

History of the Crusades.
Episode 62
The Third Crusade X.

Hello again, and welcome back to the History of the Crusades. In the final episode of last year, we saw King Richard eager to wrap up any loose ends in Acre so he could move on and take the rest of the Kingdom of Jerusalem back from Saladin. As part of this desire to conclude things quickly, King Richard ordered 2,700 soldiers of the Muslim garrison to be killed when Saladin stalled when carrying out the terms of the surrender of Acre. In the meanwhile, King Philip has had enough of the Crusading caper and is headed back to France. Right. Are we all up to speed? Good. Let's continue.

King Richard is now the undisputed leader of the Crusade, and he knows that he won't win back the Holy Land by staying in Acre, so straight after the massacre of the Islamic prisoners he makes preparations to march south to Jaffa. From Jaffa he can either march inland to Jerusalem or continue down the coast to Ascalon. Trouble is, the Latin Christian army really don't want to leave Acre. After the hardships of the siege, they are having a brilliant time in the city. They are living in houses instead of tents. Food is plentiful. The wine is flowing, there are games of dice to while away the hours, and there are women, lots of women. One crusader summed up his impression of Acre by stating that it was, and I quote "delightful, with good wines and girls, some very beautiful" end of quote.

So the first real test of Richard's abilities as sole leader of the Crusade is whether he is able to convince the Crusaders to leave the comforts of Acre and resume their dangerous mission to win back the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Does he attempt to cajole and appease the soldiers by telling them that the women can accompany them in the journey south? No, he doesn't. In fact, he does the opposite. Fearing that the women have become too much of a distraction for the Crusaders, he bans all women from traveling with a Crusading army. All women, that is, except the elderly washerwomen. With a mixture of bribery, prayer, and above all, force, Richard was able to convince most of the combatants to leave Acre and continue their Crusade.

So, on the 25th of August 1191, five days after the massacre of the Muslim garrison at Acre, bonfires were lit at dawn, and heralds sounded out across the city of Acre. The Crusaders were on the move. The Latin Christian combatants who could be convinced to journey south numbered between 10,000 and 15,000 men, and Richard was faced with the challenge of taking them out of the relative safety of Acre and marching them down the coast. He knew that this was going to be no easy feat. It was the height of summer. It was hot. And the marching army would be vulnerable to attacks from the Muslim forces. It was more than sixty miles to Jaffa, along the coast road that entailed eight river crossings. It was crucial that Richard get as many men and supplies as possible safely to Jaffa.

Now, keep in mind that Richard at this stage has no real experience controlling or leading an army of this size. In fact, he's pretty new to the whole kingship role as well. With his reputation being primarily that of a flashy showman, this was Richard's first real opportunity to reveal whether he possessed any talent for military strategy and for leading a major military campaign. How did he do? Well, actually he did really well. Military historians have heaped praise on Richard's tactics during this part of the campaign, and Thomas Asbridge, in his book "The Crusades", states that in many ways the advance from Acre was Richard's finest hour as a military commander.

What did he do that was so praiseworthy? Well, firstly, he kept his men marching in tight formation, under a strong hand of discipline and control. He divided the army into a number of divisions. The Templars led in the vanguard, followed by King Guy with his followers from the Kingdom of Jerusalem and those from his home region in France, Poitou. King Richard led the division of Anglo-Normans, and the French followed behind, led by Hugh of Burgundy and Henri of Champagne. The rearguard, which was going to bear the brunt of the Muslim attacks, was given to the Hospitallers. The baggage trains marched on the seaward side of the army as protection from Muslim attacks, and two columns of archers marched alongside the army, one on the seaward side to protect the baggage train, and one on the landward side to defend against attacks by Saladin's forces.

In the middle of the army was placed the great battle flag of the Crusade. Since the recovery of the True Cross had to be abandoned after negotiations broke down following the massacre of the Muslim garrison, this was to be the Crusaders' rallying point. It was mounted on a massive cart on top of a tall mast, so it could be seen for miles. Four magnificent horses were given the task of pulling the cart, and it rolled along in the center of the marching army, for all to see.

Secondly, Richard had to decide how to supply the army on its march, and he came up with an ingenious solution. Each combatant would carry ten days' worth of rations with him, comprising biscuits, flour, wine, and meat, while the rest of the supplies would be loaded on ships which would shadow the Crusaders as they marched down the coast. As Saladin had lost the bulk of his navy with the surrender of Acre, Richard knew that the ships would be relatively safe from attack. Their main problem would be that they were heading against the prevailing winds, meaning that they would have to tack their way down the coast against strong headwinds. The biggest ships would rendezvous with the army at the major ports they would encounter during their march (Haifa, Caesarea and Jaffa) while the less well-stocked but lighter vessels would sail into shore as needed. The smaller ships were also to be used to collect any wounded or sick Crusaders. To ensure that this plan would work, the Crusaders had to make certain that no Muslims could get between themselves and the sea. This meant that while they were marching along the old Roman coastal road, their right flank would be very close to the sea. Indeed, practically wading in the water was how one chronicler put it.

Right, so much for the meticulous planning. How did Richard's march proceed? Well, the army, set out in late August, crossed the river of Acre and made its way over the plain through the sand dunes towards Haifa. As it approached the hills of the Carmel Range, Saladin sent his men forward to harass the marching Latin Christians. The Muslims attacked the army using their much-used favored tactics of racing up to the lines, letting fly some arrows, and then retreating before the soldiers could respond. One Latin Christian chronicler described the Muslim attackers as being like venomous flies, which buzzed in, stung, and then flew away, before repeating the attack again. As the Latin Christian army marched in its line, hugging the coast, the Muslims formed a parallel line inland, which enabled them to attack almost ceaselessly.

The Muslims didn't seem to be short of arrows. Arrows were flying everywhere. Most of the heavily-armored knights were impervious to the arrows. Even if the tip of the arrow made its way through the chain mail of their armor, it would be deflected by the heavy leather jerkin that was worn under the mail. The horses, however, weren't so lucky, and many fell victim to the ceaseless attacks. The loss of the horses slowed the army down, as the men

who rode now found themselves walking, and others found themselves carrying extra baggage which would have been carried by pack horses which had been killed.

The constant attacks by the Muslim archers made for some comical sights. Occasionally a fully armored knight would be struck so often that he resembled a pin-cushion, with up to ten arrows protruding from his armor at any one time. Arrows were everywhere. When they weren't flying through the air, or sticking out of a knight's armor, they lay on the ground so thickly in some spots that you could gather arm-fuls of them.

While the attacks by the Muslim archers caused few direct Latin Christian deaths, it caused quite a significant amount of indirect ones. The constant attacks meant that the Latin Christians had to travel wearing their full armor. That's full metal armor, marching in the sun, at the height of the Middle Eastern summer. This of course meant that they became hot, very hot. Many knights suffered heat exhaustion and sunstroke, and while some were evacuated to the ships which were following the army down the coast, many more died.

As a concession to the heat, Richard took the march very slowly. He ordered his men to march only in the morning and to rest in the hot sun of the afternoon. He also made liberal use of rest days, letting the soldiers take one or sometimes two days off during the journey. The slow pace of their passage enabled the ships, which were still battling headwinds, to keep up. It also seemed to throw Saladin, who at one stage had issues with supplies. He had underestimated how long the Latin Christians would take to make their journey, and the Muslim army began to run out of food. He hastily worked to restock his baggage train, and continued shadowing the Latin Christians, firing arrows at them at every opportunity, and doing his best to slow their progress. But despite taking their time about it, the Latin Christians pressed relentlessly on, reaching Haifa and then the ruined city of Caesarea.

Saladin knew that his tactics to date were not having much of an impact on the Latin Christians. Despite some soldiers turning into walking pin-cushions due to the number of arrows embedded in their armor, more Latin Christians were dying from the heat than from Muslim attacks. Saladin decided he needed to meet Richard's army head on in a pitched battle. Taking advantage of Richard's slow progress, Saladin sent his men ahead on a reconnaissance mission to choose a place to confront the Latin Christians.

As the Latin Christians continued their march south, the landscape began to change. Desert and dunes gave way to marshes, grasslands, and forests. While this may have provided some respite from the heat, the verdant countryside also provided new challenges, mostly in the form of wild animals. Back in the Middle Ages, lions, leopards, cheetahs, panthers, and hyenas were common in parts of the Middle East, and provided the Latin Christians with an opportunity to hunt, as well as posing a risk to stragglers or those who ventured outside the camp. The marshes and grassland around the plain of Sharon and the Carmel Hills provided a habitat for crocodiles, snakes, scorpions, and tarantulas, all of which unnerved the Latin Christians. To keep the spiders and scorpions away from their tents, the Latin Christians would pray loudly for divine assistance, with the noise, and chance perhaps, encouraging the creatures to find a quieter place to spend the night.

After the Latin Christians left Caesarea and crossed the Dead River on the 3rd of September, the Crusaders were forced to turn inland, due to the hostile terrain around the

coast. Saladin took this opportunity to confront the Crusaders, personally leading three divisions of troops into an attack on the Latin Christian lines. This was the first time that King Richard and Saladin had personally faced each other on the battlefield. The Latin Christian formation held fast and repelled the Muslim attack, but Richard himself was wounded by a crossbow bolt. Luckily, his armor and jerkin absorbed most of the impact, and he was able to remain on his horse. The Latin Christians repelled the Muslim attack, and by the end of the day made their next river crossing, negotiating the River of Reeds. The Crusaders set up camp near the River of Reeds and stayed there for two days, from Tuesday the 3rd of September 1191 to Thursday the 5th of September.

It was while they were camped here that Saladin settled on a place to take the battle to the Latin Christians. It was vital that he do so. For the past fifteen days, the Crusaders had only marched 62 miles, but they were now approaching the old town of Arsuf, a small fortified town on the coast containing a minor fortress. If King Richard made it to Arsuf, Jaffa was only six miles further down the road. Saladin made his decision. He would confront Richard's army on the open plain outside Arsuf, and prevent him from occupying Arsuf itself.

Now, the Latin Christians were marching along the coast road and would approach Arsuf from the north. They would have to pass through a sandy plain before getting to the orchards which surrounded Arsuf. To the inland of the town was a ridge or crest, and beyond that stretched the forest of Arsuf, one of the few densely covered woodlands in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Saladin's plan was for his men to hide in the forest and then ambush the Latin Christians as they crossed the plain. Perhaps King Richard sensed that a confrontation was imminent, as before leaving camp on the River of Reeds, he requested peace talks with Saladin. Saladin was more than happy for these talks to occur, and sent his brother al-Adil to parlay with the Franks, telling him to string the talks out for as long as possible, which would assist Saladin to get his men set up in the forest for the ambush.

Al-Adil met King Richard at dawn on the morning of the 5th of September. Richard used Humphrey of Toron as an interpreter, and the Muslims were much taken with Humphrey's appearance. A Muslim chronicler described Humphrey as being very handsome but clean-shaven. James Reston Junior, in his book "Warriors of God", points out that it was very unusual for a man to shave his face in the Muslim world, and it was seen as a sign that the clean-shaven man was attempting to make himself look like a woman. To shave your face was seen as an aberration, something terrible that would frighten Muslim children.

Anyway, the terrifyingly clean-shaven Humphrey didn't have much to do. King Richard ordered Humphrey to open the discussions by demanding that the Muslims return the Kingdom of Jerusalem to the Franks, and withdraw back into Muslim territory. If this blunt demand was designed to outrage al-Adil, it certainly did the trick. Abandoning his orders to prolong the negotiations, al-Adil made an angry response to the proposal, broke off the negotiations, and stormed back to the Muslim camp.

As soon as the talks broke down, King Richard threw a spanner into the works of Saladin's ambush plans by ordering his men to advance towards Arsuf, not by the coast road but inland, through the forest where Saladin was hastily gathering his men to prepare the ambush. The Crusaders knew that the Muslims were planning something, and were nervous that they might set fire to the forest while they were passing through, but

fortunately for them that didn't happen. They emerged unscathed and crossed a large river, the only natural barrier between the forest and the relative safety of Arsuf. Their campsite was protected by a large swamp to the inland, but Richard knew that on their five mile march to Arsuf they would be passing through open ground, and he thought it likely that the Muslims would stage an attack once that ground was reached.

This had Richard worried. Remember that the marching Crusaders numbered around 10,000 to 15,000 combatants, including perhaps 1,000 to 2,000 mounted knights. Saladin's army was much larger, numbering around 30,000 men, most of which were horsemen. The numbers spoke for themselves. The last thing Richard wanted was a pitched battle in which his men were vastly outnumbered. He needed to form a tight defensive line, and his army had to somehow make it safely to Arsuf.

On the morning of Saturday, the 7th of September 1191, King Richard broke camp and ordered his army into a tight defensive formation. The Templars were to lead the Crusading force, with the Hospitallers bringing up the rear. Henri of Champagne, King Richard, and Hugh of Burgundy took command of the various groups of English and regional French troops. As they moved out onto the coast road and headed south, a chronicler noted that they were so tightly ordered that an apple thrown into the marching army could not have failed to strike man or beast.

The first part of the day's march took the army across soft dunes which were not ideal for staging a Muslim attack, but after a mile or so the road became firmer and a line of low hills rose on the inland side of the road. This firmer ground stretched all the way to the orchards outside the fortified town of Arsuf. Saladin waited until the Crusaders had marched a couple of miles along the firm road, then he unleashed his attack. Accompanied by the sound of trumpets and drums, the Muslim horsemen poured over the hills. Shouting "For Allah", the mixed army of Bedouin, Arab, and Turkish fighters galloped towards the Crusaders, firing arrows and attacking relentlessly.

King Richard stood his ground. His strategy was not to attack the much larger Muslim force, but to maintain discipline and keep his army moving southwards in its tight defensive formation. Messenger after messenger came to him from the different sections of the army, begging for permission to launch a counter-attack, but Richard knew that such a move could well end in disaster. So he denied permission, hunkered down and led the slow advance towards Arsuf. His strategy seemed to be working. After what must have seemed like a dreadfully long time, the vanguard of the army, led by the Templars, made it to the orchard outside Arsuf.

Just as this was happening, the Master of the Hospitallers himself, perhaps worried that his messengers just weren't being persuasive enough, approached King Richard and urged him to launch a counter attack. Richard was in the process of refusing his request when he noticed that two knights at the rear of the army, the Marshal of the Hospitallers and Baldwin of Carron, had broken ranks and were charging at full gallop towards the Muslims. King Richard could do nothing more than watch on in horror as other knights took up the charge, until the entire Hospitaller rearguard was fully engaged in battle. Within moments, Henri of Champagne, James of Avesnes and Robert Earl of Leicester had wheeled their men forward and were joining the fray. King Richard now really had no option other than to order a full on engagement of the enemy. He urged his horse to a gallop and led the remaining Crusaders into the battle.

The first wave of Christian attacks killed many Muslims, and Saladin's army started to scatter. Saladin rallied them together and launched a counter-attack, which the Latin Christians managed to repulse. King Richard, in the letter to the Abbot of Clairvaux which he penned some three weeks after the battle, described the events of the day as follows, and I quote "Our vanguard was proceeding and was already setting up camp at Arsuf when Saladin and his Saracens made a violent attack on our rear guard. But by the grace of God's favorable mercy, they were forced into flight, just by four squadrons that were facing them." End of quote.

A Latin Christian chronicler named Ambroise, whose account of the battle written some six years after the event has become quite well known, was more complimentary to his hero, Richard the Lionheart. This is his version, and I quote "King Richard pursued the Turks with singular ferocity, fell upon them and scattered them, and wherever he went his brandished sword cleared a wide path on all sides. He cut down that unspeakable race as if he were reaping the harvest with a sickle, so that the corpses of the Turks he had killed covered the ground everywhere for the space of half a mile." End quote.

Whatever exactly happened during the Battle of Arsuf, the result was undeniable. The Christian cavalry charges overwhelmed the Muslims. Despite their superior numbers, and despite Saladin's desperate attempts to rally them and make them hold their ground, the Muslim fighters scattered and fled. The first pitched battle since the Horns of Hattin was won by the Latin Christians. It was another morale-booster for King Richard and his men, and another devastating setback for Saladin.

The Latin Christian losses from the battle were small, but there was one notable casualty. The body of the respected and seasoned commander James of Avesnes was found amongst the dead on the battlefield. His body was carried to Arsuf and buried in a ceremony attended by King Richard and King Guy.

The next day, the Crusaders resumed their march south, arriving without incident in Jaffa, on the 10th of September 1191. The Latin Christians worked to repair the defenses of the city and dined on the plentiful array of fruits ripening in the orchards and gardens of Jaffa: figs, pomegranates and almonds. The victorious Crusaders were now only 40 miles away from their ultimate goal, Jerusalem.

Join me next week as King Richard waits in Jaffa while he decides on his next move. He waits, and he waits, and he waits. Until next week, bye for now.

End