry officer and a passionate horseman. Being firmly in historical realism, the book goes into the gritty details of being in a light cavalry regiment. This is wonderful for those of us who love reading memoirs and unit histories. However, there is much for the more casual reader, as the details lead to a better understanding of why people of that time did what they did and what did they do before and between battles.

Following is a brief summary of the book. Quotes are provided to give a taste of the writer’s style.

The book starts with the main character, Captain André Jobert, joining a new light cavalry regiment, the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval, just as it is being formed. This first section has a lot of details as he is introduced to the regiment and his command in the regiment. As Alton Brown says, “Your patience will be rewarded”.

I feel the story actually starts a few pages later, with the first luncheon hosted by the Colonel for the senior officers. Colonel Morin’s summary of the perils for France, the regiment, and the officers is concise and builds tension. If I was teaching a writing class, I would use this as good example of how to write exposition that sets up the rest of the story. Morin’s address to the officers is paced nicely with his giving information then pausing to do something with his wine glass before continuing.

*“All eyes were on Morin as he paced heavily to a central position in the room. Then stepping forward to the table, poured himself a glass of wine.”*

*“Fear and greed. Fear and greed.’ Morin sipped his wine.”*

*“Morin paused to drink again.”*

*"In the twelve months following the fall of the Bastille, one-third of the officers remained in the regiments. On the raising of the volunteer legions, halfway through 1791, one-sixth of the experienced officers continued to remain in the regiments. The majority of these officers promoted far beyond their experience. I am an example of such promotion.*

*"But a new generation of officers filled the void, originally sergeant majors and sergeants. As sergeant majors were promoted to officers, our sergeants became the fresh new sergeant majors. Our corporals became the fresh new sergeants. Our best chasseurs became the fresh new corporals. New blood, new ideas, new energies."*

*"Morin paused to consider his glass of wine."*

Then the colonel finished listing all the issues facing the new regiment, ending with *"... The greater challenge is getting twelve-hundred men and twelve-hundred horses, who are forced to eat and sleep in their own shit, to avoid the sisters of disease and desertion, and to arrive at that point of charge.*

*"On my honour, I swear to you now, I will give my best to overcome these challenges. If you are willing to give your best to the regiment, and to France, I welcome you by my side, and the side of my chasseurs."*

*"Morin breathed slowly, surveyed the room, and for a minute held each man in his fierce gaze."*

The remainder of the first part of the book follows the repeated refrain of *"man the regiment, equip the regiment, train the regiment"*. With concise and interesting details he tells how they recruit soldiers, check them for fitness, and assign uniforms and equipment. His descriptions of the buildings and streets brought back memories of my visits to France. Being realistic fiction, he does not shy away from the conditions such as dirt, overcrowding (three to a bed!), horse manure, etc.

At this point in French history most of the officers, including Jobert, are sergeants promoted from humble origins making them officers but not gentlemen. This is evident as the book progresses with the language and actions the officers use when in private or in battle. Jobert comes across as a very caring commander, especially compared to pre-revolutionary officers. He also come up with several clever plans, some anticipated by other officers, others approved and copied by them.

The book does not shy away from depicting the crudeness and cruelty of this period. Some actions, even by Jobert, may seem unnecessarily cruel to modern readers, but most of the other characters took these actions in stride. The one notable exception is the ex-aristocrat who early in the book was very shaken by such actions, but later was hardened to them. I feel this fits the times of the Terror, with the Committee of Public Safety sending enemies of France (including non-Jacobin revolutionaries) to the guillotine. Local unrest in many parts of rural France, and a major royalist rebellion in the Vendee were addressed with great barbarity. It was not a time of Jane Austin sensibility, even if the story includes an officer's ball with a hint of romance.

Captain Jobert's squadrons baptism of fire faces them against other Frenchmen rebelling against the Jacobin government in Paris. While the account of the action would not be out of place in a description of modern combat, the book really shines in the depictions of how the soldiers acted after the battle. Depicting the recruits being shaken and upset by the death of their comrades and even seeing one of their horses being sold to a butcher because it was too wounded to stay with the unit, feels true and matches the descriptions I've read in memoirs from that period. Lin's maps support the text helping the reader understand where events occur, especially the tactical maps. Like the writing, they depict what needs to be shown without distractions.

Napoleon is a background character in the book, mentioned only a few times at a distance, except once. Note that the author uses the more familiar Napoleon Bonaparte, even though it would be another three years before the spelling changed from "Buonaparte". Captains Bonaparte and Jobert meet briefly in Aix-en-Provence as Bonaparte is getting travel documents for transporting gunpowder to Italy. Those familiar with history know that Napoleon's journey to Italy is interrupted by events in Toulon. In Toulon, royalists supported by coalition troops seized the city and with it, most of the French fleet. The Toulon campaign takes up the remainder of the book.

Most of the popular histories focus on Napoleon and the events on western Toulon. McLaren wisely places Jobert on the north and eastern side of Toulon, giving his character plausible freedom to take part in historical events. Adding to the realistic feel of the book are the way orders and reports are portrayed. Their presentation reminded me strongly of the historical orders and reports quoted in Andrew Field's "*Grouchy's Waterloo*" history of Ligny and Wavre.

If you've wondered what cavalry does during a siege, follow Jobert and his men as they perform the traditional job of light cavalry, but mostly on foot in the rough terrain of Mount Faron, north of Toulon. Again, McLaren's experiences shine here in his descriptions of scouting the enemy positions then guiding French infantry in their assaults on the enemy positions and their rapid retreat during the coalition counter attack.

From the section where they have been scouting: *"At the lowest point of the camp [in a gully on the north side of Mount Faron], a small pine-branch lean-to obscured the light from the embers of a nearly extinguished fire which slowly burnt behind a rock screen. ... A single candle illuminated a pencil-sketch chart of the track network of Mount Faron, which the three patrol commanders bent to observe."*

Leading the French troops through hidden paths up the north side of the mountain for the first assault: *"Having silently glided along Mount Faron's trails for three weeks now, the chasseurs of 2<sup>nd</sup> company, including Jobert, were exceptionally uncomfortable with the amount of noise the infantry were making in assembling their company columns. Voices and equipment were the culprits."*

During the counter assault: *"The French brigade erupted with screams. Not so much from the wounded, but the non-commissioned officers bellowing at the men to close the gaps."*

*"[Spanish] Officers leading the front rank were punched into the earth, men with the front rank reeled back with strangled gasps. [Spanish Admiral] Gravina set his teeth as the balls zipped about him, riding high in the saddle, irritated at how the French used troops of the line for skirmish duties, as opposed to dedicated, irregular 'light' troops, as was the custom elsewhere."*

During the counter assault a French company from the 35<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment were captured by coalition forces and held in Toulon. During the scouting phase, Jobert planted locals as spies in Toulon, supported by a couple of his men posing as royalist sympathizers. He and his staff put together a daring plan to rescue the prisoners, which worked mostly as planned.

As no good deed goes unpunished, Jobert and his men are asked to use a similar ploy to subvert the coalition's ability to destroy the French ships and naval stores in Toulon during the last French attack. McLaren offers Jobert and his men as an explanation for the historical minimal damage done during the coalition evacuation. In history, as in the book, not everything went as the French planned and hoped.

The last few paragraphs describe the aftermath of the siege. A couple of sentences mention the next book in the series.

The book has 10 appendices:

A – Author's Notes (2 pages)

B – Bibliography (2 pages, 26 entries)

C – Chronology of Historical Events (6 pages, from May 1789 to December 1793)

D – Ready Reference – Military Organizations (1.25 pages)

E – Ready Reference – Measurement Conversion (0.75 pages)

Dramatis Personae: Names underlined are historical persons

F – Dramatis Personae - 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval (1.25 pages)

G – Dramatis Personae - 2<sup>nd</sup> Company (2 pages spread over 3 sheets of paper)

H – Dramatis Personae – Jobert's family (1 page over 2 sheets of paper)

I – Dramatis Personae – Avignon (0.75 pages)

J – Dramatis Personae – Siege of Toulon (1.5 pages)

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