

= Battle of Roatán =

The Battle of Roatán (sometimes spelled " Rattan ") was an American War of Independence battle fought on March 16 , 1782 , between British and Spanish forces for control of Roatán , an island off the Caribbean coast of present @-@ day Honduras .

A Spanish expeditionary force under Matías de Gálvez , the Captain General of Spanish Guatemala , gained control of the British @-@ held island after bombarding its main defences . The British garrison surrendered the next day . The Spanish evacuated the captured soldiers , 135 civilians and 300 slaves , and destroyed their settlement , which they claimed had been used as a base for piracy and privateering .

The assault was part of a larger plan by Gálvez to eliminate British influence in Central America . Although he met with temporary successes , the British were able to maintain a colonial presence in the area .

= = Background = =

Following the entry of Spain into the American War of Independence in 1779 , both Spain and Great Britain contested territories in Central America . Although most of the territory was part of the Spanish Captaincy General of Guatemala , the British had established logging rights on the southern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula (present @-@ day Belize) , and had established informal settlements (lacking formal colonial authority) on the Mosquito Coast of present @-@ day Honduras and Nicaragua . Guatemalan Governor Matías de Gálvez had moved quickly when the declaration of war arrived , seizing St. George 's Caye , one of the principal British island settlements off the Yucatan coast . Many of the British fled that occupation to the island of Roatán , another British @-@ controlled island about 40 miles (64 km) off the Honduran coast . British commander Edward Marcus Despard used Roatán as a base for guerilla @-@ style operations to extend and maintain British influence on the Mosquito Coast , and for privateering operations against Spanish shipping . (Sources do not indicate whether Despard was present on Roatán at the time of the Spanish attack ; if he was , he was probably not captured , since he continued to be active in the area . Stephens suggests that he was on Jamaica at the time .)

Gálvez , who had been ordered by King Charles to " dislocate the English from their hidden settlements on the Gulf of Honduras " , began planning offensive operations against the British mainland settlements as early as 1780 , after the British abandoned their failed expedition into Nicaragua . He raised as many as 15 @,@ 000 militia , and received financial and logistical support from many parts of the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas . For logistical and diplomatic reasons , no operations were launched until after the American victory at Yorktown in October 1781 . The British loss opened the possibility that the British would be able to deploy troops to Central America to better defend the area . Gálvez ' plans called for assaults on the British presence in the Bay Islands (principally Roatán) , followed by a sweep along the coast to eliminate the British from the mainland . Troops from central Guatemala were staged in early 1782 at Trujillo for the assault on Roatán , while additional forces moved overland from Nicaragua , Honduras , and Salvador toward the principal British settlement of Black River .

Gálvez arrived at Trujillo on March 8 to organise the assault on Roatán . Leaving a force of 600 at Trujillo to further harass the British and their partisan allies , he embarked another 600 troops onto transports , and sailed for Roatán on March 12 , escorted by three frigates (Santa Matilde , the Santa Cecilia , and the Antiope) and a number of smaller armed naval vessels , under the command of Commodore Enrique Macdonell .

The British residents of Roatán were aware of the ongoing Spanish military activities . The main settlement , New Port Royal , was defended by Forts Darling and Despard , which mounted 20 guns . The island 's white non @-@ slave population was however quite small . In 1781 they appealed to the British commander at Bluefields for support , but he was only able to send additional weapons , which did not add significantly to the island 's defenses .

= = Battle = =

The Spanish fleet arrived off Roatán early on March 13 , and , after its defenders fired several ineffectual cannon shots , anchored out of range while Gálvez sent a party in to request the surrender of the island 's defenders . The defenders asked for six hours to consider their options , which Gálvez granted . After that time had elapsed , the defenders indicated that they were prepared to stand their ground , and refused to surrender . Immediate attack was not possible due to high winds and rough seas , so Gálvez then held council , and a plan of attack was formulated .

At about 10 : 15 am on March 16 , Spanish guns opened up against Forts Dalling and Despard , which guarded the mouth of New Port Royal 's harbour . By 1 : 00 pm the British guns there had been silenced , and Major General Gabriel Herbias began landing troops . After the two forts were secured , the Spanish warships entered the harbour and began raking the town with cannon fire , while British artillery fired back from positions in the hills above the town . This exchange continued until sunset , at which point the British defenders capitulated . The Spanish had two killed and four wounded in the battle , while only two slaves were wounded on the other side .

= = Aftermath = =

Terms of surrender were agreed the next day . Gálvez and his men remained on the island for several days , collecting weapons , rounding up slaves that had run away , destroying all the buildings and agriculture on the island , as well as burning many of the ships in the harbour , which they assumed to be used in smuggling and other illicit trade . The Spanish left the island on March 23 , carrying as prisoners of war 81 British soldiers , 300 slaves , and 135 British civilians . The prisoners were sent to Havana , where the slaves were auctioned off and the others held until they could be exchanged .

Gálvez was able to only temporarily partially eliminate British influences in the area . He followed up his success at Roatán with the capture of Black River in early April , but any attempt to advance further bogged down . James Lawrie , the commander at Black River , and Edward Marcus Despard successfully recaptured Black River , and were able to hold it until the end of the war .