

The Battleground of Stamford Bridge

"On me," Coenred commanded.

"What?" Edwin asked of anyone who could hear his voice.

"We follow your master," a fyrdman told him. "Where he goes we go, who he fights we fight, and we don't stop until he tells us so."

"Oh. Thanks." He managed a nervous smile in response.

Coenred settled his helmet more comfortably on his head and heaved his heavy shield back into the interlocking position of the shield-wall. He had been attempting to spy out the position of the traitor Tostig Godwinson but he had not seen him throughout the first part of the battle. Now that he had heard his voice calling out to King Harold he believed that the Saxon lord was standing hard by the dead king's banner, which was a little off to their right. He marked the place of stand and a cold determination settled upon him.

"We will break them this time," he said in a cold voice.

"Or I will break my axe in the trying," Sigbert agreed.

"No quarter!" Aethelmaer repeated.

"This day will be my bloodiest," Hengist affirmed.

"I will match you stroke for stroke brother," Aldfrid promised him.

"Just remember what it is to be a huscarl my lads and you will make me proud," Thrydwulf told them.

The battle erupted again. The war horns sounded once more but this time they came after the first blows were struck as the Saxons now advanced into the space vacated by the Vikings when the realisation of Hardrada's death had first come upon them. They stepped over the bodies of the fallen that marked the initial point of contact and pushed hard against their enemies. The two shield walls clashed again, only this time battered shields splintered and fatigued spears shattered. The number of the dead increased.

Coenred advanced with his body low behind his shield, ramming it into the shield of the Viking in front of him. His powerful legs propelled him up the incline, the muscles in his shoulders and upper arms knotting as he lifted the warrior in front of him bodily from the ground. He surged forward pushing the astounded Viking back

into his own ranks. Into the space Sigbert, on Coenred's left, pressed, sending his spear before him and using his own shield to push the warrior on his left further away, effectively opening the gap wider. Aethelmaer had changed position and now was able to do the same on Coenred's right and the warriors behind them lent impetus through the weight of their numbers and their cruel intent.

“Remember Hereric!” someone shouted.

“Remember Fulford Gate!” another Saxon added.

Their words were repeated along the lines of the veterans and inspired them all to even greater and bloodier feats of war.

The Viking line was forced back. Its' ranks were thinned as brave warriors fell before the onslaught. Only the indomitable spirit of the Norse fuelled their resistance now and so they fought on even as the shadow of their doom fell cold onto their shoulders in the hot summer sun.

The effort was tremendous but Coenred did not stop to think about it. He was trained to war. His body was heavily muscled and his strength prodigious. He attacked the Viking again and his huscarls pushed in on either side. Sigbert's spear broke but he replaced it with his sword, which proved just as deadly if a little shorter in the reach. When Coenred's antagonist regained his feet he attempted to push back but his legs were too close together and he was pressed against the men behind him; he had no leverage.

Edwin stabbed his spear over his master's shoulder. The point missed the top of the Norse shield but coincided with the Viking warrior raising his head to see what Coenred might do next. The spear point caught him in the eye. Edwin shouted with almost hysterical excitement and stabbed again and again. The Norseman tried to raise his shield to protect himself but it was so heavily pressed by Coenred that he could not move it. Ineffectually he tossed his head from side to side in an attempt to avoid the flashing spear but he was hit repeatedly until his face on one side was a bloody ruin. Then a sudden realisation came upon Edwin and he saw what he had done. He saw the blood running freely from the torn flesh and damaged eye socket. He lent to one side and vomited.

Coenred rose up before the Viking and brought his spear down from on high, going over the top of the other's shield and into his body just below the collarbone. It was not done out of mercy, it was done because it was necessary.

As the Viking died the determined wedge of Saxon warriors pierced the first rank of the Vikings, stepping on the body of the fallen warrior, and pushed deeper into the second and then the third line. The Norse now lacked the weight of numbers with which to resist the Saxon impetus. Coenred led a small wedge of huscarls and fyrdmen with himself at the point. He veered off to the right a little, determined to reach the *Land Ravager*, the raven banner of the now dead War Wolf.

Coenred's warriors were not alone in breaking the integrity of their shield-wall. All along the Viking front groups of Saxons broke down the resistance of their enemy and pressed into the gaps thus created. The cohesion of the Norsemen began to slowly disintegrate. Thrydwulf led his own charge supported by Hengist and Aldfrid and more veterans of Fulford Gate. Like Coenred they broke the front rank in front of them and took the fight deeper into the enemy lines. Unlike Coenred they maintained their formation, their shields interlocked and offering a strong defence against the remaining weapons that still threatened their life's blood.

Although their formation crumbled around them the Viking spirit to fight did not; they were tenacious beyond all reason to stand and resist. Before the relentless pressure of the Saxons the Vikings were shattered into groups of desperate men who would not yield, who could not yield because they disdained the right of quarter. In some places their shield-wall held true, broad and deep, in others they fell in on themselves to form circles that were quickly surrounded by hard breathing Saxons. The defensive formation promised only that the lives of the warriors it contained would be spared a little longer, however. It could not promise them victory.

Coenred pushed harder than any other Saxon huscarl. He no longer felt the ache in his tired limbs, or the uncomfortable sweat that soaked his undershirt, or the pain from wounds cut into his thighs and right forearm. He had only one purpose now and his eyes saw nothing else but the position of the raven banner. His heart pounded and his breath came in great gasps so that he wasted nothing on speech. He fought with his shield and his spear, striking relentlessly. A determination was upon him that no Viking could resist. They fell before him with screams of agony and of woe as their lives were ended or they suffered terrible wounds. The poets sang of the glory of battle but few if any held that image in their mind's eye when sharp steel pierced their flesh or a crushing axe shattered their bones. The air was heavy with the smell of blood, the stench of ruptured bowels and split stomachs; such was the real glory of battle.

When the last Norse warrior gave way Coenred's spear splintered and he dropped the broken shaft. He drew his grandfather's sword and eagerly looked around for his next opponent. And there he was; Tostig Godwinson.

Tostig the traitor.

Tostig the murderer.

From his position next to the banner the Saxon leader of the Norse army could see that the battle was being lost. All along the front the Saxons were either pushing back or breaking through the shield-wall. Reason told him that he should look for his horse and fly to Riccall. Reason told him that there was nothing here that could now be rescued, and yet he spurned reason. In the heat of the fighting something cold and unforgiving possessed him. He would not answer the dictates of reason; he would visit his hatred on his brother instead. He reminded himself that the reserves would be here soon, led by dependable Eystein Orre, and shouted it out to the men around him as an encouragement to continue fighting.

He saw the Saxon huscarl appear before him through the wrecked bodies of the Viking line. The man stood there only momentarily, cloaked in the gore of war, his shield battered so that the design was obscured, his sword gleaming and unstained as yet by the blood of his enemies. His very aspect was vengeful, awe inspiring, and disgusting all at once. Tostig knew that he should have been afraid. This man's eyes burnt with an obsessive hatred that rivalled his own, but his mind was strangely detached from the horror of what was going on around him. He was calm before his nemesis. The moment of his fate was at hand and he accepted it.

In fact he smiled at it.

Coenred saw the smile and he charged with a scream more like an animal than a man. It was a mistake. With his eyes on Tostig Godwinson he did not see the axe that thudded down onto and into his shield from the left. The force of the impact sent him staggering to the right. Perhaps bones were broken in his arm, he could not tell. Everything was happening so quickly and yet he could see each event as it unfurled before him with an almost detached consciousness of his own. Time had become disjointed in his vision, almost slowed and predictable and yet he lacked the will or ability to respond appropriately. A member of Tostig's bodyguard armed with a spear launched at him from the right and delivered with terrific force his deadly sliver of steel. Coenred used his sword to deflect the point and then brought his elbow up into

the warrior's face as the other stepped too close, drawn forward by the impetus of his own thrust.

The axe-man struck again and again from the left, his weapon, a dangerous Dane-axe, held in two hands. The speed and power of his blows were relentless. The violence of them was bone jarring. Unsure of even if his arm would respond Coenred thought to raise his shield. That much beaten circle of wood rose and caught the descending shaft of the axe but the blade travelled over the rim of the shield and collided with his steel helm. The huscarl was knocked down to his right knee. Blood seeped out from under the rim of his helmet and the world began swim out of focus even as lightening pierced his brain. The spearman had recovered both his balance and his focus and looked to thrust again. Perhaps more through instinct or constant training Coenred knew the stroke was coming. He attempted to deflect the spear with his sword again but the force of the thrust beat the resistance of his blade and the sharp steel pierced the mail byrnies on his right side, slicing through the weave of the padded jacket, and into the flesh along his ribs, forcing a cry of pain from the huscarl.

Tostig moved forward now and stabbed with his own sword, all the while wondering why this stubborn huscarl would not die. He sliced over the top of the man's black shield but missed his neck as the warrior pulled his head down in response to the spear wound. Coenred did not cry out again. He was battered and bloody but he did not throw back his head and scream out his pain. To do so would be to offer his throat to the steel edged sword that Tostig proffered.

The axe-man had had to relent simply because the physical effort of the violence that he had rained down upon the huscarl had left him momentarily breathless. He prepared to land another blow; a killing stroke. Instead of the storm of blows that he had delivered on the kneeling warrior he would be more precise. He swung the long shaft over his head so that it lined up with his spine and coiled his great muscles for the effort that would end this Saxon knelt before him.

Sigbert saw his chance, dashed forward and rammed his own sword into the stomach of the axe-man. Mail links were burst by the bright steel of the blade as it progressed into the unresisting flesh. Muscle and organs were irrevocably damaged. The bodyguard's face expressed his sudden surprise and then a second later his pain. His fingers opened and released the great axe as he tried to take hold of the sword that was now protruding from his abdomen. Sigbert gave the blade a twist and pulled the sword free, his muscles knotting across his powerful shoulders and down his right

arm. The axe-man collapsed with his hands desperately trying to stem the flow of blood that now issued from the mortal wound.

Tostig swung at Sigbert, catching him on the upper right arm but the huscarl's mail byrnie prevented the blade from doing any real damage. Edwin suddenly pushed forward between Sigbert and Coenred with his spear, held two handed and low. He shoved the point with all of his strength into Tostig's exposed right thigh. Aethelmaer leapt forward at the same moment and slew the former eorl's spearman with a single stroke of his sword, even as the man was preparing to fix the wounded Coenred with his own deadly weapon for what would have been the final time.

There was no pain. There was no heat. There was no cold. There was only hate burning in his mind, a hate born from the love in his heart. Coenred could hear the sounds of the battle raging all around them but the din seemed distant, far removed from this place where he knelt. He knew that he had come close to death and only the timely intervention of his friends had preserved his life this day. In only a matter of seconds he had approached a man he hated on behalf of another and had been wounded by spear and axe. That man now reflected his own position, down on one knee, wounded, and bleeding.

Coenred rose. He cast off the damaged shield, which in truth was now a great weight on his injured left arm and of no real use to him anymore. Blood flowed freely from his right side and down the left side of his face where the old scar had been reopened. He did not care. He stepped forward and raised his family's sword. The metal gleamed in the summer sunlight, clean and unsullied, gold and silver untarnished.

Tostig Godwinson leaned heavily on his own sword and tried to rise also. He had never known a pain like the one that burnt in his thigh where the spear had gone in; where the spear still remained. The fool who had struck him with it was untrained in the art of combat. He had pushed too deep and allowed the thick muscles within to hold fast the head of the spear. It was quite curious to be looking down at his right leg and see the long shaft of wood sticking out of it. That was his hot blood dribbling over the cold steel.

I have been defeated by a wide-eyed youth of a fyrdman; where is the glory in that?

He saw the unconquerable huscarl rise before him, lift that deadly sword with the point aimed at his breast, leave it hanging there like the weapon of Damocles. He knew that his judgment was at hand and that he should be afraid but instead he felt

very calm, accepting almost. He no longer thought of his brother Harold, of his long struggle to exact revenge, instead he found his thoughts turning to his wife so distant now, at home in Flanders.

“Judith.” He spoke her name as if seeking to connect to her in this dark moment of his life.

“For Theign Aethelheard I take revenge. For Aelle, son of Aethelheard, I take revenge. For Mildryth, wife of Aethelheard, I take your life!” Coenred growled as he raised his father’s sword for the final plunge.

“Who?” Tostig asked, bemused by names that he did not recognise.

The only answer he received was the cold steel of Coenred’s sword pushing deep into his heart and just as quickly removed. Tostig Godwinson, the third son of Eorl Godwin of Wessex, brother to the King of England, ally of King Harald Hardrada of Norway, despised former Eorl of Northumbria, fell dead to the land that he had once ruled.

“Lord Coenred?!”

Edwin looked at his master with eyes that did not fully comprehend. He could see that he was hurt but he knew not how badly. A sudden fear descended upon him that the huscarl was mortally wounded.

“Your spear,” Coenred demanded of him in a voice that was cold but still yet strong.

Edwin twisted the shaft of the weapon and pulled. Only the body of Tostig Godwinson moved. Sigbert reached over and lent a hand, he placed his foot on top of Tostig’s thigh and between them they pulled the spear head free. Edwin handed it over after casting a morbid glance at the fallen son of Eorl Godwin. Coenred lent heavily upon the shaft to stop himself from falling to the ground again.

“Our war work this day is done!”