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The Battle of Agincourt

By October of 1415, the Hundred Years War had been waging between England and France for over three quarters of a century. The English troops, headed by their king Henry V, were increasingly ill and exhausted from their siege of the port town of Harfleur as they marched toward their next target, Calais. The French army intended to intercept them, taking for granted that they would easily dispatch of the English with their superior army that greatly outnumbered Henry's troops. Instead, what transpired on the narrow battlefield near the French village of Agincourt would go down in history as one of the great underdog battles of history. It would also be said to have signaled the end of the chivalric code of fighting which dominated European warfare at the time. The wealthy, heavily outfitted knights were the paragon of military strength at the time and their defeat by a paltry number of lowly, ragged archers signaled a shift in importance which favored infantry units at a time when cavalry had long dominated the battlefield.

At the time of the battle of Agincourt, France was ruled by Charles VI who was known to suffer from long bouts of mental illness whereby he would be incapacitated, and the kingdom would be ruled by his son Louis, known as the dauphin.[1] Neither Charles nor the dauphin were military leaders the way Henry V was. Henry was a warrior king in every sense of the word. He had spent his early years fighting campaigns in Wales where he learned a number of guerilla tactics he would later employ in his battles in France. When Henry ascended to the English throne amidst the Hundred Years War, he set his sights on the French throne which he viewed as being ripe for the taking. The French were, at the time embroiled in their own civil war where

two factions, the Armagnacs and the Burgundians were fighting for their own chance to rule France. Henry was a young man at the time and eager to raise an army for the purpose. He used every method at his disposal to raise the funds necessary to build an army and a navy that would be up to the task.

Both France and England existed under a feudal structure in the 15th century. Kings required their lords to raise armies when needed from amongst the nobles and peasants within their own dominion.[2] While many nobles spent a good deal of their time training as knights, much of the additional troops were gathered from the peasantry and yeoman classes. In France, heavy emphasis was placed on the knighthood. The code of warfare known as Chivalry, developed in France, was as established system of duties and expectations meant in part to civilize the process of warfare. Knights captured in battle expected to be ransomed home, unharmed by their captors. Personal glory was a concept that was incredibly important during this time and knights often viewed it as their primary aim in going to battle. This emphasis on glory and nobility were especially prominent in France where soldiers who were not a part of the aristocracy were largely undervalued. While England also existed under a feudal structure, they viewed warfare slightly differently than their French neighbors.

Beginning in 1252, the English crown decreed that every Englishman between the ages of 15 and 60 must be equipped with a bow and arrows. In 1363, the second archery Law decreed that every Englishman must practice with a longbow every Sunday afternoon, later banning other sports from being played on Sunday lest they interfere with the country's archery practice.[3] The English emphasis on archery skills for all men in the kingdom meant that whenever an army needed to be raised, there would be plenty of able-bodied archers to fill their ranks. This was especially important for training up effective longbowmen as the strength and agility necessary

to repeatedly fire an English longbow was something that had to be developed for several years, beginning in a man's youth. In France, by contrast, no such law or practice existed in favor of archery. The French largely viewed archery as a low-class pursuit that was more useful for hunting than warfare. Not surprisingly, the French failed to recognize the importance of their light infantry, focusing much of their attention and resources on their heavily armored cavalry units instead. This attitude would greatly impact the French defeat in the battle at Agincourt.

In addition to the English adeptness in archery, Henry V had another great advantage over the French: a cohesive, well-treated band of soldiers. Though they would suffer much in their time laying siege to Harfleur, Henry spent a great deal of his time cultivating camaraderie, loyalty, and trust within his ranks. He was said to have greatly valued any soldier who fought alongside him, promoting and rewarding men from every class and rank based on their merit alone.[4] Like any true warrior king, Henry always fought at the head of his men, never expecting them to risk their lives in circumstances where he was not prepared to also risk his own. Conversely, neither Charles VI nor his dauphin ever led their troops into battle, preferring instead to delegate the actual task of military leadership to their generals. In the case of Agincourt, the French army would be led by constable Charles d'Albret, who would die in the melee, and Marshal of France, Jean Boucicaut, the architect of the French army's battle plan.[5] While both men were capable soldiers, they were ill-prepared and unable to adequately manage their troops at Agincourt.

With a mentally ill monarch, a largely self-interested dauphin, and a military whose ranks were filled with opposing factions who had only recently been killing each other in the Armagnac-Burgundian civil war, the French were simply not as cohesive a unit as the English. The French nobles, meant to be leading their compatriots into battle, were all jockeying for

position at the head of the ranks, leaving the infantry, including their archers, in the rearguard to be called up when needed.[6] Henry, on the other hand, placed great emphasis on and confidence in his archers, who made up the bulk of his military forces. The French knights essentially abandoned their men in the rear to chase glory at the front of the army, sure the English would be easily defeated.[7] The English army were, afterall, much smaller than the French in numbers and most of Henry's men were without shoes or helmets. And while there were many nobles and knights within Henry's army, the bulk of his men were commoners; peasants and yeoman, whom the French knights detested and therefor underestimated. They appeared as sitting ducks to the French knights, clad in thick plate armor atop their warhorses.

The French army had chosen to cut the English off at a narrow field near the village of Agincourt. They sat, waiting for Henry's army to advance. For several hours, a stalemate dragged on until Henry, realizing the French would not move, ordered his archers to pick up their defensive stakes, sharpened poles planted in the ground for protection, ahead of them, bringing the fight to the French.[8] This was a moment when the English archers were incredibly vulnerable and the French would have done well to attack at this time while their defenses were down. For whatever reason, the French were unprepared and chose not to advance on Henry's army. When Henry's men made it to their new position, they were in an even narrower gap in the field than they had been before. Having planted their stakes in their new position, Henry ordered his archers to fire their arrows. The French, disorganized and ill-prepared advanced toward the English and the fighting began.[9]

Before the French had even made it to the English front lines, they lost numerous men to the English archers' arrows. Many of their horses had been hit as well, sending them running about in disarray, often throwing the knights from their backs.[10] The thick clay soil in the field,

recently ploughed and planted with winter crops, had turned to thick mud in the previous days of heavy rainfall. The rain had been a burden to Henry's men in the proceeding days but now served as a benefit as the thick mud slowed down the knights who were already weighed down with their heavy armor. Once a knight was thrown from his horse, it was an easy task for Henry's soldiers to dispatch with them with an axe, a dagger, or a mallet. The horses also caused a commotion in the ranks behind the knights and whatever formations had been advancing toward the English were broken up in the chaos.[11] Henry had made the wise choice of ordering all of his soldiers to dismount prior to the fighting, leaving their horses behind the fighting men with the baggage train.[12] The chaos caused by the injured and dying horses of the French increased the damage the English were able to do, with many of the French being trampled by their own horses in the commotion.

The actual fighting at Agincourt is said to have only lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. As the French soldiers continued to advance, they fell upon one another in heaps in the mud of the narrow battlefield where they were easily dispatched by the English archers, now mostly out of arrows and fighting in the field with their polearms and mallets. As one French chronicler said, "more people were killed in the press than in the fighting".[13] Many of the French, seeing the chaos unfolding, chose to retreat and flee the battle rather than take their place in the pile of bodies collecting on the field. As victory for the English now seemed certain, Henry and his men began taking prisoners as was the chivalric custom of the time. About this time, a new contingent of French troops, led by the Duke of Brabant arrived to join the fight.[14] Though he was largely unprepared, having only a small group of soldiers with him, the Duke and his men advanced upon the English. The Duke himself was killed almost immediately upon his arrival and the potential threat of more French troops arriving greatly concerned Henry. It was at

this point that Henry committed the grave sin which was said to have ended chivalry on that day: he ordered his men to execute the French prisoners they had taken.[15] Rather than being an act of cowardice or murder as some chroniclers claimed, Henry intended the act as one of preemptive self-defense. Worried that the French army may try to reconstitute itself and continue the fight, he chose instead to dispatch with as many of the French soldiers as he could, thus depriving them of men who could retaliate against the English who were still a small army and whose men were weak and tired. Henry's calculation was that they would likely be unable to continue the fight for much longer were the French able to regroup with fresh troops. Still, the French considered this an act of barbarism. Jean de Waurin claimed that "all those French noblemen were decapitated and inhumanely mutilated there in cold blood".[16]

In the end, Henry and his men were able to continue their march toward Calais. Though Henry would never capture the kingdom of France as he had intended, the battle of Agincourt caused a sensation when word of it reached London. The battle became a source of great pride for the English, a tale of bravery and victory akin to the battle between David and Goliath. Numerous ballads, poems, and plays retold the tale of the tired and miserable English troops, their lowly archers, and their victory over the French nobles. Aside from the cultural impact of the victory at Agincourt, several militarily important lessons were learned on that muddy field. The importance of the infantrymen and their projectile weapons was emphasized alongside the diminishing role of heavily armored cavalry. The importance of solidarity and cohesiveness within military units was also evident. Though the English were a much smaller force than the French, they were bonded to each other, and fighting with and for each other of their own accord whereas the French army was raised by conscription and the leaders more concerned with their own glory and status at the expense of unit cohesion.

The battle of Agincourt did not necessarily put an end to chivalry and the domination of armored knights on horseback overnight. But it did shine a light on the many failings of the system. Personal glory would come to be de-emphasized in future military thinking in favor of unit cohesion and meritocracy. Leaders and generals would also come to understand, as Henry did, the importance of morale in an army as well as the necessity of strong discipline and training. Agincourt, though a culturally pivotal battle, did little to change the outcome of the Hundred Years War. In the end, the French would defeat the English and hold onto their throne. They would largely forget the battle of Agincourt, but the institution of chivalry had begun its steady decline on day in 1415. When the French finally did repel the English, they did so with infantry and artillery rather than armored, mounted knights pursuing personal glory.

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