

= Battle of Cape St. Vincent (1780) =

The Battle of Cape St. Vincent was a naval battle took place off the southern coast of Portugal on 16 January 1780 during the Anglo @-@ Spanish War . A British fleet under Admiral Sir George Rodney defeated a Spanish squadron under Don Juan de Lángara . The battle is sometimes referred to as the Moonlight Battle because it was unusual for naval battles in the Age of Sail to take place at night . It was also the first major naval victory for the British over their European enemies in the war and proved the value of copper @-@ sheathing the hulls of warships .

Admiral Rodney was escorting a fleet of supply ships to relieve the Spanish siege of Gibraltar with a fleet of about twenty ships of the line when he encountered Lángara 's squadron south of Cape St. Vincent . When Lángara saw the size of the British fleet , he attempted to make for the safety of Cádiz , but the copper @-@ sheathed British ships chased his fleet down . In a running battle that lasted from mid @-@ afternoon until after midnight , the British captured four Spanish ships , including Lángara 's flagship . Two other ships were also captured , but their final disposition is unclear ; some Spanish sources indicate they were retaken by their Spanish crews , while Rodney 's report indicates the ships were grounded and destroyed .

After the battle Rodney successfully resupplied Gibraltar and Minorca before continuing on to the West Indies station . Lángara was released on parole , and was promoted to lieutenant general by King Carlos III .

= = Background = =

One of Spain 's principal goals upon its entry into the American War of Independence in 1779 was the recovery of Gibraltar , which had been lost to England in 1704 . The Spanish planned to retake Gibraltar by blockading and starving out its garrison , which included troops from Britain and the Electorate of Hanover . The siege formally began in June 1779 , with the Spanish establishing a land blockade around the Rock of Gibraltar . The matching naval blockade was comparatively weak , however , and the British discovered that small fast ships could evade the blockaders , while slower and larger supply ships generally could not . By late 1779 , however , supplies in Gibraltar had become seriously depleted , and its commander , General George Eliott , appealed to London for relief .

A supply convoy was organized , and in late December 1779 a large fleet sailed from England under the command of Admiral Sir George Brydges Rodney . Although Rodney 's ultimate orders were to command the West Indies fleet , he had secret instructions to first resupply Gibraltar and Minorca . On 4 January 1780 the fleet divided , with ships headed for the West Indies sailing westward . This left Rodney in command of 19 ships of the line , which were to accompany the supply ships to Gibraltar .

On 8 January 1780 ships from Rodney 's fleet spotted a group of sails . Giving chase with their faster copper @-@ clad ships , the British determined these to be a Spanish supply convoy that was protected by a single ship of the line and several frigates . The entire convoy was captured , with the lone ship of the line , Guipuzcoana , striking her colours after a perfunctory exchange of fire . Guipuzcoana was staffed with a small prize crew and renamed HMS Prince William , in honour of Prince William , the third son of the King , who was serving as midshipman in the fleet . Rodney then detached HMS America and the frigate HMS Pearl to escort most of the captured ships back to England ; the Prince William was added to his fleet , as were some of the supply ships that carried items likely to be of use to the Gibraltar garrison . On 12 January HMS Dublin , which had lost part of her topmast on 3 January , suffered additional damage and raised a distress flag . Assisted by HMS Shrewsbury , she limped into Lisbon on 16 January .

The Spanish had learnt of the British relief effort . From the blockading squadron a fleet comprising 11 ships of the line under Admiral Juan de Lángara was dispatched to intercept Rodney 's convoy , and the Atlantic fleet of Admiral Luis de Córdova at Cadiz was also alerted to try to catch him . Córdova learnt of the strength of Rodney 's fleet , and returned to Cadiz rather than giving chase . On 16 January the fleets of Lángara and Rodney spotted each other around 1 : 00 pm south of

Cape St. Vincent , the southwestern point of Portugal and the Iberian Peninsula . The weather was hazy , with heavy swells and occasional squalls .

= = Battle = =

Rodney was ill , and spent the entire action in his bunk . His flag captain , Walter Young , urged Rodney to give orders to engage when the Spanish fleet was first spotted , but Rodney only gave orders to form a line abreast . Lángara started to establish a line of battle , but when he realised the size of Rodney 's fleet , he gave orders to make all sail for Cadiz . Around 2 : 00 pm , when Rodney felt certain that the ships seen were not the vanguard of a larger fleet , he issued commands for a general chase . Rodney 's instructions to his fleet were to chase at their best speed , and engage the Spanish ships from the rear as they came upon them . They were also instructed to sail to the lee side to interfere with Spanish attempts to gain the safety of a harbour , a tactic that also prevented the Spanish ships from opening their lowest gun ports . Because of their copper @-@ sheathed hulls (which reduced marine growths and drag) , the ships of the Royal Navy were faster and soon gained on the Spanish .

The chase lasted for about two hours , and the battle finally began around 4 : 00 pm . The Santo Domingo , trailing in the Spanish fleet , received broadsides from HMS Edgar , HMS Marlborough , and HMS Ajax before blowing up around 4 : 40 , with the loss of all but one of her crew . Marlborough and Ajax then passed Princesa to engage other Spanish ships . Princesa was eventually engaged in an hour @-@ long battle with HMS Bedford before striking her colours at about 5 : 30 . By 6 : 00 pm it was getting dark , and there was a discussion aboard HMS Sandwich , Rodney 's flagship , about whether to continue the pursuit . Although Captain Young is credited in some accounts with pushing Rodney to do so , Dr. Gilbert Blane , the fleet physician , reported it as a decision of the council .

The chase continued into the dark and squally night , leading it to later become known as the " Moonlight Battle " , since it was uncommon at the time for naval battles to continue after sunset . At 7 : 30 pm , HMS Defence came upon Lángara 's flagship Fenix , engaging her in a battle lasting over an hour . She was broadsided in passing by HMS Montagu and HMS Prince George , and Lángara was wounded in the battle . Fenix finally surrendered to HMS Bienfaisant , which arrived late in the battle and shot away her mainmast . Fenix 's takeover was complicated by an outbreak of smallpox aboard Bienfaisant . Captain John MacBride , rather than sending over a possibly infected prize crew , apprised Lángara of the situation and put him and his crew on parole .

At 9 : 15 the Montagu engaged the Diligente , which struck after her maintopmast was shot away . Around 11 : 00 pm San Eugenio surrendered after having all of her masts shot away by HMS Cumberland , but the difficult seas made it impossible to board a prize crew until morning . That duel was passed by HMS Culloden and Prince George , which engaged San Julián and compelled her to surrender around 1 : 00 am . The last ship to surrender was Monarca . She nearly escaped , shooting away HMS Alcide 's topmast , but was engaged in a running battle with the frigate HMS Apollo . Apollo managed to keep up the unequal engagement until about the time that Rodney 's flagship Sandwich came upon the scene around 2 : 00 am . Sandwich fired a broadside , unaware that Monarca had already hauled down her flag .

The British took six ships . Four Spanish ships of the line and the fleet 's two frigates escaped , although sources are unclear if two of the Spanish ships were even present with the fleet at the time of the battle . Lángara 's report states that San Justo and San Genaro were not in his line of battle (although they are listed in Spanish records as part of his fleet) . Rodney 's report states that San Justo escaped but was damaged in battle , and that San Genaro escaped without damage . According to one account two of Lángara 's ships (unspecified which two) were despatched to investigate other unidentified sails sometime before the action .

= = Aftermath = =

With the arrival of daylight , it was clear that the British fleet and their prize ships were dangerously

close to a lee shore with an onshore breeze . One of the prizes , San Julián , was recorded by Rodney as too badly damaged to save , and was driven ashore . The fate of another prize , San Eugenio , is unclear . Some sources report that she too was grounded , but others report that she was retaken by her crew and managed to reach Cadiz . A Spanish history claims that the prize crews of both ships appealed to their Spanish captives for help escaping the lee shore . The Spanish captains retook control of their ships , imprisoned the British crews , and sailed to Cadiz .

The British reported their casualties in the battle as 32 killed and 102 wounded . The supply convoy sailed into Gibraltar on 19 January , driving the smaller blockading fleet to retreat to the safety of Algeciras . Rodney arrived several days later , after first stopping in Tangier . The wounded Spanish prisoners , who included Admiral Lángara , were offloaded there , and the British garrison was heartened by the arrival of the supplies and the presence of Prince William Henry . After also resupplying Minorca , Rodney sailed for the West Indies in February , detaching part of the fleet for service in the Channel . This homebound fleet intercepted a French fleet destined for the East Indies , capturing one warship and three supply ships . Gibraltar was resupplied twice more before the siege was lifted at the end of the war in 1783 .

Admiral Lángara and other Spanish officers were eventually released on parole , the admiral receiving a promotion to lieutenant general . He continued his distinguished career , becoming Spanish marine minister in the French Revolutionary Wars .

Admiral Rodney was lauded for his victory , the first major victory of the war by the Royal Navy over its European opponents . He distinguished himself for the remainder of the war , notably winning the 1782 Battle of the Saintes in which he captured the French Admiral Comte de Grasse . He was , however , criticised by Captain Young , who portrayed him as weak and indecisive in the battle with Lángara . (He was also rebuked by the admiralty for leaving a ship of the line at Gibraltar , against his express orders .) Rodney 's observations on the benefits of copper sheathing in the victory were influential in British Admiralty decisions to deploy the technology more widely .

= = Order of battle = =

None of the listed sources give an accurate accounting of the ships in Rodney 's fleet at the time of the action . Robert Beatson lists the composition of the fleet at its departure from England , and notes which ships separated to go to the West Indies , as well as those detached to return the prizes captured on 8 January to England . He does not list two ships (Dublin and Shrewsbury , identified in despatches reprinted by Syrett) that were separated from the fleet on 13 January . Furthermore , HMS Prince William is sometimes misunderstood to have been part of the prize escort back to England , but she was present at Gibraltar after the action . Beatson also fails to list a number of frigates , including HMS Apollo , which played a key role in the capture of the Monarca .

There are some discrepancies between the English and Spanish sources listing the Spanish fleet , principally in the number of guns most of the vessels are claimed to mount . The table below lists the Spanish records describing Lángara 's fleet . Beatson lists all of the Spanish ships of the line at 70 guns , except Fenix , which he lists at 80 guns . One frigate , the Santa Rosalia , is listed by Beatson at 28 guns . The identify of the second Spanish frigate is different in the two listings . Beatson records her as the Santa Gertrudie , 26 guns , with captain Don Annibal Cassoni , while Duro 's listing describes her as Santa Cecilia , 34 , captain Don Domingo Grandallana . Both frigates , whatever their identity , escaped the battle .