



The English bow facing the crossbow and facing chivalry: true false lessons of tactics 1/2

General Tactical Review - The Battle

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Published on 23/03/2019

Histoire & stratégie

On a "history" page of a regional site, it says: the following judgment: "The victory of the English at Crécy was a victory of obedience over indiscipline, of organization over improvidence, of the English bow over the crossbow...The battle of Crécy is a considerable event in history, as for the first time chivalry was defeated by infantry. "There is nothing extraordinary about this summary, nor does it prove any particular incompetence: we regularly hear such stories in our amphitheatres and workrooms. Usually, the purpose of the subject is to make the arguments of anyone who questions the relevance of the tactical doctrines we will call "retrograde" in advance. doctrines that are at least partly based on the idea that technical innovations will solve tactical problems.

We will focus here on the bow and crossbow and the cavalry versus infantry, two issues with both true and false tactical lessons based on a "battle history". based on a very superficial seasoning of false truths that has been serried out since primary school, still haunts today the praetorium of history and the corridors of the doctrine centers.

The ordeal of the Wales and Scottish Wars

Driven out of their continental possessions in the previous century by the reconquest of Philip-Augustus and his successors, the Plantagenets consecrated their efforts to subjugate the Welsh (from 1277 to 1282) and then the Scots at the cost of long and hard wars which profoundly transformed their military apparatus. The Welsh armies consisted mainly of foot-raises, mostly armed with bows in the south and spikes in the north, and led a guerrilla warfare by entrenching themselves in difficult terrain, swamps, thickets, etc. The Welsh armies were also the most powerful in the south, and the Scots in the north. They used the bow as an individual weapon and usually fired arrows capable of piercing a haubert at close range. The English quickly took advantage of the differences between the Welsh to recruit soldiers among them, most of whom came from the south

and were therefore archers. At Orewin Bridge (December 11, 1282) the massed shooting of these archers disrupted the tight and static formation of the Welsh pikemen, forcing it out of its position.

The Scottish Wars of Independence (1296-1357) gradually confirmed the value of the massed employment of large numbers of archers shooting at high speed and long distances. Scottish armies consisted of a small, relatively ill-equipped and small knighthood and a large proportion of uneducated and unprotected peasants armed with coarse spears, who formed tight formations. The Scottish armies consisted of a small, relatively ill-equipped and small knightly force, and a large proportion of uneducated and unprotected peasants, armed with coarse spears, who formed in tight formations, the schiltrons, on an eminence, behind terrain unfavourable to chivalry, possibly reinforced with traps and obstacles, from which they could both discourage a charge and attack if the opportunity arose. Instructed by their disasters at Falkirk (1298) and Bannockburn (1314), the English gradually combined all these lessons in an attempt to desorganize tight, poorly protected and relatively immobile formations of pedestrians and allow them to be boarded by people with weapons on horseback or on foot. Their armies had a growing number and proportion of archers, increasingly English and not Welsh, equipped with improved bows and supported by suitable "logistics". They became accustomed to deploying them at the front and then on the wings, in two lines of three rows, protected by stakes or by strong terrain, possibly developed (swamps, low and fat lands or flooded, woods, hedges, ditches, etc.). Often, in numerical inferiority and any forbidden retreat, they had some of their men-at-arms put ashore to support the footmen.

At Boroughbridge (1322), the army of Lancaster came up against Andrew Harclay's army, arranged in schiltrons framed by archers at the outlets of a bridge and a ford over the Ure: slowed by the passage of the obstacle, it is disorganized by the massive fire and then assaulted by the pikemen. At Dupplin Moor, ten years later (1332), the army of "pretender" John Baliol, under Henri de Beaumont, clearly outnumbered and threatened to be surrounded by a second Scottish army, crossed the river Earn at night and fortified itself on a hill where it waited for the assault, its gendarmes dismounted in the centre and its archers on the wings: the Scottish pedestrians, poorly protected and attacking uphill, are overwhelmed and decimated by the archers and then charged down the slope by the demon-weapons people and pedestrians. At Hallidon Hill (1333), young Edward III applied Beaumont's "recipe" to stop the Scottish army of the Earl of Douglas, who was trying to have him lift the siege of Berwick. He entrenched his men in three battles, each framed by archers, on the top of a steep hill preceded by low, flood-prone lands: Slowed down and exhausted by the crossing of the quagmire and then by the slope, the Scots, a third more numerous, were again disunited and decimated by the archers' fire before being charged.

So from their first ride in 1339, King Edward and his captains had a proven tactic for facing an army on the defensive: superior in number and forced on the offensive, but significantly inferior in terms of organization, equipment and tactics. But will this mainly defensive tactic be adapted to the conditions of the offensive campaign in which they are engaged? No one can say yet.

Armies in the fourteenth century

Whatever claims they make to justify their war, Edward III and his successors are not trying to conquer the throne of France, a kingdom five times more populated and much richer and more developed than their own, an objective that is totally out of reach. Their

goal, limited, is to obtain sovereignty over Guyenne, and possibly to enlarge it, with the complicity of the French people. of the nobles and bourgeois of Aquitaine, especially from Bordeaux and Gascony, who would obviously prefer the authority of a weak and distant king to that of a close and powerful sovereign. For this reason they will multiply the rides, plundering expeditions that have a multiple advantage. They ruin the enemy, directly by the damage caused and indirectly by the expenses incurred for the maintenance of an almost permanent defence of the whole territory. They require a small, mobile and lightly equipped army. Their duration rarely exceeds the duration of the military service owed to the sovereign by his vassals. And the booty, in any case, pays the army. War will therefore be characterized by an absolute asymmetry, both of the goals of war and of the means necessary to carry it out.

At that time there was neither tax nor a permanent army. The armies, both English and French, were formed for the duration of a campaign (a season) by feudal levies, based on the service of ost by which the vassals owed their suzerain the military assistance to their suzerain for a variable length of time - for the French royal domain, generally about forty days - beyond which the service becomes completely optional and in any case paid. Kings supplement their forces and try to give themselves greater freedom of action in various ways: to pay, i.e. to pay, their people beyond the period of service, or even permanently (people so paid are called "soldoyers"); to impose by law a new service on certain catechists; to impose by law a new service on certain catechists; to impose by law a new service on certain kings.(which the English kings did by forcing rural communities to provide trained archers); recruiting mercenaries by signing contracts with war profiteers (Arnaud de Cervoles, known as "the archpriest", the Bureau brothers, etc.); and recruiting mercenaries by signing contracts with the "entrepreneurs de guerre" (Arnaud de Cervoles, known as "the archpriest", the Bureau brothers, etc.); finding allies (the Genoese at l'Ecluse and Crécy).

The heart of military power is provided by the people-at-arms, the heavy cavalry of knights and all that resembles it by its equipment (sergeants, bachelors, squires, etc.). They arm themselves and mount themselves at their own expense, or at the expense of their master, which leads to significant disparities in their tactical capability. Whatever their origin and status²They are armed identically, train almost constantly, and use the same tactics. Their offensive tactics consist essentially of charging through the hedge, with the spear stopped, to maximize the effect of the first shock, and then fighting with the sword in the melee, both on foot and on horseback. In defence and in sieges, they fought mainly on foot and used bows and crossbows as part of their traditional training. In the middle of the 14th century, the equipment of the knight and his mount was more and more adapted to the search for the decisive initial shock: flat armour, basinet, stopping and lengthening of the lance, abandonment of the shield, etc. At the same time, tournaments have declined in favour of jousting, hence a more individual and technical training and less focused on manoeuvring and the combination of different "weapons". Increasingly sophisticated defences protected the knight fairly effectively from strokes, especially at the front, but mounts were not caparisoned until the early 15th century.

The foot people are largely intermittent people who are poorly armed, poorly protected and untrained. The ineffectiveness of the hindquarter levees has led the kings, on the one hand, to renounce to convene the militias and theThe inefficiency of the rearban levies led the kings, on the one hand, to give up summoning the militias and, on the other hand, to multiply the recourse to soldiers and large companies, and to more or less technically

specialized allies. Only these professionals were capable of resisting chivalry in battle; they remained in the field as long as they were paid, but their employment was expensive.

Finally, it should be noted that the asymmetry of the goals and means of warfare that we have already pointed out is reflected at the tactical level by a very significant asymmetry in the composition of armies and in the constraints imposed on their leaders. The battles of the Hundred Years' War were not fought between a French and an English army. They were almost always fought between a royal French army obeying all the political, social and economic constraints of the time, and an "Anglo-French" cavalry, a brigandage expedition very inferior in number and weaponry, based on the immediate interest and survival instinct of the parties, thus free of all the constraints in use.

Draughtmen

All the armies of the time, English and French like the others, included archers and crossbowmen. In their classic and most widespread use of individual throwing and precision weapons, their missions were much the same and the crossbow was the only weapon that could be used in the same way. It demonstrates a clear superiority of precision and power, at a much lower training cost. The bow is significantly cheaper and shows a clear superiority in rate of fire, but at the expense of accuracy, and requires long, sustained, socially and politically expensive training : Paradoxically, these defects will make its strength in the counter-use in which the English will now confine it.

The English longbow of the mid-14th century was the result of the progressive improvement of the Welsh bow. It is cut in one piece, usually from imported yew wood, is about two metres long and requires a pull of 40 to 80 kilograms.³ These characteristics mean that the bow must be used on horseback or in a position other than standing, require particularly rigorous selection and training, and impose technical constraints to prevent breakage of the bow or physical damage to the fencer: because the weapon is delicate to use and produces violent shocks that can seriously injure the clumsy shooter.

The English kings understood as early as the Scottish wars the remarkable cost-effectiveness offered by this relatively archaic but cheap weapon, requiring only the robust, plentiful and obedient labour characteristic of the yeomen. They relied on Parliament's unique ability to vote and levy a permanent tax and on the provisions of the Assize of arms of 1251 which imposed military service on all people. As early as the reign of Edward I, they legislated to provide for the training and selection of more and more archers, they developed and regulated the production of bows, ropes and arrows, prohibited the uprooting of yews, and gradually organised appropriate logistics.

If the large bow pierces at 60 metres in straight shot, with long tail arrows and square piercing points, a haubert or the secondary defences of a flat armour (the flanks or back, less so) The performance in this use remains inferior to that of the craneheaded crossbow and will decrease as armour smith technology advances.

But in its preferred use, an archer shoots from about 200 to 300 metres, plunging and without accuracy, at a rate of 10 to 12 strokes per minute, with short, flat-pointed arrows that are devastating to unprotected pedestrians and horses. Grouped in companies, firing on command, and equipped with arrows in large quantities directly on the battlefield by personnel dedicated to logistics, they produce a new tactical effect that will only

gradually become apparent. Any tactical formation, poorly or inadequately protected, stationed or moving slowly within range of their fire, suffers irreparable losses and disorganization, forcing it to leave the firing range quickly, and therefore to withdraw or charge. All they had to do was choose a strong position behind difficult terrain within range of their weapons, forbid boarding by obstacles (escarpment and stakes at Crécy, piles, hedges and vines at Nouaillé-Maupertuis, ditch, stream, etc.), and take a strong position in the middle of the field of fire.), to support their flanks to people-at-arms, an obstacle or wagons.

The development of the English archery is therefore an economic and anti-technological choice, which will have important social and political consequences in the long term. Only England in Europe has been able to provide the conditions necessary for the realisation of such a "weapons system". The other powers did not have the necessary political authority and were reluctant to arm free peasants on a massive scale in the context of the Great Plague and the great peasant revolts.

1 Nordmag site: http://www.nordmag.fr/patrimoine/histoire_regionale/Crecy/bataille_crecy.htm

2 Among the militia or knights are distinguished: barons, chased knights (provided with a fiefdom), knights of maisnie (belonging to a lord of whom they constitute the permanent military house), stipulated or bribed knights. The non-noblemen are the sergeants.

3 While the tensile force required by contemporary competition bows does not exceed 30 kg.

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Release date	14/03/2019
