

# Through the Gates of Hell

It was a suicide mission. An unbelievable plan. The greatest army leaders in all of Greece and this is what they had. But after 10 years of battles, bloodshed and defeat. Everyone was desperate. Some people thought that it was ingenious; that Athena herself devised it. But others, like myself, were more than a little dubious.

The horse had taken 2 weeks to make. Under the instruction of Epeius dozens of woodworkers and hoplites helped with the structure. They had picked the finest and strongest pines on the west coast of Troy; then assembled them neatly in the back of the Greek camp.

A giant wooden horse. At least 10 feet wide and 25 tall with a glare that would send the gods running back to Mount Olympus. It was built on a raised wooden platform with four pine wheels. If it was designed for mobility then Epeius had definitely failed. It would take hundreds of soldiers to make this horse move and in the blazing heat of the Mediterranean it would take days to move. The rest of the horse was rather typical apart from the huge barrel shaped chest. But, that was no mistake. It was in fact the key element of the design. A chest big enough to fit 40 of the finest Greek soldiers.

Odysseus had looked for volunteers to join him in the horse. At first there were many volunteers, most of them fine young soldiers looking for adventure. However, as Odysseus explained the plan the once enthusiastic young soldiers slunk subtly to the back of the crowd until only 39 out of 100 hands were left up.

And sitting here now I realise what a foolish mistake I had made...

The plan was as follows. Forty of the best Greek soldiers would hide inside the wooden horse. The rest of the Greek army would pretend to flee from Troy by taking all of our 1200 war ships to a nearby island. Meanwhile, the Trojans would think that the horse was a surrender offering and take it into their city. Then, the 40 soldiers inside the horse would climb out of the horse and let the rest of the secretly returning Greek army into Troy.

All forty of us - including Odysseus - climbed into the underside of the horse. As the final person climbed in, Odysseus walked over and closed the trap door. It gave a satisfying click. As it shut he

looked up and gave us a shaky smile “by the end of the day we are all going to stink,” he said. There were a couple of chuckles but nothing else. I managed to crack a smile; I realised that he was just trying to raise moral. “Some of us already do,” I said with a taunting look at Agafya, one of my oldest friends. In return, he gave me a smile and a not so gentle knock on my helmet. “Come on,” said Odysseus, “get some sleep, hopefully the Trojans will come in the morning and then the fun begins.” And with that everyone started taking off their armour and lying down and trying to sleep. It is going to be a long day.

I woke to the warmth of sunlight on my face; a single shaft of golden light slipping through the wooden beams above my head. I took a moment to appreciate how peaceful it was. For a blissful moment I almost believed that I was safe. But that was when I heard the noise....

A noise that I knew every person with me had heard before. The slow, scraping, screeching sound of Trojan sandals on the sun-baked earth.

“Páfsi” screamed the Trojan captain. In one smooth motion the Trojan battalion stopped moving and stood to attention.

Through the cracks in the wooden horses side, I and all of the other now awake soldiers watched with bated breath.

The Captain surveyed the scene in front of him. The smouldering remains of the Greek camp with thin coils of smoke still winding lazily into the sky.

“The cowards surrendered “ he sneered. A malicious smile playing on his lips, “and it looks like they left us a gift.”

“Captain!” said one of the soldiers in the battalion's front rank. “We have a man coming in from the Greek camp.”

“You!” said the captain “state your business here “

“I am Sinon,” said the man, “the Greeks abandoned me when they left. When they left this stupid horse.”

“What is the horse?”

“It was an offering to the goddess Athena and a gift for the Trojans”

“Why is it so big?”

“Um,” this question caught Sinon off guard “bigger the better, I guess?”

The captain seemed satisfied with this answer for now.

For most of the next two hours the Trojans debated what to do with the horse. Some said that they should just leave it and others thought that they should burn it. I looked down upon them all tensed as if ready for action. When the prospect of burning the horse arose all forty of us paid closer attention. We started to realise that this was the conversation that could decide our fates. Eventually they agreed to take the horse into the city - at which I felt all of the soldiers let out a sigh of relief. So half the battalion was sent back to Troy to prepare the slaves to haul the horse into the city.

The next 12 hours passed in a blur of suspense, boredom and daydreaming. Most of the time I spent thinking about the upcoming battle. We Greeks had a very effective fighting style. Our weapons mainly consisted of our spear or dory. Mine was a long, pine pole about 6 feet tall with a solid bronze butt at one end and a lethal iron spear head at the other. I mainly used the spear end to try and stab, but if the spear head broke you could just as easily hit someone round the head with the butt. Agafya, with his looming size, has been known to knock the hardest soldier in the Trojan army out cold with his spear butt. I also occasionally use my sword or xiphos; a short double edged short sword about 20 inches long. The idea was that you could get in close with the enemy soldier and stab them whilst their spear got in the way. Any weapon may yet prove inadequate. Would the plan work? Would we be able to trick the entire Trojan army?

At about 6 o'clock that evening, the Trojans stopped pulling the giant horse. It had taken most of the slaves in Troy to move and there was *still* a long way to go. Foolishly, or I thought at least, the Trojans decided to set the command tent right next to the horse. This meant we could hear everything that they said.

“Status report!” barked the captain at one of the soldiers

“Well, the slaves are completely wiped out sir. We have at least 20 men with heat stroke and some have hurt themselves pulling the horse. Some can't move sir.”

“Lazy slackers” grumbled the captain.

The irony of this was not lost on those listening because all the captain had been doing was sitting on his expensive battle horse, sipping his water skin and yelling at the slaves to get a move on.

“Fine,” sighed the captain “we will rest here for the night.”

“One other thing sir,” said the soldier “I spoke to some of the slaves and they seem to have heard some unusual noises from the horse”

This got the captain’s interest.

“Like what?”

Well, one thought he heard a grunt of some kind. Another thought he heard something knocking on the wood.

“Have you asked Sinon?”

“No sir.”

“Doesn’t matter, just send someone up there to check it out.”

“Yes sir!”

Up on the horse, we sat, quaking in our boots. We had all just heard that conversation and were all looking at Odysseus for guidance. His response was:

“Stick to the plan: no sounds, no movement, no fear.”

Three minutes later, though it felt like years, we heard the steady tread of Trojan sandals shuffling towards our hiding spot.

“So you just want me to check it out?” he called to someone in the distance

“Ok”

After a thorough inspection of the horse he then threw a rope onto the horse back and started to climb up. He actually put his foot right next to my head. I swear, my heart must have been beating so loudly that he could hear it. But, he just carried on up the side of the horse. When he got to the top he took out his short sword. Through the gaps we could just see the evil glimmer of the sword in the night sky. Suddenly, he pushed it straight in between the wooden slats of the horse.

Straight into the upturned head of Agafya.

Agafya did not have time to scream. The blade dived straight into his eye and kept going until you could see the gleaming point in the back of his head. His corpse just hung there. Still impaled by the sword.

For a moment, nobody made a noise. We just stared at the corpse in front of us.

Instantly, Odysseus leaped across the cabin and wrenched Agafia's head out of the grip of the sword; sending thick oozes of crimson blood flowing out of his eye and head. Odysseus then wiped the blood off the sword with the side of his blood red cape just before the soldier on the top of the horse pulled his murderous weapon back out.

Following the death of Agafya, life inside the horse took on a new perspective. Our hours sitting inside the horse awake were filled with thoughts of death and despair. All I could do was wish that Agafya would find peace in the blessed fields of Elysium and that I would be able to avenge him in the battle to come. When we did sleep, we slept fitfully; plagued by murderous nightmares.

The next day the horse finally reached the impenetrable city of Troy. Surrounded by a 20 foot high solid stone wall, Troy was a sight to behold. Imposing square towers sat every 100 meters along the wall. Each had 5 men standing to attention: carefully surveying the land around the city. The wall itself was the key defensive aspect to the city. If it had not been for that wall then we Greeks would have burned Troy down a long time ago. Along the wall, smears of dried blood acted as a warning sign to anyone near. We all knew that most of that blood was the blood of our fellow Greek soldiers.

As the Trojans dragged us towards the city, they suddenly realised that the horse was too big to get through the main entrance into the city: Lion's Gate. At this point I was sure that we would just be left outside and our mission would be for nothing. But, to my surprise, the ever unpredictable Trojan captain decided to remove the actual arch of the Lion's Gate so that the horse could get through!

They disassembled the Lion's Gate very quickly and we were soon being hauled through the gate. We were just about to reach the citadel when we heard...

"Stop!" A shrill voice cut the air.

A young maiden stormed into the citadel. Her fiery red hair whipping behind her. She was followed by a young priest of Apollo.

"Princess Cassandra," said the captain "to what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Stop," Cassandra said again, "that horse is filled with Greek soldiers! If you bring them any further into the city then they will destroy us!"

My blood turned to ice. How did she know? How could she possibly know our plan? We were ruined, the mission was a fail, we would all die here! I looked around the cabin: despite the darkness within, I could see all of the soldiers looked as shocked and terrified as I felt. Apart from one.

Odysseus was sitting there, unmoving. A knowing smile played on his face. How could he be so calm? We were about to die! Maybe he had finally lost it and was just sitting there waiting to die. Odysseus just gestured back to the scene in front of us.

"Here we go again," signed the captain.

"You must listen to her!" said the priest of Apollo "I swear on the god Apollo, there are people in that horse."

"And why would we listen to a deranged princess and a disgraced priest of Apollo?" asked the captain "Guards! Take them away!"

"No!" screamed the priest and charged at the captain.

Half of me wanted him to kill the captain. The other wanted to see this play out.

With deadly accuracy and frightening speed; the captain hit the side of the priest's body and sent him flying across the citadel. Hitting his face with a crunch on the paved citadel floor.

"Get up," the captain sneered, "I think that you need a little more time to pray."

And with that two Trojan guards picked up the humiliated priest of Apollo and took him away.

"As for you, your ladyship," said the captain, "I am sure that you would enjoy some more time locked in your tower."

And she was pulled, kicking and screaming away.

My gaze returned to Odysseus. "How did you know that was going to happen?" I breathed.

"That was Cassandra, last daughter of King Priam and also the cursed prophet. She was cursed by Apollo to be able to see the future as clear as day but no-one would believe her. Pretty grim fate if you ask me."

"But how do *you* know she's always right if nobody believes her?" I asked. At that, he gave me a wistful smile and said

"I have my ways."

For the rest of the afternoon and late into the evening there were massive celebrations in Troy. As far as they knew, the war that had killed so many and lasted for so long was over. I began to think how inhuman it would be to come out this evening and kill them all; did there really have to be

more suffering? But, as I thought back about the war so far, I remembered all of my friends they had killed and the lives they ruined. It's not like we started the war! It is all their fault and should they not pay for that?

Finally the party began to slow down and people started to either leave or simply fall asleep drunk on the floor. Eventually, just before dawn all was still apart from the gentle chirping of sandpipers in the distance. It was at this time that Odysseus gave the signal.

Silently we opened the hatch on the underside of the horse. We lowered the rope down onto the pine platform below and silently slid down it. The citadel before us was covered with overturned tables and scattered wine amphorae. We immediately set about our plan.

I worked my way around the citadel, slowly ducking in and out of the shadows. I had left my spear and most of my armour in the horse so I could move quickly and quietly. Once out of the citadel I then made my way through the streets. As I rounded a corner I came across a drunk man sitting on the side of the street. I plunged my sword into his throat and just like that, he was dead. No witnesses, no alarm. I resumed stalking my way to the Lion's Gate. A solitary guard was there. I crept up behind him and sliced my sword into the back of his neck sending a stream of blood climbing up the wall. I grabbed the keys from his corpse and opened the gate. By now I could see the warning fires lit by my allies to let the rest of the army know it was time to advance.

I heard a sudden intake of breath. A woman was standing in the street staring at me. She quickly turned around and sprinted up the street shouting to anyone that could hear

"Help! The Greeks are coming!"

But before she could finish her words, I threw my sword at her. The weapon tilted precariously in the air. This weapon is not used for throwing. But it still created a gaping wound in her back, severing nerves and veins and breaking bones, causing her to fall on the stone dead. I pulled my sword out of her corpse.

My heart was pounding, my blood racing, partly shocked at the ease with which I had ended this innocent woman's life, but the cruel gods had one more task for me.

From the house on my right, I heard a baby start crying. It would wake up the entire street if it kept crying.

Slowly, I walked into the house. I found the child in a crib up against the back wall. And I lifted up my sword: my hands trembling. Did I really want to do this? But it was too late. And what had started could not be stopped.

That night I must have killed hundreds of people. Men. Women. Children. All of it brought me pain and suffering and as I speak this to you on my deathbed, I want you to know this – I deeply regret my involvement in the Trojan War. I wish I'd never ventured to those ill-fated shores.