

Spanish Armada

Reasons that led to the battle



Philip II was the king of Spain and had a great empire with vast wealth that came from America. Philip II married Queen Mary I of England and he became the Queen's consort. However when Mary died the throne was occupied by her half sister Elizabeth, who was a Protestant. The Spanish king planned to marry her, but for religious reasons she wouldn't agree. Queen Elizabeth signed agreements with Spain but permitted her Pirates to attack Spanish ships and possessions. Philip then found a reason to fight with Elizabeth. King Philip believed that the English queen was not the rightful queen as Henry VIII (her father) had no right to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon and Isabel therefore was not entitled to be on the throne.

In 1584 Philip II had achieved through the Duke of Parma a success against the rebels in Netherlands, it seemed that Protestantism had no future there, but Queen Elizabeth I helped them with money and troops. If the Dutch lost it would mean isolation for the English Queen. In addition, she ensured her success by commanding the execution of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots who represented the best chance to restore England to Catholicism.

The English didn't like Spanish hegemony in the world. Drake, carried out a number of assignments for Queen Elizabeth including attacks on the some of the Spanish territories in America as well as against some of the Spanish ships which carried gold from America. So the powerful Spanish King thought the solution was to invade England.

Building the Armada

The Spanish empire at one time included territories on five continents – Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa and Oceania. In 1580 Portugal was annexed to Spain. Philip II planned the invasion of England which included the building of a large navy.

The king of Spain ordered the construction of over 130 ships with 30,000 men. These were joined by the armies of the Duke of Parma from Netherlands and took command of this fleet to the Marquis of Santa Cruz

The possibilities of the Navy were great considering the great power of the Spanish empire which also had the financial and moral support of the pope. The English economy was shrinking, but in 1586 not a single Spanish ship with gold and silver from Peru and Mexico reached the shores. This was the work of Sir Francis Drake, who was made vice admiral of the English fleet by Queen Elizabeth. The Armada was going to sail from Lisbon, supposedly bound for the Indian territories, but was really bound for England. The plan was for the Armada to pass up through the English Channel and meet up with the Duke of Parma's army in Calais. From Calais the fleet would cross the Channel and sail up the Thames estuary with the intention of arriving in London. In that way, the Queen of England would be defeated and England would once again become Catholic. Also the war in Netherlands would end quickly which will be good for King Philip II interests as this war was costing the Spanish treasury too much money.

The problems

The plan was risky for the Spanish navy as they needed the element of surprise in order to be successful. In addition Philip was hoping that the English Catholics would rise up against Queen Elizabeth.

Drake got permission from the Queen Elizabeth to attack the Spanish on their soil with the intention of disrupting the navy's preparations. On 29th April Drake conducted a surprise raid on the Bay of Cadiz. It took 1 year for the fleet to be ready again.

When the fleet was finally ready, the Marquis of Santa Cruz died and was replaced by the Duke of Medina Sidonia who had no experience of sea battles. The fleet sailed from Lisbon but the large number of men involved was a great detriment to the Portuguese economy; this was the reason why the king ordered the fleet to leave as soon as possible. Four weeks later, the fleet suffered the first storm near the coast of A Coruña. The lack of drinking water, the poor condition of the food highlighted the difficulty of the attack. Both the Duke of Parma and the Duke Medina Sidonia wrote to the King, explaining that the men in the fleet were not qualified for the task they were required to perform and the Duke of Parma wanted to negotiate peace with the English queen. Elizabeth agreed, but Philip believed the Catholics in England would help by rising up against the Queen and ordered the invasion to go ahead as planned.

Disease and infection, due to poor food, wreaked havoc on the crew, and made it difficult to reach England. The Spanish Armada suffered another storm in the Gulf of Vizaya, with the loss of some ships. These were discovered by one of Drake's men who rushed to warn him.

The battle

The Duke of Medina Sidonia decided to anchor in Calais where he learnt that the Duke of Parma (annoyed at being under the command of Medina Sidonia) would not provide support. . On the morning of July 31, 1588 began the first clashes between both sides. The Spanish attempted to relocate the fleet in order to take on supplies when they were attacked by the English. This was the battle of Gravelines which was the most important of the campaign. The battle can be seen from different points of view. The English fleet was better with more prestigious and better trained marines; they also displayed greater artillery power. The Spanish tried the direct approach, but the English prevented them from doing so. The Spanish tried to avoid the dispersion of the fleet, fought with courage and showed extraordinary resilience. Their bravery made them famous all over the world. After the initial contacts the ship San Salvador was lost as the result of an explosion of several barrels of gunpowder. Another huge vessel of 1150 tons was left behind and fell to Drake's troops. A rain of missiles caused an enormous amount of ammunition to be used by the Spanish fleet but only inflicted minor damage to the English fleet. Then the Spanish made the terrible mistake of running out of ammunition at the beginning of the battle. Knowing this fact the English gave no quarter to the Spanish vessels and caused tremendous damage. The Spanish lost six hundred dead and several hundred were captured and imprisoned. The British lost about sixty men and no ships. The Spanish Navy was still largely intact but without ammunition they could do very little. Something similar happened to the English as they too were low on ammunition and so they could not pursue the Spanish ships. To continue the campaign was difficult for both.

The real reasons of the disaster

After the Battle of Gravelines the British fleet withdrew, but the Spanish navy suffered another storm. Then Medina Sidonia decided to return to Spain, The British blocked the Channel so forcing the Spanish towards the Shetland Islands, northern Scotland and then Ireland. It was during this period that more than forty ships were destroyed by a big storm off the west coast of Ireland. The Irish cruelly killed several Spanish. Meanwhile, more than 90 ships managed to reach Santander in Spain.

Philip II believed he could organize a massive naval fleet from his retirement in El Escorial, but never expressed his intention to consult the army or its officers

It is considered possible that the Marquis of Santa Cruz died of a heart attack brought about by continuing accusations and denials of the king

Philip II believed that the English Protestants were a minority and that Catholics were the majority.

British ships were better and the men were much more professional than the Spanish. The Spanish navy suffered continuous storms.

Spain had no significant material losses. In a few years rebuilt its naval power, but Protestant Europe considered that Spain had lost its hegemony in the world.

The other story

In the 80's five teams of researchers analyzed different Spanish, French and English archives of that age. It has been 20 years since they published the results of that investigation. The result is that the navy was a convoy of 120 ships of various types, many were hired and these ships had not intended to invade England but were only for transporting soldiers, ammunition and food. The Duke of Parma, who was head of the thirds of Flanders, did not respond to the six messages sent by the Duke of Medina Sidonia which was to move up the channel to coordinate the operation. But this failed. In the battle of the Gravelines, Calais, no one was beaten; the Spanish navy was not destroyed as the British could not pursue it for lack of ammunition. On the way back to Spain the Spanish navy suffered from some big storms that destroyed some of the ships but the bulk of the fleet (100 ships) returned to the Bay of Biscay, most to Santander, where 9,000 were treated for injuries.

The "English, Contraarmada" sent over 200 vessels in order to destroy the ships of Philip II that were being repaired in the village of "Astillero". But Francis Drake disobeyed the Queen and went to La Coruna to capture a supposed treasure ship. Once surrounded the city a lieutenant carrying a flag got up to the top of the wall. Maria Pita killed the soldier and brandishing a sword said: "Whoever has honour, he must follow me". This attitude displayed by the Spanish demoralized Drake's troops and he withdrew them from A Coruña. So Drake went to Lisbon (Portugal was at that moment part of the Spanish Kingdom) where he tried to turn the Portuguese against Philip II, but was unsuccessful. In this "Contraarmada" many Englishmen died and lost lots of ships, however these facts were not as well known as the battle of Gravelines.