A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first began
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisie.
Ful worthy was he in his lordes were,
And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
And evere honoured for his worthynesse.
At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
Of Algezir, and riden in Belmurye.
At Lyeys was he and at Satayle,
Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See
At many a noble armee hadde he be.¹

The portrait of Chaucer’s knight from the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales is something that has intrigued me for many years. My initial impressions were formed by Mr Terry Jones whilst still at School (and impressionable) so the idea that Chaucer’s Knight was a mercenary seemed to me to be a very convincing argument.² This is a passage I have revisited frequently in teaching a module on the Hundred Years War at the University of Reading. For a time I did think that the portrayal had something to do with the crusade of Nicopolis in 1396, and should be considered alongside the symbolism present in the Wilton Dyptych, the ideas of Phillippe de Mezières and possible English participation in this ill-fated crusade.³ The question I have asked today is fraught with problems, not least the difficulty of separating out ‘crusader’ from ‘mercenary’. Nethertheless, I intend to provide some thoughts about what soldiers would get up to as part of a ‘normal’ career. In more detail, are the careers of Chaucer’s Knight and a ‘normal’ soldier
mutually exclusive or are there identifiable intersection points suggesting that a ‘normal’ career would pick up on highlights from Chaucer’s Knight. If these points of comparison do exist, then how prevalent are they and can we make any assumptions as a result?

A student suggested to me that Chaucer’s knight was a real person, it was just that I (and by implication other historians) had never been able to find an individual replicating his military career. In this spirit and with this paper in mind I have tried to find evidence of fourteenth century soldiers with careers that mirrored that of Chaucer’s Knight. We should remember that Chaucer himself was a soldier, captured by the French on Edward III’s Rheims campaign in 1359. In his own words, delivered as a deponent at the Court of Chivalry in the case of Scrope v. Grosvenor in October 1386, ‘he was [currently] of the age of ‘forty and upwards’ and ‘had been armed 27 years’. He was therefore familiar with the average military career and it is clear that whatever the reason for the accomplishments of his knight, they are fully intended. What can we find from the available sources? Did men purely fight on crusade or as mercenaries? Or did they combine service for the king in the Hundred Years War with crusade, travel beyond the ‘Grete Sea’, pilgrimage and mercenary service? We know that a small number of ‘famous’ individuals did have such military careers, but what about the bulk of the manpower of English expeditionary forces? Did they also have such a military career, or was this kind of service exceptional?

My search utilises a dataset compiled from the muster rolls of two expeditionary armies in 1387 and 1388. Then, using the power of a computer database, I have analyzed this data to look for continuance of service in other campaigns or theatre’s of warfare, where source material naming serving soldiers exists. My previous work on this subject has concentrated on the military community and looked mainly for comparisons with other royal expeditions. For this article, I will begin by looking at the well known sources from the Court of Chivalry, and then extend this search to mercenary actions, for instance with the Free Companies in France and then Spain, at the battle of Najera (1367) and in Italy, and, finally, crusading with Henry IV, then earl of Derby, in Prussia with the Teutonic Knights. I will also draw in one or two other areas of conflict when possible. This search focuses upon the contemporary to Chaucer and thus is limited from the beginning, but I think it is here that we must look if we are to develop the portrayal