

THE ENGLISH VS FRENCH

Giving the Finger - Before the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, the French, anticipating victory over the English, proposed to cut off the middle finger of all captured English soldiers. Without the middle finger it would be impossible to draw the renowned English longbow and therefore be incapable of fighting in the future. This famous weapon was made of the native English Yew tree, and the act of drawing the longbow was known as "plucking the yew" (or "pluck yew"). Much to the bewilderment of the French, the English won a major upset and began mocking the French by waving their middle fingers at the defeated French, saying, "See, we can still pluck yew! PLUCK YEW!"

Agincourt: a small comment on the longbow in action in history:

(Oct.11 - The army of Henry V, King of England, reaches Arques, France, and on Oct. 12 -The forces of Marshal Boucicaut and Constable d'Albret cross the Somme)

In 1415, Henry V sailed to France for a summer of campaigning, to take control of some of his lands in France. After a successful but long siege of Harfleur, he decided to send most of his dysentery stricken men home on ship, and march with his remaining troops through the French countryside to Calais (and the hopefully returned ships), before returning to England.

Having held off earlier in the Summer, the French nobles marshaled their forces to block Henry's march north. After a good deal of maneuvering, and some serious marching, on October 25th, 1415, the French forces finally blocked the road to Calais and challenged Henry to battle, something he did not at all desire. The battle lines were drawn in some recently plowed fields between the villages of Agincourt and Tramecourt.

The English forces, weary and ill from the long march, were outnumbered by the French forces somewhere around 5 to 1, and the situation appeared to be hopeless. In addition, there is a story that the English archers were threatened with having their bow-string fingers cut off after the battle and then sent home, instead of killed, as a warning to the English people. In the morning, the English set stakes (against the expected calvary charge), in a somewhat tapering field with trees on both sides, and prepared to receive.

At first, the French waited; Henry finally ordered the English line to move forward to longbow range and stop. The first round of arrows to strike the French ignited a calvary charge (both wings) and the battle was joined. The calvary charge was blunted by concentrated English longbow firing, the muddy field, and wooden stakes the English archers had quickly re-driven into the ground. The rest of the French nobles, knights, and men-at-arms advanced on foot (they had tried this at Crecy, too, with similar results), slowly through the muddy field, certain of their superiority, having chosen not to use their own archers, though they had them available (can you say ransom?).

The French were peppered by the English archers (firing constantly), as they tried to engage the English nobles, who were grouped in three openings in the stakes. Those French men felled by arrows or pushed to the ground were helpless, and most died if they fell (many more suffocated than were killed in battle). The English line held, while the archers picked off the relatively immobilized French, most of whom could not easily advance due to the tapering field (and soon

the piles of bodies), or retreat due to the press of those behind trying to advance. The battle turned into a slaughter and a rout, and the surviving French departed the field.

While sources vary, it appears that the English lost at most a few hundred men while the French lost several thousand. The English longbow men played a major role in greatly reducing the French ability to attack, and Henry V's excellent choice of battlefield allowed his limited forces to take their best possible position, something the French seem to have ignored, or forgot in the excitement. The eager French were easily provoked into an attack (doubtless the thought of a King's ransom was just too tempting), and no commander on the field had the ability to stop the charge, once it had begun to go wrong.

The English won the day, having killed almost all of the important French commanders. Though they still outnumbered the English army, the French army was disheartened and neutralized. The English army proceeded to Calais and England without further trouble.