

FIGHTING THE BATTLE OF CRÉCY: THE ROLE-PLAYING SIMULATION THAT UNLOCKS THE DOOR BETWEEN THE MEDIEVAL AND MODERN WORLDS

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A few days after a role-play simulation in a sophomore-level British history class, a student approached me after class. She told me that when I had asked them to follow me out of the classroom for the simulation, she almost cried. As soon as the class was over, she immediately called her father and told him everything about what we had done. At this point in her story, I began to worry, but she explained that she was not angry but delighted. This was what she had imagined, she said, when she had gone to college to study history, and it was finally happening. Considering that this incident happened in a community college where inspiring students was often a challenge, I took her mistiness as a great encouragement.

The simulation in question is a reenactment of the 1346 Battle of Crécy, a battle in the Hundred Years War between France and England. Though this battle is not crucial on its own—it did not even prove decisive in the war—it illuminates larger societal changes in an exciting and visceral way. It does the nearly impossible task of illustrating a social change in a visual and physical way. By walking in the footsteps of fourteenth-century soldiers, students actually can see and experience many aspects of the upheaval that led to the breakdown of the societies of the Middle Ages and the dawn of those of the Renaissance. This simulation takes what could easily be a stale lecture topic—the shift from medieval to early modern Europe—and turns it into an exciting experience that students will remember. This year a student came to me at one of her graduation events and thanked me for my classes. The one specific lesson she mentioned as especially meaningful and memorable was fighting the Battle of Crécy.

I have used this simulation in first-year Western Civilization classes and in lower- and upper-level British history classes with equal success. It has worked in groups of 95 students and in groups of twelve. Though it is more fun with more students, it is still quite meaningful with only a handful. Students who are kinesthetic or visual learners, especially, find this sort of interactive lesson far more understandable and memorable than lectures or even discussions. They are able to make a “big-picture” connection that had been elusive to them before.¹ It is fully as popular among the students in the women’s college where I teach now as it was at Texas A&M University where I

¹ See Clifford J. Rogers’ explanation of how the Hundred Years War formed a key part of this revolution and how the war became the “midwife of the European ‘nation-state.’” The set of political developments that he charts, although they are not the specific focus of this simulation, could be added to the lessons of this simulation. *War Cruel and Sharp: English Strategy under Edward III, 1327-1360* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003), 1-5.

developed it.² In fact, women in particular have voiced their appreciation for the simulation; at Texas A&M, one female student confided that this was the first time she had ever understood a battle.

This is the “big picture” idea that this simulation illustrates, one that every teacher of Western or World Civilization must teach: the societies, governments, and economic systems of the Middle Ages rested on the power of those who controlled land and labor—mounted knights, whose power flowed from the end of a lance. At the end of the Medieval period and beginning of the Renaissance, this reality broke down, replaced by the rise in the more broadly-based power of the middle and lower classes and by leaders (princes, kings, and dictators) who used the new power of these other classes to control their countries. Teaching students how the switch occurred can be challenging for a history teacher, because it is often difficult to teach about major social changes in any memorable way. Of course, it is impossible to say exactly when such vast, gradual changes happen, but I would argue that the best period in which to show this change to students is in the fourteenth century. The best way to show it is to involve the students directly in the action of that turbulent time.

Those who lived in Western Europe in the fourteenth century saw a huge rise in the number of peasant revolts, along with rising wages for common people, the decay of serfdom, and the rise of humanism. These changes rose from many factors, including the impact of the Plague, which made each individual’s work more valuable. Significantly, changes also stemmed from aspects of the earliest parts of what historians have labeled the “Military Revolution,” that is the changes in the use of the military that helped break down the power structures of the Middle Ages and create modern nation-states.³ In one key aspect of this revolution, heavily-armored knights on horseback lost their dominant position in battle—their doomsday-weapon status—because of technologies that made common soldiers more important. Technologies such as cannons, firearms, and star-shaped forts all tended to make the knight and his lance irrelevant.

Among the first of these “equalizer” technologies were crossbows and longbows, powerful weapons that, in skillful hands, could put bolts or arrows through knightly armor. These bows, especially the longbows, were so inexpensive compared to the knightly kit—horse and armor, pages and lances—that they were easily within reach of the common person by the mid-fourteenth century. Of course, the simplicity of the

²The original development was inspired, in very general terms, by the U.S. Civil War simulations of Dr. John Coats of Lee University, particularly his Battle of Antietam simulation in 1994, when I was his teaching assistant at Texas A&M.

³Alfred H. Burne, *The Crécy War: A Military History of the Hundred Years' War from 1337 to the Peace of Bretigny, 1360* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1955; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 141-151.

longbow could be deceiving, because it took many years of difficult practice, generally from childhood onward, to use it effectively or even to draw it properly.

A dozen battles from the early 1300s to the early 1400s illustrate the use of these new weapons and the shift from knight to peasant. Any one of them could work for this simulation, but I chose Crécy for a number of reasons. First, it is one of the most dramatic examples because the new weapons caused such a one-sided victory (as we will see)—students see the lesson and its implications instantly. Second, it happened in the year when the Plague was approaching the heart of Europe, so this timing makes it easy to compare the results and effects of the military changes with those of the Plague. Third, it is essentially a fairly simple battle, in which the action is easy to follow. Finally, the students respond well to the details of this particular battle, especially to the fact that one of the English commanders (Edward, the Black Prince) was sixteen years old, and they love the story of the most famous casualty of the battle: Blind King John of Bohemia. These stories make this battle interesting and fun.

A Narrative Description of the Battle

To be able to run this simulation and to answer questions from students, we need to know what happened before and during the battle itself. We have a number of excellent detailed descriptions, both from the period of Crécy and by modern scholars, many of which can be found in the footnotes and would be useful as supplemental reading assignments, but the following overview of the battle will offer enough details for running the simulation.

The Battle of Crécy was part of the Hundred Years War, a struggle between the French and the English for control of the disputed kingship of France. The Battle of Crécy, like most of the battles of this war, was fought on the continent, when English King Edward III brought a small force from England and invaded lands controlled by French King Philip VI. After the English besieged several towns and penetrated almost to Paris, the French raised a much larger force and began to pursue the English back toward the English Channel.⁴ Philip's army caught up with the English, who retreated and slipped away, just ahead of French pursuers, to the neighborhood of the town of Crécy, land to which Edward had a fairly clear title because it had been part of his mother's dowry.

Edward chose carefully the spot for his last stand. He brought his men to the top of a low hill at the edge of a dense forest. As his men turned to face the French, they blocked the only road through the forest; a wall of trees stood behind and to the right of the English soldiers. Also to their right sat the town of Crécy and a river, roughly

⁴Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages*, vol. 2 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1924; reprint, 1969), 135-136; Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years' War: Trial by Battle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 525-527.

parallel to the road. On their left lay the small village of Wadicourt and its orchards. The only clear space was the long, open valley that separated them from the French who would have to attack them head-on and uphill.⁵

The English king split his army into three parts, two in front and one behind, placing some knights and men-at-arms and some archers (probably about one-third to one-half of the men) in each group, totaling perhaps as many as 14,000 men but perhaps less.⁶ The leader of each group (Edward's son, the sixteen-year-old Black Prince; the Earls of Arundel and Northampton; and Edward himself, respectively) placed his archers on the sides of his lines, with knights and other soldiers on foot between them. According to Geoffrey le Baker, possibly from an eyewitness, this arrangement kept the archers out of the way of the men-at-arms and still allowed the archers to shoot into the sides of any attackers.⁷ The archers, therefore, grouped in three places: the middle of the field, along the trees near the town of Crécy on the right, and alongside the village houses of Wadicourt on the left.⁸

The English soldiers sat in these positions, broke for lunch, and waited throughout a long, soggy day for the French to appear where the road emerged from over the hill across the valley.⁹ When the French began to appear in the far end of the clearing, the lines must have seemed endless, stretching far beyond where the road curved out of sight. Historians' estimates range from 20,000 to 40,000 soldiers, led by 6000 Genoese crossbowmen and a large group of Bohemian and German knights.¹⁰ They greatly outnumbered the English, and at the core of their force rode thousands of mounted knights, the most powerful weapon of the previous half-millennium.

⁵Medieval chronicler Jean Froissart says that Edward had 2000 men-at-arms, 5200 archers, and 1000 light infantrymen (though the light infantry was certainly far greater, as the muster roles show 6000 Welshmen called for this purpose). Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Brereton (London: Penguin Books, 1968; reprint, 1978), 84; Oman, 136n. See the discussion of these numbers in Andrew Ayton, "The Battle of Crécy: Context and Significance," in Andrew Ayton, et al., *The Battle of Crécy, 1346* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2005), 15-16.

⁶Geoffrey le Baker, *Chronicle*, in A.R. Meyers, ed., *English Historical Documents, 1327-1485* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 80.

⁷Le Baker, 80.

⁸Froissart, 84; Oman, 137.

⁹Froissart, 84-85.

¹⁰Sumption, 526; Peter E. Thompson, trans. and ed., *Contemporary Chronicles of the Hundred Years War from the Works of Jean le Bel, Jean Froissart & Enguerrand de Monstrelet* (London: The Folio Society, 1966), 68n.

French King Philip tried to stop the advance as the English came into sight, but, according to some accounts, the knights behind, who could not see the front of the column, pushed those in front of them forward, forcing the front ranks up the hill and into battle.¹¹ The Genoese crossbowmen, out in the front of the French army, began to fight, though they had not had time to retrieve their shields. They were tired and their bowstrings were wet, and in short order the English longbows decimated their ranks.¹² The surviving Genoese turned and ran back toward their advancing column. The fleeing Genoese clashed with the advancing French knights and men behind them, and chaos reigned in Philip's army, while the knights trampled their allies under horses' hooves.¹³

As many as nine unorganized groups of Philip's soldiers charged into the deadly blanket of English archery, as arrows pierced the plates of their armor. The closer the French came to the English men-at-arms, the more intensely the crossfire caught them between the lines of archers.¹⁴ The dismay caused by dying, wounded, and frightened horses spread confusion through the French lines.¹⁵ Those few French knights who passed through the hail of arrows unhurt met the fresh and jubilant English knights and men-at-arms.

By midnight, more than 1500 French and Bohemian knights and nobles lay dead in the center of the field, including a roll-call of famous nobles and princes. Among them lay King John of Bohemia, who had asked quixotically to be led into the thick of the battle, though he was blind, and had died together with the group of faithful retainers who had fulfilled his last wish. Surrounding these high-born casualties lay uncounted thousands of common soldiers.¹⁶ The French king himself had been wounded—shot in the face with an arrow, according to some accounts.¹⁷ English casualties were negligible, in the dozens rather than the hundreds.

¹¹Froissart, 86-87.

¹²Jean le Bel, in Thompson, *Contemporary Chronicles*, 70.

¹³Le Baker, 80.

¹⁴Oman, 143-44.

¹⁵Le Baker, 80-81; le Bel, 70.

¹⁶Michael Northburgh, letter of September 4, 1346, in Richard Barber, trans. and ed., *The Life and Campaigns of the Black Prince from Contemporary Letters, Diaries and Chronicles, including Chandos Herald's Life of the Black Prince* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 241; Oman, 145-46.

¹⁷Rogers, 269n.

Unlike in many of the conflicts of the *early* Middle Ages, a large percentage of the dead were nobles and most of their killers were peasants. This fact was not lost on common folk, who became increasingly demanding over the next century. The legend of Robin Hood, the bandit who challenged knights and nobles with his longbow, became popular at about this same time. Common people reveled in Robin Hood's ability to use his bow to invert the medieval power structure, and because of Crécy the stories had the ring of truth.

The French, unable to believe that the power of knights had vanished, repeated their folly in the almost identical Battle of Poitiers in 1356, where the carnage was so great that the English even captured the French king. They reprised their role again, almost within sight of the field of Crécy, at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. In each case, the French tried to change their tactics, not realizing that the English had not simply beaten them through better leadership but that the entire structure of the projection of power had changed.

In the distant future, military power would shift further and further into the hands of the common people. Mass armies of common people, armed with guns, would replace the knights on the battlefield and become the cornerstones of military power in the modern world. The vast expense involved in paying and equipping those armies would force huge changes in the basic structure of societies and administrations, leading to centralized governments in some cases and the expansion of representative power in others. The ability to harness the power of these mass armies would become the great challenge of leadership for Renaissance princes; it would remain a challenge in later periods for those who had to shape their governments and societies to try to manage huge militaries, from Napoleon Bonaparte to David Lloyd George, and from the Wars of Religion to the World Wars.

Setup for the simulation

In planning for the simulation, the first thing to consider is where to stage the action. The simulation works best, of course, if you can take your students outdoors and find a low hill for the purpose, as I can do on the lawn outside of my classroom building. But I also have held the simulation indoors in a wide hallway. You need an area that is long and relatively narrow. If the area is large, you can limit it with signs (I use garden stakes with paper signs stapled to them), showing a river on the left side of the French advance (right of the English) and the Forest of Crécy on the right side. Other signs can show the town of Crécy on the right of the English and the village of Wadicourt on their left.¹⁸ I often use a sidewalk to show the river and label it with

¹⁸Those who wish to recreate a more sophisticated and nuanced battlefield area, including the narrow French approach possibly caused by the shape of the slopes of the battlefield, reinterpreted in light of

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chalk and draw the bridge at the town of Crécy. Alternatively, you could use a sidewalk for the road that bisected the battlefield. In inclement weather, I have moved indoors, one wall of a wide hallway serving as the forest/river and the other as the village of Wadicourt. If you move inside to the classroom, desks that are cleared out of the way can serve as the forest on one side of the room.

Dividing students into sides can range from simple to elaborate. (I tend toward elaborate, as you will see.) Since the numbers of people involved in the battle are not clear from the sources, the exact numbers of people on either side is not critical except that there should be approximately 1.5 to four French soldiers to every English one—I think two to one is a reasonable compromise, historically and practically. About half of the people in the English ranks should be designated as archers and one-fifth of the French as crossbowmen. You can choose students to portray the two kings who can be of great help in directing the action of the battle.

I like to add an additional, optional teaching element to this part of the process by giving each student a label that shows a more specific identity, using a square of paper to serve as a “livery badge.” Liveries were the badges or colors that identified a soldier with a particular lord, not with a nation as a modern uniform would. The badges read “Genoese crossbowman” or “Welsh archer, Black Prince’s service” or “Bohemian knight, King John’s retainer” or “French knight, Count of Alençon’s retainer.” The names and even the coats of arms and/or badges of leading nobles in the battle are easy to find online or in books of heraldry. This is a part of the preparation the students can do for themselves.

The use of badges makes their roles more personal, but, more importantly, it allows me to talk about liveries. I emphasize that these men were fighting on behalf of individuals and that, by this time, feudalism had decayed to the point that most English soldiers (and some of the French) were hired for the job of soldiering rather than being bound by oaths to fight for their lords—so-called “bastard feudalism.” Likewise, the presence of the Genoese mercenaries reflects another aspect of the same shift and can even provide a segue to discussing the “mercenary companies” that had such a big impact on much of Europe (particularly Italy) during this century and afterwards, as Niccolò Machiavelli has famously described in *The Prince*.¹⁹ Western Europe was

¹⁸(...continued)

modern examinations of the most likely site of the battle, will find an excellent source in Ayton and Sir Philip Preston, “Topography and Archery: Further Reflections,” in Ayton, et al., 1346, 351-78.

¹⁹See the work of William Caferro for specific examples on this subject. For a description of the impact that these companies could have on the society, economy, and politics of a powerful city, see his *Mercenary Companies and the Decline of Siena* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), while *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) profiles one of these mercenaries and his impact on Italian

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returning to the idea of professional, paid armies, but it was only part way there. Another advantage of the badges is that I can add instructions about where to stand at the beginning of the simulation. For instance, the "Bohemian knight" badge also will say "French Rank #2, far left side" and the "Welsh archer" will say "English right wing."

However you set them up, the initial battle lines should look like a disjointed T. The English (on the top of the T) should be spread out across one narrow end of the open space, with archers in the middle and on both sides, near the forest on the left and near the river on the right. The French (the vertical part of the T) will approach them in a long single- or multi-file line perpendicular to the English line, with Genoese crossbowmen in the front and the long rows of knights behind.

The Setting

Remind the students that each of them represents many hundreds of people and that the real place was much larger. Ask for their assessment of the advantages and disadvantages that each side brings to the battle. They should see that the numerical advantage of the French is partially offset by the fact that the English are standing still at the top of a hill and the French are riding or walking up toward them. The lack of planning on the part of the French and the wetness of the ground and the crossbowmen's strings might come up, as well. Ask, "Should the French attack anyway or should they wait and possibly let the small English force get away?" Usually, the attack will still strike the students as a good idea, because, even in the simulation, the rows of French knights seem so impressive compared to the small group of English commoners.

The Attack

As we have seen, the French did attack without waiting, so you can send the lines of French soldiers forward in multiple waves, walking toward the English. When the crossbowmen get close to the English line, tell them to start shooting at each other. As the crossbowmen were savaged by the English and Welsh archers, tell most of the crossbowmen that they are dead and tell them to kneel in the middle of the battlefield. Tell the living ones to try to get away.

Order the next French rank forward. They will have trouble getting past the dead and fleeing crossbowmen, as the real French knights did, and they will be shot while they try. As they founder, send the English knights out to finish them off and then

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society in a more personal way. I would like to thank one of the anonymous editorial readers for suggesting this excellent resource.

return quickly to wait for the next row. The dead French should remain kneeling in the middle to recreate the confusion of the battlefield.

At this point, as you can imagine, the next French row generally shows reluctance to move forward. Tell the French ranks in the back to nudge the front ranks forward, as actually happened. This same pattern should be repeated over and over until half or more of the French are dead or scattered. At this point, tell everyone to stop and, if you have a large group, to gather around. If not, it can be more instructive to have them stand and freeze where everyone is.

The Application

In the next phase of the activity, begin with the statistics of the numbers killed in battle. Ask what made things turn out this way. There are many aspects of planning and leadership that students quite rightly will bring up, and they will return to many of the issues they brought up before the battle, but eventually the answer will come around to the technology of the longbow and the actions of the commoners. The main point to draw out is: that the people who did most of the killing were common people, not knights, and most of the people killed were their so-called betters. Then get to the crux of the whole matter: "How will the attitudes of these commoners [the English archers] change once they go home? What implications does this have for the class system?"

Finally, steer the discussion toward the large overview of history, the fact that this battle reveals the thin edge of a huge wedge. Longbows will soon give way to guns, but the trajectory of the future should be clear. Common people will become more and more important in warfare and eventually will displace the feudal armies with mass armies of paid soldiers and, later, of conscripts. Since the knightly monopoly of violence was one of the defining characteristics of the Medieval period and lay at the heart of serfdom, it is not too much to say that at this battle we are witnessing the twilight of the Middle Ages.

Students should come away from this simulation and discussion with insights on several different levels. First, on a practical, tactile level, students will gain a new perspective on the experience of war for medieval soldiers; the simulation—combined with a bit of imagination—suggests the carnage, confusion, and emotions of the battlefield. It also reveals a bit about the practicalities of weapons and tactics and how they were evolving. Next, students will visualize how social ranks and feudal ties operated in a practical situation and how these medieval structures were changing in this period. Finally, students will gain a foothold on several critical issues with extremely long-term significance, particularly the gradual and uneven growth of the power of the common person, as opposed to that of the knightly elite.

Follow-Up

This emphasis can set the tone for the entire transition from the Medieval to the Early Modern. This discussion flows easily into analysis of the Plague, of peasant revolts, of Lollards and the challenge to the institution of the church by common folk. In each of these topics, students will make connections back to the Battle of Crécy and compare its social implications to those of these other events. This simulation also prepares students for understanding the Renaissance revival of humanism and the value of the individual. If the discussion at the end of the battle is handled carefully, it lays the foundations for students to see a larger picture of the sweep of European history. That is why students remember and mention this simulation long after the course is over. For a student to recall this experience at graduation as the most memorable moment of our course demonstrates its lasting value. Immersing students into the Battle of Crécy fixes the event in their minds, but more importantly it helps them to build the framework of their understanding of the modern world.