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THE BATTLE OF CRÉCY, 1346

THE BATTLE OF MORLAIX solved little in the 1342 conflict over Brittany. By the time Edward III arrived at Brest on October 27, with an army numbering several thousand,¹ he found that the province was far from pacified. In response, the English king conducted a chevauchée through the countryside, pillaging and devastating all the land up to the town of Vannes. There, on November 25, he joined his army to that of his renowned lieutenant, Robert of Artois, who had been besieging the important Breton town for nearly a month. (Artois would be fatally wounded outside Vannes before the end of the year.) Within days, English armies also attacked Nantes, Rennes, and Dinan.²

A large French army, eventually led by the king, Philip VI, was raised and immediately sent to the war-ridden province. The English army came together in anticipation of a battle. But Philip refused to be drawn into combat, holding his army away from the English for two weeks until papal legates arrived from Pope Clement VI to broker a truce, the Truce of Malestroit. It would last for three years. On February 22, 1343, Edward and his army returned home. The English would not return again to the north of France until 1345.³

At the end of the truce, Edward III was again ready to make a claim on his 'rightful' throne of France. English armies attacked French outposts in Brittany and Gascony, fighting there with much success during the next two years.⁴ But neither English army had the success of Edward III's main force which sailed to France under the leadership of the king in spring 1346.

It is now apparent, although it may not have been at the time, that the 1345-46 English campaigns in Brittany and Gascony were not to be the main thrusts of Edward's military strategy in France. The armies in those two provinces were there

¹ Adam Murimuth claims that Edward's army included 6,000 men-at-arms and 12,000 archers which were transported on more than 400 ships (p. 127).

² Burne, pp. 80-84 and Sumption, pp. 403-07. Nantes was beset by the earl of Norfolk, Rennes by the earl of Northampton, and Dinan by the earl of Warwick.

³ On the signing of the truce see Burne, pp. 84-86 and Sumption, pp. 407-08. On the period of 1343-45 when the truce was in effect see Sumption, pp. 411-54. The truce kept both sides at status quo, with the exception that Vannes became 'neutral' for the duration of the truce.

⁴ On the breaking of the truce see Sumption, pp. 447-54 and Jules Viard, 'La campagne de juillet-août 1346 et la bataille de Crécy,' *Le moyen âge*, 2nd ser. 27 (1926), 1. On the war in Brittany before Crécy see Burne, pp. 86-89; Sumption, pp. 471-73, 493-97; and Perroy, pp. 115-16. On Gascony before Crécy see Burne, pp. 100-21; Sumption, pp. 455-59, 463-71, 473-88; Viard, 'Crécy,' pp. 1-3; and Henri de Wailly, *Crécy 1346: Anatomy of a Battle* (Poole, 1987), p. 11.

only as precursors for a larger force which was to land at Normandy, fighting to reclaim that part of France which had once been held by the English crown. Alfred Burne goes one step further. He claims that it was Edward III's plan to bring all three of his armies in France together, 'advancing on three radii, as it were, all directed on Paris, the centre.'⁵ However, this may be too speculative on the part of Colonel Burne, for it does not take into account the very large French army which would probably not be inclined to wait around Paris until all the 'radii' of the English plan came to it. Why should the French king not take on the smaller Gascon and/or Breton armies before they could join up with the main English force? This very important question must remain unanswered, however, for original sources do not explain either why the king of England pursued his three-pronged strategy when conventional military wisdom spoke against dividing one's force, or why the king of France chose not to attack the smaller English armies, but instead to do battle with the main force at Crécy-en-Ponthieu.

On April 6, 1346, Edward III ordered a large force to gather at Portsmouth for transportation to the continent. Their destination was not known at the time, with most expecting transit to Gascony or Brittany. The number of troops was large, perhaps as many as 15,000, most of whom were infantry or archers; it is estimated that between 700 and 1,000 ships were needed to transport the force to France.⁶ Prepared to set sail immediately, the Channel's weather was foul enough to keep the army in Portsmouth until July 11. On the next day they landed at St. Vaast la Hogue, on the coast of western Normandy.⁷

After a short break for reorganization, the English army proceeded quickly along the coast to begin what some historians describe as a raid or chevauchée and what others call a military campaign.⁸ On July 18 it captured Valognes, on July 20 St. Côme-du-Mont, on July 22 Saint-Lô, on July 23 Torigny and Sept-Vents, on July 24

⁵ Burne, p. 136.

⁶ The numbers of English soldiers during the Normandy campaign vary between 7,000–10,000 (Sumption, p. 497) and 30,000 (Viard, 'Crécy,' p. 8). Other tallies include 9,000 (Lot, I:344–47); under 10,000 (Richard Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine: A Biography of the Black Prince* (London, 1978), p. 48); 11,000 (Wailly, p. 11); 14,000–15,000 (Andrew Ayton, 'The English Army and the Normandy Campaign of 1346,' in *England and Normandy in the Middle Ages*, ed. D. Bates and A. Curry (London, 1994), pp. 253–68); 15,000 (Burne, pp. 137–38 and Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War, c. 1300–c. 1450* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 16); and 19,428 (George Wrottesley, *Crécy and Calais from the Original Records in the Public Record Office* (London, 1898), pp. 9–10). For a discussion of English numbers see Burne, pp. 166–68 and Ayton, pp. 253–68. Burne totals the English ships at 700 (pp. 137–38), with Viard counting 1,000 ('Crécy,' p. 8).

⁷ Burne, pp. 138–40; Sumption, pp. 500–02; Viard, 'Crécy,' pp. 3–11; Wailly, p. 18; Barber, pp. 47–48; and Perroy, pp. 118–19.

⁸ Allmand (p. 15), Wailly (pp. 11–49), and, most recently, Clifford J. Rogers ('Edward III and the Dialectics of Strategy, 1327–1360,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser. 4 (1994), 88–102) describe Edward's movements across Normandy as a raid, while Burne (pp. 100–35), Sumption (pp. 471–525), and Viard ('Crécy,' pp. 1–67) all see it as a campaign. There are numerous contemporary letters written by English participants of the campaign. A campaign diary also exists, although only in fragmentary form. These are all most accessibly found in Richard Barber, ed. and trans., *The Life and Campaigns of the Black Prince* (London, 1979), pp. 14–40. For a commentary on these letters see Kenneth A. Fowler, 'News from the Front: Letters and Despatches of the Fourteenth