

In this scene from Kenneth Branagh's version of *Henry V*, released in 1989, we see the English king and his men assessing both French and English losses following the battle of Agincourt. The English longbow had been effective - thousands of Frenchmen were slain.

Although English forces also died, their numbers paled in comparison to the opposition.

The King orders the singing of *Non nobis* - a short Latin hymn used as a prayer of thanksgiving and expression of gratitude and humility. The Latin words are based on Psalm 113:9 (according to the Vulgate numbering). That corresponds to Psalm 115:1 (in the King James Version).

The words of the hymn, featured in this clip, are noted below in both Latin [and English], as follows:

Non nobis, Domine, non nobis,

[Not to us, Lord, not to us]

Sed nomini tuo da gloriam.

[But to Thy name give the glory]

The Biblical psalm, on which the hymn is based, celebrates the defeat of Egypt's army, and God's deliverance of Israel, at the Red Sea. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare has the King order its singing after the stunning English victory at Agincourt.

Why did the Battle of Agincourt take place? What was Henry V trying to accomplish in this battle on French soil?

Henry believed that he had a claim to the French throne. The clothes he wore during the battle reflected that claim. He combined the Royal Arms of England with the Fleur de Lys of France (as depicted in a 1915 painting by Harry Payne).

Although he negotiated with the French - in an effort to avoid a battle - Henry did not get what he wanted (a great deal of French land, marriage to Princess Katharine, the daughter of Charles VI and a very large dowry - of 2 million crowns - to accompany that marriage).

The battle took place in Northern France, near a French town known today as Azincourt. It was the 25th of October, 1415 - a Friday that year - which was also St. Crispin's Day (dedicated to the martyrdom of Crispin and Crispinian, legendary twin brothers from Rome who died for their faith).

Although he had fewer troops than the French, Henry - who participated in the fighting, including hand-to-hand combat - won a stunning victory. Many French troops were still alive, however, including reserves.

To prevent the French from resuming the battle, against exhausted English soldiers, Henry ordered his men to kill many of their French prisoners. Although history doesn't provide us with the exact number of French soldiers who were killed in this manner, it may have been several thousand.

Eyewitness accounts survive. One was written by Jehan de Wavrin, son of a Flemish knight, who watched the battle from the French lines. He wrote this account (later translated into English) of the battle:

When the battalions of the French were thus formed, it was grand to see them; and as far as one could judge by the eye, they were in number fully six times as many as the English.

...
[The French] *men-at-arms without number began to fall; and their horses feeling the arrows* [from the English longbows] *coming upon them took to flight before the enemy, and following their example many of the French turned and fled.*

Soon afterwards the English archers, seeing the vanguard thus shaken, issued from behind their stockade, threw away their bows and quivers, then took their swords, hatchets, mallets, axes, falcon-beaks and other weapons, and, pushing into the places where they saw these breaches, struck down and killed these Frenchmen without mercy, and never ceased to kill till the said vanguard which had fought little or not at all was completely overwhelmed, and these went on striking right and left till they came upon the second battalion, which was behind the advance guard, and there the King personally threw himself into the fight with his men-at-arms.

...
When the King of England perceived them coming thus he caused it to be published that every one that had a prisoner should immediately kill him, which those who had any were unwilling to do, for they expected to get great ransoms for them. But when the King was informed of this he appointed a gentleman with two hundred archers whom he commanded to go through the host and kill all the prisoners, whoever they might be.

This esquire, without delay or objection, fulfilled the command of his sovereign lord, which was a most pitiable thing, for in cold blood all the nobility of France was beheaded and inhumanly cut to pieces, and all through this accursed company, a sorry set compared with the noble captive chivalry, who when they saw that the English were ready to receive them, all immediately turned and fled, each to save his own life.

Many of the cavalry escaped; but of those on foot there were many among the dead. (Jehan de Wavrin, *A Collection of the Chronicles and Ancient Histories of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*; Fifth Volume: Book One, Chapter XII, pages 209-214, translated by Sir William Hardy and Edward L.C.P. Hardy.)

When the French soldiers saw the effects of this massacre, they left the battlefield. The Hundred Years War was stopped, at least for awhile.

Jehan de Wavrin tells us that 1600 Englishmen died at Agincourt (although those numbers are disputed):

When the King of England saw that he was master of the field and had got the better of his enemies he humbly thanked the Giver of victory, and he had good cause, for of his people there died on the spot only about sixteen hundred men of all ranks, among whom was the Duke of York, his great uncle, about whom he was very sorry.

What happened to the body of the King's great uncle?

And this night the corpses of the two English princes, that is to say, the Duke of York and the Earl of Oxford, were boiled, in order to separate the bones and carry them to England; and this being done, the king further ordered that all the armour that was over and above what his people were wearing, with all the dead bodies on their side, should be carried into a barn or house, and there burnt altogether; and it was done according to the king's command. (Jehan de Wavrin, *Chronicles*, Fifth Volume: Book One, Chapter XII, pages 215-16.)

Who were these soldiers who helped their King win at Agincourt? They were the common men of England - the butchers, bakers and candlestick makers of the day - who returned to their country brimming with stories about their stunning victory.

Henry V ultimately married Katharine, the French princess, and many people throughout Europe considered him to be King of France. (He did not, however, speak French.)

Only seven years later, Henry himself was dead. He died from dysentery (often referred to as a "battlefield curse") and all he'd accomplished (including his new empire) passed to his son (Henry VI) who, at that time, was nine months old.

Not unexpectedly, under such circumstances, war continued again between France and England.

William Shakespeare uses the Battle of Agincourt as a centerpiece of his Henry V play. In it, he has the King speak these words - "Band of Brothers" - to describe the unity between Henry and his soldiers.

That phrase - "Band of Brothers" - remains popular in today's culture. It is the title of a Steven Spielberg-produced HBO series about World War II (and the men of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division) who also fought in France (including the Normandy Invasion of June, 1944).

Credits:

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production.

Directed by

Kenneth Branagh

Produced by

Bruce Sharman

Screenplay (based on *Henry V*, the play by William Shakespeare)

Kenneth Branagh

Starring

Kenneth Branagh

Derek Jacobi

Brian Blessed

Paul Scofield

Emma Thompson

Michael Maloney

Richard Briers

Robbie Coltrane

Judi Dench

Ian Holm

Robert Stephens

Christian Bale

Geraldine McEwan

Editing

Michael Bradsell

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