

# The Top Twenty French Cavalry Commanders: #8 General Charles Lefebvre-Desnouettes

By [Terry J. Senior](#)

General Charles Lefebvre-Desnouettes was one of the most loyal of Napoleon's officers. He was a highly skilled horseman and a gifted commander. Born of bourgeois parents Jean-Claude Lefebvre and his wife Mlle A Leduc, in the Pont Neuf district of Paris where his father ran a drapery business and as such, was a supplier to the French army.

Born in 1773 he originally enlisted in December 1789 but twice his parents purchased his release. The third time, they conceded defeat and he embarked on what was to prove a highly successful career.

He made steady progress through the ranks and saw action in Belgium in 1798 and later Marengo, and a whole series of important conflicts across the length and breadth of Europe, right up to Waterloo.

He was made ADC to Napoleon when he became Premier Consul. He was promoted to General-de-Brigade in 1806, and General-de-Division in December 1807, at the age of 34.



**General Charles Lefebvre-Desnouettes**

There was just one stain on an otherwise unblemished career. This occurred at Benevente in Spain on the morning of the 29th December 1808. Lefebvre took a detachment of his Chasseurs-a-Cheval de la Garde Imperiale (some 500 officers and men) across the river Esla unaware that there was a substantial body of enemy cavalry still present in the town. The error was entirely of his own making and moreover elementary to an officer of his standing, experience, and ability. He ought to have had scouts well ahead of his force to foresee and avoid just that eventuality. Having reached the opposite bank, the French were first attacked by a regiment of English light dragoons. The General, who lost his sabre in the river during the action, was wounded and taken prisoner by a German dragoon named Bergman who is stated to have then given up his prize to a trooper Gridale of the 10th Hussars. Approximately 60 of Lefebvre's men were also captured by the 10th Hussars who were commanded by General Henry William Paget. Other French officer casualties included Lieutenant Bocheux who was killed and Capitaines Geist and Cayre who were among the wounded.

The General was paroled at Cheltenham and in due course was joined by his wife Stephanie who had been granted a passport by the Emperor following a suggestion by General Lejeune who himself had only recently made good his escape from Ashby de la Zouch.. The General

and Stephanie became extremely popular locally and their attendance at social events was a matter of great demand. Some years earlier, the Emperor had given the Lefebvre a signet ring of great value. The ethos of parole was trust and when in late 1811, Lefebvre, using the ring as a bribe, broke his parole and escaped back to France, the English public, especially those in Cheltenham were outraged, and all manner of inaccurate stories ensued. However, the escape was made good, much to the delight of the French military high command and the General took his rightful position at the head of his Chasseurs-a-Cheval in time for the disastrous Russian Campaign of 1812. I wonder if there was any time that he wished that he had remained a prisoner in Cheltenham.

On Napoleons return from Elba in February 1815, Lefebvre together with the Lallemand brothers, both of whom were Generals, and General Antoine Rigau made an attempt to take the garrison and arsenal of La Fere but were foiled by men loyal to Louis XVIII, led by the one armed General Augustine-Marie d'Aboville.

After the defeat of Waterloo, Lefebvre and his three principal accomplices were proscribed by the subsequent Ordonnance and fled to the United States. Lefebvre lived there until 1821 when his wife had managed to secure permission for him to return to Amsterdam and there await the final invitation to re-enter France. At the end of April 1821 he took passage in a ship called the "Albion", a vessel belonging to the "Black Ball" line, which, on approaching the coast of southern Ireland encountered very severe weather and sank just off Kinsale. Lefebvre was among those who lost their lives.

Sadly, he did not get to see his only daughter, Charlotte-Lavinie, who must have been conceived just prior to Waterloo. Charlotte was later the recipient of a large inheritance of 100,000 francs from the Emperor's estate.

Lefebvre was a fine soldier and a commander of the highest order. The only two blemishes on an otherwise remarkable and loyal career were the circumstances of his capture at Benevente, and his escape from Cheltenham, which, to the English anyway, destroyed his honour.

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