

The Hundred Years War

Brian Todd Carey details the war that shaped the Middle Ages

THE SIGNATURE WAR of the Late Middle Ages took place between England and France; a conflagration that introduced to history the military prowess of two English warrior-kings, the triumph and martyrdom of a French peasant girl and epic battles between English longbowmen and French knights. Known as the Hundred Years War, this 116-year long conflict began when the English King Edward III, the grandson of the French monarch Philip the Fair, laid claim to the French throne when the French King Charles IV died without a male heir. To further complicate matters, Edward was also a major landholder in France, with titles and possessions dating back to the 11th century. Piracy in the English Channel and territorial disputes in Gascony acted as a primer for the war, which broke out in May 1337 and lasted until 1453.

For most of the conflict, the initiative lay with the English, and the main fighting and devastation took place almost exclusively in France. Militarily, the War pitted a uniquely English style of defensive warfare against the more orthodox and offensively orientated French brand of battle typical of continental warfare. Though the French way of war was in the appearance of a combined-arms army (one that balanced horsemen and footmen), its over-reliance on heavy cavalry lancers precluded them from fully utilizing their archers and crossbowmen. In these campaigns, the French would continue to stubbornly use what had been successful for centuries while the English showed an amazing ability to adapt tactically over the long war.

In contrast to the continental system, the English army that Edward III (r.1327-77) brought to France was essentially a professional one, made up of knights and

well paid, highly motivated freemen. These freemen were, for the most part, longbowmen who had perfected their archery skills over years of campaigning in the Anglo-Scottish wars and utilized one of the most feared and effective weapons of the medieval period — the English longbow.

Death from Above

The English longbow was a self-bow, constructed from a single, carefully shaped piece of wood, usually yew. The bow received its name from its unusual length (up to six feet, four inches). It could



The naval battle of Sluys in 1340 destroyed the French navy and gave England command of the Channel.

achieve a maximum draw weight of 185 lbs., though draw weights of between 60 lbs. to 160 lbs. were a common range. These powerful longbows could hurl small-headed arrows 300 yards or less, depending on the size and weight of the arrowhead. Moreover, the skill required to shoot a longbow was substantial. To master the weapon took many years and constant practice, and a fully trained longbowman was a formidable military asset capable of piercing mail consistently and plate armor at short ranges, and attaining a rate of fire of up to 12 arrows per minute, far faster than a crossbow. This extraordinary rate of fire, combined with the sheer numbers of archers

employed by English monarchs, created a “killing zone” — a narrow fronted area around 200 yards deep into which several thousand arrows could be launched per minute. These killing zones would be instrumental in English victories in the Anglo-Scottish conflicts and the War against France.

In response to the vulnerability of mounted lancers to the arrows and bolts of light infantry, knights began to use metal plates to strengthen their mail armor at particularly vulnerable points (such as the shin and knee), creating a transitional armor known as plate-mail.

However, as the threat of enemy missiles became more prevalent, heavy cavalrymen added more and more plates until a complete suit of plate armor was worn by the beginning of the 15th century. Knights' weapons also changed in response to this new plate armor. Swords became shorter, wider and often with reinforced, sharp points for thrusting, rather than slashing attacks. There was also a movement away from edged weapons toward contusion weapons like the mace, flail and hammer and piercing weapons

like the military pick, weapons better suited to attack the flat protective plates encasing the aristocratic warriors. The English brand of warfare would be used in a defensive capacity on the continent, relying on the inevitability of the heavy cavalry charge to seal their enemy's fate on the battlefield. The French nobility would not let them down.

The *Chevauchée*

English nobility became the backbone of this new defensive posture by dismounting to reinforce the infantry, bolstering morale and putting their noble selves in the same danger as the common soldier. The English were very fond of

dismounting defensively because their preferred method of attack on the continent, the mounted raid or *chevauchée*, encumbered the army with treasure, slowing them down sufficiently for a French army to intercept. The *chevauchée* was intended to destroy French resources, damage the enemy's prestige and enrich English soldiers. One master of this tactic, the commander at Agincourt, English king Henry V, is rumored to have said that "war without fire is like sausage without mustard." Protecting the spoils became central to the success of any military campaign. During the War, when the French did catch up to the encumbered English army, the commanding monarch would order his men to seize a defensible position and prepare for the French onslaught.

The difference in character between the ways the French and English fought is significant. The continental system was based on knighted heavy cavalry, favoring the offensive and elevating the individual on the battlefield. English warfare was based on freemen infantry reinforced by dismounted nobility, favoring the defensive and effective combined-arms cooperation. Though social tensions did exist, the relationship between the English nobility and their freeman was a professional one, based on respect for each other's martial capabilities. The relationship between the French nobility and their men-at-arms was often antagonistic, with the French knights treating their light infantry mercenaries and conscripts as little more than fodder.

The Battle of Crécy

England's first great land victory in the Hundred Years War came at the battle of Crécy in western France in August 1346. A naval victory over the French at Sluys six years earlier gave the English command of the Channel, affording Edward the chance to pursue his hereditary claim to the French throne in a direct challenge to French authority. On 12 July, Edward landed near

the western tip of Normandy and set off on a raiding expedition. Edward's strategy was three-pronged: to pillage Normandy and evade French attempts at interception, to draw off French forces menacing English possessions in the south and to rendezvous with an allied Flemish army invading France from the northeast. After a successful *chevauchée* across Normandy, Edward finally approached the Seine River near the large city of Rouen. Here, the English king found that the French monarch, Philip VI (r. 1328-50), had arrived in the city first and now blocked all of the fords and bridges across the



river.

Marching toward Paris, with the French army following on the opposite bank, Edward won a bridge near Poissy by brilliant feinting and counter marching, only to be beaten to the Somme at Amiens by Philip's army. Unable to secure a bridge across the Somme and trapped between an advancing French army and the river, Edward was forced to risk crossing the waterway at low tide. A blocking French force on the opposite bank further complicated the crossing. Ordering his rearguard to hold off the French army moving in for the

kill down the left bank of the Somme, Edward commanded his vanguard archers to wade across the river and secure a bridgehead through which the English army could pass to safety. Unable to pursue the English because of the rising tide, Philip was forced to re-cross the Somme farther upstream, giving Edward time to find a suitable defensive position in which to fight the battle he now knew was inevitable.

Treasure-laden and exhausted after a 300-mile long *chevauchée*, Edward retreated to the small village of Crécy pursued by a numerically superior French army. Early in the morning on 26 August, Edward drew up his army of 8,500 men (two-thirds of which were light infantry longbowmen) in a defensive position on a low hill facing the road where the French would approach. Edward arrayed his heavy infantry and dismounted knights in three units on the forward slope of the east rise of the Crécy-Wadicourt road. The right unit was under the nominal command of the king's eldest son, Edward, then a 17-year-old, while the earl of Northampton commanded the left corps. Edward commanded the center division and used the nearby woods as rear protection and his baggage wagons for flank protection, while a windmill provided his command post.

The village of Crécy's steep, terraced hillside allowed the English monarch to deploy his longbowmen to best advantage on the flanks of the heavy infantry line. To further protect themselves against enemy cavalry charges, the longbowmen spent the day preparing the battlefield by digging ditches and driving ironshod wooden stakes into the ground in front of their positions. These makeshift obstacles usually had the added benefit of funneling enemy cavalry into the dismounted cavalry and infantry ranks, allowing archers to rake the mounted attacker's flanks.

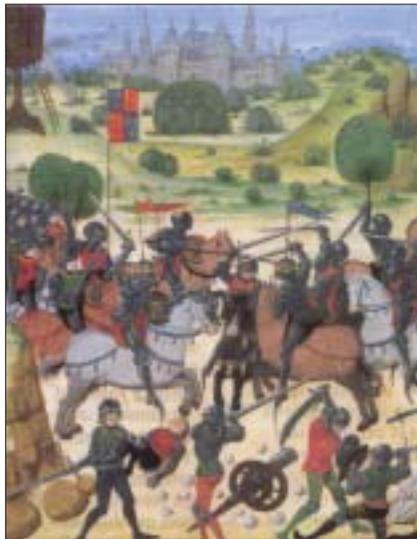
The pursuing King Philip

divided his army of 20,000 into eight divisions for marching, placing his 6,000 Genoese crossbowmen in the vanguard. The French, expecting a long chase, were surprised to find the English army arrayed for battle on the hillside. Since it was now late in the day, Philip gave orders to defer action until the next morning. However, the French knights, seeking personal glory, insisted on an attack even though much of their cavalry and none of their infantry had arrived except for the crossbowmen. Unable to control his troops, Philip gave the order to attack.

The Genoese crossbowmen were sent forward first to exchange fire with the English archers, but the crossbowmen lacked the protection of their pavise, large rectangular body shields that were still on the baggage wagons. Unprotected and unable to match the rate of fire of the longbowmen, the Genoese were outshot and forced back down the slope. As the Italian light infantry fell back, the French heavy cavalry rode them down in disgust on their way up the hill. The English longbowmen next turned their arrows on the advancing French knights. Under a withering barrage of arrows, none of the French cavalry from the first charge reached the English line. The second charge failed as well as the heavy cavalry's horse armor proved incapable of stopping the English arrows.

With the archers on the flanks, the French charges were funneled at the center of the English lines where Edward's son, Edward (later known as the "Black Prince") commanded. The prince himself became the target of many direct attacks, and despite being "compelled to fight on his knees," the prince and his men held their position against the continual onslaughts of French cavalry. In all, the French heavy cavalry charged the English position 15 times, and though some French horsemen did manage to meet the defender's lines, Edward's dismounted knights and heavy infantry resisted the cavalry charges.

When the mists cleared on the morning of 27 August and the last



The French are defeated at the battle of Crécy.

of the French were driven away, Edward allowed his men to break ranks and strip the dead. In spite of a numerical superiority of two to one, the French lost 1,500 knights and squires, including the king of Bohemia, the duke of Lorraine, 10 counts, 83 bannerets (a knight who had enough goods to raise a "banner" to group under its authority several knights) and perhaps as many as 16,000 men-at-arms. According to one account of the battle, English casualties were stated at two knights, one squire and 40 infantrymen and archers.

The French Counter-Offensive

After Crécy, Edward continued to press his advantage in France, this time against the new French king John II (r. 1350-64). The English monarch had a powerful and capable ally in his son, Prince Edward, who now commanded an army of his own. Prince Edward launched a *chevauchée* in central France, provoking a response from John, who trapped Prince Edward outside Poitiers on 19 September 1356. Taking cues from his father's success at Crécy, Edward seized a strong defensive position on broken ground and waited for the inevitable French attack. Once again, the English lines held while the longbowmen decimated the attacking French horse and footmen. John was captured and by 1360 there was a break in the war

with the signing of the Treaty of Bretigny. The two Edwards' *chevauchée* strategy had paid huge dividends, forcing the French to confirm the widest extent of lands held by the English crown in nearly 200 years.

With lands in France seemingly secure, King Edward and his son set their sights on spreading English influence in Spain. Edward allied with Castile to benefit from her fleet, while the prince campaigned to aid Pedro I of Navarre. As the English intrigued in Spain, the new French king Charles V surrounded himself with able mercenary commanders and, ignoring the Treaty of Bretigny, set out to regain lost French territory.

The most capable of Charles' new commanders, Bertrand du Guesclin, rose to fame through his defense of Rennes in 1356-57 and the defense of Normandy against a Navarrese royal expedition in 1364. A minor noble from Brittany, du Guesclin became Constable of France in 1370, defeating the English in Spain at Montiel and winning back Poitou and Saintonge in France. He even pursued the English into his native Brittany between 1370 and 1374. He died on a military expedition in Languedoc in 1380. However, by that time, the French had seized the initiative. English campaigns in Spain did not help their cause, and the heavy taxes raised to support these campaigns undermined English control of their French territories. The French continued to build on their successes, even launching naval raids on England's southern ports.

By 1400, English possessions on the continent had dwindled to Calais and a strip of coast stretching from Bordeaux to Bayonne in Gascony. English fortunes, however, would soon change with the ascension of King Henry V to the throne in 1413. Henry would take advantage of a France weakened by the uneven rule of mad king Charles VI and the internal machinations caused by the Burgundian and Armagnac factions. In 1415, Henry would attempt yet again to fulfill England's ambition to control a continental empire.

The Battle of Agincourt

A man of unlimited ambition and great military skill, King Henry (r.1413-22) decided to take advantage of the political division in France and revive Edward III's claim to the French throne. Henry then assembled an army at Southampton, and on 13 August 1415 landed it near the mouth of the Seine and besieged the city of Harfleur, which capitulated on September 22. After providing a garrison for Harfleur, Henry set out on October 8 for Calais with a small army of 5,000 longbowmen and 900 dismounted knights and men-at-arms and a week's rations, enough for the 100-mile march.

But the French, conspicuously absent from the siege of Harfleur, chose then to attack the invading English army. Unable to cross the Somme River because of flooding and French defenses, the English were forced to swing inland on their return journey to Calais and cross at Amiens. The delay allowed the pursuing French army to block Henry's path, forcing the English monarch to either continue to try to evade the French, or stand and fight. Henry decided to fight. On the evening of October 23, the English king ordered his small army, hungry, tired and sick from dysentery, to make camp south of the villages of Tramecourt and Agincourt. The larger French army encamped between the two villages northwest of the English position.

Henry would face a strategic situation similar to that which faced Edward III. After decades of conflict, the French were beginning to adjust to English defensive tactics by dismounting the majority of their nobility and attacking the invading English on foot. Throughout the remainder of the Hundred Years War, the French knight strapped on more plate armor to defend himself from enemy arrows and bolts and adopted heavier and shorter hammers, maces, flails and staff-weapons (halberds, billhooks, glaives, military forks and poleaxes) more suitable for dismounted heavy infantry. Because these weapons often required two hands to be effective, the shield was increasingly discarded for

practical use, only surviving for heraldic display.

Days before the two armies camped, French contingents had been arriving to swell the ranks of the defending army. By the evening of October 23, it numbered perhaps 25,000 men, a huge army for the period. The Constable of France, Charles d'Albret, commanded the large French host in name, but d'Albret's leadership was undermined by the presence of so many dukes and counts that his position was more analogous to a president of an unruly war council than a battlefield general. And though the Constable, aware of the effectiveness of the English longbowmen, wanted to receive Henry's army in a defensive engagement, the dukes and counts of France convinced him to move from the defensive and attack the English.

The resulting French battle plan advocated a combined-arms approach; first sending crossbowmen and archers forward against the English right flank while heavy cavalry charges simultaneously attacked the English rear in a double envelopment. Finally, dismounted French knights and their men-at-arms would engage the English center on foot as allied light infantry archers and crossbowmen pinned down the enemy longbowmen. Attacked from all directions and overwhelmed by superior numbers, the English center would collapse and the French would win the day. The narrow frontage forced the French to array in three batailles one behind the other (a bataille was a line of medieval cavalry which usually charged together). The first division contained 8,000 heavy infantry, 4,000 archers and 1,500 crossbowmen, commanded by the Constable himself. Behind this stood a second heavy infantry bataille of similar size. The third division contained the heavy cavalry, a formidable force between 8,000 and 10,000 knights and mounted men-at-arms.

Realizing the size and compliment of his foe, Henry chose a position at the end of a muddy, plowed field between two patches of woods in order to narrow the

front to 800 yards, thereby mitigating French numerical superiority. Conforming to the English defensive tactical doctrine so successful decades earlier at Crécy, Henry placed two divisions of dismounted cavalry and foot soldiers in the center and his light infantry longbowmen on each flank. His center numbered about 900 men, including many great lords from England and their armed retinues. Henry split his 5,000 archers into two equal divisions of 2,500, then placed them on the flanks of the small center of heavy infantry.

Both armies arrayed for battle about a thousand yards from one another at around eight in the morning of October 25. As the French sat around their standards eating breakfast and forgiving each other for old quarrels, Henry was deliberating with his war council. The council agreed that there was nothing to be gained by waiting to attack. English troops were already weakened by hunger and disease, and unlike the French who were in friendly territory, there was no chance of gathering much needed supplies. Believing the only option was to attack, Henry ordered his tiny force to advance against the enormous French host. Exercising great care in their slow advance over ground sodden from autumn rain, the English army moved within bowshot of the French, perhaps 220 yards of the enemy. Once in position, the longbowmen made an irregular hedge of sharpened stakes, then took position behind it in preparation of enemy cavalry charges. As the French reacted to the audacity of the English advance, Henry ordered his longbowmen to fire into the enemy vanguard.

Under a rain of longbow shafts, the French crossbowmen in the van hastily returned fire, then retreated back through the ranks of their heavy infantry and effectively out of the battle. The initial heavy cavalry charge against the English archers also did not go as planned. The two flank charges were seriously disorganized, undermanned and could not be directed at the invader's flanks because they rested on woods. Instead, the

French horsemen attacked the English light infantry across the recently plowed rain-soaked field, charging headlong into the archers' stake defenses. Although only three French knights died in this attempt at the English lines, the retreating mounts made easy targets for English bowmen. Frantic horses bolted from the battlefield, or worse, into the 8,000 men of the advancing French first infantry

weight of their plate armor. Henry then ordered his agile and unencumbered archers into the melee. Dropping their longbows, the archers pulled axes and swords and sallied out from behind their stakes to meet the dismounted French knights. As the third French division looked on, refusing to enter the fray, the English army pressed forward, killing, beating down or capturing all who

including the Constable, three dukes and seven counts. Since Henry returned to England with at least 1,000 noble prisoners, he must have called a halt to the slaughter. Nevertheless, Henry's actions at Agincourt demonstrated a coldly professional approach to warfare, one decidedly different from the stereotype of a chivalrous monarch.

The Siege of Orleans

It seemed as though the fates were against the French after their defeat at Agincourt. Henry V went on to conquer Normandy and negotiate the French crown for his dynasty. In 1420, he signed the Treaty of Troyes and married the French princess Catherine of Valois, daughter of Charles VI, who agreed to take Henry as his regent and successor. However, sickness overtook the brilliant English king and his untimely death in 1422 at the relatively young age of 34 ended his ambitions. Charles died only two months after Henry and the future of France was again in question.

Into the chaos of this period stepped an unlikely heroine for the cause of French nationalism. Joan of Arc (d. 1431) was born a peasant from Domremy in Champagne on the Lorraine border. The youngest of five children, she never learned to read or write but was apparently skilled in sewing and spinning. At the age of 13, Joan heard the "voices" of the Archangel Michael, St. Margaret and St. Catherine, eventually encouraging her to cut her hair, don armor and come to the aid of one claimant to the throne of France, the Dauphin (later Charles VII). Now 16, Joan convinced the captain of the Dauphin's forces and later the Dauphin himself of her mission. After passing an examination by leading French theologians, Joan was given the rank of captain and sent to rally the French defenders at Orleans.

Dressed as a knight, Joan began her military successes with the relief of Orleans during May of 1429, earning her the epitaph of the "Maid of Orleans". This miraculous victory was followed up with another against the English at



A scene from the *Life and Times of Henry V* showing a siege from the Hundred Years War.

division, causing it to lose its cohesion. Exhausted by the clinging mud, the French infantry had little momentum when they reached the English line. And though the dismounted French knights and their heavy infantrymen did manage to meet the English center in hand-to-hand combat, their numbers suffered from being culled by devastating longbow fire.

Moments later the second French division joined in, numbering perhaps 6,000 knights, but on the narrow and congested front their numbers were no advantage. The closely packed soldiers could not wield their weapons and those who fell to the ground could not easily regain their feet due to the

opposed them.

In an engagement of perhaps a half-hour in duration, thousands of French knights, squires and common soldiers were killed and some 2,000 French notables surrendered to the English. While the English were sorting out the living from the dead, their camp was sacked by the local French militia. Fearing that he was being attacked from the rear while a third French division of several thousand men remaining in front of his position, Henry ordered the massacre of all prisoners. His English knights refused the ignoble act and the massacre was carried out by one squire and 200 of his archers. Many important Frenchmen were killed,

Patay along the Loire River. With the invaders clearly on the run, the Dauphin was crowned King Charles VII of France at Rheims Cathedral two months later. At the coronation, Joan was given the place of honor next to the new monarch. She would later be ennobled by her grateful king.

However, the relationship between Joan and her liege soured when Charles insisted on a truce with the English, something the Maid of Orleans could not tolerate and worked

actively against. A year later, in 1430, Joan was captured by the Burgundians (long time allies of the English) near Compiègne and sold to the English. We will never know for certain whether Charles had anything to do with this capture, but he did nothing to free her. The English took Joan to Rouen before the court of Pierre Cauchon, Bishop of Beauvais, who charged her with heresy and witchcraft. The records of the trial reveal the simplicity and nobility of the virgin warrior, as well as the determination of the English and their French accomplices to find her guilty. Joan was burned at the stake in Rouen on 30 May 1431, her death supposedly serving English aims. She was just 19 years old. Ironically, the Maid of Orleans' martyrdom would become a rallying point for French nationalism and her ultimate objective, the expulsion of the English invaders, would be reached within a generation.

The French United: Charles VII and the End of War

The final phase of the Hundred Years War is closely associated with the reign of Charles VII. After the death of Joan of Arc, Charles continued to press his advantage. He made peace with Burgundy in 1435, denying England her most potent ally on the continent. He liberated Paris from the English a year later after a 14-year occupa-



Joan of Arc shown arriving at Chateau de Chinon in March 1428, where she hoped to inspire the Dauphin to repel the English.

tion. He also improved the morale of the French army by instituting new reforms, most notably the hiring of 8,000 franc-archers (French archers) and assembling bombards and other artillery for the royal artillery train. The addition of French archers and modern cannon to Charles' army gave them the advantage they needed to defeat the English.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the French victory over the invaders at Fromigny in 1450. Here, the English occupied the traditional defensive position which had served them so well at Crécy and Poitiers. Instead of attacking the English in a head-on cavalry assault, the French brought up two culverins (a type of medieval cannon) and pelted the English longbowmen beyond the range of their bows. The enraged longbowmen left their defensive positions and attacked the cannon, only to find themselves in a well conceived trap. French cavalry rode them down before the English knights could come to their aid. The English commander, Sir Thomas Kyriell, was captured and nearly 4,000 of his men were killed or taken prisoner. It was the worst English defeat since Bannockburn in 1314. After their defeat at Fromigny, the English lost Bayeux and Cherbourg, and consequently their traditional bastion of Normandy. The French went on to dis-

lodge the English from their stronghold at Bordeaux in Gascony, the same region that sparked the conflict 116 years before. By 1453, only Calais remained as an English possession.

The War left an indelible impression on the French and English kingdoms. The conflict virtually destroyed the French nobility, allowing the monarchy to centralize its authority and grow in power on the continent for the next 200 years, culminating in the absolutism under King Louis XIV in the 17th century. The Eng-

lish throne would be embroiled in a civil war known as the Wars of the Roses (1455-87), further weakening the Crown. It would not be until Henry Tudor ended hostilities at Bosworth Field in 1485 that the English situation began to turn around, with England moving away from its continental ambitions and toward a naval empire.

By 1500, England and France would enter the Early Modern period no longer dynastically or physically entwined, allowing each kingdom to reach for individual greatness in the age to come.

Further Reading:

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