

Information sheet no 103

Spanish Armada

The Spanish Armada (known as Grande y Felicísima Armada – great and most fortunate navy) was a great fleet assembled by King Philip II of Spain with the task of transporting and assisting the Prince of Parma's large invading army from the Spanish Netherlands to attack Elizabeth I's Protestant England and re-instate the Catholic Church. The Armada consisted of 130 ships - 33 galleons and 4 galleasses. It was commanded by the Duke of Medina Sidonia, a cousin of the King. He was an accomplished soldier but had barely any experience of sea command.

The Armada sailed from Lisbon on 28 May 1588 but it made little headway due to bad weather, forcing them into harbour at Corunna twenty days later. The fleet stayed there for repairs, water and provisions for a month before setting out again.

The Spanish fleet was sighted off the Lizard in Cornwall on 19 July. The sighting has given rise to the apocryphal story of Sir Francis Drake sighting the fleet while playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe. The English fleet comprised 129 ships; the main part of the fleet – 94 ships - was in Plymouth under the command of Lord Howard of Effingham, the Lord High Admiral, with Drake as Vice Admiral. The remaining fleet was at Dover commanded by Lord Henry Seymour with the task of watching for the arrival of Parma's army in the Netherlands.

The English fleet set sail from Plymouth on the night of 19/20 July and the battle began on the 21 off the Eddystone, Plymouth. The Spanish lost two ships in this encounter, the *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* and *San Salvador*. The next nine days saw a running battle along the English Channel. The Armada sailed in a crescent formation which made it difficult for the English fleet to attack. However, the English ships were smaller and easier to manoeuvre. They bombarded the Armada from a distance using their guns at their longest effective range. The Armada used fighting tactics for close quarter boarding and was unused to constant gun-firing. They found it difficult to counter-attack. The Spanish were attacked continuously like this for four days.

Two days later, a squadron under the command of Sir Martin Frobisher engaged the Spanish off Portland Bill. The Armada planned to anchor off the Isle of Wight hoping to establish a base from which to assist the invasion. They were thwarted when the English fleet attacked in small groups and Sidonia ordered the Spanish fleet to sail on. The weather and winds made a significant contribution to the outcome but the English fleet was fast running out of ammunition and despite pleas for more assistance from the government, little arrived.

With no communication from Parma regarding the readiness of the Spanish troops and needing a deep water harbour for his ships, Sidonia sailed and anchored the fleet at Calais on the 27 July. The following night, the English attacked the Spanish with fireships. These were small vessels filled with combustible



Information sheet no 103

material. The ships sailed as close to the enemy as possible with a skeleton crew. The crew would secure the helm on the same course and hitch the ship with a grappling iron to the enemy vessel. The combustible materials would be ignited with a slow charge and the crew made their escape in a small boat which had been towed astern or alongside the fireship. The use of fireships could cause untold damage to a closely anchored fleet. Despite efforts to divert the attack, the Spanish ships were forced to cut their anchors and scatter. In disarray, the Spaniards were then engaged in a fierce battle by the English fleet off Gravelines. Driven by the wind, the Spaniards were in danger of being driven onto the Dutch shoals and dangerous shallow waters; they were saved only by a change in wind direction.

The Spanish were now themselves short of ammunition and provisions and having lost three of their best ships in the battle, there was no hope of invasion and little chance of fighting their way back down the Channel. The only option left to them was to sail round Scotland and the west of Ireland to return to Spain. The battered Armada retreated up the North Sea pursued by the English. Howard left Seymour's squadron on station to watch for any movement by Parma. He eventually abandoned the chase as provisions and supplies were low. A few small English pinnaces continued to harry the Spanish until they were past the Orkneys, after which they were then committed to sailing down the Irish Sea for their return.

The weather continued to deteriorate and many Spanish ships were wrecked on the rocky coasts of Scotland and Ireland. The ships were pillaged and their crews slaughtered. Only 67 ships out of the original 130 returned and at least 10,000 men had been lost. The "invincible" Armada had been defeated.