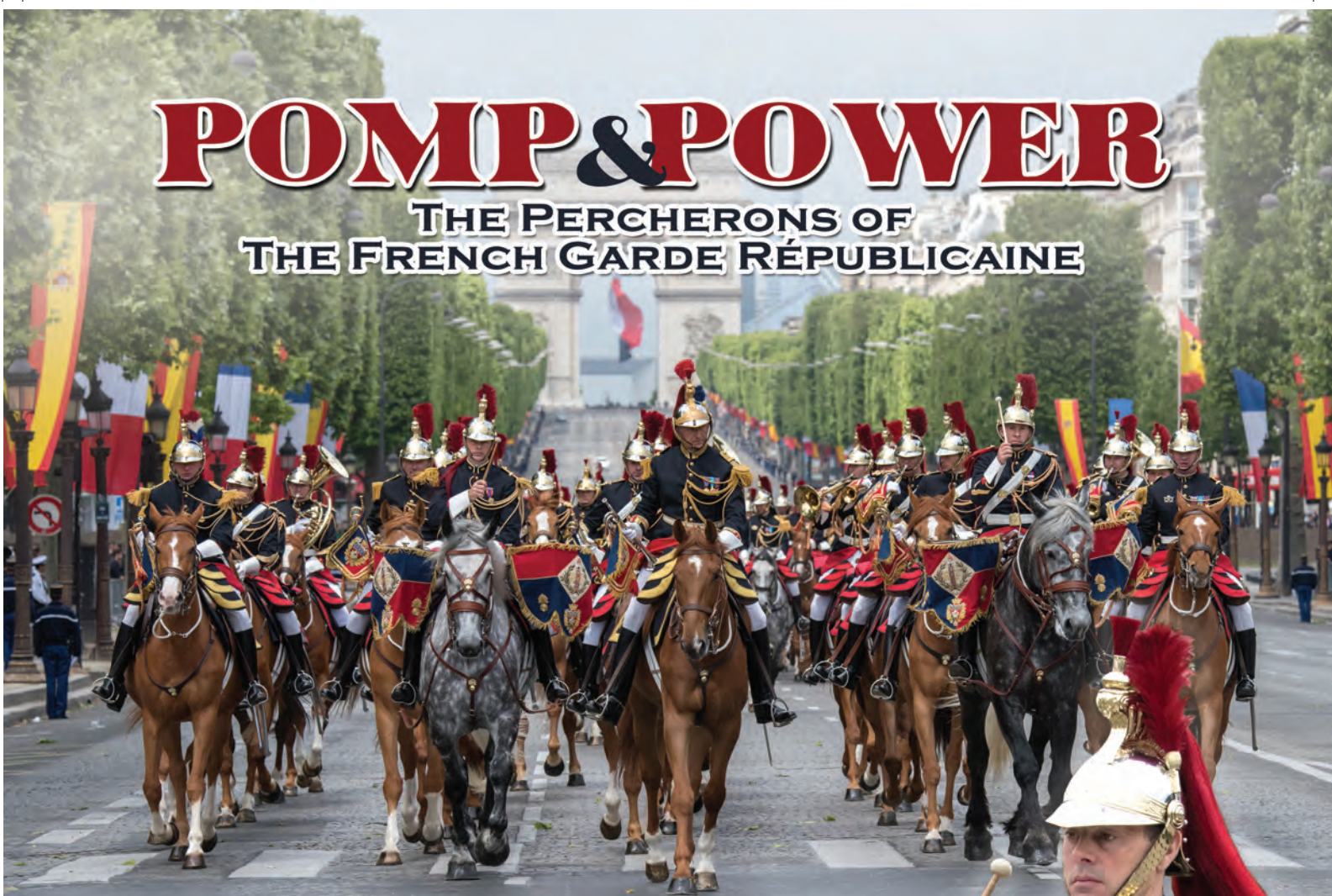


POMP & POWER

THE PERCHERONS OF THE FRENCH GARDE RÉPUBLICAINE



by Virginia Kouyoumdjian

photos by David Mendiboure, Garde Républicaine

Across Europe, a number of armed forces still maintain regiments of cavalry that are used for ceremonial duties. These include Britain's Household Cavalry, the Guardia Real in Spain, the Guarda Nacional Republicana in Portugal and the Corazzieri in Italy. In all cases, these regiments take on full military duties in addition to their ceremonial ones. The tradition in France is maintained by the GARDE RÉPUBLICAINE. Boasting a history of more than 200 years following its initial creation by Napoleon in 1802, the Garde has undergone a number of name changes during the years as France went back and forth from kingdom to empire to republic. It was only in 1870 that the name of Garde Républicaine was awarded to it and it has undergone only minor changes since. In its present incarnation, the Garde Républicaine consists of three regiments that include cavalry, infantry, motorcycle and auxiliary troops. It is part of the Gendarmerie which, although within the armed forces, is actually under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, and concentrates mainly on policing duties.

The cavalry regiment of the Garde Républicaine consists of three infantry squadrons, based at three different locations in and around Paris, plus a general duty squadron made up of the fanfare (band), farriers and veterinarians. There is also a training center for both horses and soldiers on the outskirts of Paris. In

continued on next page





photos by David Mendiboure, Garde Républicaine



Though a bit long in the tooth by Garde standards, Tonic de Charlotte, has more than proven his mettle and now leads the fanfare, ridden by Chief-Warrant Officer Xavier Harraut.

Pomp & Power continued

all, it consists of about 400 horses and just over 400 military personnel.

All of this requires horses, a great many horses. The majority of the 400+ horses used by the Garde are Selle Français, or French Saddlebreds.

The Drum Horses

Over the years, the Garde has used many different breeds as drum horses. At one time they used several Percheron-crosses that were very good at the job, but France is a country where cross-breeding of

Depending on the particular squadron they are attached to, they are either chestnut, bay or dark bay. Only a few grey horses are used: they are for the standard bearers and the drum horses. They generally are at the front of the troops during parades. The tradition of using grey horses as drum horses dates back to 1937. It has always been necessary to use weight-bearing horses to carry the heavy drums. Temperament is also very important as the horses are confronted with a great deal of noise, crowds, long waits and unexpected situations. It must also be remembered that the fanfare's horses are guided using foot reins since the musicians' hands are usually busy with their instruments.

Percherons is severely frowned upon, hence very little-to-no supply. More recently, they used crosses between Boulonnais draft horses and Arabians. These horses definitely looked the part, but proved to be far too hot-blooded for the task at hand—even an hour-long warm-up before parades never seemed sufficient to calm them down and ensure that they behaved. As a result, the decision was made a few years ago, by then commanding officer Colonel Puligny, to look elsewhere. Having had good experience with crossbreds, they were interested in Percherons, but also worried that the horses might be too massive, without the elegance required of all horses at the Garde Républicaine. Upon contacting the Société Hippique Percheronne de France (French Percheron Horse Society) in the spring of 2013, however, they discovered that the Percheron in France comes in two types, one of which, the “diligentier” or coach horse, is lighter, having had the benefit of an influx of North American bloodlines over the past couple of decades. Heartened by this news, they decided to launch a search for the right horses. They were ideally looking for geldings aged three to five that had been well-handled already, but had not necessarily had any schooling. There surfaced another problem: French Percheron breeders have never really exploited the concept of geldings, either keeping their colt foals as breeding stallions or sim-



Eight in-house saddle-makers repair and restore the Garde's many saddles, most of which predate the first World War. The standard military style, in use since 1874, is the most common, though other types are used too.



Virginia Kouyoumdjian photos on this page

Many different types of horseshoes are handmade on-site by the Garde's 20 farriers to the tune of some 15,000 each year.

ply selling them off for meat.

After a long selection process which included thorough veterinary checks and a month-long temperament testing period, the Garde settled on two horses in May of 2013. Tonic de Charlotte, foaled in 2005, is by imported Canadian stallion, Czar of Livingstone Valley, and is out of a French mare called Idole de Charlotte. He was a little older than was considered ideal, but so perfectly in line with the needs of the Garde that they went with him anyway. He turned out to be very talented and his training period ended up being much shorter than the standard two years. The second Percheron is Apollo 7, foaled in 2010. On his paternal side, his grandsire was also Czar of Livingstone Valley, and on his dam's side, his great-grandsire was Silver Shadows Sheik, the first American stallion imported to France back in the early 1990s. Tonic had already had some training and was put through an accelerated schooling process. He started ceremonial duties first, impressing the public at the World Equestrian Games in Caen in August 2014. He was soon followed by Apollo. The two now ride proudly at the head of the fanfare for all the biggest events of the Garde, starting with the enormous parade down the Champs Elysées in Paris each July 14, to celebrate France's National Day. This parade is the culmination for all of these horses because they have to be perfect in every way. Any and all mistakes, even the tiniest, will immediately be noticed and receive comment. Sandra Barré who was the person at the time in charge of finding the right horses for the Garde at the French Percheron Horse Society, is justifiably proud of the success of her first two finds. "Thanks to the reach of the Garde Républicaine through both its ceremonial and security duties," she states, "the image of the breed, as well as, its promotion have benefitted enormously."

Training for Ceremonial Duty & Police Work

The first stop for any horse entering the Garde Républicaine is the training center at St. Germain en Laye, on the outskirts of Paris. There, both young recruits and young horses (typically 3-year-olds) are put through four-to-six months of intensive training. Where the recruits are concerned, those joining the cavalry regiments have to be

excellent riders already to be accepted, but members of the fanfare are musicians first and foremost, and often do not even know how to ride when they join. The training therefore, goes from absolute basics to the finer points of military/police riding. After the initial period of training, the horses and recruits then join one of the Paris barracks to continue their training for another two years. The fanfare horses are all stationed at the Celestins Barracks, a stone's throw from the Seine River and Notre Dame Cathedral. There follows a year of mainly riding work, with regular outings on the streets of Paris to get used to traffic, noise and crowds. The second year is much more targeted when the horses

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Apollo 7, ridden by Warrant Officer François Laboch, is one of four purebred Percherons serving in the Garde. Selle Français (French Saddlebreds) far outnumber the drafts, but look who gets to carry the drums.

Pomp & Power continued

learn their actual jobs and how to deal with the environment they must face. The drum horses begin to work with the drums, first with smaller, lighter ones that are used in a special band with just drums and oboes, and then graduating to the full-size drums that weigh over 50 pounds each. Actually putting on the drums is a fairly noisy undertaking, so the horses must first get used to that. Training is done in five to ten-minute increments, and repeated several times a day (many

treats are involved, apparently) until the horses get accustomed to the weight. After that, work begins on actually beating on the drums and also desensitizing the horse to other noises, such as clapping and shouting. The horses also need to learn to work in close formation and to maintain their position within the ranks. The Percheron drum horses are right at the front of the fanfare—thus, this is less of an issue for them. On parade days, they are lunged for about ten minutes before they are ridden, to

shed some of their excess energy (the Boulonnais-Arab crosses used to have to be lunged for an hour and were still hyperactive!).

One of the biggest challenges, for both horse and musician, is to learn to be guided by foot reins. There are also ordinary reins for the rider to grab in case of an emergency, but, fundamentally, the maneuvering is all done with the feet. When on parade, the horses are ridden using Liverpool bits, to ensure maximum control in situations that could change very suddenly. During training, the horses are worked with full-cheek snaffles.

According to Lieutenant-Colonel Antoine Lerch, second in command of the cavalry regiment: "We had little idea of what the training of Percherons would entail. In the end, we found them very easy to school and very easy to use. It is as though the Percheron knows that he has size and power on his side and is, therefore, not easily bothered by anything."

As the horses are learning to deal with the noise of the instruments, the musician recruits have to learn a vast collection of music by heart—typically 50 pieces—within the first year. At the end of that first year, they are put through a test where they are asked to play three random arrangements.

Quick Learners!

For everything to come together for both horse and rider, it generally takes two years of training. Not everything always goes according to plan, and this is where the Percherons showed the Garde how outstanding a choice they had been. Tonic de Charlotte arrived at the Celestins barracks in February 2014. His trainer/rider is Chief Warrant Officer Xavier Harrault who describes his experience as follows: "Tonic's acclimatization was lightning fast. From the moment he knew he could trust me, he accepted everything from the noise and drums to his position in the formation. He proved to be intelligent, sensitive and eager for human contact. In 25 years doing this job, I had never seen a horse learn so quickly. His only fault, if you can call it that, is that he is a little lazy when training, but when he is on duty, he gives everything." Tonic was going to be put to the test much more quickly than anyone expected. One of the drum horses in service injured himself and Tonic was brought in, initially just to do rehearsals, only six months after the start of

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his training. He behaved so well that Harrault decided to use him for the opening and closing ceremonies of the World Equestrian Games in August 2014, and Tonic did everything he was asked to do calmly and well, amazing even his breeder, Pierre Sénéchal. Following that, he started on a regular schedule of outings and ceremonial duties, never taking a wrong step. Harrault concludes, "Even though he has only been doing this for two years, I can trust him with young drum majors who learn the job with him. I think that says everything."

A Depositary of Equine Crafts

The Garde Républicaine is also a depositary of great tradition and know-how when it comes to everything from farriery to saddlery. Everything is done in-house, often using equipment that has been handed down through the ages. All shoes (over 15,000 a year) are handmade by the 20 Garde farriers, and a number of different types are traditionally used. Needless to say, adaptations had to be made for Percheron feet. Lieutenant-

Colonel Herch laughingly refers to the size of a bar needed to forge a shoe for a Percheron as "the next size down from a railroad track." In terms of saddlery, the saddles that are used are the standard military model that has been used since 1874. Most of the saddles used today date from before the First World War. Old saddles are lovingly repaired and restored by the eight in-house saddlemakers, and continue to be used. There are, of course, different saddles used at different times. The saddles are usually restored every 20 years or so, using the Garde's own saddle press. With saddles and bridles, special adjustments also had to be made for the

Percherons as nothing was quite big enough initially. As an aside, musicians hold their instruments to the right which is unusual, but is to avoid being hit in the teeth by them should the horse unexpectedly raise its head while the instrument is being played. There is also a fully-equipped veterinary clinic at the barracks, which handles everything from vaccinations to major surgery.

The jobs carried out by members of the cavalry regiment are extremely varied. What they are best known for is the ceremonial aspect, parading in full dress uniform on major state occasions, as well as escorting visiting heads of state. That is far from all. Many of their policing duties are carried out in and around Paris, but they also receive special requests from elsewhere. They are used, for example, at soccer matches, ensuring security at major inter-

national matches or in "fan zones" at major competitions, with anywhere from six to 24 horses used at a single match. During the grape harvest, they have been known to patrol vineyards in Champagne to make sure that no harm comes to the precious grapes. They also work regularly in hard-to-reach areas and in operations such as search and rescue. In 2015, the Garde carried out around 12,000 ridden patrols in addition to hundreds of ceremonial duties. Under normal circumstances, around 30 horses are out on patrol on the streets of Paris each day, although current circumstances have played havoc with schedules. The band itself is out at music-related events once or twice a week, totaling about 100 per year.

The Garde's ceremonial outings are not just limited to France and they often travel, mostly to other European countries. They have been to England several times, including a role in the Queen's diamond jubilee celebrations, and take part in military tattoos (performance of music or display of armed forces in general) across Europe. Their most extraordinary overseas appearance had to be the one on July 6, 1986, when they performed at a packed Giants Stadium in New York City as part of the centennial celebrations for the Statue of Liberty. The musicians and horses were flown over and housed at West Point, and the men still speak of that stay with a gleam in their eyes.

The Garde remains very open to

continued on next page



VIPs visit the Celestins Barracks. L to R: the author and Percheron Horse Association of America representatives David Brown, Andrea Detweiler & Brenda Grant.



photo by David Menalbourg, Garde Républicaine

Now that's a lot of percussion. Drum horses have to be sturdy as well as sensible to be entrusted with over 100 lbs. of drums, not to mention the rider.

Pomp & Power continued

contact overseas and when a delegation from the Marketing Committee of the Percheron Horse Association of America visited France in the fall of 2015, they contacted the coordinator and issued an invitation for the party to visit the Celestins Barracks. Among their members was David H. Brown, current President of the Association, who was impressed by what he

saw. "France is the birthplace of the Percheron horse," he states, "and the Percherons used by the Garde are treated with a great deal of care and respect. The Garde's Percheron geldings showed a calmness and dedication to their work as they carried their drumming mount and giant drums, and it was great to see how well our breed performed with the Garde. The French Garde is very interested in American Percherons and hopes to visit the 2018 World Percheron Congress, possibly with their greys and drums. I hope we can make this dream a reality."

Hard Work Followed by a Well-Earned Retirement

For all the pomp, circumstance and public service, the life of a horse with the Garde Républicaine is one of hard work. A typical day for members of the Garde used to be to get up at 7 a.m., feed their horse, clean the stalls and then groom the horses and work them during the morning, and then go out on patrol or whatever duty was required. Nowadays, the heightened state of alert and terrorist threat means that there is no longer a typical day and everyone has to be

very flexible in managing tasks and duties. The horses work six days out of seven and very seldom get actual vacations. They are housed in stalls; the Percherons benefit from roomy box stalls! It is usually when they are dispatched outside of Paris, often to rural or resort areas, that they can sometimes be turned out in fields and paddocks rather than stalls. This tends to happen after the big parade of July 14 when everyone is expected to be present. As a rule, horses come into the Garde when they are three years old and work until they are between 15 and 18, depending on their condition. Once they are slated for retirement, which happens to around 40 horses a year, a mechanism is put in place to ensure the horses' well-being in their twilight years. There are several options. The first is that their rider will take them home, followed by the possibility of the original breeder/seller taking them back. Failing that, they are offered for adoption to the general public after a very thorough vetting process takes place, with a contract signed by the adopters. No money changes hands in any of these eventualities. If all of that fails, there is a special rescue orga-

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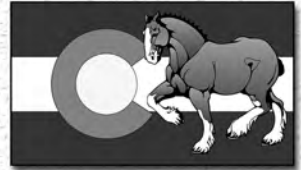
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nization/retirement home for Garde Républicaine horses. The Association Lynne Guérout was founded in 1988 and is housed in the lush Normandy countryside.

Two 3-year-old Percherons, Duc D'Albe and Diego du Bocage, have recently also joined the Garde so that Tonic and Apollo will have backup soon. It is true that there are only four Percherons among the more than 400 horses of the Garde Républicaine but they are quickly becoming the most noticed and best-known. Within the Garde itself, there was a certain dubiousness when the first two horses arrived at the training center, but soon enough, everyone wanted to ride them, including the colonel! Their proud presence at the front of all ceremonial parades is an extraordinarily powerful promotional tool for the breed. As anyone who has ever worked with Percherons well knows, they are not just pretty faces. On being asked to describe the Garde's experience to date with its Percherons, Lieutenant-Colonel Lerch summed it up in three short words: "Que du Bonheur"—meaning "only happiness." Their choice has paid off handsomely.

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