

38 An Armada Is a Fleet of Ships

An **isthmus** is a narrow neck of land joining two larger landmasses. Do you know what happened to the Isthmus of Panama?



After their first battle with the Armada, the English almost ran out of gunpowder.

England wanted some of that Spanish gold, and she got it the only way she could: by stealing it. Some Englishmen said that since the Spaniards had stolen the gold from the Indians, they had a right to steal it from the Spaniards. What do you think of that argument?

An Englishman named Francis Drake didn't consider arguments at all. He just went after Spanish treasure. Drake was a daring and fearless seaman. He hated the Spaniards, and they didn't like him either. Queen Elizabeth gave him a privateering commission, and he used it to raid Spanish ports, sink Spanish ships, and burn Spanish towns. On the Isthmus of Panama he captured three mule trains heaped with 30 tons of silver and loaded the loot onto his ships. Everywhere he landed, Drake struck terror and gathered riches.



Drake captured treasure worth twice the queen's income on his world voyage.

In 1577 Drake sailed through the Straits of Magellan and into the Pacific Ocean. His ship, the *Golden Hind*, was the first English vessel to reach the western side of America. Spanish ships were unguarded on that western coast because they thought they were safe from privateers. Then along came Drake. Near the coast of Peru he captured a huge treasure ship full of gold. The *Golden Hind* became so heavy with gold it began to ride low in the water. That didn't stop Drake. He sailed on—to California and even farther north—trying to find the Northwest Passage from the West Coast. When he couldn't find it, he headed west, to China, picked up spices, and brought everything home to the queen. It was quite a haul for Drake, England, and the queen. The English people

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were proud: Drake was the first sea captain to take a ship around the world. (Remember, Magellan hadn't lived to finish his voyage.) The queen made Drake a knight; he was now Sir Francis Drake.

In England he was a national hero, as famous as anyone in his time. But to the Spanish ambassador he was "the master-thief of the unknown world." That should tell you something about history. One nation's hero is often another's villain.

Even though some of her treasure ships were being captured, Spain was still the greatest power in the world—at least that is what everyone in Europe thought. So, in 1588, when the Spaniards sent a great fleet of ships—called an *armada*—to fight against England, all Europe was agog. A Spanish duke went to the Netherlands (where Holland and Belgium are now) prepared to invade England. The Pope blessed the venture. It was easy to predict who would win this fight.

Only it didn't happen that way. When the mighty Spanish armada faced the smaller English navy, some astonishing things happened. The big Spanish galleons weren't prepared for the small, fast English ships. Besides, the Spaniards expected to fight in the traditional way—by boarding enemy ships and fighting hand-to-hand. They were good at that. The English wouldn't oblige. They set old ships on fire and sent them into the crowded armada. (That was Drake's idea.) The winds were fierce, the ships were wooden—and you can guess what happened. The underdog England won. Spain lost 63 ships and about 20,000 men. England did not lose a single ship, except those that were purposely set on fire. Only 100 Englishmen died.

After that, power began to shift. France and England became the nations to watch, especially in North America.

After fire ships broke up the Armada, the tattered fleet had to sail northward, around Britain, to get away. Many ships were wrecked.

While the Spanish were preparing the Armada, Drake made a sneak attack. He took 24 ships right into the Spanish harbor of Cadiz, where the warships were at anchor, and captured or destroyed 37 of them. He returned to England and declared he had "sing'd the king of Spain's beard."

*The Spanish Armada met its fate
In fifteen hundred and eighty-eight.*

