

THE BATTLE OF NASEBY 1645 *By Alan Fleming*

The decisive battle in the English civil war was fought at Naseby in Northamptonshire at the beginning of 1645. King Charles' advisors urged him to attack the New Model Army while it was still forming. However, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, who had been appointed General of the Army and the King's chief military adviser, proposed instead to march north to recover the north of England and join forces with the Royalists in Scotland under the Earl of Montrose. Charles agreed to this, even though the King's army had to be weakened by leaving a detachment including 3,000 cavalry under Lord Goring, the Lieutenant General of Horse, to hold the West Country and maintain the Siege of Taunton.

At the same time, after an aborted attempt to relieve Taunton, Parliament had directed Fairfax to besiege Oxford, which was the King's wartime capital. Initially, Charles welcomed this move, as Fairfax would be unable to interfere with his move north. Then at the end of May he was told that Oxford was short of provisions and could not hold out long. A diversionary ploy was implemented and the Royalists stormed the Parliamentary garrison at Leicester on 31 May. Having done this, Prince Rupert and the King's council reversed their former decision and marched south to relieve Oxford. They sent messages ordering Goring to rejoin them, but he was reluctant to leave the West Country for several reasons. Parliament was concerned by the loss of Leicester, and Fairfax was now instructed to engage the King's main army. He accordingly marched north from Oxford on 5 June. His leading detachments of horse clashed with Royalist outposts near Daventry on 12 June, which alerted the King to his presence. Fairfax was eager to engage them, and held a council of war during which Oliver Cromwell, recently re-appointed Lieutenant General, arrived with some cavalry reinforcements. The New Model Army moved in pursuit of the Royalist army, and late in the day Henry Ireton attacked a Royalist outpost at Naseby, 6 miles to the south of the royalist army. The King now had to accept battle, or retreat with Fairfax at his heels. Early on 14 June, urged on by Rupert, he took the former course.

THE BATTLE

The morning of 14 June was foggy, preventing the opposing armies from sighting each other at first. The Royalist army occupied a strong position on a ridge between the villages of Little Oxenden and East Farndon about two miles south of Market Harborough. A Royalist scout rode south for some miles but saw no sign of the Parliamentarians. Rupert himself moved forward and saw some Parliamentary cavalry apparently retiring. He was determined to secure the commanding Naseby ridge and ordered the Royalist army to advance. Fairfax initially considered occupying the northern slopes of Naseby ridge. Cromwell believed that this position was too strong and that the Royalists would refuse battle rather than attack it. He is said to have sent a message to Fairfax, saying, "I beseech you, withdraw to yonder hill, which may provoke the enemy to charge us," Fairfax agreed, and moved his army back slightly.

The Royalists did not see Fairfax's position until they reached the village of Clipston, just over a mile north of Naseby ridge. It was undoubtedly impossible for the Royalists to withdraw to their original position without being attacked by the Parliamentary cavalry and would be at a disadvantage. Rupert therefore deployed the army to its right, where the ground appeared to be more favourable for his own cavalry and prepared for battle.

ROYALISTS

The Royalist army occupied a front of about a mile and a half, between Clipston and Naseby on the left and the Sulby Hedges on the right. Their right wing consisted of 2000 cavalry under Rupert and his brother Prince Maurice. The centre was organised as three infantry brigades commanded

by Lord Astley with a regiment of horse under Colonel Howard in support. On the left were 1,500 "Northern Horse" under Sir Marmaduke Langdale. The King commanded a small reserve, consisting of his own and Prince Rupert's regiments of foot and his Life Guard of Horse.

PARLIAMENTARIANS

Fairfax had drawn up his army on the ridge a mile north of Naseby, although some of it was behind the crest on the reverse slope. Commissary General Ireton's wing of five and a half regiments of cavalry was on the left. The infantry under Sergeant Major General Sir Philip Skippon was in the centre with five regiments in the front line and three in support. A small troop of 300 Kings Musketeers was deployed to the front, and two companies of Colonel Edward Harley's regiment was in reserve. The Parliamentary army occupied a front about two miles long. They outflanked the Royalist left, but their own left flank rested like the Royalists' right flank on the Sulby Hedges. At the last minute, as the Royalists began to advance, Cromwell sent a regiment of dragoons under Colonel Okey into the Sulby Hedges, where they could fire into the flank of Rupert's cavalry.

ACTION

The Royalist centre advanced first, Rupert apparently keeping his men in hand so that the horse and foot could hit the enemy simultaneously. Skippon's infantry moved forward over the crest of the ridge to meet the Royalist foot. There was apparently time for only one volley of muskets before both sides were fighting hand-to-hand, the veteran Royalist infantry using their swords and the butt ends of their muskets. Sir Edward Walker, King Charles's secretary of war, stated "The Foot on either side hardly saw each other until they were within carbine shot, and so made only one Volley; our falling in with Sword and butt end of the Musket did notable Execution, so much as I saw their Colours fall and their Foot in great Disorder." Sir Philip Skippon was wounded by a bullet which splintered his armour and struck him under the ribs, but he stayed on the field to prevent panic spreading. Even so, the Parliamentarians were hard-pressed and forced back.

On the Parliamentary left, the opposing wings of horse paused briefly to dress ranks before charging into each other. Ireton's own regiment apparently repulsed their Royalist opposite numbers, but Ireton then led part of them to the aid of the beleaguered Parliamentary infantry. His troopers were driven off by Royalist pikemen and Ireton himself was unhorsed, wounded in the leg and face and taken prisoner. At the same time, the second line of Royalist cavalry broke most of the Parliamentary horsemen. Some of Ireton's regiments, on the far left, were saved from destruction by the fire from Okey's dragoons, but the others broke and fled, some not stopping until they reached Northampton, 15 miles away. The entire Royalist right wing had been committed to defeat Ireton, and none were left in reserve. Rupert either failed or was unable to rally the Cavalier horsemen, who galloped off the battlefield in pursuit of the fleeing Parliamentarians.

Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Right Wing Of Horse under Oliver Cromwell and the Royalist Northern Horse faced each other, neither willing to charge to the aid of their infantry while the other could threaten their flank. Eventually after half an hour, the Royalist cavalry began to charge and Cromwell's troops moved to meet them. Langdale's men were not only outflanked and outnumbered two to one, but forced to charge up a slope broken up by bushes and rabbit warrens. After a brief contest they were routed. Unlike Rupert, Cromwell had roughly half of his wing uncommitted, as only the front line of Cromwell's wing had taken part in the defeat of Langdale. He sent four divisions after Langdale, and turned his reserves against the

left flank and rear of the Royalist centre. Okey's dragoons mounted their horses and charged from their hedges against the Royalist right, as did some of Ireton's regiments which had partly rallied.

Some of the trapped Royalist infantry began to throw down their arms and call for quarter; others tried to conduct a fighting retreat. One regiment, apparently Prince Rupert's Bluecoats, stood their ground and repulsed all attacks. One eyewitness said "they the bluecoats were like a wall of brass. Eventually, Fairfax led his own Regiment of Foot and his Regiment and Lifeguard of horse against them from all sides. The Bluecoats' resistance was broken and Fairfax is said to have taken their standard in person. Archaeological evidence recovered musket balls etc suggests that this episode took place in the vicinity of Long Hold Spinney, about half a mile behind the Royalist position at the start of the battle.

At some stage, the King attempted to lead his Lifeguard of Horse to the rescue of his centre or against Cromwell's troopers, but was prevented from doing so by the Scots Earl of Carnworth, who seized his bridle, swore at him and said, "Would you go upon your death?" Seeing the King apparently swerve away from the enemy, his Lifeguard also retreated in disorder for several hundred yards.

Behind the Parliamentary lines, Rupert's men had reached Naseby and the Parliamentary baggage. The Parliamentary camp guards refused to surrender, and Rupert eventually rallied his men and led them back to the battlefield. It was now too late to save the remnants of the Royalist infantry, and Rupert could not induce his men to make another charge. Fairfax halted and reorganised his lines, and when he resumed his advance, Rupert's cavalry rode off the field.

Fairfax's forces pursued Royalist survivors fleeing north towards Leicester. Recovered musket and pistol shot suggests stands by fugitives and Royalist baggage guards on the slopes of Castle Yard, a wooded hill fort which once had a motte and bailey castle, about 1.5 miles behind the Royalist position at the start of the battle. Many Royalists were butchered when they mistakenly followed what they thought was the main road to Leicester into the churchyard in the village of Marston Trussel and were unable to escape their pursuers. Parliamentary troops also hacked to death at least 100 women camp-followers in the apparent belief they were Irish though they were probably Welsh whose language was mistaken for Irish.

AFTERMATH

Fairfax recovered Leicester on 18 June. He immediately led his army southwest to relieve Taunton and capture the Royalist-held West Country. Royalist military force had been shattered at Naseby. The King had lost his veteran infantry including 500 officers, all his artillery, and many arms. He could never again raise an army of similar quality.

The Parliamentarians had also captured the King's personal baggage, with correspondence which showed he intended to seek support from the Irish Catholic Confederation, and Catholic nations in Europe. By publishing this correspondence, Parliament gained much support in favour of fighting the war to a finish. Within a year, the Civil War ended in a Parliamentary military victory. So the Cavaliers allied to the King lost the battle against the Roundheads, and Cromwell became the Lord Protector and ruled the country for ten years.

It is said there were various reasons for this war but the real reason behind it was the arrogance of King Charles. He believed that he was above the law as he thought he had the divine right to do as he pleased. A new order of democracy came into being were it was established that parliament would govern, and the monarch just a figure head, which remains to this day.