

Napoleon's Overseas Army
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 211 (1989)
Text by Rene Chartrand; illustrated by Francis Black

Review by Rob Morgan

There are so many titles in the Osprey series dealing with soldiers in the wars of General Bonaparte -- from the Prussians, Russians and Spanish to the Brunswickers and the Marshals of France, that deluded handful of hangers-on who called the little Corsican Emperor. Other titles by Osprey deal with battles and campaigns, with warships and even the odd commander, of course. The best by far of all the books is No. 96, on the artillery equipment, but this particular title, however, is most unusual indeed. It also must have a certain attraction to the North American reader for obvious reasons.

When the Revolution broke out in July 1789, French territories spanned the globe, small in number and indeed in land, from the islands of the West Indies, Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Lucia among them, to the territories of the Indian Ocean, the Seychelles, La Reunion, and a host of other small scattered and barely defensible colonies, and one rather large one, Louisiana. France had powerful world-wide economic interests, and rather small armed forces to protect them.

The book opens with the inevitable chronology, from the fall of the Bastille to the last colonial event of the Bonaparte era, the retaking of Guadeloupe by the British in the late Summer of 1815. This is a very interesting account, largely because those wargamers with a serious Napoleonic interest will rally to the big battles, fighting Talavera, Austerlitz and Jena, if you have a ballroom to play in, then Leipzig or Borodino maybe, rather than the minor and yet very vigorous far-flung island struggles. They are less well known to the average reader. Chartrand deals with the early uniforms, the disposition of European and native troops, and with the changes necessary to the organisation of French colonies in the face of almost immediate states of siege from the British.

The book deals first with events in the Windward Islands and Guadeloupe up to 1802; the writer is thorough in his account of the complex and frequently reversed military events, and always gives a useful account of uniform and equipment. He moves on the present day Haiti (Saint-Domingue then), and provides substantial detail on an island through which, as he suggests, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse seem to have ridden; slavery brought it all down, and here the enigmatic Toussaint L'Ouverture and his own army come to the fore! Bonaparte sent an expedition to the island during the short peace of 1801-02, captured Toussaint and sent him to die in a French prison, but the

expedition suffered a massive defeat by the British and fell to disease in 1803. This part of the text is fascinating, and the fighting on the island continued until July 1809, when the last French garrison marched out to surrender.

Compared to these events, the matter of French Louisiana was a short-lived almost trouble-free transfer of property; likewise the conflict in French Guiana and in Senegal amounted to little apart from raids and naval actions on a small scale. In the Indian Ocean, the isolated French islands and the allied Dutch Colonies were captured in a piecemeal and not particularly vigorous manner, but there were some spirited scenes of resistance and even a few attempts at reinforcement from Metropolitan France. The Dutch army lost the Cape Colony in 1806, and lost Surinam before that. Chartrand ends with a discussion of the numerous colonial units based in France. Some had a penal aspect, one or two mutinied, but others served loyally.

The final Hundred Days of Bonaparte's adventures saw only one of the colonies support him, Guadeloupe, where on 9th August 1815, the very last action of the Napoleonic Wars was fought by Colonel Boyer, the French commander, who surrendered to the British the following day. The inevitable fate of all these colonies was capture and loss, but as the writer says, they did tie down a considerable number of enemy troops and ships for many years.

The plates are remarkable, as they provide detail of forces very differently dressed and equipped from the European armies of France and her allies. The round topped hat was old-fashioned Royal French attire, but many of the colonials kept this headgear for many years. The white-clad Pondicherry infantryman (plate A3) is an interesting option, and the variety of uniforms worn by black and French troops on Saint-Domingue are quite magnificent, providing an opportunity for small but flamboyantly dressed soldiers. The Reunion and Indian Ocean soldiery of France are perhaps a little more traditionally attired, as the plates show, but the potential for variety is clearly there.

The book is a real delight for the Napoleonic wargamer!

As for the figure potential, well, in fact, the numbers involved were frequently quite small, dealing with raiding and landings. So even the 25mm scale figures would do neatly, though the differentiation in uniform and in the style of gear worn, makes 15mm a better choice. If only the old Peter Laing range was still around, then I'd opt for that, but you can find all you want, with some exceptions requiring conversion (Plate F2 is one -- he looks and is dressed like the commander of the Alamo!) in ranges such as Irregular, Mick Yarrow, and

so on, with Peter Pig heads in some cases. Pay your money and take your choice, as they say.

