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The Battle of Poitiers
19 September 1356

THIS EARLY battle of the Hundred Years War was fought between an English army under the Black Prince and the army of King John of France.

The ridge occupied by the English army for about 1,000 yd was thick with scrub and undergrowth, and bounded by a hedge, with its left end falling away to a marsh and its right resting on open ground, strengthened by wagons, earthworks and trenches. Of the two gaps in the hedge, the upper gap was left open, but the lower was barricaded with stakes interlaced with vine branches. Between this ridge and the North Ridge, where the French Army massed, lay cultivated land, partly vines and partly fallow.

The English Army, about 6,000 strong, comprised 3,000 men-at-arms, with 2,000 archers and 1,000 sergeants, and was formed into Salisbury's division on the right, Warwick's on the left and the Prince's division, with a small body of mounted men, in reserve in rear. The men-at-arms were deployed into line, and solid wedges of archers were formed up on the flanks of each of the divisions, slightly in advance of them. The French army was about 20,000 strong, including 3,000 crossbowmen and two small contingents of 250 mounted men commanded by Marshals Clermont and Audrehen, and was formed into the Dauphin's division, the Duke of Orleans' division and that of the King. Remembering Crécy, the King of France dismounted his men-at-arms and shortened their lances to about 5 ft.
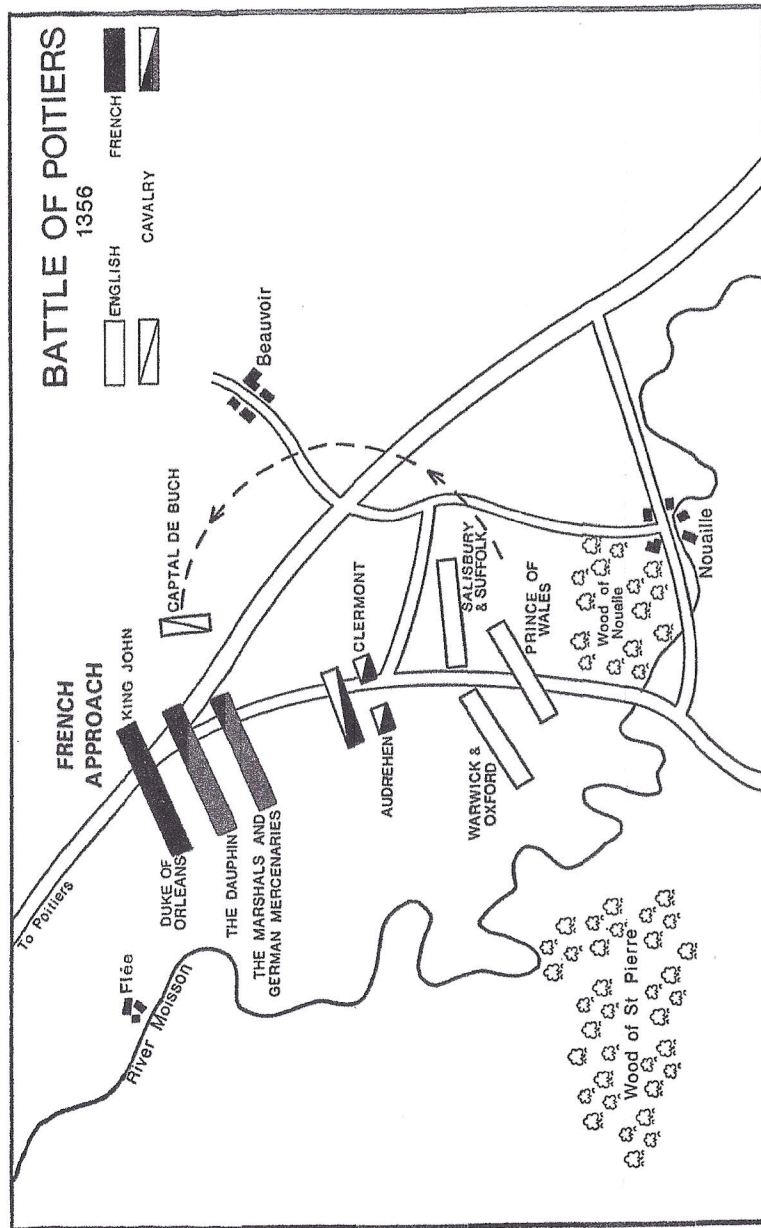
The two Marshals led their small mounted force forward

through the vineyard in a series of small columns, with Clermont's column bunching leftwards on the Nouaille Road while Audrehen followed the Gue de l'Homme track, each path bringing the two columns up against the twin gaps. The English archers on the left of their position kept up a galling fire and caused many casualties. Audrehen's men halted at the manned barricade, which their impatient leader jumped and was captured. Clermont's column passed through the unguarded gap, and swung right to be halted by Salisbury, who moved his line quickly forward, right up to the hedge, so closing the gap and preventing a flank attack on Warwick's division. After severe fighting the cavalry broke and fled; the English soldiers were rigidly restrained from pursuing.

The closely packed ranks of the advancing Dauphin's division were thrown into confusion and disorder as panic-stricken horses crashed through them, but got to grips when the English archers ran out of arrows. The hand-to-hand struggle surged backwards and forwards and, after Warwick's division was reinforced with the Prince's force, the Dauphin's men wavered and drew off in good order.

The division of the young Duke of Orleans was so shaken by the two repulsed attacks that, panic-stricken, it fled in scattered groups from the field. Seeing this, the King's Division of 10,000 men began slowly to advance, rolling forward in a glittering horde that alarmed the weary English. Scornfully dispelling their fears, the Black Prince mounted his force and sent the Gascon the Captal de Buch with 200 cavalry wide out to the right to hit the left flank of the trudging French column.

Led by the Black Prince, the mounted English men-at-arms rolled down the slopes towards the dip that lay between them and the North Ridge, with the mounted archers tacked on to the flanks and rear of their armoured comrades. Seeing the sudden avalanche of men and horses cascading down upon them, the advancing French division stopped, so that the rear ranks piled up on those in front, while others shambled from the field in panic, and before they could assume a defensive forma-

BATTLE OF POITIERS 1356

ENGLISH ☐   CAVALRY ⧄
FRENCH ▮   CAVALRY ⧄

FRENCH APPROACH

To Poitiers

River Moisson

Flée

DUKE OF ORLEANS

THE DAUPHIN

THE MARSHALS AND GERMAN MERCENARIES

KING JOHN

CAPTAL DE BUCH

Beauvoir

CLERMONT

AUDREHEN

SALISBURY & SUFFOLK

WARWICK & OXFORD

PRINCE OF WALES

Wood of Nouaille

Nouaille

Wood of St Pierre

tion, the English horsemen crashed into them with a fierce shock that tumbled men and horses to the ground.

In the hard and bloody conflict the outnumbered English forced their way forward yard by yard in a mêlée that surged back and forth. No one saw the Captal de Buch's small body of cavalry coming in from the flank to drive deep into the King's division. The great French column, attacked on two sides, slowly disintegrated as men lurched from the field, until the King of France, realising that all was lost, surrendered. Slowly the battle burned itself out, with the triumphant English pursuing the fleeing French as far as the very walls of Poitiers.

The French casualties were approximately 2,500 killed, some 2,000 captured plus about 4,000 wounded. The English appear to have got off very lightly.

At a figure-scale of 20 to 1, the English force will consist of 200 dismounted men-at-arms and 100 archers, plus 10 horsemen, and the French 500 men on foot plus 25 cavalry, but the wargame will only require sufficient men-at-arms to form the Dauphin's initial attacking force of 250 men (representing 5,000) who, when dispersed, can become half the King's force of 500 men (representing 10,000). The Duke of Orleans' column of 5,000 never got into the battle.

In a wargame it is unlikely that the scaled-down force of 25 mounted French men-at-arms who attacked under the two Marshals will be very effective against 300 English in position, plus the massed fire from their archers. To simulate the battle, the cavalry must attack, but Military Possibilities can make their venture more than a suicidal mission. The vineyard can be sufficiently high to mask them from archery fire for most or all of their charge; the height of the vines could produce surprise by the horsemen bursting upon the English (particularly at the point where the gap in the hedge is not barricaded). At that stage the English must check their morale. If the English archers move into the marsh during the charge, their firing time will be taken up.

The Dauphin's column of 5,000 strong (scaled down to 250 dismounted men-at-arms) will attack next—the French *must*

attack piecemeal as in 1356—and the trampled vines will cause it to split up into small columns to attack all along the English line. The French must check their state of morale, which will be affected by the retreating cavalry crashing through them plus losses from archery fire. If it is adequate, the English will test their morale to see if they stand—if they flee, the similarity between our reconstruction and the battle itself vanishes with them; but most wargames rules allow a force in position, aided by defensive fire, to repel an attacking force of approximately equal size.

Assuming that the Dauphin's column is repelled as in 1356, there may be a Military Possibility to decide if the English pursue one or both of the defeated French columns and so diminish their numbers. This can be decided by throwing two dice: a total of 4 or less means that both columns are pursued, a total of 5 that the Dauphin's column is pursued, a total of 6 that Orleans' column is pursued, and any total of 7 or over that no pursuit takes place.

If a pursuit is decided on, throw three dice to settle the numbers of pursuers—the combined total being the percentage of the remaining strength of the English force. For example, if the English have 200 men remaining on the table and the dice total is 15, then 15 per cent of their force (30 men) will pursue.

The North Ridge is crowned by the lance pennants of King John's host of 10,000 (scaled down to 500 dismounted men-at-arms). The morale of both French and English must now be considered. Reluctant to attack, the French morale might be low, but the English might suffer a temporary lapse in morale at the thought of attacking such a large force of the enemy. Nothing occurs to raise French morale, whereas English morale quickly rises because of the inspiring personality of the Black Prince. The English dismounted men-at-arms are all replaced by cavalry figures who charge down the hill towards the on-coming dismounted French. The Captal de Buch leads 200 horsemen (scaled down to 10) out in a wide arc to the right, coming in on the French flank, moving off the table (at scaled rates) on to a map of the countryside immediately to the right

of the English position, and coming back on the table when they reach the French column. Timing is of primary importance here; de Buch should move *before* the Black Prince. Military Possibility might make them move off simultaneously, besides presenting delaying obstacles to de Buch's progress—a sunken road, a small ravine, thick hedges to hinder his progress or a stretch of marsh that looks like lush green grass. A well designed group of Chance Cards will be very useful at this stage in the battle.

In wargames it has to be decided whether the infantry's morale will allow them to stand against horsemen and, should they stand, whether the cavalry, shaken by their losses from missile fire, suffer in their morale. There were some 3,000 (scaled down to 150) mercenary crossbowmen with the French King's force, and few sets of wargames rules will allow the English to charge home in the face of crossbow fire. It is extremely unlikely in an army of this period, however, that the crossbowmen were deployed in front like skirmishers; they were far more likely to be bunched somewhere in the middle of the column or in the rear. Therefore, probably no more than half of them (possibly far less) will fire upon the oncoming English cavalry. A morale test will reveal whether they hold their ground and fire or let go at long range and flee.

A sprawling hand-to-hand combat will end the battle one way or the other. In 1356 the French were taken unawares by de Buch's flank attack, but that is unlikely in our wargame. A Military Possibility can allow the English commander to send de Buch out to his right or left; the French will then be forced to allocate a force (which will not count in the main mêlée) to watch their flanks. On the other hand, it is possible that Chance Cards, etc, may cause the flanking force to be delayed or never to arrive at all.

Rating of Commanders
The Black Prince must undoubtedly be classified 'above average' as must Warwick and Salisbury and even the Captal de Buch. The French King, the Dauphin and the Duke of Orleans must

WARGAMES TERRAIN FOR THE BATTLE OF POITIERS 1356
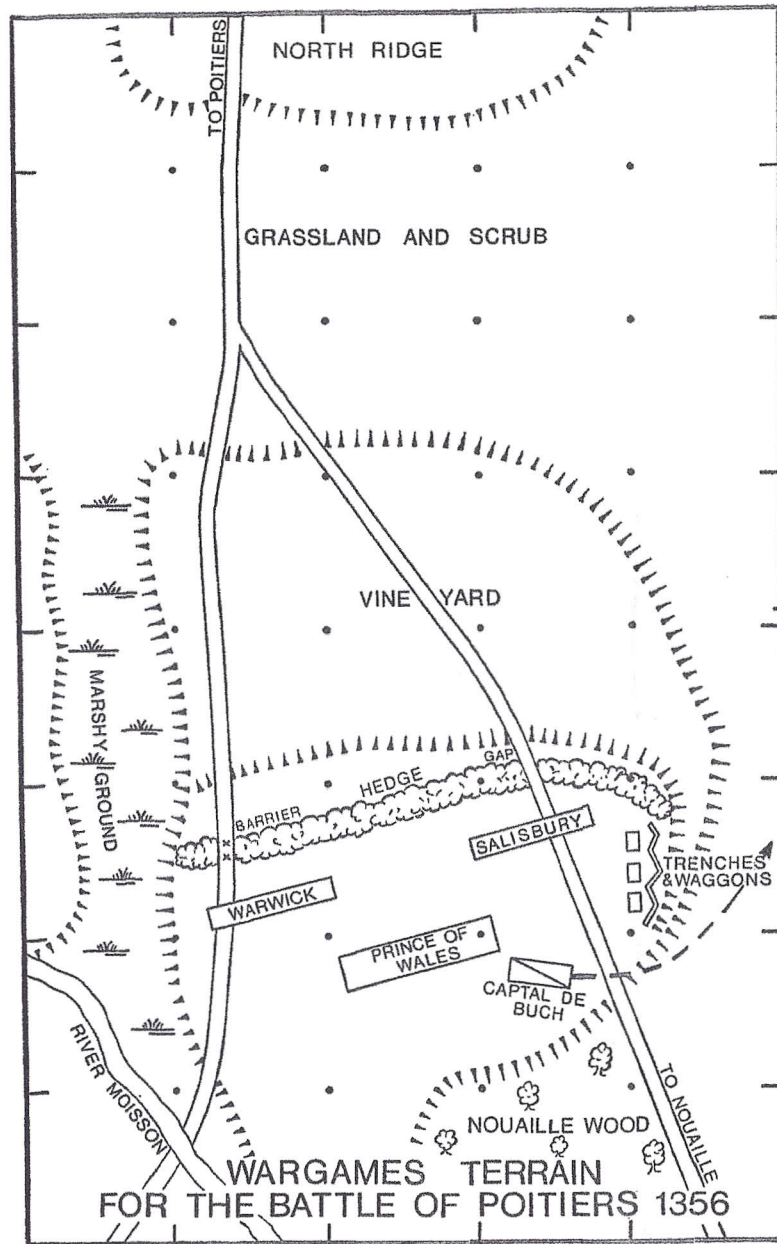
be classified as 'below average', while one of the two Marshals, Clermont or Audrehen, can be 'above average'.

Construction of Terrain

Fight the battle lengthways rather than across the table. The ridge and its approaches covers about 9 sq ft, for the first stage of the battle with the horsemen and the Dauphin's column. Extending $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft forward is an area of about 16 sq ft for the mêlée with the King's column. This allows sufficient space for the crossbowmen to fire on the mounted English attack on the French King's forces.

The ridge on which the English formed up will cover approximately the lower half of the table, allowing a gradual slope up through the vineyard for the initial cavalry attack and the advance of the Dauphin's column, besides allowing the English archers to get off a reasonable number of shots at the advancing French. This is most important, because it is the firepower of the English archer which really makes possible this battle between two forces of such vastly different strengths.

This terrain may easily be constructed of planks of wood, slabs of polystyrene or books on the table-top, covered first by sheets of newspaper or blankets and then by a green cloth to fall realistically into the right contours. The tracks can either be coloured in or made of strips of suitably coloured adhesive paper. The scrub and vines are simulated by lichen moss.