

20. AGINCOURT

For nigh one hundred years we English had been at war with France. We simple farmers are indentured by the local noble to go to war for the King in pursuit of power, influence, land and money. Six pennies a day during any war is a rare fortune in exchange for my trusty longbow and otherwise worthless life, so the King's coin is a godsend when our very existence is held sway by starvation, injury and pestilence.

So it was in this year of Our Lord, Fourteen Hundred and Fifteen, that our great King Henry V rode through our village, trailed by his Dukes, Earls, Barons and Knights and his army of longbowmen and men-at-arms in horseback cavalcade.

I joined this army's ranks on its march to the southern port of Southampton from which the King intended sail to quell a troublesome France.

At port, the 12,000 men, 20,000 horses, 700 sailing vessels with thousands of crew, plus food and water for all, made for a hellish chaos beyond imagining. With no others from my own village, I ended up aboard a small coastguard vessel in the company of strangers, several horses, and tons of provisions. The fevered excitement slowly subdued as all present realised the dangers ahead, and we communed in silence with God for the success of the King's campaign and for our own safety.

Whether due to rum, incompetence, or Divine intervention, our small ship became separated from the invasion armada and currents took us west into a maelstrom and we found ourselves swept towards a jagged rocky coastline that was hell bent on destroying us.

We foundered on the rocks and my last memory, as I was flung into the broiling sea, was the desperate cries of my fellows, the screams of the horses, and the tortured rending of the wooden hull. All was lost.

I came to on a darkened beach with a wild sea breaking around me. Lightning revealed the debris of ship and cargo, and broken bodies of men and horses alike. I dragged myself through the foaming surf and up the beach through torrents of rain to the long grass where the land took hold. Approaching from the distance I could see lanterns held high and the sound of horses and hounds. We were discovered! I ran as if the devil himself was at my heels.

I awoke exhausted in the early hours. My pursuers had either given up or missed my prone waterlogged body. The rain has mercifully stopped and I realised my predicament ... I was on enemy land with no companions, no weapons, and no food or water. With the still-raging sea behind me I could see no landmarks or sign of humanity. The windblown dunes and marshland stretched to infinity. My God has truly forsaken me. I harnessed my meagre energy and headed east in the hope of finding my compatriots.

I walked, stumbled and crawled for a day and a night. I know not when I lost consciousness but I awoke to a welcome warmth stealing over my cold limp body. At last, thank God, the sunshine!

And was this delirium, or in truth was that really human voices nearby in quiet conversation?

I must have passed out yet again but I awoke to delicious fresh water at my lips ... I drank like a man possessed. My eyes slowly found focus on the group of peasants gathered around me. They showed me no harm and one held out a lump of bread and an apple. I displayed my thanks and devoured the food much to their amusement and pleasure. We tried to converse, but neither side understood the other. They beckoned me and, much invigorated, I followed them back to their hamlet. Their farming tools were much the same as the ones I used at home so, through mime and much hilarity, we struck a deal that I would work in their fields for my board and lodging.

Autumn was soon coming to an end. I was healthy and hardened, a valued worker in the fields, and drawing looks from girls and women seeking a good husband. I was learning their language and picked up news that King Henry's expeditionary force had lost half its number to death, injury and disease. The remainder were exhausted, dispirited, and desperate to reach Calais before defeat by French nobles amassing in ever increasing number.

Although enjoying my respite in the countryside and with no stomach for war, I still had a duty to help my King and countrymen. In sombre mood I bade farewell to my saviours and new-found friends, packed a few provisions and headed east to see what I could do.

Happening upon the small village of Agincourt, on the horizon I could see lines of French pennants in their thousands vastly outnumbering those of our own depleted force, and heard the faint waft of battle horns and bugles. I was one day's march from the battleground and the taking part in the killing of people who were neither friend nor foe to me or, in return, being injured, killed or taken prisoner by them. Today was October 25th, my birthday, and also the feast of Saint Crispin to whom I sent a prayer for my soul and that of my compatriots, and indeed all that joined in battle.

Every few heartbeats, I saw the sky turn dark as if a mighty flock of starlings were wheeling above the battlefield to suddenly realise they were instead deadly fusillades of a thousand arrows at a time. My heart sank at the imagined carnage but I made my peace with God and committed to set off and join whatever remnants remained. At worst I would give succour to the wounded and dying before suffering their same fate.

As I eventually neared the battlefields, the very earth on which I stood trembled with the approach of several thousand hooves from over the next rise. Expecting to be slaughtered by the oncoming victorious French I resigned myself to my inevitable fate, knelt, bowed my head in prayer, closed my eyes and waited for the cold kiss of steel on my neck.

But it was King Henry and his retinue, exhausted but triumphant.

I recognised a few faces amongst the rank and file and they beckoned me to join them on spare horses and we returned all-conquering to English shores. Once landed and as the column headed north, soldiers peeled away to rejoin their families, as I did to my own village. Being the only person to have gone and returned, I was feted as a victorious hero and a banquet was held in my honour.

I refused all entreaties to describe my journey, adventures and tales of battle for fear I would become a laughing stock. Folk mistook my reticence for the shock of war, heroism and humility, raising my status even further in their eyes. And so, by sheer luck and good fortune, I had survived. My simple life continues, awaiting the King's pleasure ... to wage war ... yet again.