

THE BATTLE OF THE PELENNOR FIELDS AN IMPOSSIBLE VICTORY?



he moment of greatest peril is the moment of victory" [Napoleon Bonaparte].

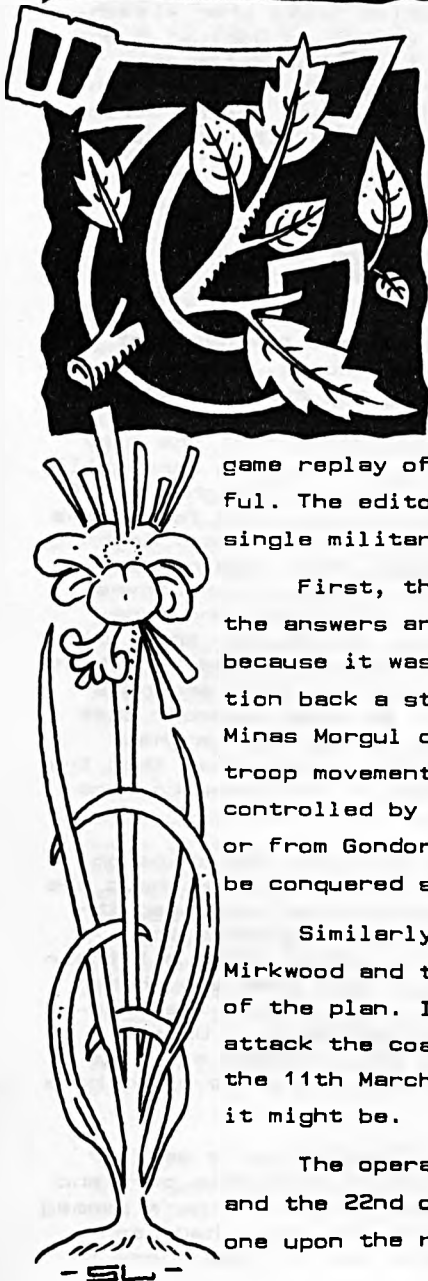
Bonaparte is also reputed to have asked of a candidate for promotion, after hearing a long list of his martial qualities, "Is he lucky?". In the Battle of the Pelennor Fields the truth of both these quotes is shown. The hosts of Mordor came close to winning at least twice. Instead they lost.

At the end of the letter column in Amon Hen 51 there is a mention of a letter from Perry Johnson, reporting on a war-game replay of the battle. In this replay the hosts of Mordor were successful. The editor, Jenny Smith, goes on to comment, "There doesn't seem to be a single military explanation for the Victory of the West!"

First, the question must be asked, "Why fight for Minas Tirith?" Some of the answers are given within The Lord of the Rings. It was partly defended because it was the capital of Gondor, but that answer merely shifts the question back a stage. Minas Tirith controls the western bank of the Anduin; Minas Morgul controls the eastern side. Neither side can do more than harass troop movements through the Vale of Anduin. With, as Sauron planned, Isengard controlled by Saruman, the Vale of Anduin was the only way to move troops to or from Gondor. So if Sauron controlled Minas Tirith, Gondor and Rohan could be conquered separately.

Similarly, if Lorien had fallen the dwarves, elves and men living about Mirkwood and the Iron Hills would be isolated. This seems to have been part of the plan. It was an obvious, and effective, move to have the Corsairs attack the coast of Gondor: in that context the invasion of eastern Rohan on the 11th March is equally obvious. However, the plan is not as well-laid as it might be.

The operations mounted from Dol Guldur were wasteful. Between the 11th and the 22nd of March three attacks are made upon Lorien, one upon Rohan and one upon the realm of Thranduil: none succeed. The Ents destroy the invaders



of Rohan; Thranduil is victorious in the battle under the trees in Mirkwood; in Lorien there was Galadriel. It is said that only Sauron could have overcome the power of Galadriel and her ring. It is rather rash to suggest a better plan, but ignoring the magical leaves only the conclusion that the Orcs of Dol Guldur were too scattered to be effective. Warfare in woods and forests is, like crossing a broad river, difficult even with the weapons and bridging equipment of a modern army.

Meanwhile, at Minas Tirith, the war starts on the 10th March, when an army from the Morannon takes Cair Andros and marches into Anorien while the Morgul-host marches forth. Already it is the second day of Aragorn's journey from Erech. There is a slight pause as the Morgul-host prepares to cross the Anduin but on the 13th the Pelennor is overrun and the siege proper begins. On that same day the Corsairs are destroyed and their ships taken. By this time the abortive invasion of eastern Rohan has failed as has the first assault upon Lorien.

If Theoden had not been guided by the Wild Men, the Rohirrim would have been engaged by the army that had marched into Anorien upon the 14th. Aragorn, despite defeating the Corsairs, would have been too late. Almost nothing of importance happens on the 14th. Aragorn and Theoden are travelling; the siege lines are prepared. It is the calm before the storm. (I know Frodo and Samwise are busy escaping from Cirith Ungol, but none of their actions affect the conduct of the battle, though Sauron no doubt hoped to force the Captains of the West into using the One Ring.) The next day is the day of the battle.

First the Gates of the City are broken. The Rohirrim are lucky and are unchallenged until they are close to the attacking army and about to charge. Their attack is eventually halted and they are about to be wiped out when Aragorn arrives, greatly surprising the Morgul-hosts who expected the Corsairs. There are more details and events recorded. Some are significant to the battle; some are not.

The deaths of Theoden and the Witch King (with the apparent death of Eowyn) are significant. There is a close comparison between the death of Theoden and the death of the Swedish king, Gustavus II Adolphus, at the battle of Lutzen (16th November 1632). In both cases there was a desire for vengeance. That of the Rohirrim seems almost suicidal, almost as though there was a feeling of guilt at not standing by Theoden and dying to protect their lord. That Eowyn apparently did die in defending Theoden

would have heightened this feeling: Wom-en's Lib was not a feature of Middle-earth.

The death of the Witch King, as would the death of any commander, did not do the Morgul-hosts any good. His ability to terrify the enemy was gone (which would hearten the men of Gondor and of Rohan) as was the driving will which pushed on his own troops. There is also a great advantage in a commander who can move rapidly in battle: before a battle could only be as large as one man could see if it were to be manageable. All this was lost. If anyone doubts the effect of the death, or flight, of the commander of an army they should read of the Battle of Arbela, where Alexander the Great was almost defeated by the overwhelmingly superior army of Darius, which broke when Alexander's last ditch attack on Darius' Guard caused Darius to flee. The difference is that the Morgul-hosts did not flee when the Witch King died. Also, the Haradrim flee when their chief is slain and the standard falls.



So it is clear that the hosts of Mordor had suffered shocks. Commanders had died, including one supposed to be immortal. The Rohirrim had fallen upon their rear and the garrison of the city had marched forth. But numbers were still on their side. The mumakil frightened off the horses of the Rohirrim and formed the centres of patches of resistance. Gothmog, lieutenant of Morgul, had regained control of the army and thrown in reserves. The Rohirrim were surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered. It was, by then, mid-morning: they had been fighting for about three hours, sunrise being at around a quarter past six. We must remember that they were used to armour and yet had ridden far and fast. It was then that the ships of the ships of the Corsairs were sighted.

Aragorn had captured the ships on the day that the siege began. Without the army of the dead he would have been incredibly lucky to have defeated the Corsairs on land and then taken all their ships. There would have been enough men on the galleys to have worked them further offshore and returned to Umbar. There might have been trouble with the slaves but even then the ships might have been fired.

Imagine the feelings of a soldier seeing friendly ships come into port and disembark an enemy army when there seemed to be no sign that the ships had been fought over and no way for the enemy to

get near them. How was it done, and would they do the same again?

"But the hosts of Mordor were seized with bewilderment, and a great wizardry it seemed to them that their own ships should be filled with their foes; and a black dread fell on them, knowing that the tides of fate had turned against them and their doom was at hand" [LotR III.5.VI].

Indeed, for all they knew there was still a kingdom of Arnor, as powerful as Gondor, and here was its king: and if the king was there his army would be with him. The men of Gondor knew a little more, no doubt, and expected less.

It is at that point that the battle was decided. Once the hosts of Mordor lost they could be ridden down almost at will by the cavalry. Always in war an army that has fled has suffered heavy casualties, often more in the pursuit than in the battle. Always organised infantry, armed with spears, pikes, or bayonets and muskets, have been able to defend themselves against cavalry. The key is organisation. It collapsed.

That deals with the psychological side of the battle. There are also suggestions of a difference in equipment. Armour has almost always been an advantage in warfare. For a period of about a hundred years on either side of the career of Napoleon it was little used. Heavy cavalry wore some armour since they often engaged other cavalry using swords. In some armies sappers and engineers wore armour. These were the only significant exceptions. Then, in 1914, war broke out in Europe and the firepower of magazine rifles drove both sides into trenches. The French cuirassiers still wore their traditional helmets and discovered that they saved lives. Since then personal armour has returned.

Before firearms armour was widely used, from padded jackets to shaped plates of metal. In Europe the weapons that developed were heavy; the swords were intended to crush and smash as much as cut. It didn't much matter if armour was worn or not. In the Crusades the Saracens wore far less armour than the Crusaders. Their weapons were not designed to harm an armoured man. The story of Richard the Lionheart's meeting with Saladin illustrates the difference in weapons. The scimitar cuts through silk while Richard's sword can hardly harm it but splits a shield (or in some versions, an anvil).

It is significant that the Haradrim are described as coming from a hot southern land and carry scimitars. The descrip-

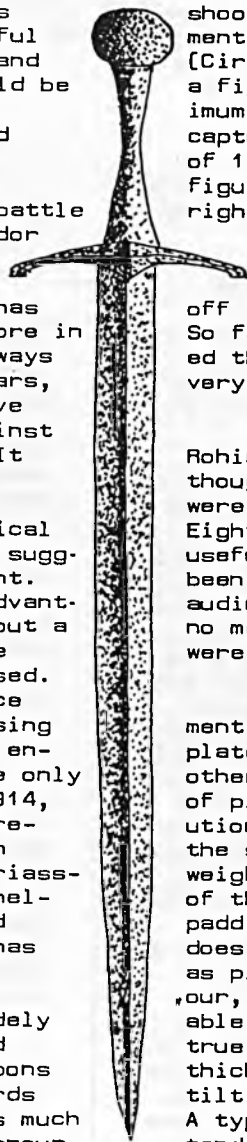
tions of the Crusades, of both sides, agree that the crusading knights were unstoppable when they charged, though often the Saracens didn't try to stop them. The Haradrim could be similar to the Saracens.

The available descriptions of the Rohirrim are more detailed. At first sight they appear similar to the Norman knights who conquered England. However, some also carry bows and are skilled at shooting from a running horse. From a mention of numbers in Unfinished Tales (Cirion and Eorl, ii: The Ride of Eorl) a figure of one in seven seems the maximum. Eomer pursued the Orcs which had captured Merry and Pippin with an Eored of 120 men. No numbers are given but a figure of around 15 archers seems about right from the descriptions of the pursuit and battle. There are not enough to seriously affect the skirmish. Some stragglers are picked off and some of the Orcs waste arrows. So far as Merry and Pippin are concerned the arrow that wounded Grishnakh was very welcome.

It is not known if there were any Rohirrim with bows at the Pelennor, though there is no evidence that they were any less well prepared for a melees. Eight hundred archers would have been useful at times. They would also have been useful in defending Rohan from marauding Orcs. Whichever was done there is no mention of them. Even if the bows were brought, they might not be used.

There are other clues to the equipment used. Prince Imrahil wore some plate armour and it is likely that others would follow suit. The advantage of plate armour is the weight distribution: chainmail is not only heavier for the same protection but puts all the weight on the wearer's shoulders. Some of the extra weight is in the form of padding since chainmail is flexible and does not spread the impact quite as well as plate. While on the subject of armour, the image of the knight being unable to stand up unaided is false. It is true that some plate armour was very thick and heavy. It was intended for tilting - for sport rather than for war. A typical suit of full plate armour intended for war weighed about ninety pounds - the sort of load a modern infantryman might carry - and the user would have been trained for it for most of his life.

In other parts of the world the weapons and armour used were quite different. Lamellar armour was as flexible as chainmail but didn't trap the point of an arrow. The swords of Japan are remarkable weapons: were some of the legends of magic swords inspired by traveller's tales of such blades? Tolkien as a scholar studied Europe, and especially



the north of Europe. That is the region we must look at first; there seems no need to look to the mysterious Orient.

Orcs are more shadowy figures. The descriptions concentrate more on their physical appearance rather than their equipment. Some wore ring-mail, and weapons were varied. It isn't clear what an 'orc-scimitar' was. It may merely have been a sabre. What is very clear is that they were, on the whole, nearer in size to halflings than to men. Sam and Frodo would never have considered disguising themselves in orc-gear if the average Orc was more man-like. The size is a disadvantage in battle, and partly explains the Battle of Greenfields. It would also explain why no mention is ever made of the Shire rabbits being unusually large.

Others have suggested that the Variags of Khand were similar to the Varangian Guard of the Byzantine Empire. Any guesses based on similarities in names and nothing more are no more than that. The Easterlings bore axes. Of the others even less is known.

To sum up, the Captains of the West were lucky - what if Aragorn were late - and repeatedly surprised, in the military sense, the enemy. There is evidence that they were better armed and armoured. Quite apart from descriptions the simple fact that, of six thousand Rohirrim, four thousand survived the battle able to fight despite the high numerical odds suggests they had better protection. Also, Men are usually bigger, stronger and heavier than Orcs. All of this would work against the numerical superiority the hosts of Mordor had. The Orcs had been raiding Rohan and Gondor for several years. It is quite possible that only a few of the Orcs at the Pelennor had actual combat experience, though it was less than a year since Osgiliath was taken. The men of Rohan and Gondor could have gained more from the raiding.

There is one other difference between the two armies that would have an effect on their fighting qualities. The Orcs were driven to battle. The armies of the West were led. Throughout military history well-led armies have prevailed, from Arbela to Port Stanley.



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(CHRISTIANITY & KINGSHIP, continued from p.7)

in Middle-earth: to obey the king is to accept his authority. However, obedience is not forced upon the peoples of Middle-earth and Narnia, except by tyrants. Kings are obeyed because of the love their subjects bear them.

So far I have only discussed the positive aspect of kingship, and have only given examples of where the king has fulfilled his role. However, in both Middle-earth and Narnia it is also possible to witness the betrayal of the ideals of kingship. Edmund's description of a tyrant sums up most of the qualities of despotism: "Proud, bloody, luxurious, cruel and self-pleasing". The White Witch, Sauron and Saruman betray the ideals of kingship. They wish to dominate in their worlds, not to guide them. In The Silmarillion, Melkor desires "to subdue to his will both Elves and Men ... he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called master, and to be a master over other wills". A refusal to accept the responsibilities of kingship indicates that he is unworthy to rule. Edmund views the crown as a means by which he can gratify all his desires: "that get him off thinking about being a king and all the other things he would do" [LWW ch.9]. Another symptom of the abuse of power is the rejection of justice: "The world will be ruled by tyrants who care no more for joy and justice and mercy" [The Magician's Nephew].

Thus can one see how some of the Christian ideologies of both Tolkien and Lewis are reflected in their fictional works, particularly in the theme of kingship.

