

Templar Battle Fighting Tactics – Terry McMahon

The Knights Templar are widely regarded as a very driven group of warrior monks who exercised tight discipline and struck fear into the enemy. But what were their battle fighting tactics? And were they effective?

One thing we do know is that they were a unique military proposition combining monk and soldier. They emerged just as a new order of monks, the Cistercians, were also launching. And the two organisations had a lot in common.

Templars linked to a new order of monks

The spiritual mentor of the Knights Templar, and their biggest advocate in western Christendom, was Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. Like many of the early Templars, Bernard was born into the Burgundian nobility but turned his back on earthly comforts from an early age. Becoming a monk, he joined a growing number who felt that the Benedictines, the most prolific monastic order of the time, were insufficiently ascetic.

Bernard wanted a return to the spirit of self-denial and rejection of worldly goods that had characterised the earliest Christian monks. Bernard's own brutal self-punishing regime caused periods of ill-health. He was often seen kneeling in church with a sick bucket at his side. But he was undaunted. And in the Knights Templar, he saw the military expression of his severe approach to monasticism.

Bernard presided over a growing band of monks at the abbey of Cîteaux which broke away decisively from the Benedictines electing to wear white habits instead of the Benedictine black. Together with the first Templar Grand Master Hugh de Payens, Bernard developed the Latin Rule, which determined how Templars would conduct themselves.

Both the Cistercians and Templars grew in tandem with a very similar outlook. The only differences were practical, such as the level of fasting. Knights were allowed a more lenient regime on account of having to fight in battle. A hungry, dizzy knight was going to be no match for a well fed Saracen.

The Rule Book

At the very beginning, the Knights Templar chose to be governed by the long established Rule of Saint Augustine. They would be knights who took the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Then, under the guidance of Saint Bernard,

the Templar rule book was established. This was as much about moral conduct as battle tactics - though the two were intertwined.

The Templar approach to battle wasn't just about armour and weapons but also an ethos and demeanour. These knights were celibate and eschewed lustful thoughts. They were forbidden to be boastful or gossip. Laughter was discouraged.

Unlike secular knights, they were not to engage in hunting, gambling, whoring, or keeping bad company. In short, there were none of the psychological releases that a secular knight enjoyed. Instead, outside of battle, the day was punctuated with prayer.

Saint Bernard preached that by taking the cross, crusaders were wiping away sin and smoothing the path to their own heavenly glory. In war, they would commit the act of homicide - which one might assume contravened the Ten Commandments. Thou shalt not kill. And many observers certainly felt uneasy at the thought of killer monks. But Bernard reasoned that these Templars were committing 'malecide' - the killing of evil as opposed to human beings. This was slaughter in the name of God. And therefore OK.

Was all this theological stuff necessary to create a battle-ready knight? Well as any battle commander will tell you - great armies are forged not just by their hardware but by their esprit de corps. What goes on in a soldier's mind is as important as what they do physically. If they believe their cause is just, then they will fight with greater vigour and effectiveness.

As Saint Bernard put it, the Templars would go into combat with the "breastplate of faith".

FIND OUT MORE: [What was in the Knight Templar rule book?](#)

Templars charging in unison

There was a strong Templar collective spirit. Knights were to act in concert in battle and not seek individual glory. They were a cohesive, indivisible unit. The Templars looked out for each other and were prepared for the ultimate act of self-sacrifice to protect their comrades. And they were to look after those injured or sick.

One of their most distinguishing hallmarks was their cavalry charge in battle where the knights would gallop forward in close formation. We are told this struck terror into the Saracens. While many Templars had been knights beforehand and learned basic battle skills, this kind of tactic must have been picked up after joining the order. Secular knights didn't charge in quite such a tight-knit manner.

Arms - keeping it simple

When it came to their weapons and other equipment, the Templars were all about simplicity. No fancy gold or silver ornamentation, twiddly designs, or elaborate coverings for shields and lances. This echoed Saint Bernard's contempt for bibles that were ostentatiously illuminated or churches stuffed with gargoyles and no-expenses-spared sculptures. Again, a military expression of his strict monasticism.

The knights were allocated three or four horses and a squire to assist. There would be two destriers (warhorses); a palfrey (riding horse); and a roncín (packhorse). Some knights might have ridden a mule instead of a palfrey. I've blogged about the size of warhorses previously but just to reiterate that a Templar warhorse would have been quite short by today's standards. So erase any thoughts of a gigantic stallion.

If a horse was killed in battle or equipment lost then the Templar knight had to explain himself to an official, called the 'draper', acting for the Master, who would then decide whether to replace these things.

Let's detail what a Templar knight wore for battle:

- Knights wore a padded jerkin close to their body offering additional protection
- Over the jerkin, there was a long-sleeved chain mail cover known as a 'hauberk'
- Over the head a chain mail hood called a 'coif'
- A helmet over the coif which was open-faced in the 12th century and enclosed later on
- Chain mail leggings or 'chausses'
- Over the chain mail a white surcoat
- A kite-shaped shield with black and white design
- Three knives: dagger, bread knife, small knife
- A thirteen foot long wooden lance

- A Turkish mace

Initially, they seem to have worn a monastic-style cloak that restricted arm movement in battle and this was replaced by an arm-less surcoat. It seems odd to us but the Pope got involved in discussions about battle dress even though the supreme pontiff didn't go to battle himself.

The importance of uniform

For the enemy in battle, the appearance of the Knights Templar must have been chilling. Here was a group of knights with an easily recognisable uniform. Their white mantles symbolising purity and a rejection of sin with a hint of martyrdom. On the left breast of the white mantle was the distinctive red cross. Almost an early example of modern branding. Everybody in the medieval era was familiar with the Templar logo.

One has to imagine what it was like for those fighting the crusaders to see these well disciplined knights, their white mantles billowing in the wind, charging towards them. And knowing that they had no fear of death.

