

On the 29th of July, 1588—a Friday that year—a lookout on the southern coast of England spotted sails around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The Spanish Armada was approaching Britain's coast.

Waiting for this moment, England's Lord High Admiral (Charles Howard, also known as Howard of Effingham) and his second-in-command (Sir Francis Drake) made ready to defend their country.

Admiral Lord Howard (the Queen's cousin) sailed aboard the *Ark Royal* (which the Queen had purchased from Sir Walter Raleigh to serve as England's flagship). Drake (then considered England's greatest sailor) was beloved by his men (whom he considered as equals when they were onboard ship).

The future of their country depended on these two men and the decisions they would make in the coming days.

British ships were in port, in Plymouth, when the Armada approached the English Channel. Unfortunately for Howard and his ships, the wind was blowing inland (exactly opposite the direction they needed) and the tide was coming in (also exactly wrong for their departure plans).

Before Howard could give the order to sail, the tide had to turn. Meanwhile, his men and ships were trapped in Plymouth harbor as the Armada approached.

Had the Spaniards not followed their King's explicit order not to engage the enemy but to sail straight to Calais, the results of the Spanish Armada's 1588 visit to England may have been different. But ... those are not the facts. Medina-Sedonia did not order what could have been a decisive attack on the port-bound English ships.

When the tide was in, and the British ships could finally sail into Plymouth Sound, the wind was still blowing from the wrong direction. Howard and Drake planned to split their forces, aiming to get west (or behind) the Armada, but to make that happen they would have to sail *into* the wind.

Even today, sailing directly into the wind is not easy. In 1588, it was even more difficult because of the way ships were built. Maps depicting the route of the English, as they left Plymouth, often show zig-zag markings. That's because the British ships had to "tack" (move in a zig-zag direction) in order to get behind the Armada.

As the English ships were getting into their preferred position, Medina-Sedonia and his men did not know where the British were located. Then ... on Sunday, the 31st of July, the Spaniards realized that the British were behind them. They also realized that the Brits were preparing to attack.

Comparatively, the number of ships alone would cause one to think that Britain was doomed. England had 55 vessels (including 11 in Drake's squadron). Spain had more than 120 ships (including huge galleons with around 50 large guns each).

It wasn't just the number of ships which gave Spain the advantage. They employed a crescent formation which positioned the Spanish ships closely together. It would be very difficult for British sailors to break that defensive position, allowing them to attack individual enemy ships.

Spaniards waited for the British ships to get within grappling-hook distance (so their soldiers could board and attack the enemy).

British sailors used their guns to batter Spanish ships. At all costs they wanted to maintain a grappling-hook-safe distance.

Credits:

Clip from "Battlefield Britain," an [8-episode series](#) (produced by Danielle Peck) and distributed by the BBC. This clip is from Episode 4, "The Spanish Armada," which originally aired on 27 August 2004.

Presented by Peter and Dan Snow; produced and directed by Nathan Willians.

viewers with the program.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Spanish-Armada-English-and-Spanish-Ships-Differ>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Spanish-Armada-English-and-Spanish-Ships-Differ>