



On the 26th of August, in 1346, Edward III—the English King—leads his forces to a field near the French town of Crécy (in northern France). With him is his sixteen-year-old son, Edward of Woodstock (also known as The Black Prince).

Although France already has a King—Philip VI—the King of England also wants to be the King of France. He has been fighting a war, against French forces, to achieve that objective.

Outnumbered, Edward and his battle-weary men believe they can win this battle. How could that be possible? Because they have faith in their weapon-of-choice: the English longbow.

This English weapon is no ordinary bow-and-arrow. The longbow, which the English warriors use that day at Crécy—also known as Cressy—is tall as a man. It is made from the yew tree. It requires 100 pounds of force to draw this weapon, which is also known as the Welsh Longbow.

Deadly at about 200 yards, it is capable of reaching up to 320 yards.

The English King orders his knights to dismount their horses. Men-on-horseback will not win the battle this day. Instead, Edward orders those knights to take their positions in a v-formation known as a "harrow." Positioning his men this way allows a greater barrage of arrows to fly against the enemy when it is time to draw the longbows.

The Englishmen are not the only ones equipped with powerful bows. Opposite them are men from Genoa, helping the French. These mercenaries from Genoa are using crossbows.

Just before the battle begins, the English get a strike of good fortune. A thunderstorm drops lots of rain onto the men. The Genoese—around 6,000 of them—are especially impacted by the rain which loosens the heavy bowstrings of their crossbows.

As the battle begins, arrows from the English longbows hit their marks. The Genoese mercenaries are unable to match the deadly impact of the longbow.

French cavalrymen begin to charge up the battle slope, but the wet ground makes it difficult for them to advance. Their horses are getting tired and, by the time they are in range of the longbow, horses and riders are met with barrage after barrage of well-aimed arrows.

As more and more men and horses fall, the French forces are in serious trouble. Despite the waning light, incredibly brave Frenchmen continue the battle. Refusing to give-in, to a much-smaller force, they continue to fight for their King.

By midnight, after the battle has been raging for eight hours—since four in the afternoon—Philip VI is wounded. He is carried off the field, causing the French attacks to stop.

Before the end of the fighting, at least 12,000 French and Genoese soldiers die. Among the dead are around 11 French princes and 1200 Knights. During the same time frame, somewhere between 150-250 Englishmen are lost.

The impact of the longbow, at the Battle of Crécy, is battle-changing. Although the French view the English style of fighting with the longbow as unchivalrous, they have to make changes to their own future battle plans. As we learn from Longbow Archers—"the reference site for the longbow"—Knights did not fight on horseback for the next fifty years:

...the devastating effectiveness of the longbow at Crécy meant that for some 50 years thereafter Knights dismounted to fight. In the next major battle of Poitiers there were almost no crossbows. Crécy had shown they were of inferior cast, had a low rate of shot and made the reloading crossbowman vulnerable in the process. Only when their bows could be made of steel were the French armies again tempted to use them.

For almost ten years after the battle of Crécy the fighting between France and England subsided. This was caused in part by the Black Death, which swept over Europe and killed more than a third of its population. (See the last paragraph of "Longbow Archers, The Battle of Crécy.")

To learn more about the Battle of Crécy, see this clip—narrated by Walter Cronkite—which explains and reenacts the famous conflict.

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