

Tudors

THE SPANISH ARMADA BY NIGEL BRYANT

August 1588. On the deck of an English ship about to join battle with the Armada. A beat is being played on a drum. Over this:

CAPTAIN You, boy - get to your post!

THOMAS What, sir?

CAPTAIN To your post, I say! You know your duty!

JOHN No, sir, he's my son - we're not part of the crew, we...

CAPTAIN And you, man, down below and ready to engage.

JOHN But, sir, we're not supposed to be here - we only -

CAPTAIN Go!

FX Cut to gun deck down below, claustrophobic bedlam.

THOMAS [V/O] There weren't no arguin' - it's were a mistake, but the captain wouldn't listen! I'm Thomas - Thomas Harte - and I'm not even a sailor! But suddenly me dad an' me...we we're about to fight the Spaniards! The Armada!

GUNNER We're nearly within firing range!

CAPTAIN Stand ready to fire a broadside!

THOMAS [V/O] We're down with all the cannon now, on the gun deck. The ceilin's so low I have to stoop and squat, and there's so many men I can't see nothin' - but as I look at the wooden plankin' walls all I know is this: if a Spanish cannon-ball hits right there, there'll be giant splinters scythin' the air and I'll be cut to ribbons! An' to think - just a couple of hours ago I was on the beach, workin' on me father's fishing boat!





- FX* *Crossfade to gulls and seawash - and a racket of chains and scrap iron being loaded into a boat.*
- But it weren't nothin' to do with fish: our boat was needed for somethin' else...**
- MAN* All the iron you can get! Fill your boat!
- THOMAS [V/O]* **We'd been fearin' it for months - the Spanish Armada: a great fleet come to invade our shores!**
- MAN* Load up anything you can find! Plough chains, scrap iron...
- THOMAS [V/O]* **And now our English ships were runnin' out of ammunition!**
- MAN* We've scarce a cannon ball left, so anything that'll make a missile will do! If your boat's full, get out with the tide - sail as fast as you can!
- FX* *Crossfade to sound of small boat at sea.*
- THOMAS [V/O]* **So we put our fishing boat out to sea, to join Sir Francis Drake's fleet o' warships, and take 'em all the iron we could lay our hands on. Cos the Spaniards are here now, right off our Dorset coast, just beyond the horizon! But me dad says we'll never let 'em land...**
- JOHN* Drake's the terror of the Spaniards! They think he commands the winds!
- THOMAS* But the Spaniards have conquered half the earth!
- FX* *Cut to the warship - a great groaning of timbers.*
- THOMAS [V/O]* **And soon we could see 'em! We boarded the ship to deliver our load o' metal for the gunners - and from the deck we could see the Armada not half a mile away! A vast forest of masts and sails and flags, in a great half-moon about...seven miles wide!**
- THOMAS* There's so many of 'em, you can hardly see the sea!
- JOHN* I ain't never seen the like. The ocean groans under the weight of 'em.
- CAPTAIN* Hold your fire till I give the word! Load all guns!



- THOMAS [V/O]** And now here we are, sent down to the gun deck! The ship's lurchin' and pitchin' in the waves - how can anybody aim? But still, the gunner nearest me takes a bag full o' gunpowder and feeds it down the barrel o' this massive iron cannon. Then he gets a wad o' cloth and rams it down to keep the powder-bag in place. Then he takes the ramrod a second time, an' drives down the barrel two great lumps o' metal linked by an iron chain.
- THOMAS Why's he loadin' it with that?
- JOHN The chain'll spread open when it's fired, then wrap itself around a mast and smash clean through it - smash it in half!
- GUNNER We've been firing balls into the sides of their ships, trying to blast holes so the sea floods in, but we can't sink 'em fast enough - so now we're aiming to smash their masts or tear their sails.
- CAPTAIN Stand by!
- THOMAS [V/O]** I can see through the gun-port - the hatch the cannon fires through - and there's a Spanish ship no more than a hundred yards away!
- 2nd GUNNER God help us! No nearer, or they'll board us!
- THOMAS What's he mean, Dad?
- JOHN If we sail too close, the Spanish'll throw grappling hooks across our decks, haul us in beside 'em and swarm aboard!
- THOMAS Don't we want to fight 'em?!
- GUNNER No! Not hand to hand we don't!
- THOMAS [V/O]** I look again through the gun-hatch... Still we're pitchin' up and down...
- CAPTAIN And...broadside on!
- THOMAS [V/O]** And we're turnin' side-on, ready to blast the Spanish ship, its four great masts and twelve sails loomin', colossal...
- CAPTAIN Prepare your fire!



- THOMAS [V/O]** I can see the Spaniards on their decks, muskets flashin', plumes o' smoke... Our men on the deck above are firin' back - rainin' arrows at 'em, too, from longbows - and I see three, four, five Spaniards fall... How many'll fall when these cannons roar?
- CAPTAIN** On the up-roll, give your fire!
- THOMAS [V/O]** We wait for the sea to tip us upwards so the cannons are pointin' above the Spanish decks, then...
- CAPTAIN** Give your fire!
- FX* A colossal, shattering cannon blast close to, then another, and another, each one rolling further off.
- THOMAS [V/O]** Cannon after cannon blasts and roars, all the way along our gun-deck! All the gunners are cheerin', punchin' the air. The ship's turnin' hard about and we're pullin' away from the enemy...
- JOHN** Her sails are shredded! Her rigging's smashed!
- GUNNER** Her mainmast's comin' down!
- FX* Cheering, then suddenly a massive crash as their ship is hit by a cannon ball. Splintering wood. After a few moments the confusion fades.
- THOMAS [V/O]** We didn't escape unharmed. Our good ship was pierced with shot above forty times. Two of the gunners next to me...one 'ad 'is leg blown clean away, another 'ad 'is brains scattered.
- FX* Sound of hammering.
- Later they got me patchin' the 'oles in the ship's side, with wooden plugs and tar and shredded rope. But there weren't much tar or pitch left, cos most of it had been taken away for somethin' else, along with a load o' gunpowder. I asked my dad what was goin' on.
- JOHN** We're gettin' ready to send in fireships.
- THOMAS** What's that mean?



- JOHN The Spanish fleet's put into harbour, somewhere up the coast from Calais. We've tracked 'em all the way, and now we're loadin' old boats with gunpowder and pitch - stuff that'll really burn! - and we're gonna set 'em loose to float down on the tide and smash into the Spanish ships! Think: all that canvas, rope and wood!
- THOMAS Just ripe for burnin'!
- GUNNER Right! If a ship gets tangled with a fire-boat, nothing can save it - it'll be up in flames!
- 2nd GUNNER Devil ships, the Spanish call 'em!
- FX *Cut to the sound of wind and sea.*
- THOMAS [V/O]** **Devil ships was right. Standin' up on deck we could see the fire ships floatin' in.**
- JOHN Look at them Spaniards panickin'! See - they've sent out rowboats to grapple the fireships and pull 'em away.
- GUNNER It won't work. And look! Look there!
- FX *Distant explosion. The gunners cheer.*
- THOMAS [V/O]** **One o' the Spanish ships is blown sky-high - a barrel o' powder must've caught fire. The Spanish ships were heavin' in all directions, blunderin' into each other as they tried to escape.**
- JOHN They'd no time to hoist anchor! They must've cut their anchor-ropes!
- GUNNER So they'll have no way to stop and land now - they'll have to keep on sailing!
- FX *Triumphant cheering crossfades to the monotonous creaking of the ship.*
- THOMAS [V/O]** **They had to keep on sailing...and so did we. The Spanish fleet was broken up. No longer a half-moon seven miles wide - they all sailed on in dribs and drabs, just as the wind blowed 'em - northward, up past England and on towards Scotland. We trailed 'em all the way, till we knew they weren't gonna land, and then we turned back for home. But then, right at the harbour-mouth, we were stopped and told we couldn't go back on shore.**
- GUNNER The order's come to stay on board.



- 2nd GUNNER What for?
- GUNNER In case the Spanish return.
- JOHN They ain't comin' back! Every mast and sail is riddled with shot!
- 2nd GUNNER Ask me, they're keepin' us here so they don't have to pay us! They're leavin' us cooped up here, waitin' for us all to die!
- THOMAS [V/O] A week passed. Men fell sick an' started to die for want of fresh food and water. I grew afraid real afraid - my dad could be the next.**
- JOHN Give me that tumbler, Thomas. I've got to have water.
- THOMAS You can't, Dad - it ain't fit.
- JOHN Then get me to the shore! I've such a fever on me.
- FX* *Sounds of the dockside.*
- THOMAS [V/O] When finally we got ashore we found the streets in port lined with men too weak to make their way home.**
- JOHN Dear God, look at 'em all.
- THOMAS [V/O] They were dyin' in alleys and doorways, and no-one goin' near 'em for fear o' disease...**
- I couldn't get 'im home. 'E died there in port. I left 'is body in the porch of a church, hopin' they'd give 'im a Christian burial. That was a year ago. And I'll tell you somethin': the whole fleet that fought for England, fought for Queen Elizabeth, lost fewer than a hundred men to the Spanish guns. But now, a year on, half the heroes who beat the great Armada...are dead.**