

Navy

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Navy

Napoleon strove mightily to give France a first-class Navy. Lacking time and competent subordinates enough, he failed, but he achieved enough-despite Trafalgar and other defeats-to keep England worried until 1813-14.

He was responsible for many naval reforms, including permanent crews for his warships, and an insistence on better officer training and naval administration. In 1804 he issued the first uniform regulations for common seamen, which merely standardized what had long been common sailor dress, dark blue jackets, red waistcoats, and dark blue trousers, with a high-crowned "plug" hat. Specialists were identified by collars of distinctive colours: red for gun crews, *aurora* for helmsmen and pilots, crimson for carpenters and caulkers, white for sailmakers, black for armorers, and blue with yellow braiding for the elite top-men. Officers had plain dark blue undress uniforms and black chapeaus. They and the *maîtres* (senior non-commissioned officers) usually wore long-tailed coats instead of jackets.

These uniforms steadily became more "military" especially after 1808. Army-style insignia of grade and long service were adopted, and the crew of each ship of the line was given a distinctive uniform.

The result, however, was to leave us with a series of puzzles. Contemporary artists, amateur or professional, seldom pictured naval uniforms; when they did, we seldom can be certain that they identified them correctly. Naval units serving with the French Army may have been outfitted hurriedly with whatever clothing was available. And sailors-proverbially carefree and easy-going-probably did not concern themselves overmuch with perfect conformity to the decreed style of dress.

Two points should be noted: First, the French Navy, unlike England and the United States, had no marines; second, its Naval Artillery was a separate organization from the rest of the Navy. Founded in 1626, it always was thoroughly military in discipline, dress, and function.



Contre-Amiral, 1804



Capitaine de Frégate, 1812

Plate 1: Rear Admiral, 1804.

Except in its cut, this uniform is little changed from that worn by a French rear admiral during the American Revolution. This is ceremonial full dress—the tall boots would have been damnably cumbersome for storm or battle. The object in the admiral's right hand is a "speaking trumpet," a nautical version of the megaphone, much used by naval officers when giving orders in high winds and combat or when hailing other ships.

This officer's grade of *contre* (rear) admiral is indicated by the width of the gold embroidery on his coat and his sky blue and gold sash—the same type worn by brigadier generals, his Army equivalent in grade.

Plate 2: Frigate Captain, 1812.

The grade of *Capitaine de Frégate* did not necessarily imply command of a warship of that class—an officer of that grade might be assigned as the executive officer of a ship of the line (which would be commanded by a *capitaine de vaisseau*), or as commander of a flotilla of gunboats, or as a battalion of sailors serving with the Army.

He wears his full-dress uniform, donned—to judge from the pistols in his belt—for a day of battle. His top boots were common wear among officers of all navies, though some seem to have preferred the light hussar model.



*Equipages de Haut-Bord, Maître, 1812
Comp. d'Abordage*



*Bataillons de Marine, Second-Maître, 1808-15
9th Battalion?*

Plate 3: Boatswain, Boarding Company, Ship of the Line, 1812.

This upstanding bosun (*maître*) is the senior noncommissioned officer, equivalent to an Army 1st sergeant, of the one company (out of the four constituting a ship of the line's crew) that was specially trained for boarding and capturing an enemy warship in hand-to-hand fighting.

His uniform and insignia of grade and length of service follows the Army style introduced by Napoleon, beginning in 1804. Only his broad red sash and his hat (probably made of jacked leather for protection against cutlass blades and musket butts) are traditional "Old Navy" dress. The loop of chain on his right chest ends in the "pipe" (not "whistle"), now tucked inside his jacket, which is his badge of office.

Plate 4: Boatswain's Mate, 1808-15.

Like the Army, the French Navy applied its own interpretations to its uniform regulations. This 2nd *maître* wears his chain as his badge, but his grade is indicated by the yellow lace on his collar. Also like the Army, the Navy used blue wool trousers for winter, white linen or cotton for summer. Black leggings were favored for duty, white for full-dress and shore leave. Red cuffs and collar and red piping would suggest that this sailor belongs to the 9th Naval Battalion.



Matelot 1803



*Régiment de Flotille, 1808 - 1809
Bataillon*

Plate 5: Seaman, 1803.

Before 1804, the French Navy, like those of other maritime nations, had no uniform regulations for common seamen, such uniformity as existed being imposed by individual captains according to their fancy.

However, French seamen had generally worn the type of dress illustrated here. The wide red wool sash provided handy storage for small personal articles. Summer trousers might be plain white or striped with blue or blue and red. Hats varied according to the wearer's taste, but this "plug" type of leather, canvas, felt, or straw—varnished or tarred to make it waterproof—was popular. One common item of dress not shown here was a large black neckerchief.

This *matelot* carries a "boarding axe," used in hand-to-hand fighting.

Plate 6: Seaman, Serving With the Army, 1809.

Besides putting his sailors into uniform, drilling them as infantry and instructing them in marksmanship, beginning in 1808 Napoleon organized them into Army-type units. In 1809 several "flotilla battalions"—organized, armed, and equipped like infantry—were activated for coastal defense, training naval recruits, and service with the Army. One accompanied the *Grande Armée* into Austria that year and, together with a battalion of Naval Military Artificers, made themselves extremely useful in operations along the Danube River. This figure, with its cutaway Army-style coat, pointed cuffs, and colorful epaulets has a decidedly different appearance than the other naval units shown here. This may be another case of hasty uniforming; normally flotillamen wore plain dark blue outfits.



Fusilier de la Marine, 1810



*Marin de Flotille, 1810
en service de l'Armée*

6th Bn.?

Plate 7: Seaman, 1810.

This figure, which Knötel titled "Naval Fusilier," has not so far been positively identified. His uniform differs from the standard naval-type in having lapels, as well as collar and cuffs, of its facing color. It may represent the two little-known Naval Infantry regiments Napoleon formed from unemployed sailors and laborers at Brest in 1806 for garrison duty there, or it may be one of the higher-numbered naval battalions (assigned to ships of the line) for which we have not yet found positive uniform descriptions.

Plate 8: Seaman, Ship of the Line, 1808–09.

Each of the Naval Battalions (later designated *Équipages de Haut-Bord* or "Battleship Crews") that after 1808 constituted the crew of a French ship of the line supposedly was assigned a distinctive color combination of facings and piping for its jackets. Some were distinctly garish: the 42nd had orange collars, cuffs, and shoulder straps, trimmed with pink! This seaman with his dark blue uniform, piped with yellow, belongs to the 6th Naval Battalion. Note that his trouser legs are lined with light-colored cloth, probably linen.



Gnötzel d. J.

Bataillon de Marine Impériale, 1813

39th Bn



Gnötzel d. J.

*Equipage de Haut-Cord (Bataillons de Marine, Infanterie)
Fusilier, 1815*

Plate 9: Seaman, Ship of the Line, 1813.

Sky blue facings and white piping should designate the 39th Naval Battalion. However, this seaman has dark blue shoulder straps instead of the sky blue, which would be regulation for the 39th—possibly an artist's error or the choice of the ship's captain.

Seamen disliked the shako for wear aboard ship, finding it unhandy while working in the rigging. Therefore, Napoleon decided in August 1811 to replace it with the usual round hat as those issued wore out, a process apparently completed in 1812–13.

Plate 10: Seaman, 1815.

On his return from Elba, Napoleon found the French Navy much neglected, with few ships ready to put to sea. Needing all available troops for his field armies, he withdrew the soldiers garrisoning his naval bases. To replace them, he reorganized most of his available Navy personnel into provisional infantry regiments.

This "Naval Infantry Fusilier" wears a plain undress uniform, dark blue jacket over a red waistcoat. (In 1814, regulations called for dark blue waistcoats, but there was not time for complete reuniforming.) The round hat is the type authorized in 1811; the brass "ribbon" across its front probably still carries the name and number of his former *équipage*. The sky blue pompon may signify either that *équipages* facing color (as specified in 1811) or his present company assignment.



*2^e Régiment d'Artillerie de la Marine
Officier, 1813*



Artillerie de Marine, tenue de sortie, 1811

Plate 11: Naval Artillery, 2nd Regiment, Lieutenant, Field Uniform, 1813.

This Imperial Corps of Naval Artillery was handy at all sorts of duties. Aboard ship they were gun captains and gun pointers; ashore they manned the batteries guarding naval bases and served with the field armies as infantry or artillerymen. Their officers supervised the manufacture of naval guns and were used for various odd details requiring toughness and savvy—such as making soldiers out of Haitian prisoners of war.

This lieutenant (so identified by the thin red stripe on the strap of his fringeless *contre-epaulet*) is serving ashore in 1813. He has made a horseshoe roll of his overcoat, which thus protects his chest and left shoulder; his trousers are cut full, in a fashion then favored by young officers, and gathered at his ankles; his shako has a protective cover of soft, thin leather. The brown object at his left side is a gourd canteen.

Plate 12: Naval Artillery, Private, Off-Duty Uniform, 1811.

Tenue de sortie has no exact equivalent in our American military vocabulary. An Englishman would call it “walking out dress”—the uniform a soldier wore when on pass from the barracks for a few hours of rest and recreation. Men with skinny legs might have themselves fitted with false calves to fill out their stockings. Because every sailor and soldier entitled to wear a sword or saber did so, the evening’s entertainment might include a little bloodshed, whether from a polite duel or a major beerhall brawl.



Gnötel d.3.

L'Artillerie de Marine à Lützen 1813.



Gnötel d.3.

Ouvriers Militaires de la Marine, 1809

Plate 13: Naval Artillery, Private, Field Uniform, 1813.

Desperately in need of soldiers in early 1813, Napoleon milked his Navy for able-bodied men. Most of the Naval Artillery, after providing filler replacements for the Imperial Guard's Artillery and cadres for eight companies of foot artillery, was fleshed out with conscripts and converted into four infantry regiments. They served excellently. At Lützen in May their staunchness under fire and their blue overcoats made the Allies think them part of the Guard.

The Army had issued them artillery overcoats and three pairs of good shoes. Black leather belts had replaced the more scarce and expensive white ones in a good many hurriedly uniformed regiments.

Plate 14: Naval Artillery, Artificers, Master Artificer, 1809.

Formed in 1808 by militarizing civilian employees of the French naval bases, the *Ouvriers Militaires de la Marine* were the Navy's equivalent of the Army's engineer troops. Beginning in 1809 Napoleon employed battalions of them with the Army where they built bridges, manned supply vessels and gunboats, or served as gunners or infantry—and did all of it expertly.

They were uniformed, armed, and equipped much like the Army engineers. The red cords on this artificer's shako are nonregulation, but nonetheless worn by some units. The red braid around the top of his shako indicates his grade.



Plate 15: Naval Artillery, Artificers, Artificer 1st Class, 1810.

With his vest of lightweight white material and his trousers worn over his leggings, this artificer is in summer full dress. His red epaulets and his *briquet* proclaim him an Artificer 1st Class: The Artificer 2nd Class had red shoulder knots without fringes, and the Artificer 3rd Class merely had blue shoulder straps trimmed with red piping. Master artificers, as shown in the preceding plate had their shakos bound with red braid. There naturally was considerable variation among units as to plumes. One Alsatian source shows light infantry-type pointed cuffs.