

## The Napoleon Series

### Officers of the Anhalt Duchies who Fought in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1789-1815: Bürkner, Leopold Friedrich Lebrecht

By [Daniel Clarke](#)

Leopold Friedrich Lebrecht Bürkner (sometimes spelt as Bürgner, or even Brückner in one instance) was born in the city of Dessau, the capital of the Principality of Anhalt-Dessau, sometime during the late 1770s or possibly even the early 1780s. Little is known or could be found about his family.

He began his military career in 1801 when he joined the Prussian army as a private soldier in the 10th Hussar Regiment, von Usedom. By 1806 he had become a Sergeant in the regiment and took part in that year's campaign against the French. He served in general Eugen, Duke of Wurttemberg's (1758-1822) Reserve Corps, fighting at the Battle of Halle on October 17, and also in the rearguard skirmishes that followed. Bürkner was most likely taken prisoner when the port of Wismar surrendered on November 5, 1806—if he hadn't been captured already—where his regiment had sought refuge.

Leaving the service of Prussia he returned to Dessau and became a civilian, setting up a small business. Having gained some military experience, when Leopold III, Duke of Anhalt-Dessau needed men in 1809 to form a small company of Gendarmerie, Bürkner was one of those who joined, possibly as its commander with the rank of Rittmeister (Cavalry Captain). With Anhalt-Dessau's Gendarmerie Bürkner's job was to maintain law and order in the duchy, while its main military force was fighting against France's enemies. His duties were for internal security only, and he did not take part in any active campaigning.

With the French disaster in Russia during 1812, Napoleon needed fresh troops for 1813, and demanded that the three Anhalt duchies provide another infantry force. When the three dukes said they could not, he demanded that they provide a small light cavalry regiment instead: the Chasseurs-a-Cheval of Anhalt. Having no experienced cavalry officers between them, the duchies turned to the Gendarmerie of Anhalt-Dessau and Anhalt-Bernburg to provide them. As it so happened Bürkner was by this time the commander of the Gendarmerie of Anhalt-Dessau with the rank of Major, and he was duly appointed to lead the Chasseurs-a-Cheval in the field.

Bürkner began to organise his two-squadron, 500-man regiment on July 12, 1813. He later began to seriously train his cavalrymen around Dessau from July 20, when the French 9th Cheval-Leger-Lanciers Regiment moved in to garrison the city. To aid in the training of the Germans a handful of officers from this regiment helped to drill them, most

of who had never ridden a horse in their lives. Also at this time Bürkner knew that this regiment would serve alongside his in a brigade commanded by newly promoted General de Brigade Martin-Charles Gobrecht (1772-1845), in the I Corps commanded by general Dominique Vandamme (1770-1830). With the summer armistice ending, the brigade and corps moved out of the city on August 12 and reached Dresden on August 20, where, because it was still not fully equipped, the regiment was given old weapons from the city arsenal. The regiment did not take part in the Battle of Dresden on August 26-27, as they were performing other duties with the corps that had been detached by Napoleon from the main army.

Moving with Vandamme's corps, Bürkner and his troopers did not take part in the Engagement of Pirna on the night of August 27-28 with the Russian rearguard of the Allied army, but did skirmish with them at the Nollendorf Pass and also Priesten (Přestanov) on the 28th, before moving onward to Peterwalde (Petrovice) and the village of Kulm (Chlumec). Bürkner missed the chance to engage the enemy on the first day of fighting on August 29 that drove the Allies from the village. This was because on the night of August 28 the regiment, due to heavy desertion, had been reorganising into a single squadron of something over 200 men. During the night of August 29-30 Bürkner and his regiment moved to a position on the left flank of the French line in support of the infantry brigade of general Martin-Francois Dunesme (1767-1813). At around 8.30am on August 30, Austrian and Russian cavalry broke through the infantry lines in this sector and the French lancer regiment quickly moved forward to counter-attack. But, Bürkner lagged behind, which meant the Anhalters did not get to grips with the enemy troopers. With pressure growing on this part of the line, as Austrian infantry also advanced, the left was pulled back toward Kulm, and by about 10am cannon fire could be heard coming from the rear, as a wandering Prussian corps came down behind the French position. Trying to save as many men as possible, Vandamme contracted his line to centre on Kulm and tried to cut his way out. Gobrecht and Bürkner were ordered to form a hastily assembled rearguard. Bürkner and his fellow Anhalters endured Allied cannon fire for the next hour while they were in and around Kulm, before Gobrecht, wanting to save his regiment after the other cavalry brigade in the division had withdrawn, ordered Bürkner to hold as long as possible, while he retreated quickly down the main road with his lancers. Here Bürkner's inexperience told as he kept the regiment in column on the road, hemmed in by bushes and fences. Attacked by Austrian and Russian cavalry, the Chasseurs-a-Cheval of Anhalt were decimated, with only 30 men around the colours the next day.

Bürkner was not one of those. He had been captured along with the majority of the regiment, and was transferred to Prague on September 2 under escort by a Russian detachment, where he arrived several days later on September 7. With this the Anhalt Duchies switched allegiance to the Allies, but there is no record of Bürkner becoming an officer in one of the handful of infantry formations that were raised to fight in 1814 and

1815. After the wars no record of Bürkner's life could be found, although he most likely returned to Dessau.<sup>1</sup>

Placed on the Napoleon Series: September 2017

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<sup>1</sup> Nafziger, George F, *The Armies of Germany and the Confederation of the Rhine, 1792-1815, Volume I*, Privately published, 1993, pages 8-9; Gärtner, Markus and Wager, Edmund, "Das Chasseur-Regiment der Anhaltinschen Herzogtümer in Jahr 1813", *Depesche: Uniformen und Heere vergangener Zeiten*, No. 28, December 1996, pages 15-23; Wittich, Karl Heinz, *Das Anhaltische Chasseur-Regiment 1813*, [http://www.salzlandkreis.de/media/6134/wittich\\_anhaltisches-chasseur-regiment-1813.pdf](http://www.salzlandkreis.de/media/6134/wittich_anhaltisches-chasseur-regiment-1813.pdf), accessed 27/01/2017; Nafziger, George, *Nafziger Orders of Battle Collection*, Combined Arms Research Library (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College), *Nafziger Orders of Battle Collection*, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/carl/nafziger.asp>, accessed 06/1/2017; Petre, F. Lorraine, *Napoleon's Conquest of Prussia 1806*, Uckfield, United Kingdom, The Naval & Military Press Ltd, 2007, pages 206-210; Petre, F. Lorraine, *Napoleon's Last Campaign in Germany, 1813*, Driffield, United Kingdom, Leonaur Ltd an imprint of Oakpast Ltd, 2011, page 211; Smith, Digby, *The Greenhill Napoleonic Wars Data Book*, London, Greenhill Books, 1998, pages 226-227 and 230-231; Rawkins, W. J., *Armies of the Confederation of the Rhine, The Rheinbund Contingents 1806-1813, Part 2: Anhalt, Lippe, Reuss, Schwarzburg, Waldeck, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Oldenburg & Frankfurt*, <http://www.thehistorybookman.webeden.co.uk>, pages 39-43 and 44; Cust, Sir Edward, *Annals of the Wars of the Nineteenth Century, Volume IV, 1813-1815*, London, John Murray (Publisher), 1863, pages 92-95; Hein, Bernhard, "Geschichte des Dessauer Militärs", *Dessau Geschichte*, [http://www.dessau-geschichte.de/dessau\\_geschichte\\_militaer.php](http://www.dessau-geschichte.de/dessau_geschichte_militaer.php), accessed 06/5/2017