

The Explorers: Sir Francis Drake

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A portrait of Sir Francis Drake by Marcus Gheeraerts. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Synopsis: Francis Drake was born around 1540 in Devonshire, England. Though he had a history of illegal activity, in 1577, he was hired by the Queen of England to become the leader of an expedition intended to sail across the Atlantic Ocean, around the tip of South America, across the Pacific Ocean, around the tip of Africa and back to England. Drake successfully completed the journey and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth I when he returned. In 1588, he saw action in the English defeat of the Spanish Armada. He became ill and died off the coast of Panama in 1596.

Early Years

Like many others at the time, no birth records exist for Sir Francis Drake. It is believed he was born around 1540.

Francis Drake was the eldest of 12 sons born to Mary Myllwaye and Edmund Drake. He was taught to sail by a sea captain trading goods between England and France. Soon, some relatives named Hawkins asked him to join their crew. They were privateers, or pirates, sailing off the French coast, taking over merchant ships.

Life As A Slave Trader And Privateer

By the 1560s, Drake was given command of his own ship, the Judith. With a small fleet, Drake and his cousin, John Hawkins, sailed to Africa. They worked as slave traders. They then sailed to New Spain, or Mexico, to sell slaves to settlers, which was against Spanish law. In 1568, Drake and Hawkins became trapped in a Mexican port. The two were able to escape in their ships, but many of their men were killed. This defeat caused Drake to hate the Spanish.

In 1572, Drake got permission from Queen Elizabeth I to attack ships and property belonging to King Philip II of Spain. That year, Drake sailed to Panama. He planned to attack the town of Nombre de Dios. This port was used by Spanish ships to bring silver and gold from Peru. With two ships and a crew of 73 men, Drake captured the town. They returned to Plymouth in 1573.

Circumnavigating The Globe

After bringing home gold and silver from Panama, Queen Elizabeth sent Drake out against the Spanish again in 1577. He was to explore along the Pacific coast of South America and explore the northwestern coast of North America. Drake had five ships for the expedition.

Among his men were John Winter, commander of one of the ships, and officer Thomas Doughty. Before they left, Drake told Doughty the truth about the mission, that it was not to explore, but to attack Spanish ships and property. With pressure from Parliament, Doughty was told to mutiny and arrest Drake while they were at sea. Upon arriving off the coast of Argentina, Drake had Doughty arrested because he heard about the planned mutiny. After a quick trial, Doughty was convicted and beheaded.

Francis Drake then led the fleet around the tip of South America and through the Strait of Magellan to reach the Pacific Ocean. They were soon caught in a storm, which eventually caused Winter's ship to return to England. Continuing to face stormy weather, Drake sailed up the coasts of Chile and Peru where he attacked an unprotected Spanish merchant ship full of gold. Drake landed off the coast of California, claiming it for Queen Elizabeth. There are some who believe Drake reached the Oregon coast or even as far north as British Columbia and Alaska.

After repairing the ship and getting new food supplies, Drake set sail across the Pacific, through the Indian Ocean and around the Cape of Good Hope back to England, landing at Plymouth in 1580. Drake had become the first Englishman to circumnavigate the world.

The treasure he captured made him a wealthy man, and the queen knighted him in 1581. That year he also was appointed mayor of Plymouth and became a member of the House of Commons.

Battle With Spanish Armada

Between 1585 and 1586, relations between England and Spain grew worse. Queen Elizabeth sent Drake against the Spanish in a series of raids that captured several cities in North and South America, taking treasure and damaging Spanish pride. These acts led Spain's Philip II to invade England with a great armada of warships.

In 1588, Drake was made a vice admiral of the English Navy, under Lord Charles Howard. On July 21, 130 ships of the Spanish Armada entered the English Channel. The English fleet sailed out to meet them, relying upon days of long-range cannon fire to significantly damage the armada.

At the Battle of Gravelines, the English began getting the better of the Spanish ships. The Spaniards would end up having to retreat. While they were leaving, thousands of Spaniards ended up drowning from weather and ships crashing into rocks. The sailors who reached land were later executed by the English. Less than half of the original fleet returned to Spain.

Final Expeditions And Death

In 1589, Queen Elizabeth ordered Drake to seek out and destroy any remaining ships of the armada and help Portugal in its fight against the Spanish. This effort failed as ships were lost and many died, so Drake returned home, where, for the next several years he busied himself with his duties as mayor of Plymouth.

In 1595, the queen once again called upon Drake. He and his cousin Hawkins were to capture Spain's gold and treasure in Puerto Rico and Panama. These riches were used by Spain to pay for war. After a defeat at Fortaleza, near San Juan, Puerto Rico, Drake's fleet moved farther west. They anchored off the coast of Panama. They attacked and burned Nombre de Dios, but found no gold. Moving to Portobelo, Drake became deathly ill from drinking foul water or eating bad food. On January 28, 1596, he died of a fever. He was buried in a lead coffin at sea near Portobelo. Today, divers continue to search for the coffin.

Quiz

- 1 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) After learning how to sail, Drake joined a crew of pirates.
 - (B) Drake attacked Spanish ships in Peru to bring back gold and silver for the queen.
 - (C) Drake was the first Englishman to sail around the world.
 - (D) Drake died in Panama on a mission to capture more treasures from Spain.
- 2 Fill in the blank.
- The author developed the central idea of the article by ...
- (A) highlighting Drake's bravery in battle against the Spanish.
 - (B) describing the circumstances that led to Drake's major accomplishments.
 - (C) providing examples of how loyal Drake was to his country.
 - (D) illustrating how Drake cleverly defeated the Spanish over the course of his life.
- 3 Which answer choice accurately characterizes Drake's reaction toward the queen's orders to attack Spain in 1577?
- (A) He was overly concerned about his men's loyalty.
 - (B) He was careful not to reveal the true cause of his mission.
 - (C) He was not confident in his fleet's abilities.
 - (D) He was eager to capture as much Spanish gold as possible.
- 4 What is the MOST LIKELY reason the author included information about Doughty's planned mutiny?
- (A) to highlight Drake's determination to attack the Spanish
 - (B) to emphasize Drake's unanimous leadership
 - (C) to demonstrate how others feared Drake
 - (D) to challenge the idea that Drake truly sailed to Oregon

Answer Key

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