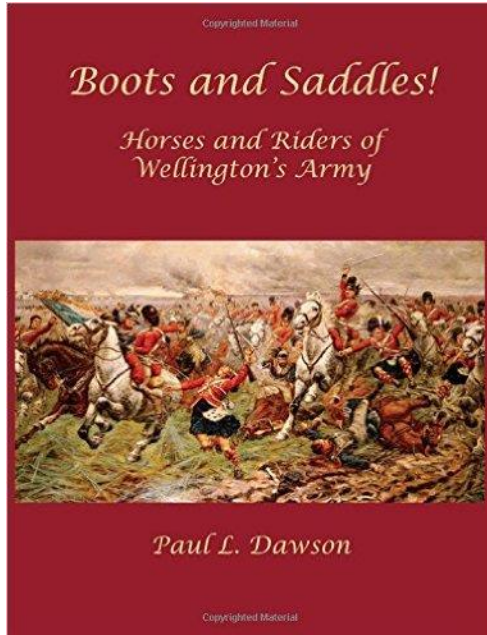


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Dawson, Paul L. *Boots and Saddles: Horse and Riders of Wellington's Army*. Stockton-on-Tees (UK): Black Tent, 2014. 248 pages. ISBN: 9781907212109



There are hundreds of books about the cavalry of the Napoleonic Wars. Most focus on their campaigns, leaders, organization, uniforms and equipment. Very few look at the horses they rode. In the few volumes that do, it is usually in reference to the color of the horses or even to just what color of horse the trumpeters rode. *Boots and Saddles* is the exception. Before you read any further, if you are looking for a book about the British cavalry – their battles, campaigns, and uniforms – this is not the book for you. *Boots and Saddles* is a study of the mounts and to a point, the men who rode them. So why is this book so important? Although I say the book is about the cavalry, in reality it is about the horses and mules the British used for the cavalry, the artillery, and to move their supplies.

Thankfully the author starts with the basics and provides a history of the evolution of horses in Great Britain in the 18th Century. He explains the types of different horses that were available to mount the regiments and shows the most common horse that was used. Despite what many novelists have written over the years about the British cavalry being superior to the French because they were mounted on thoroughbreds, this was not the case. He also looks at the type of cavalry regiment and its role in war, because its mission determined what kind of horse it required. The size and type of horse that was needed for a Dragoon Guards Regiment was different than what was needed by a light cavalry regiment.

One of the most informative chapters is Chapter 3: The War Horse. In it Mr. Dawson examines and explains the factors that made a good war horse. Size of the horse was important, however large horses came with their own set of requirements, especially in regards to food. And of course a horse that was too small would have trouble carrying a fully equipped trooper. Another factor was the age of the horse. The British tended to use horses as young as 3 years old, which caused long term problems, because a horse was not fully developed at that age. He then compares British and French cavalry mounts. He closes the chapter with an overview of the types of horses used to mount the various national armies in Europe.

As I mentioned in the introduction, *Boots and Saddles* is not just about the cavalry. Wellington's Army, like all armies at time was dependent on animal power for food and supplies. By 1812, the British Army in the Peninsular was using over 12,000 mules to keep itself supplied. Chapter 4: Mules and Draught Horses, covers these animals. The author talks about the number of animals needed, not just for moving supplies, but also for the artillery. This discussion includes information on what the most desirable animals were, the availability of them, and what type was actually used. He also looks at the harness, saddles, and other equipment these animals needed.

Unlike the other major European armies, the British Army did not have stud farms that supplied them with horses. Instead it was the duty of the regimental colonel to ensure that his regiment was well mounted. Chapter 5: Obtaining the War Horse looks at how the system worked in both theory and practice, and its strengths and weaknesses. Generally the system worked, however the quality of the horses varied from regiment to regiment. The other major issue was there was often a huge time delay between when a regiment needed the horses and when they received them. This was not just a problem for the regiments in the Peninsula, but also those in garrison. After the 10th, 15th, and 18th Hussars were forced to destroy their horses before they evacuated from Corunna in January 1809, it was four years before they could be deployed again, due to a lack of horses. For those already in the Peninsula, even if the horses were available, they had to endure a long voyage to Portugal, during which many were injured or killed, exposed to sickness and disease, and most had a long recovery upon arrival.

There are also chapters on training the horse and the rider. Once a horse was bought, it not only needed to be broken to the saddle, but trained to ignore gunfire and loud noise. Of course, the horse was only half of the equation. The new recruit had to be taught how to ride. The author points out that the British Army had no standard way of riding and the "seat" varied from regiment. He also discusses the duties of the Riding Master and Rough Riders. He closes the chapter with a look at the daily duties of a cavalry trooper in garrison in regards to his mount.

Two of the most important chapters in *Boots and Saddles* deal with the care and maintenance of the horse in garrison and on campaign. In Chapter 9, the Care and Maintenance of the War Horse: Home Service, the reader will find information on what the horse's authorized daily ration was both in garrison and on campaign. . . this is important, because for some reason the authorized ration was less when the horse was in the Peninsula, than when it was in garrison. The author also compares the British authorized campaign ration to the French campaign ration, which was 40% more than the British. There is also information on the regimental stables and the daily schedule for the care of the horse. In Chapter 10, the Care and Maintenance of the War Horse: Foreign Service, there is information on how the horses were transported to the Peninsula, the continuous problems the army had finding food for them, and the quality of what was provided.

Boots and Saddles also has chapters on the regimental veterinarian and farriers, plus a large amount of information on the saddles and bridles the different regiments used, the various articles and clothing the trooper carried to take care of himself and his mount.

The final chapter takes all the factors discussed above, looks at the data from the Peninsular War, and asks how did the cavalry fare? Did the system work, as compared to the French in the Peninsula? There are charts showing, by regiment, the average number of horses that were lost each month. Because of their more active role in screening the army and providing picquets, the light cavalry lost about 25% more mounts than the dragoon regiments. The 14th Light Dragoons lost the most horses. They arrived in Portugal in 1809 with about 750 horses. By the time the regiment returned to Great Britain in July 1814, they had only 313 troopers' horses and had lost over 1500 horses in 65 months! One of the myths about the British cavalry is that the King's German Legion took better care of their horses than the rest of the British army. Mr. Dawson uses this data to see if there is any truth behind the myth. Another myth about the Peninsular War is that the French abused their horses and those losses were staggering compared to the British. *Boots and Saddles* closes with a comparison of the two armies. The results may surprise you!

The author spent a massive amount of time doing research in the British and French military archives for this book. He also made extensive use of the British Army regulations, regimental standing orders, and instructional manuals. He took the information found in them and then used memoirs, diaries, and letters from officers, NCOs, and troopers to show how these official documents and directives were implemented or, in some cases, ignored. *Boots and Saddles* is lavishly illustrated with contemporary prints, most of which are in color.

Boots and Saddles does have one very noticeable flaw. Mr. Dawson is an expert on horse and their equipment. His writing reflects this, with the many technical terms about horses that will leave the reader reaching for a dictionary. Hopefully he will include a glossary in his next book.

Boots and Saddles is one of the most important books ever written about British cavalry. It is a must read for understanding the most critical element of mounted warfare during the Napoleonic Era – the horse! Let's face it. . . a cavalry trooper without his mount is a just a poorly trained infantryman in a fancy uniform!

Reviewed by Robert Burnham

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