

LES OUVRIERS DE LA MARINE

With the outbreak of war following the French Revolution men were needed not only for the army and navy of France but also to work within the dockyards to construct, repair and re-arm the ships of the French Navy.

To attract and retain workers the Revolutionary Government had addressed by decrees of 1790 and 1793 many of the complaints then prevalent, and even gave certain benefits to those workers whose skills were particularly important.

By 1800 the need for men in the dockyards of Cherbourg and Toulon led to further conscription of skilled men: carpenters, blacksmiths and masons. Married men were now paid 25% more than single men, and as the preparation for an invasion of England grew more and more men were diverted to that work.

In 1800 over a 1000 men were conscripted into the dockyards, and a similar number the following year. By now they were formed along military lines and were even given a uniform similar to their military counterparts – a round hat and a buttoned jacket. Rank was signified by a white, woollen stripe on the right arm for ‘aides-ouvriers’ two for ‘contremaitres’ with a double row of lace in silver on the right shoulder.

Twenty companies, comprising 2000 men were stationed at the main ports: two at L’Orient, 5 at Toulon, 5 at Rochefort and 8 at Brest.

A further levy of 4,462 men was called for in 1803. In 1807 each port had its own regiment, and by 1808 each battalion, commanded by a captain, included a sergeant-major, 4 sergeants, a ‘caporal-fourrier’, eight corporals and a drummer. The provisions also allowed for two worker’s children to be admitted, who would serve an apprenticeship and on reaching 16 years of age would become workers of the 3e classe.

By now the need for workers was dwindling as the French Navy was effectively blockaded in port by the British. Napoleon instead needed men for his army, and in March 1809 Captain Baste, who had made his name as a dashing sea-captain was put in charge of two companies from Antwerp and Boulogne at Strasbourg. Forming the 44e battalion de la Flotille they marched for Ulm, and then onto Vienna.

Napoleon had informed Bertrand by letter dated 29 May, 1808 of his intention “to use a part of the ouvriers de la Marine to construct some 60 bridges.” On 1 June of that year he also wrote of the need for “the construction of armed barges which would serve perfectly to gain control of the river. Amongst the achievements of the

carpenters and caulkers would be created fighting ships, bridges, barges and embarkation rafts for the troops.”

The construction of a bridge 150 metres long, and built in a single span was perhaps the greatest work, and done without the knowledge of the enemy.

The battalion left Austria on 29 December 1809 with the last of the troops. Captain Baste wrote seeking help with clothing for his men. “I see that since their arrival with the army, the difficult service that they have provided in various boats on the Danube sailing back and forth had often meant that they had to get into the water fully clothed to tow them, to give urgent help and facilitate the navigation of the river. This service, I state, and various other accidents have led to many men losing their shoes and gaiters in pulling on the ropes, others have lost part of their equipment like greatcoats, shakos and knapsacks which were carried away in the fixing of the bridge at Ebersdorf and at other times by towing or were lost in those boats which capsized and in which several sailors drowned.”

More ouvriers were sent to assist in Spain, and two battalions joined the Grande Armee in Napoleon’s campaign in Russia in 1812 under Captain Perroy, and served under Generals Eble and Chasseloup-Laubat. The crossing of the Niemen was aided by their work and one questions if they were also present at the Berezina, but the papers are silent on this point.

The ouvriers were used to fortify Dresden and after the battle of Leipzig were holed up in Torgau, where they fought successfully against the enemy. They were used as auxiliary gunners and the Prussians came to fear these ‘grenadiers noirs’ “who, benefiting from an energy superior to those of the soldiers charges with their protection, showed greater fighting qualities.”

After the armistice of 1814 they returned to their bases at Antwerp, Toulon, Cherbourg and Boulogne, but were reformed in 1815 during the Hundred Days as the ‘corps imperial d’ouvriers du Genie maritime’.

They had served the Revolution and the Empire well both in sustaining the French Navy and latterly supporting the army on campaign in many theatres of war, but with the end of the war and the restoration of the monarchy the dockyards once again went into decline and many were left unemployed.