

LEWES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

It was suggested to me that it would be interesting to hear what it was like fighting as a knight against the O.G. and N.F.P.S. at Lewes. So I will tell you what I remember of the biggest ever re-enactment of a medieval battle. Where, sadly, a great many friendships were severed and a great rift occurred between clubs which has not been healed to this day and now can never be healed.

The day before the battle we set off with the full size siege machine (or catapult) in tow. On the journey down we met a lot of other participants who passed our slower vehicle with much blowing of horns, shouting and waving. Some of them stopped for a few quick words. One of these was Sa ra with his usual van full of people. It seems strange now to think of that joyous roadside meeting with cheerful greetings and handshakes. For when we met the next day it was with thrusts and blows trying with all our might to smash each other into the ground. Lewes was a doubly memorable weekend for me in that it was my last show with the Sword of Christendom and my first with the Wessex Mercenaries.

The day of the battle dawned with people staggering out of tents and congregating in small groups. Trying to remember what old friendships they had revived the night before in the ale house. Slowly people were climbing into their armour, strapping on their battle jacks and trying to find the bits and pieces they had mislaid the night before. Our catapult proudly parked outside our little group of tents was causing quite a stir with people wanting to know whose side it was on, what sort of ammunition we were going to fire etc..

Well the time for the battle drew near, the tension was mounting. The Viking groups had moved out to the arena and were practicing and trying to keep the crowds interest. I walked across to the gate in the wall which separated the camp site from the field that the arena was in. Looking at the mass of men on the field (about 200) I think) and looking back at the night's camp which was in chaos, with people wandering everywhere not knowing what they were supposed to be doing. I thought "We don't stand a chance". Slowly our army assembled. At last we marched onto the field with flags and pennants flying and drums beating. I gained confidence for now we were and looked a formidable force. In the middle of the column was the catapult. It was an extremely difficult machine to move. It weighed about one ton and stood ten foot tall and had fixed wheels. So, to turn it, the back had to be lifted and bumped round. Most of our army consisted of knights who had their arms full carrying shields, weapons etc.. The local volunteers were assigned to push it into position. These local levies were dressed only in sack cloth and carried quarter staves as weapons. They all seemed to be drunk and proved to be more of an hindrance than anything else. I remember remarking to a comrade later during the battle that we would stand more chance of winning if they were on the other side. We eventually got into position and the leaders of both sides moved to the middle of the field to offer each other the usual option to leave the field without their weapons or face the consequences. Our leader returned and said "The fools want to fight us" which was greeted with a great cheer. Our men had been spread out in two lines across the field with the front rank spaced out enough to allow them room to swing their weapons and the rear rank at the same spacings but looking through the gaps in the front rank. There were no reserves as our leader was confident in an early victory. We would let them attack once or twice and tire themselves out and then move forward and drive them from the field. Anyway the script said that we would win so they would have to give in to us wouldn't they?!

Their first attacks came in small waves as expected. When the first wave was about 20 yards from our line I fired the catapult that was positioned in the centre just behind our lines. We were firing small sandbags weighing about 1 lb as a sort of grape shot. This we thought would be heavy enough to let people know they had been hit without doing them any great harm. Well, my first shot came crashing down on my own men hitting them on the back of the neck and sending them sprawling to the ground sending up shouts of laughter from the enemy and the crowd. As I hastily reloaded the catapult and tried to find what had gone wrong the felled men got to their feet throwing unrepeatable insults at me. I fired again and the same thing happened once again, this time resulting in even stronger language and comments, like "Whose !-x!-x! side are you on!" The two sides clashed with much shouting and crashing of weapons. In the meantime I had

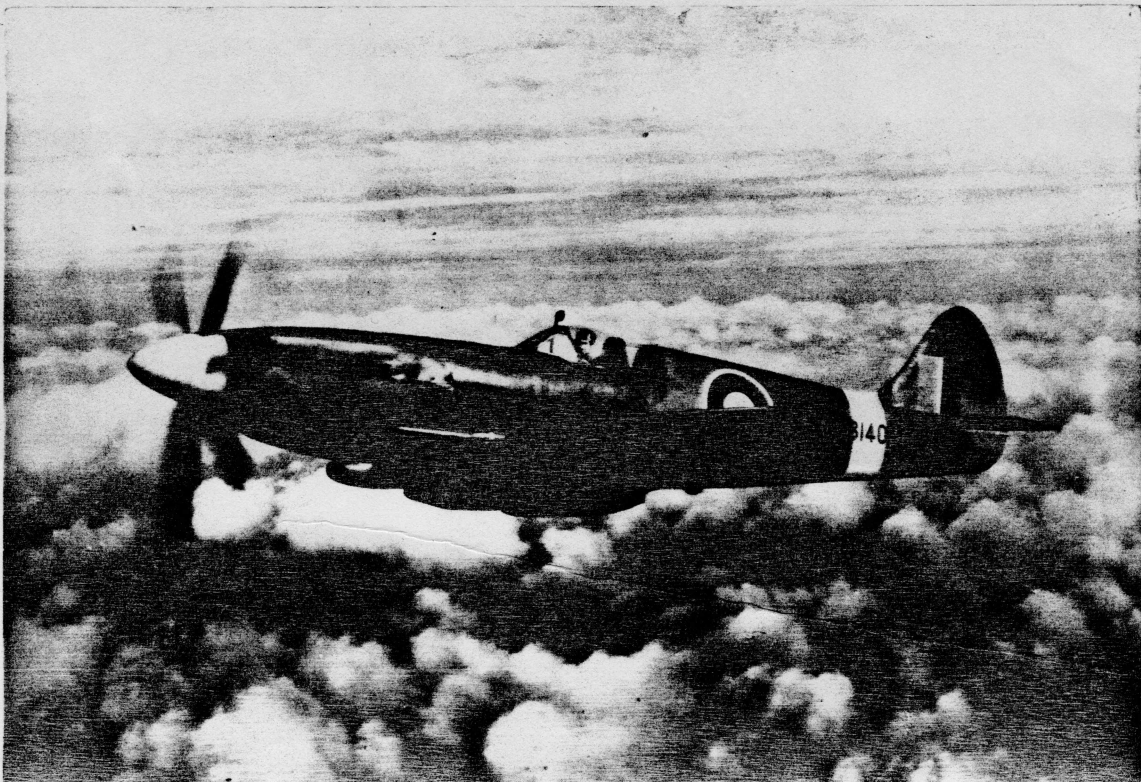
what was wrong. Those f-!x! volunteers had bent the steel basket which held the sandbags. The enemy had withdrawn and by the time they attacked again I had repaired the basket. When they came into range again I fired, this time it worked. Perry, who was in charge of the section of Vikings directly in front of the catapult, was quick to see the danger and shouted an order to raise shields. Most of the sandbags thudded down onto the shields with one or two finding their way through to give the recipient a hefty thump. This system of attack and retreat continued for a while without much damage to either side. When we ran out of ammunition for the catapult I decided to use myself and the two men with me as a support for any spots in the line that looked like giving way. This constant attacking by waves was starting to take its toll. The enemy attacks were getting faster and faster like the waves of the sea, as one rolled back it was reinforced by the one behind and came back in faster and stronger. It was evident that our men were getting tired. The line was sagging and bending and I knew that at any moment it would start to break up. When the first break came we were quick to act, charging in screaming and swinging our weapons. Not having done any fighting yet and being fresh and eager we had no trouble pushing back three times our number. The local volunteers who were off to the right of my position, more of a drunken rabble than part of an army, had been making a lot of noise and waving their lumps of wood in an extremely violent fashion much to the annoyance of the Vikings but with little effect. These were the first to break. A single Viking axeman crashed into them clearing a swarth right through, followed by more Vikings. Once they saw their fellows falling to the ground amid shouts of pain they started to scatter. I didn't see what happened to them after that but I never saw any of them again. My attention had been attracted by a shout of arrows! so I had lifted my shield above my head and the next moment a great black cloud of arrows was raining down on us. These arrows had been coming over in drones all day and were being returned by our own archers. The reason I took more notice of this last volley was that one or two of them were standing stick firm in the ground. I pulled one out and there was a steel filled pile on the end, not the usual rubber tipped job we used for these displays. I don't know who first started using them but once they were fired in one direction someone on the other side fired them back.

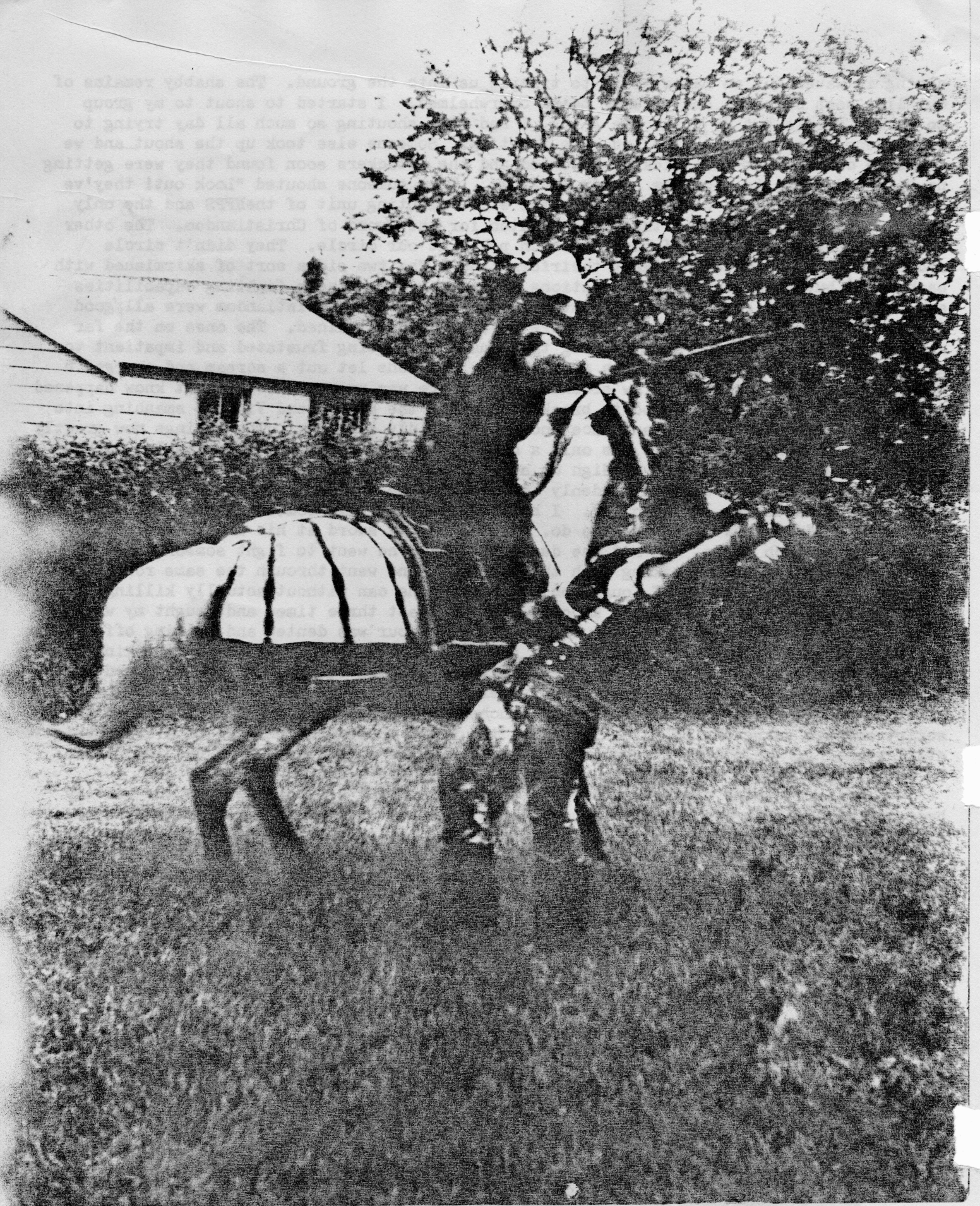
The situation was now getting bad it was obvious that Barry Marsh the leader of my side had little or no control over his men. Shout as he may he could not get his troops organised. The script had gone out of the window and everyone was fighting to win. The side I was on being made up of about eight different clubs. The other mostly one big club the inevitable happened the smaller clubs started to fight as their own small independent units. While the Vikings seemed to be one large disciplined force fighting a well co-ordinated and tactical battle. Another attack came in and we rushed forward to meet them. William Barsinister who had been with me throughout the battle went wading in beating them back, more I think with verbal abuse than with his weapon. He disappeared into a crowd of Vikings shouting and swinging his mace. I saw him sometime later laying face down on the ground in the middle of a group of bruised and bleeding Vikings. A tall blond haired Viking came screaming toward me swinging his axe down toward my head. I caught it on my shield and hit him across the side of the knee (the way Jim Spooner had taught me). He went sprawling across the ground to my left. I swung blows at a couple more who swerved around me. I caught a glimpse of Perry out of the corner of my eye and felt a blow across my stomach winding me. I doubled up and fell to my knees expecting another blow to finish me off, but it never came. When I straightened up the Vikings were withdrawing. I'm still not sure why they seemed to be having some sort of discussion. This small pause gave me and the rest of my side who were still capable of fighting a chance to sort ourselves out. I went over to join the rest of my club, that is the Wessex Mercenaries or Sword of Christendom, for me, were still as one that day. I hadn't fought with them yet today and was glad to forget the catapult which was of no further use and stand and fight with comrades I knew and trusted. They hadn't done a lot of fighting as yet because the Vikings that had been attacking so far had been mostly fresh young warriors quite new to the game. They had soon learnt that these were no ordinary knights. In fact they had been met with such determination and hostility that they had tried to avoid coming into contact with this section of the line. Taking advantage of this short rest break to discuss the battle so far we all agreed this was no ordinary show. Numbers of people from both sides had been taken for medical treatment including two with arrows sticking out of them. Some strange force seemed to have descended on the field and it was affecting everyone there. Instead of the usual friendly rivalry everyone was aggressively determined to win.

The attack was resumed, this time it was a definite all out attack, they weren't

coming in waves but en masse as if to trample us into the ground. The shabby remains of our line soon crumbled and we were being overwhelmed. I started to shout to my group to form a circle but my voice was going, I had been shouting so much all day trying to rally people to hold the line and keep fighting. Someone else took up the shout and we formed a circle that was quickly surrounded and the attackers soon found they were getting nowhere and began to look for easier pickings. Then someone shouted "Look out! they've sent the O.G. in. The Odin Guard were the elite fighting unit of the NFPS and the only force on the field that day that were a match for the Sword of Christendom. The other Vikings were in a sort of V formation which poked at our circle. They didn't circle around us as we expected but kept their formation. The two sides sort of skirmished with each other but both kept their formations respecting each others fighting capabilities and not wanting to get into an all out melee. The Sword of Christendom were all good fighters in their own right but they were never that disciplined. The ones on the far side of the circle had no enemy facing them and were getting frustrated and impatient to get stuck in and prove their worth as fighters. Someone let out a scream and charged berserk out of the circle. A few seconds later there was no circle. I don't know happened to the O.G. but all hell seemed to break loose with the knights and Vikings smashing into each other with axes, swords and mace and chains wildly swinging. The Vikings now greatly outnumbered the knights and it was only a matter of time, defeat was inevitable, but we weren't going to give in easily. High on adrenelin I kept on fighting trying to take as many down with me as I could. Suddenly in front of me I saw Joe Raboni with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. I had never fought this combination of weapons before and didn't know quite what to do. So I swung my sword at his unhelmeted head missing by an inch or so. It had the desired effect, he went to fight someone else. I met the same tall blonde viking with the axe again and went through the same routine (some people never learn). I fought on as hard as one can without actually killing or maiming anyone. I must have been knocked down at least three times and fought my way back to my feet. I was bruised and exhausted, my armour was dented and falling off, feeling all in I fell to my knees without anyone landing a blow. I remember thinking "So we didn't win, but we sure gave them a fight they will remember". Then I heard all this shouting and looked up, the Viking leader was shouting to his men "Lay down your arms, we are capitulating". I swore and punched the ground he had now gone back to the script and was surrendering. Looking round the field there were only about a dozen knights still standing. He couldn't even give us the honour of losing well. He had let us win by the script, but we felt degraded by the farce, it was a charade.

Well, everyone dragged themselves up and staggered off the field to the waiting beer and food. That night seemed a jovial and friendly enough one but from then on the clubs involved have not and will not work together. If there ever was another show on that scale with the same clubs I think someone would end up dead. Because these clubs distrust each other so much it would only take one person to be injured and everyone would think it had been done on purpose and start fighting for real.





Fernet + mike Ellis Tonbridge 1975.