



Mission: History

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1588: Defeat of Spanish Armada Marks Ascendancy For England, Decline for Spain, for Next 400 Years



THE SPANISH FLEET WAS ANCHORED off the Plaine des Flandres near Calais on the evening of 28 July 1588 when the English unleashed a small fleet of eight fireships at Medina Sidonia's tightly packed ships. Backed by a fresh onshore breeze, the flaming ships bore down on the Spaniards, double-shotted guns firing and throwing all into confusion.

Cables were cut and anchors lost as captains sought the safety of the open sea, but once at sea the ships were disorganized. They had left behind their leader and a few others to face Drake's squadron the next day in the Battle of Gravelines.

Painting by an unknown artist, National Maritime Museum, London

Philip's Hatred for Heretics, Englishmen Ruined Spain

The story of the Spanish Armada is one of those tales that make reading history high entertainment, for it involved so much more than an engagement between two naval fleets and included a galaxy of players that the mind can elevate to grand opera.

By the second half of the 16th Century, Spain had become the most power-

ful nation in the world. Her mariners and soldiers had conquered much of that half of the unexplored world granted to them by Pope Alexander VI when he drew his "line of demarcation" north and south through the Atlantic. Portugal was given "rights" to the other half, but now Spain had Portugal as the result of conquest in 1580.

By the 1580s, Spain and its king were at the peak of their influence. In addition to Philip II's European possessions, there were the Portuguese outposts in Africa

and across the Indian Ocean to India as well as the bulge in Brazil. Spain in her own name laid claim to the rest of South America, Central America and much of North America, including what is now California, Arizona, New Mexico and Florida. On the other side of the world, the Philippine Islands were named after Spain's king.

Philip II, the only legitimate son of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, had succeeded his father in Spain in 1556. For a time he

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Howard, Drake, Hawkins, Frobisher Too Much for Armada

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had been joint sovereign of England through his 1554 marriage to Mary I who is remembered by history as Bloody Mary for her persecution of Protestants. During that time, Philip had inherited the Habsburg possessions in the Netherlands, Italy and the New World, to go with the lands acquired through exploration.

The most significant achievement of Philip II in his 42-year reign was his participation in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 when, in alliance with Pope St. Pius V and the Republic of Venice, a combined fleet under Philip's half-brother, Don John of Austria (a beloved illegitimate son of Charles), defeated the fleet of the Turks, ending a threat of



Philip II of Spain

Moslem domination of the Mediterranean.

The Vatican faced a far graver threat from within Europe, that had begun when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg in 1517. The Protestant Reformation was regarded as a revolution by the Vatican and Philip was nothing if not a knight of the Vatican. He became champion of the Counter-Reformation, seeking to crush heretics and infidels alike. Queen Elizabeth of England was, in Philip's eyes, even worse. She was both heretic and murderess, for the blood of Mary, Queen of Scots was on her hands. He would invade England, return

her people to the bosom of the One True Church, and avenge the 1587 execution of the Scottish queen.

That is pretty much the background given for the Spanish Armada in elementary school classes at St. Augustine's School in the 1930s, but the



Elizabeth of England

rationale for Philip's attempted invasion of England was far more secular.

For one thing, the English were trifling with his Dutch possessions in



The Duke of Parma

northern Europe by supporting rebels who were attempting to win independence from Spain. Alexander Farnese, the Duke of Parma and Philip's governor general in the Netherlands, was a harsh master. With Philip's encouragement, William of Orange, the Protestant leader, had been assassinated and many others had been put to death. Parma had plans to crush Protestantism in the Netherlands and then cross the Channel and deal with England. Elizabeth, to head this off, sent Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, with an army to aid the Dutch Protestants.

Add to that the depredations by English marauders on his New World ports and the shipping to and from them, and Philip had plenty of reasons to invade England. There were Sir Francis Drake, to whom Elizabeth referred as "my deare pyrat," John Hawkins, and in the wake



Sir Francis Drake

of their successes, countless others. And Drake and Hawkins had an axe to grind.

In 1569, with Hawkins in command, they had taken three ships into Spanish San Juan de Ulloa, an island in the harbor of Vera Cruz, wanting only to mend their tired ships. Hostages were exchanged with the Spaniards to assure gentlemanly behavior on both sides, but the Spanish interpreted the word "gentleman" to not include heretics. The two Englishmen fought a losing battle and eventually returned to Plymouth with but 70 men out of the 400 they had sailed with 15 months earlier.

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1915: Chicago Excursion Steamer Capsizes; More Passengers Die than in Titanic Sinking

The Western Electric Co. company picnic in 1915 would be an excursion aboard six ships, from Chicago to Michigan City, Ind., for a picnic lunch and a few hours of corporate *bonhomie*. The ships would return to Chicago by night-fall. It was a bargain for those who held the 7,000 tickets — seventy-five cents for adults, children free. Western Electric was a subsidiary of the telephone company, which had not yet become Ma Bell. It made the telephones that had been invented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876.

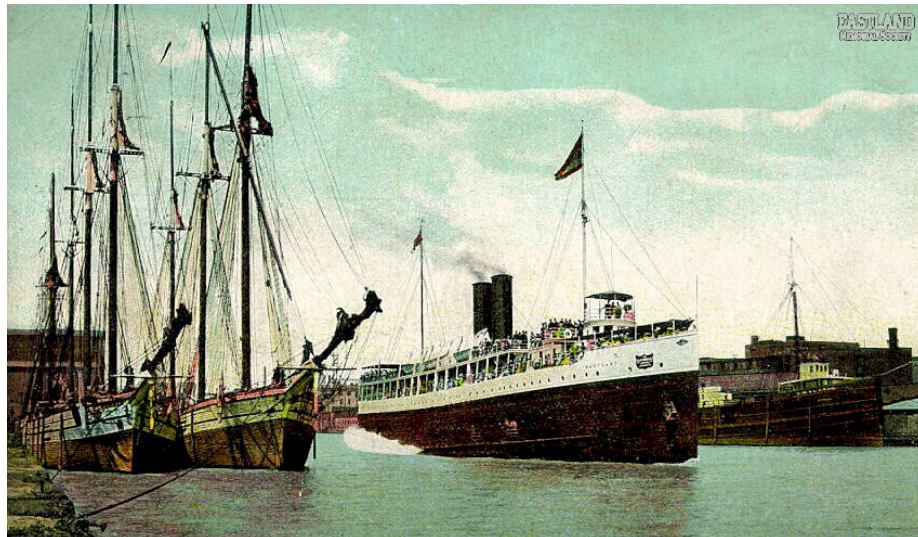
Departure would be at 7:30 a.m. on 24 July, a Saturday. At 6:30, the steamers *Eastland*, *Theodore Roosevelt*, *Petoskey*, *Maywood*, *Racine* and *Rochester* were tied up in the Chicago River, ready for boarding. This was downtown Chicago, two blocks from City Hall, three from the Illinois state building, two from the famous merchandise Mart.

Assignment had not been made to the ships, and most of the picnickers wanted to ride on *Eastland* or *Theodore Roosevelt*, the newest and grandest of the lake steamers, for the trip across the lower tip of Lake Michigan.

Company picnics were important social events for young employees and in those days there were lots of young workers, many were young enough to be called “school dropouts” today. But in the early part of the last century, they were simply “getting an early start.” They got an early start on 24 July, too, and when the gangplanks were lowered there were 5,000 people on hand, and many of them rushed to get aboard either *Eastland* or *Theodore Roosevelt*.

People began pouring up *Eastland*’s gangplanks at 6:40 and congregating along her starboard dockside rail to see who else was boarding. The ship immediately developed a list toward the dock because of the weight of her passengers, a not unexpected phenomenon, but Chief Engineer Joe Erickson liked to keep his ship on an even keel and ordered that the port ballast tanks be filled enough to compensate.

At 6:51 the ship was level, but now the passengers began moving about and



THE EXCURSION STEAMER *Eastland* on the Chicago River in 1903, heading for Lake Michigan. The ship was rated to carry 2,500 passengers and often did. There were 2,500 passengers aboard on the morning of 24 July, and a third of them perished.

From the private collection of Mary J. Boneville

she listed to port at 6:53. When the list reached 10 degrees, Erickson ordered that the starboard ballast tanks be filled enough to compensate, and once again the ship leveled off. At 7:10, with *Eastland* now loaded to her capacity of 2,500, the ship began to list to port again. The list reached 15 degrees by 7:16 and Erickson ordered the port ballast tanks pumped dry, once again bringing the ship back to level.

All of this listing, which a seaman would regard with some concern, didn’t bother the picnickers at all, and many of them made jokes about their “tipsy” boat that couldn’t stand up straight.

Because the ship had been loaded to capacity, the gangplanks were raised and, because there were no boarders to watch, most of the passengers moved to the port rail to see what was happening on the Chicago River. Once again *Eastland* listed to port, and the ship’s radio officer, Charles M. Dibbell, asked passengers remaining on the weather deck to move to starboard. The passengers were indifferent to the request. By 7:27 the list had reached 25 degrees, and then a Chicago fireboat passed, sounding its whistle. Back to the port rail went the passengers to see the fireboat.

The list worsened to 45 degrees and everything not fastened down crashed

across the ship, including some passengers. Other passengers, now beginning to panic, crawled upwards to the starboard side of the ship. Those below fought their way (and each other) toward any opening that was above them. At 7:30, *Eastland* settled on her port side. A few lucky passengers found themselves standing on the starboard side of their ship.

Rescue attempts began immediately, but many passengers who were trapped on the lower decks of *Eastland* had been unable to get out and some, who had been at the port rail watching the fireboat, were pinned between the ship and the bed of the river. Screams coming from inside the hull tormented rescuers but, by the time holes had been cut in the hull they had died out.

The Second Regiment Armory on Washington Boulevard, three blocks from the river, was pressed into service as a temporary morgue and bodies were laid out row on row. But nobody knew who was who — there was no passenger manifest, as boarding had been first come first served. Around midnight, people with missing relatives began their mournful task of searching among the dead for loved ones.

Eight hundred forty-one passengers

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By 1587, Philip Had Had Enough of Drake

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Thereafter it was open season on Spanish possessions and shipping. On his circumnavigation of the globe in *Golden Hind*, Drake had no sooner entered the Pacific than in March 1579 he captured a Spanish treasure ship, *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*. The news enraged Philip, who demanded that the English arrest Drake the minute he set foot ashore or face "grave consequences." It was a threat of war, and had nothing to do with heresy.

Drake plundered ports and shipping on both sides of New Spain, intercepting Incan treasure bound from Peru to the Isthmus of Panama on the Pacific Side and sacking and looting Cartagena on the north coast of Colombia in early 1586. He burned St. Augustine in what is now Florida. When he returned from that cruise, his ships held more than £100,000 in Spanish treasure.

There were other raids and other ships taken by Drake, Hawkins and the others, but Philip had had enough. He ordered Admiral Don Alvaro de Bazan, Marquis of Santa Cruz and the hero of Lepanto, to plan an invasion and conquest of England. Preparations began at once, with shipbuilding and accumulation of supplies in Cadiz and Lisbon. This activity was promptly reported to Elizabeth by her spies in Iberia. She asked Drake's advice and he recommended a preemptive strike at Cadiz. This he carried out on 29 April 1587, destroying about 100 ships and "singeing the Spanish king's beard." (See *Mission: History*, April 1999.)

The ships lost to Drake's raid were replaced, largely through requisition of merchant ships which were adapted to carrying guns, and the great enterprise was at last ready in May 1588. But Philip could no longer command the services of Don John of Austria or of the Marquis de Santa Cruz, for both were dead. Philip placed his trust in the Duke of Medina Sidonia, a cousin who was courageous and loyal, but not a man of the sea.

Medina Sidonia divided his 130 ships into six squadrons, named Portugal, Biscay, Guipuzcoa, Castille, Andalusia and Levant. This force, which included an



THE ARMADA IN THE CHANNEL, thought to be the design for a tapestry. It is interesting to note that even a century into the Renaissance, not all artists had learned the tricks of perspective, nor had all joined in the pursuit of realism in their works.

By an unknown artist, National Maritime Museum, London

army of 19,000, would be joined by that of Parma who had 30,000 men under arms and a fleet of small craft to get them across the Channel. Parma had even invented a sort of LST, a ship with ramps for embarking and debarking mounted cavalry. Together, they would be invincible in Philip's reckoning. Moreover, God was on the side of Spain. In fact, Spain was depending upon divine intervention.

Sidonia set sail during the second week of May, or rather began to set sail, for a fleet of such size could not clear the River Tagus on one tide. After two days, all were at sea, but now faced headwinds that denied them progress. A

month later, the Armada had only sailed as far as Cape Finistere, on the northwest corner of the Iberian Peninsula. On 19 June it put into Corunna to replenish food and water and await following winds.

All of this was known in London, because of the network of spies. Lord Howard of Effingham had been placed in charge of the naval forces that would meet the Spanish, and flew his flag in *Ark Royal*, recently sold to the Crown by Sir Walter Raleigh. Drake had command of a 30-ship squadron and had received his vice-admiral's flag as a gift from Howard. The names of the English ships

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Lord Howard of Effingham

Drake, Alas, Wasn't Bowling When Spanish Armada Came

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ring down through the ages -- *Triumph, Revenge, Lion, Dreadnought, Tiger, Victory*.

When the Spanish at last appeared off Lizard Point on 19 July, the English were in port in Plymouth. There is, incidentally, no contemporary support for the legend that Drake wished to complete a game of bowls before sailing to meet the enemy, but it sounds enough like the man to be accepted as fact. In any case, the English had to beat out of Plymouth sound against the wind and gaining the weather gage on their foe would not be easy. It was nonetheless accomplished by local knowledge and seamanship.

Medina Sidonia, meanwhile, was sailing slowly and majestically up the Channel, closely massed as if infantry gathered against cavalry. Howard said "All the world never saw such a force," but by the morning of 21 July he had his ships to windward of the Spanish, and he intended to keep them there.

This day, 21 July 1588, marked the pinnacle of Spanish world prestige in all of history. The country would now enter decline from which it has yet to emerge 412 years later.

Howard realized that his lighter ships could not hope to penetrate the Spanish mass and elected to attack at long range with superior big guns and gunnery. On the night of 21 July, Drake came upon a large Spanish galleon that turned out to be *Nuestra Senora del Rosario*, flagship

of the Andalusia squadron. Her captain, Don Pedro de Valdes, was one of Medina Sidonia's most capable officers, but his ship had lost her bowsprit and foremast in a collision and was lagging. Drake demanded, and received his surrender, and *Rosario* was sent into Dartmouth with a prize crew.

Howard now formed his fleet into four divisions, his own and three others under Drake, Hawkins and Martin Frobisher. The fighting was intermittent for four days as the "battle" progressed up the Channel and, on 26 July, the sea was so calm Howard was able to summon his captains onboard *Ark Royal*, where he exercised his delegated right to confer knighthood on Hawkins and

Frobisher.

On 27 July, the wind freshened and Medina Sidonia sailed to Calais, where he anchored. He had been successfully kept off England's shore and now sought to meet with Parma.

On 28 July, a squadron from London under Lord Henry Seymour and Sir William Winter joined Howard, whose force now matched that of the Spaniards. If the Spanish could be forced from their anchorage, they could be fought singly or in small groups, and the way to make the Spanish captains cut their cables would be to threaten them with fire. Eight vessels were fitted out as fire ships, guns aimed ahead and loaded and

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A FANCIFUL INTERPRETATION of an unknown portion of the battle between the English and the Spanish Armada. Paintings such as this sold well in an England awake to its naval power.

Detail from a painting by an unknown artist, *Worshipful Society of Apothecaries*

Alexander and Mabel Bell Visit Plant for Personal Talks with Survivors

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perished in the disaster, more passengers than were lost in the sinking of *Titanic* three years earlier. Two members of the crew died and a member of *Petoskey's* crew gave his life attempting to save the lives of *Eastland's* passengers.

There was a court inquiry into the



THE GRIEF in this fireman's face is evident as he holds the lifeless body of a young child who perished when *Eastland* capsized. Two courts ruled that no one was responsible. The accident "just happened."

Chicago Evening Post photo by Jun Fujita

accident, but it was pretty perfunctory. On August 7, the Associated Press wire carried a short item: "The United States Circuit Court of Appeals today upheld a District Court ruling that the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Co. ... is not liable for the ... deaths in the disaster."

Also in early August, two visitors arrived unexpectedly at the Western Electric Hawthorne Works, where those who were lost had been employed. They were 68-year-old Alex Bell and his wife Mabel. They spent the day at the plant, visiting every work station and talking with the survivors. Mabel took careful notes about those who had been lost. Alex had become almost deaf and used an ear trumpet, into which Mabel would occasionally shout comments.

Over the next few weeks, the families of those who died on 24 July 1915 each received a personal note of condolence from Alex and Mabel Bell — and a gift



RESCUE WORKERS carry a victim of the *Eastland* disaster to a waiting boat, the bow of which is just visible in this picture. Tarps and other pieces of fabric were thrown on the starboard side hull of the ship to provide footing for rescuers and survivors, many of whom remain on the side of the ship hoping a friend or loved one will be found safe.

Photo from Chicago Public Library collection



NOT A SURVIVOR. Chicago firemen lift the body of a fashionably dressed young woman through the opening between a canopy and the ship's rail. Because boarding was "first come, first served," there was no passenger manifest. Bodies of victims were taken to the Second Regiment Armory three blocks from the river where, around midnight, relatives of missing persons were admitted to search among the bodies for their loved ones.

Photo from Chicago Public Library collection

which the Bells felt appropriate.

Eastland was refloated in August 1915. She was taken into the U.S. Navy as the training vessel *USS Wilmette* during World War II, decommissioned in 1945 and sold for scrap.

It is difficult to understand why this disaster is so little-known outside of Chicago. Everyone has heard of the Chicago Fire, and even of Mrs. O'Leary and her

cow. But only 250 died in the Chicago Fire, compared with 844 who lost their lives in the *Eastland* disaster.

The timeline of the *Eastland* disaster was taken from the World Wide Web at <http://eastlanddisaster.org/Timea3a1.htm>

Other sources for this report were the Chicago Public Library, the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society, American Telephone & Telegraph Co. and the Chi-

Fireships Spread Havoc In Spanish Anchorage

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helm's lashed with the rudders amidships. With the evening breeze, the ships were set afire and the crews removed.

The fire ships must have presented a horrible sight to the Spanish captains, their ships anchored and crowded as eight blazing vessels bore down on them, guns shooting. Every captain acted on his own, in complete disorder, in an attempt to flee the trap for the safety of the open sea.

By morning, Medina Sidonia had lost the battle. All hope of invading England was gone and all he could do was try to get back to Spain. His ships were scattered along the coast from Calais to Ostend and Dutch rebels in Antwerp made any thought of seeking shelter in the Western Scheldt impossible. On top of



Sir John Hawkins

that, all of his ships were low on provisions and many had been damaged by the long guns of the English.

Howard, Drake, Hawkins and Frobisher blocked any possible retreat back down the English Channel and a west-north-west wind had him pinned against the shore. Medina Sidonia in *San Martin* and a few others had stayed in the anchorage after either weighing anchor or cutting their cables and they turned to fight the English in what came to be called the Battle of Gravelines. Drake, in *Revenge*, was first to close *San Martin*, and after him came others. The same sort of punishment was meted out to *San Juan* and *San Marcos*, but the shallows of the anchorage were not a

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BROADSIDE AGAINST BROADSIDE? This scene was probably painted by a 19th Century artist caught up in Nelson's victories. The two ships are Medina Sidonia's *San Martin* on the left and Howard's *Ark Royal* on the right. Howard had ordered his captains to stand away from the Spaniards and punish them with their long guns and better gunnery.

From a reproduction in Great Battles of the Royal Navy, USNI Press, 1994



A GALLEASS OF THE SPANISH ARMADA. The oars were a boon in a dead calm and sometimes helpful in keeping small boats away, but got in the way of serious fighting. On this ship's foremast is a flag bearing the arms of Portugal, Leon, Castile and Naples. At the mainmast is a standard with the crossed keys of the Papacy. At the mizzen, she flies the Spanish national ensign. And on her stern is a huge flag displaying Philip II's royal arms.

An English painting by an unknown artist

The Spanish Defeated, Britannia Will 'Rule the Waves'

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good place for a sea battle. Earlier, in the confusion caused by the fireships, *San Lorenzo* had run aground, showing what could happen to any captain. Gravelines is probably remembered for Drake's involvement, but similar fights were taking place up and down the Flemish coast. Divine intervention, once trusted in as the guarantor of a successful invasion of England, was now besought for salvation.

Spain's miracle came on 30 July when the wind shifted about 45 degrees south, enabling the Spanish to steer for the North Sea and escape the English, who had been like a swarm of hornets. Medina Sidonia left behind the wrecks of some six ships and headed for home, the long way around Scotland.

Howard followed, but gave up the chase when the Spanish were off north-east England, well at sea. The English ships were low on victuals and sickness was beginning to appear in his crews. It was time to return to port. A few ships shadowed the Spanish as they rounded Scotland but, when, off the Orkneys, Medina Sidonia turned to the west and was met by a howling gale. His fate was sealed, the shadowers knew it, and they too headed for port.

At least 25 Spanish ships were wrecked in the Hebrides and along the rocky coast of northwest Ireland. By the time Medina Sidonia was on the last leg of his disastrous voyage, he had lost at least half of the ships with which he had set sail and of the 30,000 men who had sailed with him about 20,000 died. About 1,500 had perished in actual battle, another 6,000 or so had died in shipwrecks and an estimated 12,500 succumbed to disease and starvation. Medina Sidonia wrote to Philip that the troubles and miseries "have been greater than have ever been seen in any voyage before," and they had been.

All of Spain mourned, but not for Philip's lost conquest. The people were largely indifferent to the brouhaha between the Pope and the Protestants. But every village had given up someone to the disaster of the Armada. Spain mourned for her lost sons.

But the English didn't know of the Armada's fate. Through August, How-



QUEEN ELIZABETH (the Roman numeral "I" is needed only in retrospect) in the "Armada Portrait" hanging in Woburn Abbey. Behind the queen are two pictures. On the left are English warships, all flying the red cross of St. George on a white ensign, sailing before a benevolent wind to meet the Spanish Armada. On the right, the Armada sails into the malevolent wind that wrecked 25 of its ships on the rocky coasts of Ireland and Scotland.

Painting by George Gower

ard and Drake fretted that it could have sailed to Norway or elsewhere to revictual and then return for another attempt at invasion. Both urged continued vigilance lest Medina Sidonia reappear.

In mid-August the queen gave her famous "heat of battle" speech in which she said "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England, too, and I think foul scorn on that Parma, or Spain, or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm."

Two months later, though, it was different. In November, Queen Elizabeth rode to St. Paul's Cathedral in a golden carriage drawn by snow white horses, for a service of thanksgiving. Before entering, she knelt and gave thanks for God's mercy. And, as the queen entered the cathedral, the choir sang words she had herself written:

*He made the wynds and waters rise,
To scatter all myne enemies...*

In reality, England had no need for divine intervention, for she had better

ships and better guns and, most of all, better men. Her ships and sailors would "rule the waves" for more than 350 years, protecting their island nation.

But what of the men who fought on the English ships? The government did nothing. Howard, Drake and Hawkins, of their own volition, set up a special fund for "sailors maimed in the navy."

How to Get in Touch

Mission: History has been asked to provide an address for reader communications. E-mail may be sent to this address:

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Submissions are not encouraged because of constraints on the time available for editing. If such are sent, they should be sent as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word 6.0 or as type-written copy, double-spaced, accompanied by a 3½-inch diskette containing the submission in Microsoft Word 6.0 for Windows.

Quite welcome, however, are suggestions of events for coverage. Please offer suggestions two months ahead of the anniversary of an event.