

TIME SPENT ON RECONNAISSANCE IS RARELY WASTED

TAKING A LOOK AT NAPOLEONIC RECON

Into the Age of Reason, armies moved at relatively low speeds and it was very unusual for an army to be surprised on a European battlefield. This was more the preserve of the Americas, where native irregular troops relying on speed and surprise countered the ordered ranks and disciplined volleys of European troops.

By Eoghan Kelly

In the upheavals of the French Revolution, everything changed. Gone was the Ancien Régime, with its rigid lines of infantry and heavy cavalry designed to carry the day through the charge of cold steel. The ever-evolving citizen armies of enthusiastic amateurs, led by the 'new men' of France, learnt how to match and beat their enemies despite the odds. The French developed a new type of light cavalry, replacing the rigid discipline of the heavy cavalry with a high degree of autonomy, encouraging individual initiative as well as collective responsibilities. Alongside these forces, dynamic leaders emerged – the likes of Davout, Lasalle, and Masséna (amongst many others) all became superlative leaders of light cavalry, and their forces soon became Napoleon's eyes and

ears whilst on campaign. These formations were deployed in numbers, by regiment and more, and were charged with three principal tasks:

1. To scout out the enemy forces and deployment, and also the land around their lines of advance, identifying roads, bridges, strong points, and so on;
2. To prevent the enemy from finding out about the French army and its deployment and content;
3. To act on their own initiative if this would enable the light forces to seize the initiative unexpectedly, or exploit an opportunity for attack.

As the French developed this concept, their enemies quickly adapted their light cavalry

forces to try to offer them the same benefits when manoeuvring around their enemies. Whilst the idea of 'reconnaissance in force' was not new, the concept of Hussar light cavalry was over a century old, the idea of allowing individual 'detached' units to choose to seek out opportunities – in effect, a new type of 'opportunity reconnaissance' – most certainly was.

In 1792, knowing where their opponents were, allowed the French army to place itself across the lines of supply of the Prussian and Austrian armies advancing on Paris. The subsequent Battle of Valmy took place on ground scouted by the French, which allowed them to best place their artillery.

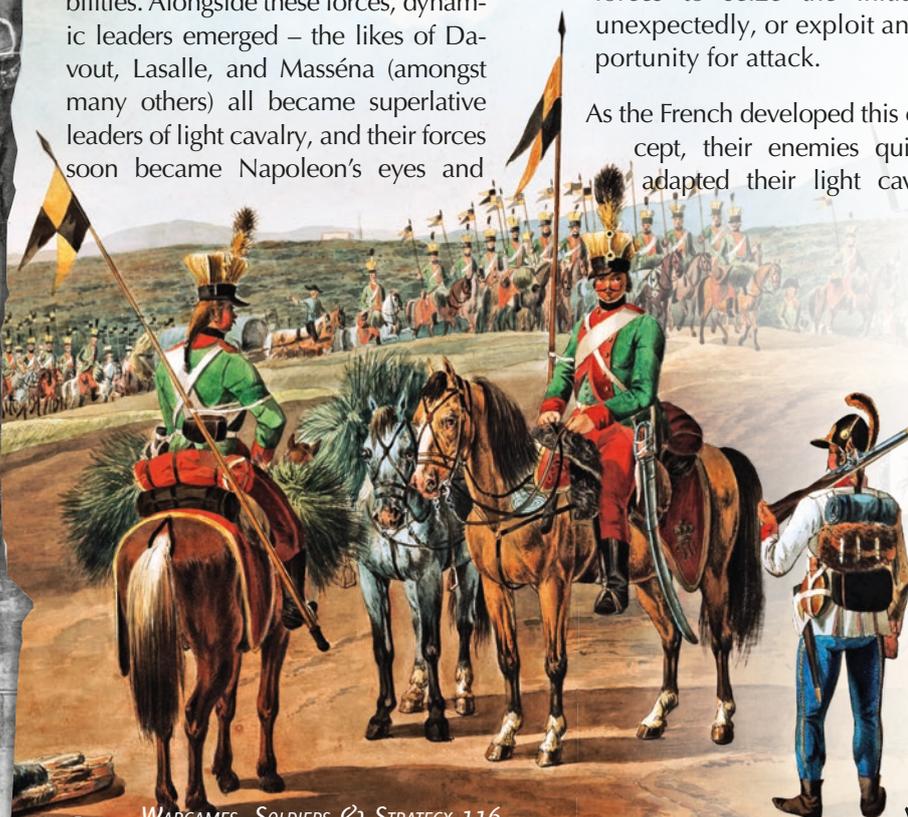
One of the key French advantages was numbers; they had nine regiments of scouting cavalry compared to the Prussians' two mounted and two light foot. Fighting blind meant the Prussians had little choice but to abandon the battlefield, as they had little idea as to the size or strength of the French. They, however, knew almost every unit present in the Prussian army.

By the time the Empire had been established, the French had become

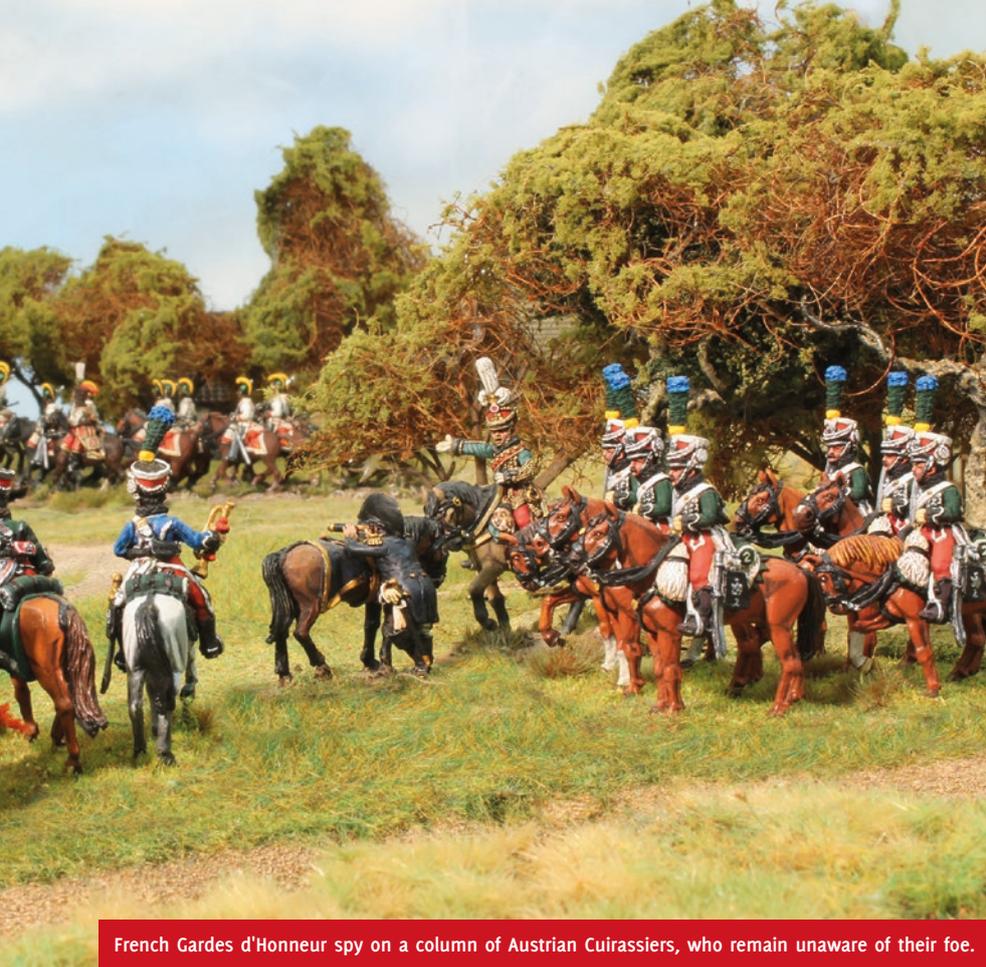
Austrian Uhlans and infantry on the march, circa 1800.

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LES DUNES DE VADREVILLE
TOP SECRET · BIGOT ·



French Gardes d'Honneur spy on a column of Austrian Cuirassiers, who remain unaware of their foe.

masters of the use of light cavalry, and one of the principal reasons the French won so many spectacular victories in the period 1805–1808 was the fact that they were able to know where the enemy was, what they were doing, and how to best them, and then generally ruin them.

Whilst this mounted capability was being developed by the French, other nations developed similar forces. In the latter part of the Napoleonic wars, a shortage of suitable horses gradually deprived Napoleon of the scouting cavalry and thus the knowledge he needed in order to defeat his enemies; at the same time his enemies were increasingly well-informed. By 1814 the Allied forces had gained the upper hand, and it was the French who now paid a terrible price for the lack of knowledge they possessed. At Craonne in 1814, the French should have won a vitally strategic battle, but their lack of light cavalry meant they had little idea as to the Prussian plans.

Whilst all of these grand strategic reconnaissance forces enabled the great battles of the period to take

place, there were also untold smaller actions fought out between small cavalry patrols, each attempting to prevent the others from scouting or foraging. These were what the light forces excelled at – and their flamboyance was reflected in their uniforms, their panache, and their flair.

Reconnaissance was everything in this period; slowly moving armies meant they needed to have eyes and ears that could also think and fight – on their own terms whenever possible.

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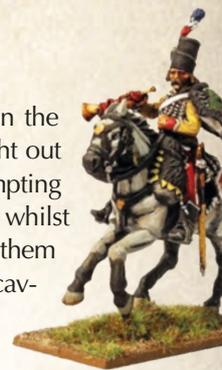


The French 1st Eclaircur regiment spots the Austrian lancers at a distance. Time to prepare for the attack!



CROSSING THE ADDA

When using reconnaissance on the tabletop, players can either fight out actions where one side is attempting to capture a bridge or a hilltop whilst the other player tries to deny them this. A classic example is the cavalry action at the Battle of Lodi (10 May 1796).



As the War of the First Coalition slowly moved in favour of the French, Napoleon pushed the Austrian-Neapolitan Army east, away from their fortress of Milan. Dispirited and depleted, the Austrian army retired across the River Adda at the town of Lodi. The Austrians held the advantage, but their commanding general, Beaulieu was worried about losing his army. He chose to extricate his army the night of the 10th whilst leaving a rearguard behind to prevent the French from pursuing. Whilst the bulk of the French army was gradually building up around Lodi, Colonel Michel Ordener instructed two squadrons of 2e Chasseurs à Cheval to scout north of the town to see if there were any crossing opportunities. Approximately 200 troopers rode away around 1300 on the 10th. At more or less the same time, General-Major Gerhard Rosselmini dispatched two squadrons of troopers from Cavalry Regiment Mészáros (Uhlán Regiment No.1) to monitor any French troop movements that could cause concern.

At 14:00, the French discovered a semi-derelict bridge across the Adda near the town of Erbatico. Dismount-



A group of Austrian Hussars ride through a small village, on the lookout for any signs of French activity.

ed Austrian cavalry were camped a few hundred metres away on a slight rise, but they seemed unaware of the presence of the French troops.

THE BATTLE

This scenario is designed for skirmishing rules, such as *Sharp Practice* or *Chosen Men*. You can adapt the details here – these give a general idea as to the troop quality and quantities.

French forces

Leaders: Good

Two units of 20 light cavalry figures each. Armed with carbine. Morale: high. Training: average. Ability: élan.

Austrian forces

Leaders: Average

Three units of 20 lancers each. Morale: poor. Training: good. Ability: reform.

Élan: troops can choose to ignore the first morale test they are required to take (one use), or instead they can re-roll any morale test (repeat use).

Reform: troops can reform after a failed morale test if they move one full move towards the rear – they can use this ability only once.

Terrain

This game can be played on a table as small as a 4' x 4' board. There should be a river running through the middle of the table and a bridge in the centre. Feel free to

add trees, fields and other terrain, but there should be a clear path to the river and crossing it. The ground is rough, and units may only charge along roads. Walls are low but stone built. Only five figures can cross the bridge in a turn. The river is fordable but is very difficult to cross – it should be counted as very difficult terrain. The Austrians are on a small hill, overlooking the bridge.

Who goes first?

The French have the first turn, entering the table. In subsequent turns, they can choose to move first or second. The Austrians can only start to move once they can see the French

cavalry – they will automatically see the French if any cavalry arrive at the bridge. The Austrians start dismounted and may only move at half speed in their first move (as it takes time for them to mount up).



Winning and losing

The side that holds the bridge after eight turns wins. If there is any doubt about who owns it, the player with the most unbroken figures/units closest to it is deemed to be in control.

HISTORICAL OUTCOME

The French drove off the Uhlans, who had little appetite for a fight they felt had little to do with them as they were a Hungarian-raised formation. This enabled Ordener to inform his commander that a way across had been found and secured – and this allowed General Beaumont to bring 1000 of his heavy cavalry across the river and circle south to attack the Austrian rear guard. The timing was crucial as it occurred just as the French forces in Lodi were forcing the bridge across the river. The appearance of the cavalry caused a general collapse in Austrian morale, and it would have been a complete collapse if it hadn't been for the heroic last stand by the Austrian Infantry Regiment No. 16, who covered the withdrawal of the remaining forces. **WS&S**

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Having discovered the Austrian position, the French charge bravely at the waiting Austrian lancers.

