

DEFEAT OF THE SPANISH ARMADA

1588

Robert Carey

In 1588, one of the greatest battles in naval history took place when Philip II of Spain sent his armada, a fleet of about 130 ships, to invade England. The Spanish king wanted to stop English piracy and restore Roman Catholicism in England. Although the Spanish Armada had more ships, the English fleet was faster and had more long-range cannons. In the following selection, an Englishman at the battle describes the events that led to the defeat of the Spanish.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Causes

According to Carey's account, what were the key happenings that caused the Spanish defeat?

The next yeare the king of Spain's great Armado came upon our coast, thinking to devour us all. Upon the newes sent to court from Plimouth¹ of their certain arrivall, my Lord Cumberland and myselfe tooke post horse, and rode streight to Portsmouth,² where we found a frigot that carried us to sea; and having sought for the fleets a whole day, the night after wee fell amongst them: where it was our fortune to light first on the Spanish fleet; and finding ourselves in the wrong, we tackt about, and in short time gott to our own fleet, which was not farre from the other. At our coming aboard our Admirall,³ wee stay'd there awhile; but finding the ship much pestered and scant of cabins, we left the Admirall and went aboard Captain Reyman, where wee stay'd and were very welcome, and much made of.

It was on Thursday that wee came to the fleet. All that day wee followed close the Spanish Armado, and nothing was attempted on either side: the same course wee held all Friday and Saturday, by which time the Spanish fleet cast anchor just before Calais.⁴ We likewise did the same, a very small distance behind them, and so continued till Monday morning about two of the clocke; in which time our counsaile of warre had provided six old hulkes and stuffed them full of all combustible matter fitt for burning, and on Monday at two in the morning they were lett loose, with each of them a man in her to direct them. The tide serving they brought them very near the Spanish fleet, so that they could not misse to come amongst the midst of them; then they set fire on them, and came off themselves, having each of them a little boate to bring him off. The ships set on fire, came so directly to the Spanish fleet, as they had no way to avoid them, but to cut all their halsers, and so escape; and their haste was such that they left one of their four great galeasses on ground before Calais, which our men took and had the spoil of,

1. **Plimouth:** an English port in southwestern England on the English Channel

2. **Portsmouth:** an English port in southern England on the English Channel

3. **our Admirall:** Charles Howard, commander of the English fleet

4. **Calais:** a seaport in northwestern France

where many of the Spaniards were slaine with the governour thereof, but most of them were saved with wading ashore to Calais.

They being in this disorder, wee made ready to follow them, where began a cruell fight, and wee had such advantage both of wind and tide as wee had a glorious day of them; continuing fight from foure o'clocke in the morning, till almost five or six at night, where they lost a douzen or fourteene of their best shippes, some sunke, and the rest ranne ashore in diverse parts to keep themselves from sinking. After God had given us this great victory, they made all the hast they could away, and wee followed them Tuesday and Wednesday, by which time they were gotten as farre as Flamboroughhead. It was resolved on Wednesday at night, that by four o'clocke on Thursday, wee should have a new fight with them for a farewell; but by two in the morning, there was a flagge of counsaile hung out in our Vice-Admirall, when it was found that in the whole fleet there was not munition sufficient to make halfe a fight; and therefore it was concluded that we should let them passe, and our fleet to return to the Downes.⁵ That night wee parted with them, wee had a mighty storme. Our fleet cast anchor, and endured it; but the Spanish fleet, wanting their anchors, were many of them cast ashore on the west of Ireland, where they had all their throates cutt by the kernes⁶; and some of them on Scotland, where they were no better used; and the rest (with much adoe) gott into Spaine againe. Thus did God blesse us, and gave victory over this invincible navy; the sea calmed, and all our shippes came to the Downes on Friday in safety.

Source: Excerpt from *Memoirs of the Life of Robert Carey* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759).

5. **the Downes:** an anchorage for ships off the southeast coast of England

6. **kernes:** Irish soldiers

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Robert Carey explained that the English attacked the Armada by sending burning ships into their midst. In order to get away from the burning ships, the Spanish had to cut their anchors. In the ensuing battle, the English had the advantage of the wind and the tide. Later, a fierce storm hit. Because the Spanish did not have anchors, the Armada ran aground on the Irish coast. Many survivors were killed by Irish soldiers.