

# Medieval Knighthood Lives In Indiana's Levant Preceptory

By

Sir Knight Christopher L. Hodapp, KCT

**B**lame it on Sir Walter Scott, who helped to usher in the Romantic period in the 1800s with his novel *Ivanhoe*. Or Masonically, go back to Chevalier Michael Ramsay for his oration in 1736 that claimed Freemasonry was brought from the Holy Land by medieval knights. But no matter who's to blame, nothing seems to charge the imagination in boys or men like chainmail, broadswords, and steel helmets.

That was the conclusion of a group of Indiana Knights Templar at Raper Commandery No. 1 in Indianapolis in 2007. The Commandery was named after Reverend William Raper, an Ohio Methodist minister, and is among the most decorated Commanderies in the country for its celebrated drill team. But as with Templary everywhere in the United States, times have changed for Raper No. 1.

Unfortunately, by the turn of the newest century, many young members entering Raper Commandery expressed fading interest in the paramilitary customs of marching in drill teams and rehearsing twelve-man openings. When new members who were not participating were

questioned informally, there was an overriding melancholia in their explanations of why Commandery had not excited their interest. When they thought of knights, they had images of chainmail, broadswords, and steel helmets. Nearly

“Grandpa, are we knights?”

“Do you want to be?”

—*National Treasure*

all mentioned the lack of connection to the medieval order of warrior monks who had inspired the creation of the Masonic Templars in the first place. They had envisioned studying, or at

least hearing about, the crusading orders of knighthood, even if only occasionally. Dull business meetings held no attraction, and guilt-ridden entreaties for joining the drill team cemented the sense for many that Commandery was a place to avoid.

Thus, Levant Preceptory was born. The goal was to create a medieval period degree team for conferring the Order of the Temple, as well as a promotional public face for Indiana Templary. After discussing the concept with the Grand Commander of Indiana at that time, Sir Knight Andrew Jackson, along with the Grand Master of the Grand Encampment, dispensation was given so the group could perform the Order of the Temple in costume.

The decision was specifically made not to seek a charter as a new Commandery but to simply remain informally organized under Raper's existing charter. If it had sought a charter as its own Commandery, the little group would have been required to purchase regulation uniforms, hold business meetings, rehearse openings, and stand regular inspection—the very things many non-participating members had fled from in the first place. The group had no desire to weaken any existing Commanderies by siphoning off members into a brand new and otherwise unneeded one.

As an informal club, Levant has no separate officers, bylaws, dues, regulations, or requirements. Knights are simply expected to provide their own medieval uniforms and equipment, and to know their assigned cast parts in the standard ritual of the Order of the Temple.

While Levant technically operates under Raper No. 1's charter, the group has encouraged participation from Sir Knights from all over Indiana. This was key, as the concept was an unusual one that raised some objections across the state at first. The goal was never to draw dedicated drill team members or active officers away from other Commanderies. Levant was always designed, rather, to provide a very different and unique experience for its participants and for candidates on whom the group conferred the order, as well as to attract Knights who were staying away from other Templar activities. Part of that design was the decision to perform the Order of the Temple no more than twice a year in an effort to keep it a unique event.

Levant's Armorer, Sir Knight Robert Coleman, has a background in medieval period reenactment and renaissance fairs, and provided a wealth of knowledge for



knight templar



outfitting a troupe of knights on a budget. Broadswords (either sharp-edged or blunted), Norman-styled steel helmets, chainmail hauberks, gauntlets and coifs, and other equipment was cobbled together from a wide variety of Internet sources, with a rapidly changing landscape of eBay dealers who come and go.

White tunics made of heavy canvas duck material were hand-sewn by Robert's wife Rebecca, custom fit for the height and girth of each Knight. Tunics are lined with black to absorb the oils and dirt from the mail, so as to not stain the white material. Older or less spry Knights prefer aluminum mail to the steel version, which can weigh considerably more—a real consideration when kneeling, or marching on a hot day in an un-airconditioned tent while wearing up to seventy pounds of steel.

Sir Knight Dale Adams created a set of easily transportable medieval-styled camp chairs, a sturdy altar, and triangular table

for use in non-traditional locations outside of an indoor asylum or lodge room. Sir Knight Coleman provided a medieval tent for conferrals outside, and one such event was appropriately accompanied afterwards by a roast hog feast.

The greatest surprise to most participants is that equipment can be had to fully outfit a medieval knight for as little as \$300, not much more than the cost of a regulation chapeau these days. It is common for Knights who are unable to arrange their schedule for every event to share their equipment with new men entering the group. It is truly a cooperative effort. To date, Knights from nine Indiana Commanderies have taken part in its ritual work.

Levant has attracted attention all around Indiana and has performed in Illinois, with a trip planned to Detroit in 2011. In addition to conferring the Order of the Temple, Sir Knight James Dillman created a public ceremony suitable for non-Masons



world as an active part of the fraternity of Freemasonry.

In addition, the group has appeared in "Templars Last Stand," a documentary produced for Canadian Television by Arcadia Entertainment in Nova Scotia which will air later in 2011 in the United States on the National Geographic Channel.

in which the Knights dramatize the night before the arrest of the order in France in 1307. At its first public presentation for a statewide gathering of DeMolay members and parents on the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrests on October 13, 2007, the enthusiastic audience spent two hours afterwards asking questions, trying on the equipment, and bursting with excitement over seeing Templar Knights assembled as they had always imagined them.

The members of Levant Preceptory have no illusion that what they are doing is a magic bullet solution that will bring a stampede of excited new Knights back to meetings. What works in one



Levant Preceptory Knights have appeared at community events, marched in parades, and are planning an outreach for Indiana Templary at Renaissance fairs. The mission is not to represent modern Masonic Knights Templar as a variation on the Society for Creative Anachronism, but to spread the word that Christian chivalry and knighthood still exist in a modern

Commandery may not work in another. But their model is part of a growing desire to seek innovative ways to stir men's blood and bring them back to the doors of our Commanderies by tapping into the romance of our historic heritage. And it seems to be working.



Sir Knight Christopher L. Hodapp, KCT, is a member of Raper Commandery No. 1 in Indianapolis, Indiana. He is the author of *The Templar Code For Dummies*, and the editor of the *Journal of the Masonic Society*. He can be contacted at [hodapp@aol.com](mailto:hodapp@aol.com).

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