

The Napoleon Series

Dawson, Paul L. *Crippled Splendour: the French Cavalry from Valmy to Toulouse*. Stockton-on-Tees (UK): Black Tent, 2016. 346 pages. ISBN# 9781907212178 £27



Paul Dawson has built a well-deserved reputation as an expert on the cavalry of the Napoleonic Wars. Previous books include [Boots and Saddles! Horses and Riders of Wellington's Army](#) and [Au Pas de Charge! Napoleon's Cavalry at Waterloo](#). His latest book looks at the rise and decline of the French cavalry from 1792 to 1814. Like his previous books, *Crippled Splendour* does not really focus on the campaigns and battles, but instead examines the two most critical elements of mounted warfare: the horses and the men who rode them. Mr. Dawson does not just limit his study to the cavalry. He has expanded it to include information on the types and number of horses needed by the artillery, horse artillery, and other branches.

The book begins with an overview of the type, size, and age of horses needed by the different cavalry units and the artillery and the price the government was willing to pay for them. For example a light cavalry horse was smaller than a heavy cavalry horse and cost 28% less. Additionally there is information on the number of horses that each rank was authorized. A marshal was allowed 18 riding horses, 8 draught horses, 10 pack horses, and 2 wagons. An infantry battalion commander was only permitted 2 riding horse and a pack horse. In a very interesting table, the author looks at the ratio of officer horses in the army versus the number of horses ridden by the cavalry troopers. By 1812 it was 1 – 7, but by August 1813 the ratio was 1 – 4. Chapter 2 is titled “Care and Maintenance of the Horse” and covers at all aspects of the subject: what the horses’ rations were while in garrison, on campaign, and when moving between barracks and depots; stabling and housing of the horses both in garrison and campaign, the shoeing of the horse, and its health care. When a horse was sick or injured it was sent to depots that specialized in nursing the animal back to health. The overview also devotes a chapter to how the army acquired horses. In the early years, they had stud farms and when the need for horses exceeded the number that was available from the farms the army would buy from horse dealers. The book explains in detail how this system worked.

The rest of the book looks at this system and how it evolved over the years. Mr. Dawson divides it into major periods, including:

The old monarch and revolution: 1761 – 1799

Continuity and change: 1792 – 1806

December 1806 – February 1807

February – June 1807

Germany March – September 1809

September 1809 – January 1810

Russia 1812

Central Europe 1813

Winter 1813 – 1814

Spain – covering the Peninsular War

For each period he looks at the campaigns and battles and discusses the impact of them on the men, the horses, and draught animals. He then examines how the animals that were lost were replaced and how long it took to do so. As the years went on, the remount depots moved from France to central Europe and the horses were either sent there or bought locally. I was surprised to learn that a cavalry recruit was initially taught to ride and take care of a horse in France, but then was marched to the depot in either central Europe or Spain where he was linked up with a horse, a saddle, saddle blanket, etc., plus his uniforms and weapons.

Crippled Splendour examines the French system of providing remounts in particular its strengths and flaws. There is a copious amount of data on the number of horses lost in each of the above periods and how the remount system coped with these losses. Mr. Dawson does not pull any punches when pointing out its flaws. The real issue he argues is not getting the horses to the regiment but getting a trained cavalry trooper with his horse there. The French cavalry was at its peak in 1805 and 1806 when they had the benefits of well-trained and experienced officers, NCOs, and troopers. But several years of constant warfare took its toll. A horse was easier to obtain than an experienced cavalryman. As the years went by the cadre of expertise in a regiment was considerably reduced and when the new trooper and his mount arrived there were not the older soldiers who could teach him how to take care of his horse and survive in the field. This led to a vicious cycle where the horse, and often the soldier, would die before he learned the tricks of the trade. A few months later, his replacement would show up and the cycle started all over again. In 1813 tens of thousands of horses were lost because of neglect by the soldier.

There is no argument that amount of horses lost by Napoleon's Army between 1805 and 1815 was immense. Yet time and again Napoleon was able to remount his regiments and fight on. In 1813, the remount system was still able to obtain over 140,000 horses to replace the losses from the Russian Campaign. What Napoleon had trouble with was finding and equipping men to ride them.

Once again, Mr. Dawson provides an insightful and groundbreaking study of the cavalry of the Napoleonic Wars. As usual he bases the book on a large amount of data taken from the French National Archives. *Crippled Splendour* is extensively illustrated with contemporary black and white and color images. Although it covers 22 years of battles and campaigns, because its focus is specific to the French cavalryman and his mount during those years, it will be invaluable not only to those who study the era in general, but also to those who specialize in a specific battle or campaign. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: December 2016