

# BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 2 ★ Issue 4

Ancient and Medieval:

## Agincourt

**DATE:**

October 25, 1415

**LOCATION:**

Northwestern France

### OPPOSING FORCES

**English:** 6,000 men (5,000 archers, 1,000 infantry), led by King Henry V. Subordinate commanders were Edward Duke of York, Thomas Lord Camoys, and Sir Thomas Erpingham.

**French:** 25,000 men (1,000 mounted knights, 24,000 infantry), led by Comte de Dreux Charles D'Albret, the Constable of France. Subordinate commanders were Jean Boucicaut II, Marshal of France; Charles, Duke of Orléans; and John, the Duke of Bourbon. Also leading contingents were Dukes Alençon and Anthony of Brabant.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Since the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, when Duke William of Normandy, a vassal of the French King, invaded England and became King William I of England, a series of land disputes roiled England and France into the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). In this war, William's heirs launched numerous invasions into France to reclaim what they considered their rightful possessions. Edward III gained one-third of France in 1360, but

by his death, he had lost most of it. His great-grandson, King Henry V, continued the struggle in 1415. And although Henry's campaign did little to alter the war, his victory at Agincourt was a tactical masterpiece against great odds. On the muddy fields of Agincourt, an army of mostly commoners (English longbowmen) defeated the nobility of France (armored knights). The age of professional armies was coming.



King Henry V of England

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the English** – Henry of Monmouth was crowned Henry V of England in 1413, at age 25. Believing he was the rightful King of France, he soon demanded marriage with King Charles VI's daughter Catherine, 10 million crowns dowry, and finally, all of France. After negotiations stalled, Henry invaded.

In the summer of 1415, he loaded his 10,000-strong army in 1,500 ships and crossed the Channel. His plan was to besiege Harfleur and capture the region of Normandy, close to England, from which he

difficult, five-week contest had cost him dearly in manpower and time. With a third of his army lost to sickness, and autumn rains coming, further campaigning seemed out of the question. But rather than an ignominious retreat home, Henry chose a chevauchée (a ride) to pillage north from Harfleur to the English garrison at Calais. (*Map 1*) Edward III had done the same 69 years earlier, which led to the battle of Crécy. At a council of war on 5 October, Henry convinced his followers that the chevauchée would save face by appearing to seek battle with the French while still allowing the English to reach the safety of Calais.<sup>1</sup>

The next day, Henry set out on his 160-mile march with 5,000 archers, 900 infantry, and eight days of rations. He left his artillery and 1,500 men to garrison Harfleur. The movement proved difficult from the start. Not only was his army accompanied by steady rains, but when they reached the Somme River on 13 October, it was at flood stage. Worse still, French troops blocked the fords. Henry turned his weary army southeast and moved up the Somme for another five days, searching for a crossing site. Low on rations and finding the fords destroyed, Henry's men pillaged French towns before burning them.

The French army, meanwhile, tracked Henry's moves from the north bank. (*Map 2*) On the 19th, Henry finally caught a break when he was able to cross the river at two damaged fords. The next day, Henry rested his exhausted men. But without rations, and close to the safety of Calais, he knew he had to keep moving. The following day, Henry set off northwest toward the town.

Three days later, on the 24th, the Duke of York's scouts reported the French army closing in like "an innumerable host of locusts."<sup>2</sup> Henry's path to Calais was blocked.



Charles of France

**Actions by the French** – In 1415, England and France were nominal kingdoms – personal possessions of monarchs, whose crowns were contested by competing nobles. The French monarchy was precarious and rife with factions. Led by mentally unstable King Charles VI, the Armagnac faction held Paris. The king's cousin, John of Burgundy, conspired with the king's wife, Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, to replace Charles. The result was a low-grade civil war.

Henry's army, however, the French found themselves