

INTRODUCTION

I. THE PREPARATION OF THE ARMADA

(a) *The Concentration in La Coruña*

As a result of the great victory of Nördlingen (September 6th, 1634), the young Cardinal-Infant Ferdinand, brother of Philip IV of Spain, made a triumphal entry into the Spanish Netherlands with the troops he had brought from Italy. But the effect of this success was not so favourable to the Imperialist cause as might have been expected, for the increased danger from the victorious arms of Spain and Austria tended to draw their rivals of Sweden, Holland and France closer together—a tendency which was confirmed in the Congress held at Hamburg in 1638.

In the meantime the Cardinal-Infant had more than held his own in Belgium against the attacks of France and Holland on two fronts. Breda, it is true, was lost to the Prince of Orange, Frederik Hendrik, in October 1637 after a determined resistance; but after this success, the Stadtholder, racked by gout and hampered by the intestine quarrels and provincial jealousies of the various States of Holland, relapsed into inactivity. Ferdinand on the contrary, after carrying the war almost to the very gates of Paris in 1636, avenged the loss of Breda by taking the offensive against the Dutch, and captured Roermond and Venlo. Nor was this all. In 1638 the Prince of Orange attempted to carry out the design on which his heart was secretly set, namely the capture of Antwerp,¹ but his plans were completely upset by the severe defeat inflicted upon a detached portion of his army under Count Willem van Nassau, by the Spaniards at the Dike of Calloo in June 1638. Nevertheless,

¹ The fear of Amsterdam that Frederik Hendrik had ulterior designs on the assumption of the Crown, frequently led that city to oppose and obstruct his plans. He himself said to D'Éstrades in this connection, "je n'ai pas de plus grands ennemis que la ville d'Amsterdam, mais si j'ai une fois Anvers, je les mettray si bas, qu'ils ne s'en relèveront jamais".

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even these victories cost the Spaniards dear. Their losses at Calloo amounted to 1300 killed in half-an-hour's fighting, so that as one of their writers states, "they lost as much in men as they gained in reputation".

In view of this, it is therefore not surprising that the Cardinal-Infant addressed numerous and urgent appeals for reinforcements of men and money to the Court at Madrid. Nor did these appeals fall on deaf ears. Many members of the Council of State in Madrid had themselves served in the wars in Flanders, and thus were able fully to appreciate and to sympathise with the predicament of the Cardinal-Infant at Brussels. But although it was agreed that a determined effort should be made to send large and powerful reinforcements to Belgium, these could not be despatched overland like the force which Ferdinand had conducted in 1634. The reason for this was that Cardinal Richelieu had subsidised Bernhard von Weimar to enable him to take the field against the Imperialists in the Upper Rhine in 1638. Equipped with these supplies, Bernhard avenged his reverse of Nördlingen four years before by inflicting a crushing defeat upon the Imperialists at Rheinfelden, and before the year was out he had taken the strong fortress of Breisach, together with Breisgau and Freiburg. These successes not only opened the way of the French troops into Germany, but completely cut off the path of the Spanish reinforcements up the Rhine valley from Italy to Flanders. The only way left open for the despatch of men and money was therefore by sea. This of course was not a new way. On many previous occasions during the Thirty Years' War, troops had been sent to Dunkirk from Northern Spain and the undertaking had successfully been carried out in the two previous years.¹

In September 1637 Don Lope de Hoces had set sail from La Coruña with a strong fleet carrying men and money which he successfully landed at Dunkirk; on his return voyage, he had the good fortune to fall in with some French and Dutch convoys, with the result that he entered La Coruña with

¹ For the transport of troops by sea between Flanders and Spain during the Thirty Years' War, see *Militärische Seetransporte von Spanien nach Flandern* (1631-9), by Dr F. Graefe in the *Marine-Rundschau*, 1927, Heft 1, 2, 3.

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12 prizes, having destroyed as many ships by fire. In December of the same year he left on a second similar mission which was likewise successfully accomplished. Evading the fleet of Tromp and Witte de With which was cruising on the look-out for him between Portland Bill and Alderney, De Hoces sailed close along the English coast, in company with a Dunkirk squadron which had been sent to meet him; and having slipped past the Dutch fleet in the darkness and mist on December 12th, he came safely to Dunkirk with 38 sail carrying 5000 soldiers and a large store of bullion. His return voyage to Spain in March 1638 was even more profitable, for he entered La Coruña with about 20 Dutch and French prizes.¹

The success of these expeditions led the Council of State at Madrid to determine upon an even more ambitious programme for 1639. They knew that although the Spaniards had twice evaded the watching fleet of the Hollanders, they could scarcely hope to do so a third time, whilst the powerful French fleet threatening their coasts had also to be reckoned with.² They therefore determined to assemble such an Armada, that its safety would not depend on its evading the enemy fleets, but that it would be of sufficient strength to force its way through to Dunkirk, if necessary, in the teeth of the combined Franco-Dutch squadrons.

With this object in view orders were given by the Court of Madrid to concentrate all available troops and ships which could be assembled by any means whatsoever, in the two maritime centres of La Coruña on the Atlantic Ocean, and Cartagena in the Mediterranean. The Italian contingents and that of Ragusa were to be assembled at Naples under the command of Don Antonio de Oquendo, and were to proceed thence to Cartagena and Cadiz to collect other troops and ships,

¹ C. Fernandez Duro, *Armada Española*, iv, pp. 170-1. Tromp's *Journal* for 1637-8.

² In 1638 the French invaded Northern Spain, captured and burnt the ports of Lezo, Renteria, and Pasajes in Guipuzcoa, together with some 16 galleons, built or building therein, and laid siege to Fuenterrabia. Don Lope de Hoces, trying to relieve this last place, was caught in the haven of Guetaria by the French fleet under De Sourdis, and the whole of the Spanish fleet was destroyed by a fireship attack with the loss of 4000 men, De Hoces himself escaping only in his shirt. (*Vide* C. de la Roncière, *Histoire de la Marine Française*, v, pp. 38-47, Paris 1920.)

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after which this squadron was to unite with that of Don Lope de Hoces in La Coruña. The concentration in this last port soon included some 35 ships, comprising the squadrons of Vizcaya, Galicia, Portugal and Dunkirk. The Dunkirk squadron had originally put to sea on February 18th with 22 sail carrying some 2000 Walloon soldiers destined for Spain,¹ but the blockading squadron of Tromp had forced them to put back into the harbour with the loss of three of their ships, two of which were carried as prizes into Holland. The Dutch themselves had received such damage that they were temporarily compelled to give up the blockade, and on the day before Tromp left Holland to resume his post off the port, the Dunkirkers made their escape with 18 sail which duly arrived in La Coruña with 12 prizes that they had picked up on the way.

Amongst the troops raised to serve in this expedition, there were four *terços* or regiments which were formed in Portugal. One of these was commanded by Dom Francisco Manuel de Mello, who has left us a long account of the whole expedition,² and originally mustered 500 Portuguese and 600 Spanish soldiers, though the number of the latter was subsequently increased. The five Spanish regiments were commanded by the *Mestres de Campo* (or Colonels) D. Jerónimo de Aragón, D. Martin Alfonso de Sarria, D. Antonio de Ulhôa (whose regiment was composed of raw Neapolitan recruits), D. Gaspar de Carvalhal and D. Francisco Palominas.

In order to raise the necessary levies for this expedition the Conde-Duque of Olivarez, who was the prime mover of the whole affair, arranged with some private contractors to supply recruits at 21 ducats a head. In pursuance of this arrangement the contractors were empowered to seize—and actually did

¹ It may seem odd that at the same time that the Spaniards were so desirous of sending men *to* Flanders, they should draw men away *from* that Province, but they were sorely in need of practised troops to withstand the French invasion. The idea was to send thousands of raw Iberian recruits to Flanders where they would be “licked into shape” in that school of warfare, whilst the Walloons would be repatriated in due course. In 1638 Olivarez wrote to the Cardinal-Infant, “The safety of Spain depends entirely on the coming of the Walloons”; and again, “. . . to rest assured, we require some 5000 Walloons”.

² In *Epanaphora* iv on pp. 445–571 of his *Epanaphoras de varia historia Portugueza*, 2nd edition, Lisboa 1676.

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seize—more than 10,000 men from amongst all classes throughout the whole of Spain without regard to their age, occupation or walk of life. So thoroughly did the crimps do their work, that when some grandees tried to raise from their estates the men which they were bound to supply for the royal service, they could not find a single man to serve, although they offered 16 *reals* per diem as pay. Dom Manuel relates numerous instances of the abuses created by this press, and states that parts of Spain were almost entirely depopulated as a result of it.

The Armada of De Hoces¹ was made up of ships from the following squadrons. Some galleons of Vizcaya which had escaped the disasters of the previous year; they appear to have been under the personal command of De Hoces. The squadron of Galicia commanded by Don Andrés de Castro with Don Francisco Feijó as Almirante or Vice-Admiral. This latter individual was a brave and capable but unfortunate officer, and Dom Manuel observes that he was the author of an important treatise on naval warfare and tactics entitled *El Sargento Embarcado*. Portugal was represented by three vessels, the *Santa Anna*, *Santiago*, and the *capitana* or flagship *Santa Tereza*, which mounted 60 great guns of bronze, and carried 600 musketeers. This 1200 ton monster was the largest and most powerful ship in the fleet, and as Dom Manuel remarks, was worth an entire squadron in herself. This galleon had been built in Lisbon by Bento Francisco, the greatest Portuguese shipwright of the century.² There were also some vessels from Naples under the Almirante Don Pedro Veles de Medrano, whilst the squadron of San José, commanded by Francisco Sanches Guadalupe, was included in this La Coruña concentra-

¹ Don Lope de Hoces y Cordova was a noble *caballero* of the city of his second name, and a brave and experienced seaman. He commanded fleets to and from the Indies from 1619 till 1636 on numerous occasions, and always with success. His expeditions to Dunkirk in 1637–8 were also successful, as we have seen, but Fortune subsequently deserted him until his death in this present expedition.

² Over whom see Sousa Viterbo, *Trabalhos Nauticos dos Portuguezes*, II, pp. 57–9, Lisboa 1900. Peter Munday, who visited her in the Downs, calls her “the Fairest and biggest shippe off them all. Shee was built For an East India Carracke, & afterwards appointed for this Expedition.” Some Portuguese writers say that she was expressly built as flagship for the European fleet, but Munday’s statement that she was intended for a *Ndo da Carreira da India* is probably correct.

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tion; but the best ships in it were those of the famous Dunkirk squadron under the command of the celebrated Miguel de Orna,¹ of which squadron Dom Manuel gives a curious account which it is interesting to compare with that in Henri Malo's work.² The vice-admiral of this squadron was Mathieu Rombout, who had been captured by the Hollanders under Piet Pietersz Heyn in 1629, whilst other celebrated captains included Josse Pieters, Salvador Rodriguez and Francisco Ferreira. Both these last-named individuals were Portuguese; Rodriguez, who was born at Almada near Lisbon, had risen from grumet in a Portuguese Indiaman to the post of Vice-Admiral of Dunkirk in the space of 39 years. Whilst still a lad, he had been captured by the English in an engagement with Downton's fleet in Swalley Hole, January 1615. Francisco Ferreira was a native of Angra do Heroismo in the Azores.

As it was well known to the Spaniards that the French fleet was likely to put in an appearance off the coast of Galicia to interfere with the concentration of this Armada, the Court at Madrid ordered the Governor of the Province, the Marquis of Valparaiso, to superintend the arrangements for its defence. Accordingly Valparaiso began to assemble the hordes of pressed and ill-found recruits within La Coruña, dividing them up into *terços* as they came in.³ Not content with this, the Governor called out all the local militia, gentry and nobility, and by this means he collected 18,000 men within a narrow, impoverished town which could not properly support half of their number. The natural result of this foolish proceeding was that many of the men sickened and died, whilst famine and disease ranged unchecked throughout the fleet and army. In addition to this, there were not nearly enough arms or munitions to go round amongst this ill-assorted rabble, so that in the event of the threatened French invasion materialising, there was not much hope of an effective resistance being offered. The sailors, who also mistrusted the efficiency of their fellow soldiers, determined to secure their ships by constructing a large boom

¹ Or De Horna. Born at Pamplona in Navarra Province of N. Spain. Under the name of Michiel Doorn he was well known to the Hollanders as one of their doughtiest opponents.

² *Les Corsaires Dunkerquois et Jean Bart*, 1, Paris 1911.

³ Five of these regiments were formed.

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across the harbour, from Fort San Antonio on the one side to that of Santa Luzia on the other; this boom was anchored by 50 strong sheet-anchors, and had a gap cut in the middle to permit of the entrance or exit of one ship at a time; the structure was further defended by ten well-manned shallops armed with swivel guns which patrolled around it day and night, and by batteries thrown up at vantage points on the shore. Dom Manuel assures us, however, that the real force of the boom by no means corresponded to the impression of prodigious strength which it produced in friends and foes alike. These preparations were still far from complete when the long-awaited French fleet appeared in sight.

(b) *The French Expedition to La Coruña*

Despite the annihilation of the relieving squadron of Lope de Hoces by De Sourdis in Guetaria (August 22nd, 1638), Fuenterrabia had gallantly held out until September 8th, when a relieving army under the Admiral of Castile and the Marquis of Valparaiso utterly defeated the besiegers under Condé and La Valette, and drove the French back over the border in headlong rout.

Richelieu was cut to the quick by the shame of this disaster and determined to strain every nerve to avenge it in the following year. Hence the appearance on June 9th, 1639, of a great French Armada of 73 sail carrying 25 companies of foot soldiers, off Cape Prior, some six leagues N.N.E. of La Coruña.¹

The Governor—although, as we have seen, he was fully aware of an impending attack—had not yet allocated the various regiments to their posts, and consequently when the alarm was given, all was confusion worse confounded. Dom Manuel de Mello gives us a very graphic picture of the panic and despair which reigned in the town. He shrewdly observes that whilst the Spaniards individually are the most active and determined people in Europe, in matters affecting the common weal they are the laziest and most irresolute, and this (he says) was the reason for much of the ill-success of their

¹ De Sourdis' fleet comprised 40 ships of war, 21 fireships and 12 transports.

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arms. Dom Manuel's own regiment¹ garrisoned the trenches defending the boom, and the fort of San Antonio which was the key to the position.

The cavalry, who were few in numbers and ill-armed, patrolled the beaches and the surrounding country, whilst various other units were stationed along the walls.

Shortly before the appearance of the French Armada, an English ship laden with cloth for the uniforms of the garrison arrived in La Coruña. The master of this vessel handed to the Spanish Governor a letter from the French commander stating "that he had captured that ship, and being informed of the needs of the Spanish soldiers, he sent it on as a present, and as a token that His Most Christian Majesty of France did not desire to make war upon his enemies with the aid of the elements, but only by force of arms and the justice of his cause".

Four days after this chivalrous message had been delivered, De Sourdis and his captains drew up a plan of attack at a nocturnal Council of War on June 10th.² One division was to mask the fort of San Antonio, another that of Santa Luzia, whilst the pinnaces of the fleet supported by 12 lightships were to try to hack a way through the boom; when a gap had been made, 12 fireships were to enter the harbour protected by another detachment of heavier ships, whilst the largest ships of the fleet were to cruise in the offing, ready either to meet any attack from the rear or to prevent the sallying-out of the blockaded Spanish ships. On the 11th, however, a further Council was held, and the majority of the French captains declared that the attempt would be foredoomed to failure owing to the converging fire from the forts and to the (imagined) strength of the boom. Despite the protests of a few bold spirits led by Abraham Du Quesne (later Admiral of France), the views of the majority prevailed, and De Sourdis cancelled the plan of attack. But he still did not give up hope of inducing the Spaniards to venture out, and dispatched a cartel to De Hoces, challenging him to come out and fight either ship for ship or squadron for squadron.³ De Hoces prudently declined

1 Which consisted of 570 Portuguese and 600 Castilians—1170 men in all.

2 Details from C. de la Roncière, *op. cit.* pp. 50–4.

3 Henri d'Escoubleau de Sourdis, Archbishop of Bordeaux at the age of 34, was a sailor by inclination though not by profession. He served at the defence of

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the offer and contented himself with sending out each day eight or ten Dunkirk frigates which sailed up and down outside the boom, but under the protection of the forts and galleons, exchanging occasional broadsides at long range with the French vessels, which on their side showed no disposition to close. Dom Manuel assures us that had the French been bold enough to attack within a few days of their first appearance they would undoubtedly have taken the place and burnt or sunk the galleons. He states that not only was there a general panic amongst the raw recruits of whom the garrison was composed, but that the supply of powder and shot was so scanty that express orders were issued that it was only to be used as a last recourse. To make matters worse, the Iberian captains quarrelled fiercely between themselves, whilst the place was hourly alarmed by the rumours and forebodings which spread amongst the soldiery and populace.

The blockade was not without an element of comic relief. De Sourdis had commenced a desultory long range bombardment of the city soon after his arrival, and one of the shots fell in the courthouse of the magistrates who had assembled to discuss the preparations for defence. Dom Manuel describes with evident gusto the terror caused by this incident amongst the lawyers, and he adds that after this occasion they invariably met in a subterranean cellar which served as a storehouse for provisions. The bombardment ceased with the sortie of the Dunkirk frigates, as the French were too occupied with them to continue their first efforts.

The appearance of an archbishop as the head of a fighting force caused great scandal to the whole of Spain,¹ and what

Ré against the English, at the siege of La Rochelle, and was appointed to the chief command in the Mediterranean in 1636, in fact if not in name. He retook the Lérins isles from the Spaniards in 1637, and in 1638 destroyed the fleet of De Hoces in Guetaria. He was the chief exponent of fireships, which arm of the service he brought to a high pitch of perfection, and used against the Spaniards with great skill. He was disgraced (on very inadequate grounds) for failing to prevent the Spaniards from relieving Tarragona in 1641 and died in exile.

¹ Duro, referring to the refusal of the Pope to grant a dispensation to De Sourdis enabling him to bear arms, says that His Holiness thought that it ill became a Prelate to prefer the smoke of gunpowder to that of incense! But the Spaniards might have saved their breath to cool their own porridge, for in the person of the Cardinal-Infant, Governor of Flanders, they possessed one of the

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irritated the Spaniards still more was the sight of the French ships riding off the bar “as if they had already completed the victory rather than only begun the battle”. Dom Manuel mentions in particular the vast size and imposing dimensions of the vice-admiral ship called *La Reine*, which was named in honour of the Queen Mother, Anne of Austria, although he adds that she was a very clumsy and unsatisfactory vessel from the sea-going point of view.¹

On June 23rd De Sourdis landed some 2500 men in the neighbourhood of Ferrol with orders to occupy that port. The Spaniards were on their guard, and Don Juan Fardo de Figueroa, the commander of the garrison, with the assistance of 2000 men hurriedly sent him by Valparaiso from La Coruña, forced the French to retire to their landing place after some four hours' skirmishing. De Sourdis intended to land more men on the next day to renew the attempt, but a storm sprang up and it was only with great difficulty that the crews already landed were disengaged and re-embarked. The weather grew steadily worse and mounted to a strong tempest from the S.S.E. On the advice of his captains, De Sourdis resolved to give up the blockade of La Coruña and seek the shelter of his home ports, whither the French set sail on the 24th. Before the rendezvous of Belle-Isle was reached, the fleet was scattered by a storm, and many of the ships had to put in to La Rochelle, Brest, Nantes and other ports, whilst the remainder, “all tottered and torn”, struggled into Belle-Isle.

Sourdis, however, “ne cède ni au mal, ni à la fortune”. He was resolved, he said, to finish by fire what the wind and water had denied him, and he still cherished hopes of repeating elsewhere his exploit at Guetaria. He proposed to Richelieu that he should attack either Fuenterrabia, Guetaria, Santander or La Coruña. Richelieu's reply was brief and to the point. Fuenterrabia would be a wasted effort, as Condé was in no condition to support the attack by land; Guetaria was not worth

doughtiest pillars of the Church Militant, whose “Apostolic blows and knocks” fell with equal force upon Catholic Frenchmen and Heretic Hollanders alike.

¹ Although Dom Manuel calls this vessel *Reyna*, I suspect she was really *La Couronne* launched shortly before, as this ship was of 2000 tons burthen and famous for her size. Also, it was *La Couronne* which was serving as Vice-Admiral to this fleet, in which *La Reine* (1000 tons) was Rear-Admiral.