

THE INVINCIBLE ARMY

In 1588, 'la felicissima armada', or 'the most fortunate fleet' was made up of 150 ships, mainly Spanish, but with some from Portugal and Naples. At the time, it was the largest fleet ever seen in Europe.

Who planned the Armada campaign?

It was planned by King Philip II of Spain, who intended to sail with his navy and army, a total of around 30,000 men, up the English Channel to link up with the forces led by the Duke of Parma in the Spanish Netherlands. From there they would invade England and bring the country under the Catholic rule of Spain.



Philip II

Why did Philip II want to invade England?

There were several important reasons why Philip wanted to fight with England. These were centred around the religious differences between the two countries, and the competition for trade and expansion in the 'new world' of the Americas. Also, Queen Elizabeth executed the catholic Queen Mary of Scots, because she was plotting against her, and helped the 'Sea Beggars', a small group of Protestant noblemen who were determined to drive the Spanish out of the Netherlands

How did the Armada campaign begin?

The Spanish fleet kept a strict crescent formation which the English realised would be very difficult to break. Their only chance was to get the wind behind them and try and attack any stragglers. The English ships were longer, lower and faster than before. The castles fore and aft had been lowered to give greater stability, and this meant more guns could be carried to fire lethal broadsides. The ships were also more manoueverable than the heavy Spanish vessels.



Queen Elizabeth I

Who was the commander of the Spanish Armada?

The commander of the great Armada was the Duke of Medina Sidonia. On board, he had a large army of soldiers ready for battle on English soil with armour and cannon from Germany and Italy. The Duke had set out on the enterprise with some reluctance, for he was aware of the superiority of English ships, but hoped he would be able to join with the forces of the Duke of Parma in the Netherlands and have safe deep anchorage for his fleet before the invasion of England.

Who was the commander of the British Army?

The commander of the British Army was Sir Francis Drake, who joined the navy as a young boy and sought his fortune in the 'new world'. One way he made his name was by attacking treasure ships sailing back to Spain from America. One of his most daring acts was to 'singe the King of Spain's beard', by setting alight Spanish ships in Cadiz harbour in 1586.

The battles

Once the Armada had anchored off Calais the English decided to send in fireships. They filled eight old vessels with inflammable material and waited for the wind to send the burning ships towards the enemy ships, hoping to set them alight. At midnight, when the fireships approached with the wind, the Spanish cut their anchor cables ready for flight. In the darkness many ships collided with each other as the Armada scattered, but none were set on fire.



Next morning, there was the fiercest fighting of the whole Armada campaign during the Battle of Gravelines. By evening the wind was strong and the Spanish expected a further attack at dawn, but as both sides were out of ammunition none came. That afternoon the wind changed and the Spanish ships were blown off the sandbanks and towards the North Sea. With no support from the Duke of Parma, Medina Sidonia's aim was to bring the remains of the Armada back to Spain.

Did the Armada manage to return to Spain?

In the north of Scotland, the Armada met very stormy weather. Many ships were wrecked off the rocky coasts of Scotland and Ireland. Of the 150 ships that set out, 65 returned to Lisbon. The following year, Philip sent another smaller armada of about a 100 ships. This ran into stormy weather off Cornwall and was blown back to Spain. It was not until the reign of James I that peace was finally made after the conference at Somerset House in 1604.

Note: The term "Invincible Armada" was not a Spanish one. It was a sarcastic phrase employed by later English commentators.

Bibliography

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Question

1. Which were the reasons for the battle?
2. Why did the Invincible Army fail?

