

The French Army 1914-1918
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 286 (1995)
Text by Ian Sumner; colour plates by Gerry Embleton

Review by Rob Morgan

What you would expect to be a standard title approached in a straightforward way, but of course Sumner's problem with the French Army is the French Army!

So, what we have in this text is a detailed and useful account of the organisation of the army at the outbreak of the Great War, almost 500 regiments of infantry and 80 regiments of cavalry, and a vast artillery park (if some of it was rather dated), as well as substantial support arms. The text goes on to describe, briefly, the Army of Africa, a fascinating subject in its own right; with its Penal Units and mentioning the *Legion Etrangere* of course with its own title of course.

The problems for any author on this subject begin with uniform matters, and Sumner handles everything well, but is bound to be immersed in the simple fact that, in July 1914, any of the Emperor's marshals of 1870 observing a French Metropolitan Army march out of one of its fortresses would have little problem recognising it in detail. The machine guns and odd motor vehicle might have been worthy of comment, but little else! The gaudy kit at the outset, and the complete lack of any camouflage or even drab clothing made the troops highly visible targets. There were, Sumner reminds us, half a million French casualties in 1914! A substantial part of the middle of the book is spent on the serious difficulties involved in deciding on what the troops should wear. Remember that eventually it was horizon blue, but the African troops wore khaki!

The book continues with comments on the individual kit of the unfortunate *poilu*, and the small arms issued -- there were no automatic weapons at squad level, of course, until the worst light machine gun in the history of warfare, the legendary 1915 Chauchat was issued in the second year of the War. The crucial subject of Tactics and Trenches begins only at page 23, and ends at page 33. It opens with the almost suicidal cult of the offensive. Wargamers should remember, when they line up their Summer 1914 French infantry and cavalry, the rules of this utterly incredible game as envisioned by the *Ecole de Guerre*.

There was to be *no firing* in the advance (to the drumbeat); only two orders would be given, 'Fix Bayonets!' and 'Charge!' The mass, red-trousered formations of Frenchmen made the finest target in modern times as they rolled over the hills of Artois. Morale would win the day, said the generals. Sumner suggests -- and I believe this is absolutely correct -- that of all French infantry officers in action in 1914, almost two-thirds became casualties.

The new weapons which simply had to be developed in the course of the war and the evolving yet still sterile tactics of the trench-based attack are given brief treatment, as is the problem of French trench systems, which were appalling places compared to the first-rate German or passable British and Imperial systems. Sumner's text concludes with the problem of discipline. A tide of indiscipline rose through 1916, and became critical after Verdun, where just about every regiment in the line spent its time and its men's lives. Petain, who gets rather little mention, saved the French army, and with better skill than he claimed to have done in 1940, and there the book ends.

The photographs in the text are good, some I'd not seen before, and the diagrams are of interest. The Colonial troops especially interest me, and I'd like to have seen more on the subject here, plate F has tremendous value and I do hope that among the manufacturers currently planning and producing ranges, that the French Colonials are represented. Cycle troops too -- plate B1 shows the sombre effectiveness that force might have achieved, not properly followed up in the text though. Emblem's colour plates are both elegant and attractive, but of course the same comment comes to the surface time and time again. Pretty, but pretty useless, uniforms. Do notice the uniform of the *Tirailleur Algerien* at E2, that's what the French infantry could have looked like. Contrast this with plate H, and allow the term camouflage to drift across your mind.

I suppose all in all a good opening brief, Sumner had no alternative but to follow in the deadly footsteps of the French General Staff. A good effort.

For wargamers, naturally the sheer scale of the Great War conflict from the shots at Sarajevo in July 1914, to the true, and bitter, end of the War sometime in the Summer of 1923 (perhaps) permits the smaller scales to come to the forefront. Irregular Miniatures's splendid 6mm range will allow you to waste the crack line regiments of France on the table top at a reasonable price. Do take a look at them, and of course in this scale their WWI aeroplanes are also pretty good value.

In 15mm, the Peter Pig range is sound. Providing a good opening-moves French force, entirely Metropolitan, of course, the dragoons, *Chasseurs Alpains*, and even the Zouaves, but no colonials. There's a new 15mm range from Mick Yarrow too, with some delightful figures. I suspect that both 15mm ranges will be developed and extended shortly. The Great War centenary will offer much to wargamers, I can feel it in my bones. If only the old Peter Laing 15mm range of figures and equipment was still around.

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THE FRENCH ARMY 1914-18



IAN SUMNER GERRY EMBLETON