
Inter-frontal Cooperation in the Fourteenth Century and Edward III's 1346 Campaign

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The spatial scale of medieval wars was often as extensive as that of modern ones, and could involve fighting on several fronts hundreds of kilometres apart. For example, during the first two decades of the Hundred Years War the fighting was never limited to a single front, and in 1346 fighting took place in Northern England, Artois, Brittany, Normandy and Gascony. However, it is far from clear whether such simultaneous operations were conducted as parts of a single overall plan. For most of the Scots, Flemings, Bretons and Gascons who fought in 1346 these conflicts had local causes and aims, and had little or nothing to do with events elsewhere. As for the commanders, the communication difficulties they faced were so great that it is questionable to what extent they could have cooperated with each-other even if they had wanted to.

Though the question whether there was strategy in the Middle Ages has aroused much interest and controversy in recent years, the issue of inter-frontal cooperation has received little attention.¹ Characteristically, Rogers's recent article on the strategy of Edward III, notwithstanding its other merits, completely ignores this issue.² Contamine and Verbruggen contend that medieval commanders occasionally employed 'collective strategy' and 'concentric advances', but limit their discussion to making a list of examples illustrating their claim.³ Prestwich, who maintains that in the Middle Ages 'grand strategy there

¹ By 'inter-frontal cooperation' I refer to a situation in which one force operates on a certain front so as deliberately to facilitate or take advantage of the actions of another friendly force, operating on a different front.

² C. Rogers, 'Edward III and the Dialectics of Strategy, 1327-1360', *Royal Historical Society Transactions*, VI (4) (1994), pp. 83-102.

³ P. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 225-6. Contamine does not distinguish here between cooperation on a single front and inter-frontal cooperation. J.F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1977), pp. 280-5.

certainly was',⁴ discusses at some length inter-frontal cooperation between allies, but focuses on its political and diplomatic feasibility, while disregarding the purely military angle.⁵

In this article I will endeavour to fill this gap, and examine to what extent medieval commanders campaigning on different fronts could have cooperated with each other in pursuit of a common plan, and what was the potential importance of such cooperation. As a test case I have chosen Edward III's 1346 campaign. This campaign is one of the most researched campaigns of the Middle Ages, and yet comparatively little attention has been given to the role inter-frontal cooperation played in it. In the following pages I hope not only to utilize this campaign as a test case for examining medieval inter-frontal cooperation but also to demonstrate how this approach can lead to a new interpretation of the campaign.

Communication in Fourteenth-Century Invasion Campaigns

The ability of armies to cooperate with each other depends to a large extent on their ability to communicate. Hence as a preliminary step we must first examine the communication conditions prevalent during fourteenth-century campaigns.

Though mounted messengers could make 100 km a day and more,⁶ messages did not always travel at the maximum rate of which messengers were capable. For not all messages were of such importance as to warrant the dispatch of a special mounted messenger; messengers did not always travel at top speed;⁷ and weather and road conditions were not always optimal: For example, in the winter of 1324/5 William of Worcester, acting as a messenger, travelled only about 40 km a day on average.⁸

In times of war there was also the danger of interception by the enemy. Sometimes, armies had their communication lines completely cut off, as when they penetrated deep into enemy country, in which case they could communicate with other friendly forces only by means

⁴ M. Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages: The English Experience* (London, 1996), p. 187.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 191–3, 197 ff.

⁶ M.N. Boyer, 'A Day's Journey in Medieval France', *Speculum*, XXVI(4) (1951), pp. 597, 604; R.-H. Bautier, 'La route française et son évolution au cours du Moyen Âge', in *Sur l'histoire économique de la France médiévale: la route, le fleuve, la foire* (Aldershot, 1991), p. 98; R.-H. Bautier, 'Recherches sur les routes de l'Europe médiévale. I. De Paris et des Foires de Champagne à la Méditerranée par le Massif Central', in *Histoire économique*, p. 103. For empirical examples see e.g. K. de Lettenhove, ed., *œuvres de Froissart. Chroniques* (25 vols, Bruxelles, 1867–77), 14.81, 14.181–2, 15.187; S. Luce, G. Raynaud, L. Mirot and A. Mirot, eds., *Chroniques de Jean Froissart* (15 vols. in 17 parts, Paris, 1869–1975), 8.ii.212–3, 13.244, 248.

⁷ Bautier, 'Recherches sur les routes', p. 102.

⁸ F.M. Stenton, 'The Road System of Medieval England', *Economic History Review*, VII(1) (Nov. 1936), pp. 13–14.

of covert messengers.⁹ Communicating through enemy territory had several obvious problems. First, there was always the danger of the messenger being captured. Secondly, it was a slow means of communication, because the messenger had often to take by-ways, could not be replaced, could not change his horses easily and could not count on local help. Thirdly, it was imprudent of a commander to rely too heavily on the report of a single messenger coming from enemy territory. Therefore, armies operating on different fronts and separated by hostile territory preferred to communicate through circuitous routes, rather than by means of covert messengers. Often, as in 1346, this meant reliance on sea routes.

The speed of sea travel fluctuated greatly, because it was completely at the mercy of the elements. Though we have many examples of ships and news travelling at speeds of at least 100 km a day, sometimes reaching rates of 250 km a day and more,¹⁰ examples of ships being sunk or delayed for long periods by the weather are just as abundant. In 1346 Edward III's army was ready to embark by the beginning of June, but due to bad weather left Portsmouth only on 5 July, and landed in the Cotentin only on 12 July. In July 1428 it took the Earl of Salisbury six days to cross from Sandwich to Calais. In 1345, 1378 and 1399, three English expeditions to Gascony were delayed by the weather for two months, one month and two and a half months respectively. In 1405 contrary winds bottled up a French fleet in Brest for 15 days.¹¹ It is true that lone ships could venture out when whole fleets could not, but even lone ships might be delayed for days by bad weather. For example, in 1392 French knights had to wait five days in Dover for a favourable wind.¹² In 1379 a French ambassador for Scotland was held up in Sluys for 15 days by contrary winds. He was then arrested by the Count of Flanders. Having been released, he took fright that the English would try to intercept his ship, and therefore returned to Paris without accomplishing his mission.¹³

This was not the only occasion when important news were not only delayed, but actually failed to reach their destination. In 1379 an expedition was sent from England to Brittany by sea, in response to an urgent plea from the Duke of Brittany. It was caught in a storm, some of its ships were sunk, and the rest returned to England. The

⁹ See e.g. Luce, *Chroniques*, 15.63–5; Lettenhove, *œuvres*, 14.187.

¹⁰ A. H. Burne, *The Crecy War* (London, 1955), p. 330; A. H. Burne, *The Agincourt War* (London, 1956), pp. 40, 106, 117, 164; *Gesta Henrici Quinti: The Deeds of Henry the Fifth*, ed. and trans. F. Taylor and J. S. Roskell (Oxford, 1975), pp. 20–22; Lettenhove, *œuvres*, 14.150, 15.307; Luce, *Chroniques*, 10.168, 12.296; H. Nicolas, *History of the Battle of Agincourt and of the Expedition of Henry the Fifth into France in 1415* (London, 1971 [1833]), p. 147.

¹¹ 1428: Burne, *Agincourt War*, p. 222. French knights: Lettenhove, *œuvres*, 14.392. 1345: J. Sumption, *The Hundred Years War: Trial by Battle* (London, 1990), pp. 457, 463. 1378: Luce, *Chroniques*, 9.86. Percy: Lettenhove, *œuvres*, 16.215–16. 1405: *Chronique d'Enguerran de Monstrelet*, ed. L. Douet-d'Arcq (6 vols, Paris, 1857), 1.82.

¹² Lettenhove, *œuvres*, 14.392.

¹³ Luce, *Chroniques*, 9.128–30.

duke heard neither about the dispatch of this expedition nor about its fate, and was very surprised that the English did not respond to his message. He therefore sent new messengers to England, and only on their return did he learn of the failed expedition.¹⁴ In 1384 a truce was signed between England and France, which was also valid for the Scottish front. The French failed to notify the Scots of this truce, and the English took advantage of this and invaded Scotland, without the Scots knowing that a truce had been signed.¹⁵ During the crusade against al-Mahdiyya (1390), Froissart says that no intelligence of the fate of the crusade reached France till the return of the crusaders, even though the Christians controlled the sea.¹⁶ Furthermore, sea routes were not always safe from the enemy, and, for instance, messengers travelling between Gascony and England were in constant danger of interception.¹⁷

Hence it is quite impossible to give any precise figures regarding long-distance communications involving sea routes. A message might take 10 days to travel between Gascony and Normandy, but it could also take many weeks or completely fail to reach its destination. Nevertheless, as some concrete figures are needed, I will assume that under good conditions an important message might take 15 days to travel between Bordeaux and London,¹⁸ about the same time between the Gascon and Norman fronts and perhaps half as much between the Norman and Flemish fronts.

However, communications were delayed by more than the slowness of travel. First, the gathering of information was a time-consuming operation, and hence when information from one front was sent to a commander on a distant front it was often already at least a few days out of date.¹⁹ Secondly, coordinating the actions of two forces operating on different fronts can seldom be effected by sending binding orders in response to information; rather, it requires reciprocal communications. Ideally, once a commander-in-chief, on the basis of information currently available to him, decided to make a change in the overall plan, he would communicate this suggestion to his subordinate on the spot and ask for his opinion. After receiving the subordinate's reply, the commander-in-chief would reassess the proposed

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, 9.209–11, 234.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 11.164–6.

¹⁶ Lettenhove, *œuvres*, 14.239–40.

¹⁷ See e.g. *Chronographia regum Francorum*, ed. H. Moranville (3 vols, Paris, 1891–7), 2.221–2; *Chronique Normande du XIVe siècle*, ed. A. Molinier and E. Molinier (Paris, 1882), 74; Luce, *Chroniques*, 9.6.

¹⁸ The letter in which the Black Prince informed his father of his 1355 *chevauchée* took two weeks to travel from Bordeaux to London: Robert de Avesbury, *De gestis mirabilibus regis Edwardi tertii*, ed. E. M. Thompson (London, 1889), pp. 432, 437. News of the victory at Poitiers, which occurred on 19 September 1356, reached London only on or a bit before 10 October: H.J. Hewitt, *The Black Prince's Expedition of 1355–1357* (Manchester, 1958), p. 138.

¹⁹ See e.g. the account of the French agent Bertaut Jobelin: *Chronique de Richard Lescot suivie de la continuation de cette chronique*, ed. J. Lemoine (Paris, 1896), pp. 228–30.

change and send his final orders, receiving in return a message confirming that his subordinate was proceeding to execute these orders. Today, this whole procedure might take as little as a few days, if not hours. For Edward III in Normandy to communicate thus with his Gascony lieutenant would have taken at least 60 days,²⁰ and with his Flanders lieutenant at least 30 days, and that in a campaign whose active phase lasted about 50 days. Once Edward struck deep into France and allowed his communication lines to be cut, his ability to communicate with his lieutenants was reduced much further.

Nor should we overlook the limitations on the volume of communication between distant fronts, and the almost complete lack of maps from which fourteenth-century commanders suffered – a lack which meant that commanders could hardly have translated the literal information they received into a spatial image, and had to make do with a more qualitative impression of the situation on distant fronts.²¹ When considering all these difficulties, we see that even under optimal conditions a commander could hardly ever have formed an accurate picture of the state of affairs on far-off fronts, and whatever partial picture he was able to form was bound to be grossly out of date. Even if we take into consideration only the time it took for information to reach from Gascony to Normandy and for commands to make the return trip, the 30-day gap was still so huge that it made any practical coordination between the fronts well-nigh impossible. All that the commander-in-chief could do was to make an initial overall plan giving each local commander a certain role to play. Once the campaign begun, he could hardly have altered this plan or supervised the conduct of his subordinates.

Inter-frontal Cooperation in the 1346 Campaign

Before analysing the campaign from the cooperative point of view, it would be best to give a short overview of the main events.²² The first act of that year's campaigning was played in Gascony, where the French concentrated their main field army under the command of Duke Jean of Normandy, King Philip's son and heir. This army contained, according to the most moderate of modern estimates, 15–20 000 combatants,

²⁰ Fifteen days for Edward's initial message to reach Gascony; 15 for the reply to reach Edward; 15 for the final orders to reach Gascony; 15 for the confirmation message to reach Edward.

²¹ Contamine, *War*, p. 226; Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare*, pp. 189–90, 211–7; M. Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), p. 19.

²² The course of Edward's campaign from La Hogue to Calais has been described in length so often that I saw no need of providing here a detailed description of my own.

and was faced by Lancaster's much smaller Anglo-Gascon force.²³ At the beginning of April, after capturing a few border fortresses, Duke Jean laid siege to Aiguillon, an important fortress controlling the confluence of the Lot and Garonne. Since Lancaster was unable to confront the French army in the open, he threw a garrison of about 1000–1500 combatants into Aiguillon, and sent an urgent plea for succour to King Edward.²⁴ In response to Lancaster's plea, Edward's first idea was to sail to Gascony and rescue Lancaster by means of a direct intervention. However, wishing to take advantage of the fact that the main French army was operating so far away in Gascony, he later resolved to invade defenceless Normandy instead, and on 12 July landed at La Hogue in the Cotentin with an army of 10–15 000 men.²⁵

The armies operating in Gascony and Normandy were not the only English forces taking part in the campaign. On 20 June 1346 Edward sent Hugh Hastings with 250 archers and a handful of men-at-arms to Flanders, there to unite with the Flemish army and together invade France from the north.²⁶ A fourth army was meanwhile engaged in the Breton civil war, while in October a fifth army was raised in Northern England to repel the Scottish invasion.

Despite the overwhelming odds against it, the garrison of Aiguillon tenaciously held out, and Duke Jean's army remained motionless in front of its walls for almost five months. Even after he was informed of Edward's landing at La Hogue, and although at the time there was no other major French field army in existence, the duke refused to raise the siege. Consequently, after the landing at La Hogue, Edward was able to overrun western Normandy without meeting any serious resistance. Throughout the second half of July the French made desperate efforts to contain the English invasion, while they were raising a new field army, and had to abandon all the lands south of the Seine to the mercy of the English. These efforts eventually bore fruit: shielded by the Seine, Philip managed by the beginning of August to collect a sizeable host, which kept growing with each passing day. Edward too attempted to enlarge the forces at his disposal, and at the end of July sent orders to England to prepare a fleet with reinforcements, that was directed to sail towards Crotoy, a small harbour near the mouth of the Somme.²⁷ This fleet set sail from England only at

²³ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, p. 485. The chroniclers, French, English and neutral, give much higher figures, ranging from 25 000 to 100 000: Jean le Bel, *Chronique*, ed. J. Viard and E. Deprez (2 vols, Paris, 1904–5), 2.56; *Chronicon monasterii de Melsa*, ed. E.A. Bond (3 vols, London, 1866–8), 3.54; Gilles li Muisit, *Chronique et annales*, ed. H. Lemaître (Paris, 1906), p. 151; *Chronographia*, 2.218; Giovanni Villani, *Cronica* (Florence, 1823), p. 152.

²⁴ Bel, *Chronique*, 2.49, 57; *Chronographia*, 2.220; *Chronique Normande*, 72.

²⁵ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, p. 497; Rogers, 'Edward III', p. 259.

²⁶ T. Rymer, *Foedera, conventiones, literae et cujuscunque generis acta publica, inter regis Angliae* (7 vols, London, 1826–69), 3.i.83, 84.

²⁷ K. Fowler, 'News from the Front: Letters and Despatches of the Fourteenth Century', in P. Contamine, C. Giry-Deloison and M.H. Keen, eds., *Guerre et société en France, Angleterre et en Bourgogne, XIVe–XVe siècle* (Lille, 1991), p. 84.

the beginning of September, attacked Boulogne on 4 September and united with Edward before Calais the following day.²⁸

Meanwhile in the north, the Flemings waited for definite news of Edward's actions. After being informed of the landing at La Hogue – thereby being reassured that they would not have to face the main French army themselves – they began their invasion of Artois on 1 or 2 August.²⁹ The army included a couple of hundred Englishmen and several thousand Flemings, though it is impossible to say how many exactly.³⁰ The invasion was initially checked on the line of the river Lys, but on 10 August the Flemings managed to cross the river near Menreville, and four days later they laid siege to Bethune.³¹ Bethune was strongly defended, and the Flemings suffered heavy losses due to several successful French sallies.³² On 22 August the Flemings were heavily defeated by another French sortie, which so discouraged them that on 24 August they raised the siege and retreated back to Menreville.³³

Like Hastings, Edward too found his way blocked by a river – the Seine. Since all the bridges were either broken or heavily guarded, Edward was forced to march almost to the gates of Paris before he succeeded in establishing a bridge at Poissy. He then lured the French south of the river, either by feigning a move towards Chartres,³⁴ or by deceitfully promising to do battle with them near Antony (the second option seems more likely).³⁵ Once the French were on the Seine's southern bank, Edward quickly crossed the river and bolted north, pursued by the enraged French. His situation now began to deteriorate rapidly: the ever-growing French army, which already enjoyed a decided numerical superiority, was close on his heels, while before him other French forces destroyed or occupied all the crossings of the Somme. Edward barely managed to escape this trap, crossing the Somme on 24 August at the ford of Blanchetaque. Two days later Edward offered Philip battle at Crécy, which resulted in a decisive English victory, following which Edward continued his march northward, and laid siege to Calais at the beginning of September.

Only on 24 August did Duke Jean raise the siege of Aiguillon and

²⁸ Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 166; Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, p. 537.

²⁹ *Chronique Normande*, 76; Henry Knighton, *Chronicon*, ed. J.R. Lumby (2 vols, London, 1889–95), 2.34; Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 152; *Chronographia*, 2.225.

³⁰ The chroniclers give greatly exaggerated numbers; Knighton, for instance, asserts that there were 60,000 men in the army. Knighton, *Chronicon*, 2.34.

³¹ Muisit, *Chronique*, pp. 152–4; *Chronographia*, 2.225; Bel, *Chronique*, 2.134 n.2.

³² Bel, *Chronique*, 2.134; Muisit, *Chronique*, pp. 154–5.

³³ Bel, *Chronique*, 2.134 n.2, 135; *Chronique Normande*, p. 82; Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 159; *Chronographia*, 2.231.

³⁴ Jean de Venette, *Continuatio chronici Guillelmi de Nangiaco*, ed. H. Géraud (Paris, 1843), p. 199; Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 158.

³⁵ Bel, *Chronique*, 2.87 n.1; *Chronique Normande*, pp. 77–9; *Chronographia*, 2.227–8; *Grandes chroniques des France*, ed. J. Viard (10 vols, Paris, 1920–53), 9.276–9; R. Barber, ed., *The Life and Campaigns of the Black Prince* (Bury St Edmunds, 1979), p. 38.

march to his father's assistance.³⁶ He was much too late to retrieve the situation in the north, and the sole consequence of this move was to expose the southern provinces in their turn to an English invasion. Lancaster was not slow in taking advantage of this opportunity, and on 12 September he marched northward from La Réole with about 6000 men.³⁷ Lancaster penetrated deep into French territory, wasting the now defenceless Poitou and Saintonge. He got as far north as Poitiers, and then retreated back to Gascony unmolested, after placing English garrisons in several captured strongholds.

When we come to analyse the part played by inter-frontal cooperation in this campaign, we should first ask why did Edward divide his troops into so many parts instead of concentrating them for a united effort. In the fourteenth century commanders dispersed their armies to several fronts usually because they were forced to do so by political circumstances or transportation difficulties. Edward III's 1346 campaign well exemplifies this. He was obliged to fight with dispersed forces, because most of the Flemings, Bretons and Gascons he employed fought for local interests, and would not have been willing to fight on any other front, even if Edward had been able to transport them thither, which he probably could not. In contrast, if we exclude their Scottish allies, the French could switch a far greater proportion of their troops from one front to another. Thus Duke Jean's army in Gascony, a large part of which was made of Norman troops, would have fought just the same in Normandy; this is also true of the troops defending the Flemish border, an important segment of whom were Genoese mercenaries; while the pro-French Breton troops, when not embroiled in the Breton war of succession, often fought away from Brittany. The French therefore had an advantage not only in the total numbers of troops at their disposal but also in their superior ability to concentrate their forces on any one front. To counter these advantages Edward had to rely on some kind of inter-frontal cooperation. His first option was to try and unite at least some of his forces before confronting the French.

Plans of Convergence

In the Middle Ages the above-mentioned communication difficulties usually made it possible for armies coming from different fronts to join hands only when they were not opposed by a strong hostile field army.³⁸ When the converging forces had to cope with an active enemy field army, their task became practically impossible. The activity of such an army exacerbated the communication problems of the con-

³⁶ J. Viard, ed., *Les Journaux du Trésor de Philippe VI de Valois* (Paris, 1899), nos. 2339, 3860, 4536, 4860.

³⁷ Avesbury, *Gestis*, p. 373; Burne, *Crecy War*, p. 122.

³⁸ See e.g. the Anglo-Portuguese juncture in 1386: Luce, *Chroniques*, 14.83–8.

verging forces, thereby making it difficult for them to ascertain their respective positions and to agree where and when they should meet; while the enemy army, placed as it was between the converging forces, could more easily be informed of their movements and fall upon each in its turn. Hence fourteenth-century commanders only rarely tried to converge forces coming from different fronts, and when they tried they usually failed, as the English learned in 1356 and the French in 1370.³⁹

Nevertheless, several historians contend that in 1346 Edward's plan of campaign was to unite not two but three different forces before engaging the French in battle. The fact that neither juncture took place makes it hard to determine whether Edward intended to effect these junctures but failed, or whether he never planned them in the first place. What follows is an effort to clarify the matter, and to establish the role of convergence plans in the 1346 invasion.

The Seaborne Force

On 29 July 1346 Edward wrote from Caen to London, requesting that the ships returning from Normandy to England be loaded with all the men and arms available, as well as money to pay his troops, and sent towards Crotoy 'pour restreindre noz enemis celles parties'.⁴⁰ Crotoy is a port adjacent to the ford of Blanchetaque, which Edward crossed on 24 August. Right after the crossing, while the main English army went towards Crécy, Edward sent a detachment to Crotoy, where it found a large amount of victuals but no fleet. Sumption, Fowler, Rogers and Prestwich all argue that Edward planned to unite at Crotoy with the fleet from England, and Fowler says: 'From the moment Edward III had arrived in Caen, and in all probability from the time he left England, he had intended to proceed in the direction of Le Crotoy, and in view of the speed with which he took up position after the crossing of the Somme, the battlefield must have been reconnoitred in advance.'⁴¹

However, the evidence is not as conclusive as it might seem. First, Edward states that the fleet's purpose would be not to unite with him, but 'restreindre noz enemis celles parties'. Secondly, on 24/5 August, when Edward was near Crotoy, the fleet was not even loaded, and the men it was meant to transport were still gathering in Kent. It eventually joined Edward only when the latter was already camped before Calais.⁴² Thirdly, Edward at first tried to cross the Somme at Longpré and Pont-

³⁹ 1356: Geoffrey le Baker, *Chronicon*, ed. E.M. Thompson (Oxford, 1889), p. 142; Burne, *Crecey War*, p. 283. 1370: Luce, *Chroniques*, 7.221, 229, 240-1.

⁴⁰ Fowler, 'News', 84. See also A. Ayton, 'The English Army and the Normandy Campaign of 1346', in D. Bates and A. Curry, eds., *England and Normandy in the Middle Ages* (London, 1994), p. 263; Rymer, *Foedera*, 3.i.87.

⁴¹ Fowler, 'News', 79; Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, pp. 510-11, 525; Rogers, 'Edward III', p. 94 n. 53; Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare*, p. 203.

⁴² Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 166; R. Barber, *Edward Prince of Wales and Aquitaine: A Biography of the Black Prince* (London, 1978), p. 73; Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, p. 525.

Rémy, well to the east of Blanchetaque. Only because these crossings were too heavily defended, and because the French army was coming up from the south-east, was he forced to turn north-westwards towards Blanchetaque.⁴³ Moreover, contrary to Fowler's idea that the area was reconnoitred in advance and that the whole move was planned back in England, Edward heard of the existence of Blanchetaque just hours before he crossed there.⁴⁴ Hence the fact that Edward was near Crotoy on 24/5 August was purely accidental. According to his own plan, he should have been on that date much further east. Furthermore, once he crossed the Somme, Edward again moved away from the sea, which indicates that he did not intend to link up with a fleet. The purpose of the raid on Crotoy might have been only to replenish the army's depleted stores, rather than to join hands with the fleet.

The last point worth considering is the money Edward wanted the fleet to bring over to pay his troops. It is quite clear that after leaving Caen Edward planned to march towards Flanders, where he could have eventually linked up with the fleet. The question is whether or not he planned to effect such a link-up during the campaign itself, *before* engaging the French in battle. His request for money in itself hardly supports this more concrete claim, because for the intended battle Edward needed men more than money. Shortages of money and delays in pay were very common in the fourteenth century, and though Edward's troops might have clamoured for their pay, the enormous amount of spoil must have appeased them somewhat. In the event, they fought superbly at Crécy even without the money from England.

We can conclude then, that either Edward did not intend to converge with the seaborne force before fighting the French, or, if he did, this plan failed miserably, for the fleet was more than 10 days late to the planned rendezvous.

The Anglo-Flemish Army

That Edward had in mind a convergence with the Flemings is maintained by both modern and medieval historians. Gilles li Muisit says that after crossing the Seine, Edward harried north 'intendentes venire cum Flamingis', while the French made equal haste 'ad preveniendum et obviandum regi Anglie fugienti ut veniret cum Flamingis sedentibus ante Bethuniam'.⁴⁵ Villani likewise asserts that Philip tried to intercept Edward 'innanzi che s'accozzasse co' Fiamminghi suoi ribelli'.⁴⁶ Burne holds that Edward planned from the beginning of the campaign to unite with the Flemings before giving battle to the French, while Sumpston goes a step further and claims that Edward had even 'remained

⁴³ Bel, *Chronique*, 2.92–5; *Chronique Normande*, p. 79; Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 159; *Grandes chroniques*, 9.280–1; *Chronographia*, 2.228–9; Barber, *Life and Campaigns*, pp. 19, 22; Villani, *Cronica*, p. 162.

⁴⁴ Bel, *Chronique*, 2.96; *Chronicon monasterii de Melsa*, 3.57.

⁴⁵ Muisit, *Chronique*, pp. 158–9.

⁴⁶ Villani, *Cronica*, pp. 161–2.

in fairly regular contact with Hugh Hastings by runners ever since he had landed in Normandy'.⁴⁷

The more radical claim that Edward planned to unite with Hastings ever since he landed at La Hogue seems very dubious. First, if that was Edward's intention all along, why didn't he land his army in Flanders, unite there with the Flemish levies, and invade France from the north? It might be claimed that by marching through France Edward hoped to inflict such a severe blow on Philip's prestige that the latter would not be able to refuse him battle yet again. However, from about 15 August onwards Philip was eager for battle, and it was Edward who shunned it. Edward could have had his battle under the walls of Paris, but once he drew the French south of the Seine by a ruse, he scuttled across the river and fled northward as fast as he could. Only after crossing the Somme and establishing a line of retreat to Flanders was he willing to engage in battle. If Edward considered a secure line of retreat a necessary precondition for accepting battle, it would have been much more logical to provoke Philip to battle by invading from Flanders and devastating France's northern provinces. The idea that Edward thought that only the devastation of the Île-de-France and the vicinity of Paris would provoke Philip to battle is groundless, for his passage near Paris was clearly unintentional – Edward had tried to cross the Seine already near Rouen, and was forced to march eastwards only because the French broke or heavily guarded all available bridges.⁴⁸

What then was Edward's initial plan? It was to conduct a limited campaign in Normandy, meant most probably, as Sumption suggests, to establish an English bridgehead there.⁴⁹ The idea of marching to Flanders was adopted only at Caen, as attested by several pieces of evidence. First, during the march to Caen Edward's army moved considerably slower than during the march from Caen to Poissy and from Poissy to Crécy. Moreover, during the march to Caen Edward attacked several fortified castles and towns, most notably Caen, where he even left a force of up to 1500 men to besiege the castle and guard the city.⁵⁰ In contrast, after leaving Caen he tended to refrain from assaulting fortified positions, in order to save time, ammunition and lives.⁵¹ If Edward's intention all along was to march to Flanders there

⁴⁷ Burne, *Creçy War*, p. 149; Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, p. 524.

⁴⁸ Furthermore, even if we accept the above hypothesis, it still does not explain why Edward landed in the Cotentin. If he planned to provoke Philip to battle by devastating the environs of Paris, and then retreat towards Flanders and accept battle only north of the Somme, it would have been much more sensible to anticipate his great-grandson and land north of the Seine.

⁴⁹ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, pp. 532–4.

⁵⁰ *Chronique Normande*, 77; *Chronographia*, 2.225–6; Barber, *Life and Campaigns*, p. 34; *Chronique de Richard Lescot*, p. 72 n.1. It may well be asked why Edward left such a force in Caen after resolving to march towards Flanders. The best explanation I can offer is that he thought that this force would be able to hold Caen as an English bridgehead in Normandy until help could be sent over.

⁵¹ See e.g. Luce, *Chroniques*, 5.148, 152; Barber, *Life and Campaigns*, p. 39.

is no reason for this marked change of pace and policy at Caen. Contrariwise, if he wanted to reach Flanders without being caught *en route* by the French, he should have made all possible haste to cross the Seine before the French could gather their forces and guard the river-line.

Secondly, it seems that Edward enjoyed the support of a section among the Norman nobility and populace.⁵² These men, like their Breton counterparts, would have had reason to join Edward's cause only if he intended to occupy Normandy permanently.⁵³ That the Norman populace believed that Edward was there to stay is also evidenced by the action of the townsmen of Bayeux, who after the fall of Caen voluntarily offered to surrender their town to Edward without even being summoned to. If they thought Edward was conducting a mere *chevauchée* and would soon continue on his way, there was no reason to make such an offer, especially in view of the French crown's probable reprisals. It should be remarked that Edward refused their offer, saying he would not be able to protect them, which indicates that by that date he already resolved to abandon Normandy and march towards Flanders.⁵⁴ We can conclude then that the plan to march towards Flanders was adopted only at Caen, about 28 or 29 July.⁵⁵

Hence, initially Hastings's invasion was not meant to converge with Edward's. If Edward decided to march towards Flanders only about 28/9 July, information to this effect could not have reached Hastings by 1 or 2 August, when his invasion began. That still leaves open the possibility that, though Hastings' invasion was initially meant to be just a diversionary attack, Edward sent Hastings a message from Caen ordering him to try and link up with the main army. Edward certainly would have welcomed the addition of these several thousand men before engaging the French in battle. However, it is much more difficult to ascertain whether he made any binding plans to ensure that such a juncture would take place, and whether he regarded it as essential for his campaign's success.

On 24 August, when Hastings's army raised the siege of Bethune, Edward crossed the Somme at Blanchetaque and proceeded to the forest of Crécy. The aerial distance between Blanchetaque and Bethune is 80 km, and the actual marching distance (calculated

⁵² Most famous was Godfrey de Harcourt, but there were others: Villani, *Cronica*, p. 157; Archives Nationales (Paris), Série JJ, 76/393. In Valognes and Carentan Edward even installed Norman garrisons loyal to him: *Chronique Normande*, p. 75; *Grandes chroniques*, 9.271, 290–2; *Chronographia*, 2.223; *Chronique de Richard Lescot*, p. 71.

⁵³ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, pp. 533–4.

⁵⁴ Avesbury, *Gestis*, pp. 360, 362; Barber, *Life and Campaigns*, p. 34.

⁵⁵ According to a speech Froissart puts into Godfrey de Harcourt's mouth, not only the march to Flanders, but even the siege of Calais, were resolved upon before the taking of Caen: Luce, *Chroniques*, 5.145. However, this is clearly a remark made with the help of hindsight. It may even be argued that Edward's first objective after leaving Caen was to bring Philip to battle before the latter gathered all his forces, an objective which was discarded somewhere between Caen and Poissy due to the success of the French mobilization.

according to modern roads) is about 90–100 km. Since no French field force separated the two armies (Philip did not cross the Somme till the morning of 26 August), if Edward and Hastings had each marched 50 km, which could easily have been done in two days, they would have joined hands by the evening of 26 August, when the battle of Crécy took place. Yet on 25 August Edward camped motionless in the forest of Crécy, preparing for battle, while the Flemings were retreating northwards. How can we account for the fact that when the decisive battle was imminent, the two allied armies, separated by no enemy force and by a mere 80 km, instead of straining every nerve to join their forces, actually allowed the distance between them to grow?

The most reasonable explanation is that they were simply ignorant of each other's whereabouts. Sumption's assertion that Edward and Hastings were in regular contact is based on a single document, which offers hardly any support for this sweeping claim. For it mentions only two occasions in which letters were passed between the king in Normandy and Hastings, and there is no indication that it was done by means of runners. Rather, the letters probably travelled by sea via England.⁵⁶ If Edward and Hastings stood in some kind of communication, or if they knew of each other's position from some other source, it is hard to explain why Edward offered battle to the superior French army when he knew that Hastings was so close to him. If Edward knowingly chose not to wait for the Flemings, the English chroniclers would not have missed such an opportunity to praise his courage. Likewise, if, as some sources hint, the Flemings did not join Edward because they believed he would be defeated, some English complaints of Flemish treachery should have reached us.⁵⁷ But there are simply no allusions to the Flemings in the English accounts of the battle. Furthermore, even if the Flemings did betray Edward, that does not explain why Hastings's English troops failed to come to their king's assistance.

We must conclude, then, that it is fairly likely that Edward intended to link up with Hastings, but failed to effect such a juncture due merely to communication problems. When Edward left Caen, a plan to unite with a force descending from Flanders might have seem quite impracticable, for a couple of hundred kilometres, two major rivers and the gathering French forces separated the armies. Ironically, Edward managed to overcome all these obstacles, so that by 24 August nothing divided him from Hastings apart from 80 km of open and defenceless ground; and yet the juncture failed, because the communication problems disclosed themselves as a more severe obstacle than the Seine, the Somme or the French army.

⁵⁶ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, p. 524; Public Record Office, Exchequer, E.372/191, m. 49, Gendelingburgh.

⁵⁷ *Chronique Normande*, p. 82; *Chronographia*, 2.231; Bel, *Chronique*, 2.135; Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 159.

Thus we see that difficulties of communication and coordination wrecked the two attempts Edward made to unite with other friendly forces during his 1346 campaign. Indeed, the alleged link-up with the seaborne force failed so completely that it is doubtful whether Edward envisaged such a link-up at all. It is also evident that even if Edward planned to unite with Hastings and the seaborne force, he had no high expectations of this plan. The fact that he willingly engaged Philip at Crécy, although he joined hands with neither force and although the road to Flanders lay open to him, indicates that he did not regard these junctures as a *sine qua non* for offering battle to the French. Hence the 1346 campaign well illustrates the fact that communication difficulties would have wrecked most attempts to coordinate the actions of far-flung armies during the fourteenth century, and that consequently commanders usually did not rely on plans of inter-frontal cooperation requiring inter-frontal coordination.

However, if plans of convergence played little positive role in the 1346 campaign, the more general plans of cooperation proved themselves to be singularly successful.

General Plans of Cooperation

Due to the communication problems, any initial plan that committed commanders to too specific aims, such as convergence with another force, was quite unrealistic. For, since it was impossible to modify fast enough the overall plan in the middle of a campaign, in case of a collision between the plan's rigid demands and the rapidly changing military situation, most commanders would have abandoned the plan. The only way plans of inter-frontal cooperation could be accomplished successfully despite the communication problems was to set the commanders only very general aims, thus giving them extensive latitude *within* the confines of the plan to change their immediate goals as they saw fit. Accordingly, most plans of inter-frontal cooperation took two forms: either the secondary forces were required to engage the enemy and draw him towards them before the main blow fell on a now exposed front, or all forces were required to engage the enemy simultaneously, and thereby relieve some of the pressure on the other forces. Operations on one front relieved pressure on other fronts by forcing the enemy to employ there funds and troops, at least some of which could otherwise have been employed elsewhere.⁵⁸

Despite their very loose and unbinding character, such general plans of cooperation could be quite effective, as Edward III's 1346 campaign clearly demonstrates. Though Hastings's army failed to unite with Edward, it nevertheless contributed to the success of the latter's

⁵⁸ Large sections of many fourteenth-century armies were made up of local levies, who would have been reluctant to serve on another front. However, in almost all armies a considerable part of the troops, often the best and most professional, could have been transferred from one front to another.

invasion by forcing the French to leave a considerable number of troops on their northern border. An even larger force was tied down in Brittany by Thomas Dagworth, whose army included no more than a few hundred English soldiers, besides Bretons. Thus two English contingents totalling perhaps fewer than a thousand men, by serving as a necessary incentive and nucleus to England's Flemish and Breton allies, deprived Philip VI of many thousands of soldiers as well as large sums of money, which otherwise could have been employed against Edward's own army.

The achievement of Lancaster's army was even more remarkable, and one cannot stress too strongly its contribution to the success of the 1346 campaign. It is a little known fact that the original field army that the French raised for the 1346 campaign never confronted Edward. That army spent the critical months of April to August 1346 before the walls of Aiguillon, and was not present to oppose Edward's invasion. By tying down this army in Gascony, Lancaster ensured that for the first 20 days or so Edward was able to overrun Normandy without meeting any serious resistance, and that even subsequently he was opposed only by a hastily raised and ill-organized host which lacked many of the more experienced French commanders and troops.⁵⁹ In their turn, the English successes in the north eventually caused the recall of Duke Jean's army, which enabled Lancaster to invade France as far as Poitiers. The skilful cooperation of Edward's and Lancaster's armies, separated as they were by hundreds of kilometres, thus paralysed Duke Jean's army. It was tied down in the south when the main blow fell in the north, and when it subsequently marched north – much too late – this merely exposed the southern border to a second blow.

To what extent was this outstanding success of inter-frontal cooperation the intentional result of strategic vision? Characteristically, the garrison of Aiguillon, which contributed to Edward's success more than any other English contingent, did not learn of the invasion of Normandy till after the siege was raised. Hence this contingent could hardly have known what were the effects of its heroic resistance on the strategic situation.⁶⁰ In general, however, the successful cooperation of

⁵⁹ Though Philip's army at Crécy was bigger than Duke Jean's army, its quality was worse. Since initially the duke's army was meant to bear the brunt of the fighting in 1346, picked troops from all over France went to join it, and consequently much of Philip's army was made of local levies and troops of secondary quality. Furthermore, the duke's army had been raised in an orderly fashion, and by August had already been fighting together for several months, and was therefore relatively cohesive and well organized. In contrast, most of the French troops which fought at Crécy joined Philip's army just two or three weeks earlier, and as that army hardly had a moment's respite during August, Philip was never given the opportunity to forge an effective fighting force from these troops. The incohesive state of Philip's army at Crécy can be surmised from the fact that on 27 August the English surprised several formations belonging to Philip's army, which had no idea that that army's main body had been defeated the previous night.

⁶⁰ Bel, *Chronique*, 2.117–8.

the English invasion armies was intentional and not accidental. Edward's choice to land in Normandy rather than Gascony was made deliberately in order to take advantage of the favourable situation created by Duke Jean's embroilment in Gascony. Edward knew that Normandy would be defenceless, because 'toute la fleur de le chevalerie, qui y poet estre, gist maintenant devant Aguillon aveoch le duch'.⁶¹ Hastings and Lancaster too acted with the grand-strategic situation in view, and did not limit their vision to their own front alone. As was explained above, the former began his invasion of Artois only after he heard of the landing at La Hogue, while Lancaster, despite his difficult local situation, flatly turned down a truce offered him by Duke Jean, reporting to Edward that once he was informed of the latter's landing in Normandy he was not willing to assent to any truce.⁶²

To conclude, while plans of convergence played little positive role in Edward's 1346 campaign, the more general plans of cooperation were indispensable for this campaign's success. Though Edward's four armies in France operated with a minimal level of communication and coordination between them, still the actions of each army greatly facilitated those of the other three. At the beginning of the campaign Edward suffered not only from an overall numerical inferiority but also from the fact that, while he could not concentrate most of his troops at any one front, the French could. However, by a skilful use of inter-frontal cooperation Edward succeeded with a minimal investment of force to draw much larger sections of the French armed forces away from the decisive point, thereby creating auspicious conditions for his main invasion, while the success of this invasion in its turn relieved the French pressure on the other fronts.

Conclusions

Due to communication difficulties, the ability of fourteenth-century armies operating on different fronts to coordinate their actions was very limited, and it was impossible for a commander to direct the actions of distant forces by remote control. This meant that plans calling for the convergence of forces coming from different fronts, as well as all other plans setting commanders on different fronts too specific aims, were usually doomed to failure. Cooperative plans were workable only when they set the different commanders no more than very general aims. Often, when several forces simultaneously fought a common enemy, they cooperated solely in the sense that some of the forces drew unto themselves part of the enemy's forces, thereby preventing him from concentrating his entire military might against the main

⁶¹ Luce, *Chroniques*, 5.131.

⁶² Flemings: *Chronique Normande*, p. 76; Muisit, *Chronique*, p. 153 n.1; *Chronographia*, 2.225. Lancaster: Avesbury, *Gestis*, pp. 372–3 ('puis qe nous savons qe monseigneur le roy estoit arive en Normandie, nous ne vodrons mie assentir a nulle trieve').

effort. In such a case the commanders of the subsidiary efforts were committed by the common plan to only one very general purpose – to draw onto themselves part of the enemy's army. The commander of the main effort had even greater freedom of action, and was committed by the common plan to practically nothing.

Thus in 1346, if we disregard the alleged plans of convergence, all that was expected of the commanders in Flanders, Brittany and Gascony was to tie down to their front as big a portion of the French armed forces as possible, while the choice of their actual course of action was left to them alone. For instance, Hastings's choice to besiege Bethune was not dictated by the overall plan, and he might just as well have besieged St. Omer, or conducted a destructive raid deep into France. Edward, on his side, was even less restricted by the plan. Instead of marching towards Flanders, he might have chosen to establish an English bridgehead in Normandy; to accept battle near Paris; to march south to Brittany or even to Gascony; or to conduct a wild *chevauchée*. His reliance on inter-frontal cooperation, vital as it was to his success, could hardly have dissuaded him from adopting any one of these alternative courses of action. Yet the looseness of such plans of cooperation does not mean that they were ineffective or unimportant. As the 1346 campaign clearly demonstrates, such plans could have been highly effective, and of crucial importance to the success of invasion campaigns.

We can conclude, then, that in the fourteenth century military operations on different fronts could have been conducted as part of an overall plan, and that cooperation between fronts could have made an important and even vital contribution to a campaign's success. However, in contrast to inter-frontal cooperation, inter-frontal coordination was normally out of the question. Hence, important as the inter-frontal strategic cooperation might be, it had only a small effect on the operative level. Though local commanders could well have been aware of the fact that they were playing only a part in some overall plan, how each of them conducted operations on his front was affected to only a small degree either by this plan or by operations on other fronts.

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