

From The History Corner

By Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

What was the 100 Years War? : So, you are sitting around the campfire with a bunch of medieval re-enactors and you want a free drink. The loser of the following question has to buy the next round: How long was the 100 Years War? Someone will almost always state that it lasted 100 years. **WRONG.** The Answer is 116 years. As the loser of the bet sits around rather perplexed, he or she eventually asks the following question: Tell me what the 100 Years War was anyway? Well, here is your answer.

The Hundred Years War was a conflict between England (ruled by the House of the Plantagenets) and France (ruled by the house of the Valois) over who had the better claim to rule various territories within France, notable Normandy, Gascony and Flanders. This latter territory was one of the major markets for English wool. The conflict lasted 116 years (from 1337 to 1453) and was actually a series of wars with long periods of very tense truces. It can be divided into three to four distinct phases.

During the first phase (1337-1360), Edward II and his son, Edward, the Black Prince of Wales, lead the English to victory over the French forces. The French were forced to recognize Edward as the ruler of the Aquitaine and England took the city of Calais in 1360.

During the second phase, the French won control over the interior of France and the English withdrew to their coastal fortresses. These victories were largely won under the leadership of Bertrand du Guesclin, one of the most successful French generals of the War. By the 1380s, the English gains in France had largely been undone by the French. The Truce of Leulinghem ended this phase of the War.

Henry V started the third phase of the War (1415-1420) and was able to do so largely as a result of a civil war among the French nobility. Charles VI, the King of France, was subject to long bouts of insanity and would later be known in history as "Charles the Mad". His cousins, the Duke of Orleans (whose supporters became known as the "Armagnacs") and the Duke of Burgundy (whose supporters were known as the "Burgundians") started fighting for the throne of France. In short, it became a three way contest with the English, the Armagnacs, and the Burgundians all fighting for the throne of France. Contrary to William Shakespeare's play, Henry V did not begin his war against France based upon a gift of French tennis balls. He negotiated with both sides in this civil war and continued to make a series of territorial demands while arming his country for war. In the meantime, the Burgundians adopted the old adage that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. They allied with the English against the hated Armagnacs. Henry V's military victories in France, which included the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, allowed the English to dictate the terms of the treaty of Troyes. This treaty made Henry the future King of France as well as its Regent. It also made him the husband of Catherine, King Charles VI's youngest daughter. Henry and Catherine would have a single son, Henry VI who was born before both Henry V and Charles VI died in 1422. The Duke of Belford, the Regent for the one year old Henry VI, continued to zealously prosecute the war on behalf of his ward. The English and the Burgundians, their allies, took over most of the northern, eastern and some of the southwestern portions of France.

During the fourth phase of the War, Charles VII, the young son of Charles the Mad, becomes the Dauphin ("Heir Apparent") of France. He was weak, indecisive, uncrowned and set up his court at the town of Chinon. He had little hope of ever becoming King. He had an exhausted and demoralized army and a treasury which had been depleted by war. The countryside of France had been devastated not only by the battles between the armies of the English and the French, but also by the constant and continued marauding. Stores of food and wine were frequently plundered

and their harvests were stolen by marauders and mercenaries. Towns were set afire and the nobles frequently feasted as their peasants starved in the countryside.

To add yet another dimension to this already complicated situation, the only institution that could have provided some moral authority to resolve this conflict was also divided within its self. By 1412, there were three claimants for the head of the Catholic Church. One resided in Rome, another in Avignon, and yet another in Spain.

During this fourth phase of the War, an unlikely hero emerged for the French. During the course of a single year, a young peasant girl who had no formal education and no military experience was able to rally the French army into a cohesive fighting force and beat the English in multiple military engagements including the defeat of the English siege of Orleans. She saw Charles VII crowned as the King of France and gave hope that a French victory was possible. The unlikely nature of her victories was such that the English claimed she had supernatural powers. She would later be known as Joan of Arc. The Burgundians eventually captured her and Charles VII would ultimately betray her by failing to pay any type of ransom. She would be burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic on May 30, 1431. The English may have removed a French leader but they could not stop the turn of the tide that she had created. The Burgundians eventually switched sides and allied with the Charles VII with the Treaty of Arras. By 1449, the French had retaken the city of Rouen and would later defeat the English army at the Battle of Formigny. The French army then took the cities of Caen, Bordeaux, Bayonne in 1451. They would finally defeat the English at the Battle of Castillon in 1453 leaving English with virtually no holdings in France except the city of Calais.

The importance of the Hundred Years War lies in several factors. First, it changed the way that warfare was waged. It introduced the longbow, gunpowder and cannon onto the battlefield. It also introduced the concept of professional mercenary companies and professional soldiers. It solidified nationalism in both England and France and hastened the end of feudalism. It further changed the social landscape of both countries by hastening the end of an armored knight as any type of military force and brought to an end of many of the concepts of Chivalry which had been prevalent during the beginning of the conflict. Finally, it motivated England into eventually becoming a dominant naval power.

And that is a quick message from the History Corner.

