

= Battle of Cartagena de Indias =

The Battle of Cartagena de Indias was an amphibious military engagement between the forces of Britain under Vice @-@ Admiral Edward Vernon and those of Spain under Admiral Blas de Lezo . It took place at the city of Cartagena de Indias in March 1741 , in present @-@ day Colombia . The battle was a significant episode of the War of Jenkins ' Ear and a large @-@ scale naval campaign . The war later was subsumed into the greater conflict of the War of the Austrian Succession . The battle resulted in a major defeat for the British Navy and Army .

The defeat caused heavy losses for the British : mostly due to disease that also took its toll among the Spanish forces , especially yellow fever .

= = Background = =

The War of Jenkins ' Ear was a conflict between Great Britain and Spain that lasted from 1739 to 1748 . Under the 1729 Treaty of Seville , the British had agreed not to trade with the Spanish colonies except under limited conditions , under the Asiento de Negros slave trade and the Annual Ship under the Navio de Permiso . The Asiento allowed Britain a monopoly to supply 5 @,@ 000 slaves a year to the Spanish colonies . The Navio de Permiso permitted a single yearly trading ship , the Annual Ship , which could carry 1000 tons of imports to the yearly trade fair in Porto Bello . Upon receiving these concessions from Spain , the British government granted a monopoly for both to the South Sea Company . The merchants and bankers in Britain , who were the driving force behind Britain 's international commerce and trading , demanded more access to the lucrative Spanish markets of the Caribbean Basin . In turn , the Spanish colonists desired British @-@ made goods , so a burgeoning black market of smuggled goods developed .

By the terms of the treaty , the Spanish were permitted to board British vessels in Spanish waters . After one such boarding in 1731 , Robert Jenkins , captain of the ship Rebecca , claimed that a Spanish coast guard officer had severed his ear . The legend that Jenkins exhibited his pickled ear to the House of Commons appears to have no basis in fact . This served to heighten the " war fever " developing against Spain , which was also driven by the British desire for commercial and military domination of the Atlantic basin . To much cheering , the British Prime Minister , Robert Walpole , reluctantly declared war on October 23 , 1739 , reportedly saying , " They may ring their bells now ; they will be wringing their hands before long . "

= = = Spanish Caribbean = = =

The Spanish Caribbean trade had a network of four main ports : Vera Cruz , Mexico ; Cartagena , Colombia ; Porto Bello (now Portobelo) , Panama ; and the main port through which all the trade of those three ports came , Havana , Cuba . On November 22 , 1739 the British captured Portobelo in the Viceroyalty of New Granada . The British attack was part of an attempt to damage Spain 's finances . The poorly defended port was attacked by six ships of the line under Vice @-@ Admiral Edward Vernon . The relative ease of this capture , although it was quickly recaptured by the Spanish after Vernon 's fleet departed , caused jubilation in Britain .

Vernon was given command of the very large naval force , which was one quarter of the British Royal Navy , of a major land and sea amphibious expedition under the overall command of Lord Cathcart . The first goal of the expedition was to capture Havana , the most important of the Spanish ports because it had facilities where ships could be refitted and , by 1740 , it had become Spain 's largest and most active shipyard . Lord Cathcart died en route and it remained unclear who was in command overall . Cathcart 's untimely demise resulted in dissension in the British command , preventing the coordination needed for this complex operation .

The despatch of the large fleet and troop contingent had been demanded by the public led by the merchant class lobbies , especially , and the South Sea Company , in particular , which refused to accept the compromise agreements made by the governments of Spain and Britain . The Duke of Newcastle advocated the public 's demands before Parliament . Vice @-@ Admiral Vernon was an

active and ardent supporter of war against Spain and advocated offensive action both in Parliament and before the Admiralty . The decision to mount a large West Indies expedition was reached in December 1739 . Walpole , who opposed the war categorically , and Vernon , who favored small squadron actions , were dissatisfied with the situation . Vernon , despite his earlier failed small squadron raid on Cartagena , was not convinced that a large @-@ scale attack on a heavily fortified city would prove to be as successful as his smaller Portobello assault had been . He feared , particularly , that a prolonged siege would lead to heavy attrition from disease , a typical situation given the limited medical knowledge of the time .

= = = Objectives = = =

Britain 's objective was to capture and permanently retain Spain 's four ports of the Caribbean basin . By taking control of these ports , the British would effectively control the entry and exit routes to South America . The British would have bases from which to launch attacks into the interior , and Spain would have limited access to deep water ports on the eastern coast of their American colonies and therefore be unable to resupply their inland forces . Control of these ports would provide the British with a key control of the area and allow them , in time , to acquire the whole of Spain 's American empire . However , Britain had no place to build and refit ships in the Caribbean , as Spain did with the dockyards at Havana , and without a dockyard no fleet could remain in the area for any length of time without breaking down . Quick capture of Havana and its dry dock was imperative and it was the favored objective of Newcastle and Sir Charles Wager , First Lord of the Admiralty , but Britain 's divided ministry left the course of the campaign up to Vernon and others at a Council of War held in Jamaica . They followed Vernon , who preferred Cartagena as their initial objective as it was a good port and to windward of Britain 's existing Caribbean bases and Vernon thought Havana too well defended to be the initial target .

= = = The city of Cartagena de Indias = = =

Cartagena of Indies , in the eighteenth century , was a large and rich city of over 10 @,@ 000 people . It was the capital of the province of Cartagena and the main town had significant fortifications that had been recently repaired , increased and improved with outlying forts , batteries and works . Its harbor was considered one of the finest in the world and it served the galleons of the commercial fleet , Galeones a Tierra Firme y Perú , that annually conveyed through Havana to Spain the immense revenues of gold and silver from New Granada and Peru .

Founded by Pedro Heredia in 1533 , it had been the target of conquest in the past and was captured by the English , under Francis Drake , in 1585 and by the French , under Baron de Pointis in 1697 . The city faces the Caribbean to the west , to the south its bay has two entrances : Boca Chica (Little Mouth) and Boca Grande (Big Mouth) . Boca Chica was the only deep water entrance and was so narrow it allowed the passage of only one ship at a time . This entrance was defended on one side by the Fort San Luis with a couple of small outworks on the peninsula of Terra Bomba and on the other side by the fascine battery Baradera . Beyond Boca Chica was the great lagoon of the outer harbor with an entry channel into the inner harbor between two peninsulas , each defended by a fort . The walls of the city itself mounted some 160 cannon and the suburbs 140 guns . The city was surrounded by a water @-@ filled ditch and its gates supported by recently built bastions . The suburbs were also surrounded by a wall and ditch . About a quarter mile south from the city on a hill was Fort San Lazaro , a square fifty feet on a side with three demi @-@ bastions . The position of Fort San Lazaro commanded the city itself and the plain around the hill . There was also a small hill nearby that commanded Fort Lazaro , but there was no fresh water source available outside Cartagena and the fort . The road from the best landing point , the beach at Texar de Gracias , to Fort Lazaro was three miles long .

= = Battle = =

The Battle of Cartagena pitted a British invasion force of 186 ships including : 29 Ships of the Line ; 22 frigates , 2 hospital ships , various fire ships and bomb ships armed with a total of some 2 @,@ 000 cannon ; 80 troop transports and 50 merchant ships . There were at least 27 @,@ 400 military personnel , of which the land force totaled 12 @,@ 000 including : two British regular infantry regiments , the 15th Foot and 24th Foot , 6 @,@ 000 newly raised marines and some 3 @,@ 600 American colonial troops , commanded by Colonel William Gooch (the Lieutenant Governor of Virginia) , in four battalions designated as the 43rd Regiment of Foot , arriving from the North American colonies on another 40 transports .

The Spanish force defending Cartagena was composed of 2 @,@ 700 to 3 @,@ 000 Spanish regulars from the regiments Aragon , España and that of Toledo , Lisboa and Navarra just arrived in October 1740 , brought by Vice @-@ admiral Torres ; a colonial regiment from Cartagena ; an unspecified number of sailors ; 5 companies of militia and 600 Indian archers , perhaps 4 @,@ 000 to 6 @,@ 000 defenders , manning six Ships of the Line and strategic fortifications ? under the command of the Governor General of Cartagena , Don Blas de Lezo and the Viceroy of New Granada , Sebastián de Eslava . Blas de Lezo , a Basque , was an experienced , wily and tenacious Spanish Naval commander , whose previous career was as daring and spectacular as any naval officer of his day . Lezo , who had lost an arm , a leg and an eye in the service of Spain , made use of every advantage , strategy and tactic available to him .

= = = Preliminary maneuvers = = =

The expedition was very slow leaving Britain . Initially , contrary winds delayed the sailing until most of the shipboard provisions were consumed and a steep increase of sickness occurred among the ship crews . Then news of the sailing of the French squadrons and a Spanish squadron caused further delay while the British fleet was reinforced in response . The expedition suffered from manpower shortages in the navy , which required drafting two full infantry regiments , the 34th and 36th , to fill crew requirements Cathcart was ordered by the government to transfer 600 of his marines to provide marines for the men of war . These delays cost the British three months of valuable campaign time . The 3 @,@ 600 Americans were transported to Jamaica from New York on 40 transports escorted by some British men of war and arrived much sooner on December 3 , 1740 . The Americans were originally under the command of General Spotswood , Governor of Virginia , who was to be second @-@ in command under Cathcart , however Spotswood died and was replaced by Gooch as commander of the Americans . They found on their arrival that no arrangements had been made by the British government for their provisions . The lack of provision and climate immediately began to take a toll on the Americans , while the fleet from Britain was suffering from typhus , scurvy and dysentery ; by January 1741 the land forces had already suffered 500 dead , including Lord Cathcart the commander in chief , and 1 @,@ 500 sick . With both Cathcart and Spotswood dead , command of the land forces went to Thomas Wentworth , who had no previous combat command experience . In Jamaica , 300 African slaves , called ' Macheteros ' , were added to the expedition as a work battalion . Additional delays before and after embarking from Jamaica cost more precious time , including a brief skirmish with a French squadron . Both the British and the Spanish were well aware that with onset of the two @-@ month rainy season in May , the so @-@ called ' sickly season ' , which would last from May to November , would also begin .

The Spanish had received reinforcements but were already suffering severely from diseases as well . Similar to the British , but not as disruptive to operations , there was dissension between Lezo and Eslava . In particular , Lezo favored a very strong , all @-@ out defense of Boca Chica channel ; Eslava 's opposition led to an under @-@ manning of some of the forward defenses , allowing the British an easier initial landing .

= = = Attack on Fort San Luis at Boca Chica = = =

The British expedition arrived off Cartagena on March 4 with no overall commander but with decisions being made by councils of war , with General Wentworth commanding the land forces and

Vernon the sea forces . The navy had lost so many sailors by this time as a result of the epidemics that one third of the land forces were needed to fill out the crews . Although the city of Cartagena was fronted on one side by the ocean , the shore and surf were so rough as to preclude any attempt to approach it from sea . The other access channel , Boca Grande , was too shallow to allow the passage of ocean @-@ going ships . The channel of Boca Chica was the only deep @-@ draft passage into the harbor of Cartagena . It ran between two narrow peninsulas and was defended on one side by the fort of San Luis , Boca Chica Castle , with four bastions having some 49 cannons , 3 mortars and a garrison of 300 soldiers under the command of the chief engineer , Carlos Desnaux . A boom stretched from the island of La Bomba to the southern peninsula on which was Fort San Jose with 13 cannon and 150 soldiers . Also supporting the entrance were the 6 Spanish line ships .

After a week of bombardment , the British planned to land near the smaller access channel , Boca Chica , with 300 grenadiers . The Spanish defenders of two small , nearby forts , San lago and San Philip , were driven off by a division of three ships of the fleet under Chaloner Ogle which suffered some 120 casualties with the Shrewsbury alone losing 100 killed and wounded as well as taking serious damage from cannon fire from Fort San Luis . The grenadiers landed that evening and were followed on March 22 by the whole of the British land forces : the two regular regiments and the six regiments of marines . Of the American land forces only 300 were allowed ashore as most of the American troops of the four battalions had been dispersed to serve aboard the Ships of the Line to replace Vernon 's losses in sailors and were not available for amphibious operations . They were followed in a few days by the artillery . After the army made camp , the Americans and the Jamaicans constructed a battery in two weeks and its twenty 24 pounder guns began battering the fort . A squadron of five ships , consisting of the Boyne , Prince Frederick , Hampton Court , Tilbury , and Suffolk , led inshore by Commodore Lestock , also attempted to batter the fort into submission for two days but had the worst of it , making no impression on the fort and having many men killed and three ships heavily damaged and disabled .

The British artillery on land , after three days of firing night and day , made a breach in the main fort while part of the fleet assisted . Another part of the fleet engaged the Spanish ships , two of which Lezo scuttled and another , the Galicia , he set on fire . The two scuttled Spanish ships partially blocked the channel and the Galicia was captured by the British before it could sink . The British attacked Fort San Luis by land and sea on April 5 . The infantry advanced on the breach ; however , the Spanish had already retreated to fortifications in the inner harbor . Over the following week , the landing force re @-@ embarked and entered the harbor . The operation against Boca Chica cost the British army 120 killed and wounded , additionally 250 died from the diseases of yellow fever and malaria , and 600 sick were hospitalized .

= = = Attack on Fort San Lazaro = = =

The next council of war decided to attempt to isolate Cartagena from the land side by an assault of Fort San Lazaro , called in some accounts San Felipe de Barajas . With the capture of San Luis and other outlying defensive works , the fleet passed through the Boca Chica channel into the lagoon that made up the harbor of Cartagena . The Spanish withdrew to concentrate their forces at Fort San Lazaro and the city . Vernon goaded Wentworth into an ill @-@ considered , badly planned assault on the fort , an outlying strong @-@ point of Cartagena , which Vernon refused to support with the fleet making specious excuses about the depth of the harbor . The ships cleared the beach with cannon fire and Wentworth landed on April 16 at Texar de Gracias .

After the British gained the inner harbor and captured some outlying forts , de Lezo strengthened the last main bastion of Fort San Lazaro by digging a trench around it and clearing a field of fire on the approach . He had to hold the fort as it commanded the city and , in British hands , a bombardment would force Cartagena to surrender in a short time . Lezo defended the trench with some 650 soldiers and garrisoned the fort with another 300 , while keeping in hand a reserve of 200 marines and sailors . The British advanced from the beach and had to pass a narrow defile . There they met a Spanish force that briefly contested that passage before giving way .

The only British engineer with the expedition had been killed at fort San Luis ; no one could construct a battery to breach the walls . The British decided to storm the fort outright in a coup de main , walls unbreached , during a night attack . The night attack would allow the assault of the northern side of the fort facing Cartagena because , in the dark , the guns of Cartagena would not be able to give supporting fire . The southern side had the lowest and most vulnerable walls and the grenadiers would attempt to quickly storm and carry the parapets . But the attack started late and the initial advance on Lazaro was made near dawn at 4 am April 20 by a forlorn hope of 50 picked men followed by 450 grenadiers commanded by Colonel Wynyard . The main body was 1 @, @ 000 men of the 15th and 24th regiments commanded by Colonel Grant , then a mixed company from the 34th and 36th regiments and some unarmed Americans carrying scaling @-@ ladders for the fort 's high walls and wool packs to fill in the trench . Finally , there was a reserve of 500 marines under Colonel Wolfe .

The column was led by two Spanish deserters as guides who misled the British on the southern low walled side . Wynyard was led to a steep approach and , as the grenadiers scrambled up the slope , they were received with a deadly volley of musket fire at thirty yards from the Spanish in the entrenchments . The grenadiers deployed into line and advanced , slowly trading fire . On the north face , Grant fell early and the leaderless troops traded fire with the Spanish . Most of the Americans dropped the ladders they carried and took cover . Those ladders brought forward were too short by ten feet . After an hour , the sun rose and as the guns of Cartagena opened fire on the British , casualties mounted . At eight o 'clock , when a column of Spanish infantry coming from the gates of Cartagena threatened to cut the British off from their ships , Wentworth ordered a retreat . The assault failed , with a loss of 600 casualties from a force of approximately 2 @, @ 000 . Sickness and disease increased the casualties of the expedition . During the period surrounding the attack on Fort San Lazaro , Wentworth 's land forces were reduced from 6 @, @ 500 effectives to 3 @, @ 200 .

= = = British withdrawal = = =

Don Blas de Lezo 's plan had been that , given the overwhelming force against him , he would attempt to conduct a fighting withdrawal and delay the British long enough until the start of the rainy season at the end of April . The tropical downpours would delay campaigning for another 2 months . Further , the longer the enemy had to remain mostly crowded on ships at sea and in the open on land , the more likely that insufficient supply , discomfort and especially disease would become his allies and the deadly enemies of the British . De Lezo was aided by the contempt that Vernon and Wentworth had for each other , which prevented their cooperation after the initial landing .

Another important factor in the defeat of the British force was the fact that Cartagena 's defensive fortifications had been repaired and improved over the past year . Although De Lezo was pressed to the limit , his plan worked and the Spanish prevailed . The rains came and the British had to board their ships , where close quarters made disease even more deadly . By April 25 , Vernon and the council decided to retreat to Jamaica , and by mid @-@ May they were gone . By May 7 , only 1 @, @ 700 men of the land forces were fit for service and no more than 1 @, @ 000 in condition to land against the enemy ; within a month of leaving Cartagena , another 1 @, @ 100 died . British strength was reduced to 1 @, @ 400 and American to 1 @, @ 300 .

The expedition and battle lasted for 67 days and ended with the British fleet withdrawing in defeat , with 18 @, @ 000 dead or incapacitated , mostly by disease . The Spanish also suffered severely from disease including Blas de Lezo himself , who died a few weeks after falling ill from the plague from unburied bodies . In addition a total of 50 British ships were lost , badly damaged , disabled or abandoned for lack of crews . There were nineteen ships of the line damaged , four frigates and twenty @-@ seven transports lost . Of the 3 @, @ 600 American colonists , who had volunteered , lured by promises of land and mountains of gold , most died of yellow fever , dysentery , and outright starvation . Only 300 returned home , including Lawrence Washington , who renamed his Virginia plantation , Mount Vernon after Admiral Vernon .

During the early stage of the battle , when the Spanish forces had retreated from different defense

points to regroup in the larger fortress of San Lazaro , feeling victory in his hands Vernon dispatched a messenger , Captain Laws , to Britain to inform King George of the British forces ' entry to the inner bay on May 17 . The souvenir industry , in expectation of a triumph that never came , had been busily manufacturing commemorative medals for the occasion . They were mainly made by button @-@ makers , who copied a few basic designs and are generally of very poor quality . The largest collections of these medals can be found in the UK and the US . Commemorative china was also produced but its survival has been rarer . In one of the medals Admiral Vernon was shown looking down upon the " defeated " Spanish admiral Don Blas de Lezo who appeared kneeling down . A contemporary song was composed by a sailor from the Shrewsbury that prematurely celebrated the victory :

VERNON 'S GLORY ; OR , THE SPANIARDS DEFEAT .

Being an account of the taking of Carthage by Vice @-@ Admiral Vernon ... " ... and the town surrender [ed]

To Admiral Vernon , the scourge of Spain " .

The main reasons for the British defeat were the failure of the British to find united leadership after the commander in chief , General Charles Cathcart , died of dysentery en route ; the logistic inability to land siege artillery and ammunition near to Cartagena ; the impediments made by Vernon that prevented involvement of his line ships to support the infantry forces ; and the effective Spanish maneuvers carried out by the viceroy Sebastián de Eslava , Admiral Blas de Lezo and Colonel Carlos Suivillars .

After the defeat , Admiral Vernon sent a letter to Blas de Lezo : " We have decided to retreat , but we will return to Cartagena after we take reinforcements in Jamaica " , to which Blas de Lezo ironically responded : " In order to come to Cartagena , the English King must build a better and larger fleet , because yours now is only suitable to transport coal from Ireland to London " .

= = Aftermath = =

Following the news of the disaster Robert Walpole 's government soon collapsed . Spain retained control over its most strategically important colonies , including the vitally crucial port in the Caribbean that helped secure the defense of the Spanish Main and its trans @-@ Atlantic trade with Spain .

News of Britain 's defeat reached Europe at the end of June , 1741 and had immense repercussions . It caused George II of Great Britain , who had been acting as mediator between Frederick the Great of Prussia and Maria Theresa supporting Austria over Prussian seizure of Silesia in December 1740 , to withdraw Britain 's guarantees of armed support for the Pragmatic Sanction . That encouraged France and Spain , the Bourbon allies , revealed to also be allied with Prussia , to move militarily against a now isolated Austria . A greater and wider war , the War of the Austrian Succession , now began .

The staggering losses suffered by the British compromised all the subsequent actions by Vernon and Wentworth in the Caribbean and most ended in acrimonious failure despite reinforcements of 1 @,@ 000 troops from Jamaica and 3 @,@ 000 regular infantry from Britain . Vernon and Wentworth were both recalled to Britain in September 1742 , with Chaloner Ogle taking command of a very sickly fleet that had less than half its sailors fit for duty . By the time the Caribbean campaign ended in May 1742 ninety percent of the army had died from combat and sickness . Several other British attacks took place in the Caribbean with little consequence on the geopolitical situation in the Atlantic . The weakened British forces led by Charles Knowles made raids upon the Venezuelan coast , attacking La Guaira in February 1743 and Puerto Cabello in April , though neither operation was particularly successful .

The failure to take Cartagena caused what was left of the naval forces assigned to Vernon to remain in the Caribbean longer . This resulted in the weakened Mediterranean squadron being unable to prevent the Spanish from twice convoying troops totalling 25 @,@ 000 to Italy in November and December 1741 . It was not until Commodore Richard Lestock , commander of one of Vernon 's divisions at Cartagena , returned to Europe with ships from the Caribbean fleet , that

Britain reinforced its presence in the Mediterranean .

Historian Reed Browning describes the British Cartagena expedition as " stupidly disastrous " and quotes Horace Walpole , whose father was Vernon 's bitter enemy , writing in 1744 : " We have already lost seven millions of money and thirty thousand men in the Spanish war and all the fruit of all this blood and treasure is the glory of having Admiral Vernon 's head on alehouse signs . "

In spite of his defeat the inscription on Vernon 's marble memorial in Westminster Abbey credits him for victory in Cartagena in a deliberately elliptical style : " He subdued Chagre , and at Carthage conquered as far as naval forces could carry victory " that probably also reflects ironically his conflict with Wentworth .

= = Popular Culture = =

Scottish folk / pirate metal band Alestorm , has a song entitled ' 1741 (The Battle of Cartagena) ' on their 2014 album ' Sunset on the Golden Age ' , which chronicles the battle .

= = Additional reading = =

= = = Fiction = = =

Smollet , Tobias . The Adventures of Roderick Random . 1748 . Historical novel based on Smollett 's own experiences at Cartagena .

Hall , Charles W . . Cartagena or the Lost Brigade . 1898 . Historical novel of the North American contingent at Cartagena .

Régniez , Philippe . Blas de Lezo . In French . Les Editions de La Reconquête , 2012 , Assomption .

In the detective / historical novel " Watery Grave " by Bruce Alexander © 1996 , the main character , the blind judge Sir John Fielding , describes how , as a junior officer , he was blinded at the battle of Cartagena (3 pages)