Riders and Ramparts

How medieval armies attacked and defended

AWH.C.10.5.F "Describe military improvements (e.g., mounted knight and fortifications)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three details that show how mounted warriors fought. Circle three details that show how fortifications protected a position.

Two Ways to Gain an Advantage

1 In eleventh-century Europe, an approaching force might first appear as a line of riders crossing open fields. Wealthy warriors could afford trained horses, armor, and weapons, while land and income helped support their costly service. A saddle and stirrups improved a rider's balance, and a lance let a rider strike while moving. Mounted warriors could travel quickly, scout, and attack exposed troops. Their speed did not make them unbeatable: mud, steep ground, and closely packed defenders could blunt a charge. Armies still needed foot soldiers, so a mounted knight was one part of a larger force.

2 Now picture those riders reaching a defended stronghold. Many early medieval castles used an earthen mound, a wooden tower, and a fenced courtyard. Builders could raise timber defenses relatively quickly, but fire and decay threatened them. In places with enough money and suitable materials, rulers later built stone walls and towers, which resisted fire and were harder to break. A ditch slowed attackers before they reached the walls. A guarded gatehouse protected the entrance, a vulnerable point. Defenders on towers could watch approaches and shoot from above. These features made an attack slower and more dangerous, even when the garrison was small.

3 An attacker could not simply ignore a castle. Its garrison might shelter supplies, control a road, or threaten troops passing nearby. Besiegers sometimes surrounded a stronghold to cut off food; they also used ladders, tunneling, or siege engines to breach defenses. In response, defenders stored provisions and strengthened weak points. Stone could reduce the danger from fire, but no wall guaranteed safety if supplies ran out or attackers found a way in. Mounted knights and fortifications solved different problems: riders helped a force move and strike, while castles held a position over time. Commanders had to consider both when planning a campaign.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the saddle, stirrups, and lance make a mounted warrior more effective?

2. What conditions could weaken a mounted charge, and why would those conditions matter?

3. Describe two defensive advantages of stone walls and towers over timber defenses.

4. How did a ditch, gatehouse, and towers work together to defend a castle?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A commander must hold a narrow mountain pass for one week. The force has 12 mounted warriors, foot soldiers, timber, and only a little stone. In four or five sentences, explain how you would use the riders and build defenses, including one limit of your plan.

ANSWER KEY

Riders and Ramparts

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.C.10.5.F

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three details that show how mounted warriors fought. Circle three details that show how fortifications protected a position. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the saddle, stirrups, and lance make a mounted warrior more effective?	**The saddle and stirrups improved the rider's balance, and the lance allowed the rider to strike while moving.**
2	What conditions could weaken a mounted charge, and why would those conditions matter?	**Mud and steep ground could hinder the riders' movement, while closely packed defenders could resist their attack.**
3	Describe two defensive advantages of stone walls and towers over timber defenses.	**Stone resisted fire and was harder for attackers to break than timber.**
4	How did a ditch, gatehouse, and towers work together to defend a castle?	**The ditch slowed attackers, the gatehouse guarded the entrance, and towers let defenders watch approaches and shoot from above.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would put foot soldiers behind a timber barrier across the narrow pass and dig a ditch in front of it. I would use the small amount of stone to protect the barrier's main opening. The riders would scout the open approaches and warn the defenders before an enemy arrived. They could attack exposed troops on open ground, but I would not order a charge inside the narrow pass. The timber could burn, so the defenders would need to watch for fire and keep supplies for the week.

Accept other workable plans that give the riders and defenses distinct roles suited to the terrain and resources. The response must explain a realistic weakness, such as fire, limited supplies, or poor ground for a mounted charge.