



Incomparable: Napoleon's 9th Light Infantry Regiment (General Military)

Terry Crowdy

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This is the story of people who were caught up in the blazing trail of Napoleon's epic career. It describes the Napoleonic war machine from within, shedding light on the lives and feats of soldiers on whose toil a spectacular Empire was built and lost. This is far more than a regimental history, as it depicts a time of epic change spent in proximity to the greatest commander of their time.

France's 9th Light Infantry regiment was created as an elite battalion in Louis XVI's Royal Army. After the aristocratic officers fled from the Revolution, command of the battalion fell to a close-knit group of grizzly ex-NCOs, idealistic revolutionaries and a young, battle-scarred captain, Mathieu Labassée. In 1799, as First Consul of the Republic, Napoleon needed a military victory to cement his political power. He drove a hastily gathered army across the Swiss Alps to recapture northern Italy from the Austrians. It was a risky gamble which very nearly failed. At Marengo Napoleon is taken by surprise. His army were in open retreat when the Ninth arrived late on the field. As Napoleon's last hope they were launched forward to stop the Austrians and give the rest of the army time to recover. Their charge was so ferocious it breaks Austrian morale and precipitates their headlong flight from the battlefield.

With the crown of France within his reach, Napoleon was generous in his praise for the Ninth, dubbing them 'Incomparable'. They were feted as celebrities in Paris, but success went to their heads, some officers turned to drink, others fought duels against rivals in Napoleon's Guard. A new commander, Claude Meunier was brought in to bring about change: The Ninth's prestige was now at its peak.

From such heady heights, the fear of failure became a powerful motivator. Through successive campaigns in Austria, Prussia, Poland and Spain, the regiment proved its worth. Eventually the strain began to show. The misery of guerrilla war sucked the life and soul out of the regiment. By the time the Allies reached Paris in 1814, the regiment could muster only a handful of men capable of holding their place in the line. They fought on, regardless.

In 1815 Napoleon returned from exile in Elba. The Ninth immediately acclaim his return and take their cherished Eagle out of hiding, promising once again to conquer or die. The climax of the book comes ten miles from Waterloo on a bridge over the River Dyle. The Ninth spearheaded the charge to rejoin Napoleon. Like Marengo, their late arrival might save the day. Unlike Marengo, they fail. Even in defeat their story is extraordinary - even by the standards of the dramatic and turbulent years in which they lived.

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