

BATTLE OF CAPE SAINT VINCENT

Captain Collingwood to his Wife Sarah

EXCELLENT, off Lagos
17 February 1797

I am sure you will be glad to hear from me after such a day as we have had on the 14th (Valentine's day). It was indeed a glorious one, and it seldom falls to the lot of any man to share in such a triumph. First, my love, I am as well as I ever was in my life, and have now pretty well got the better of my fatigue. Now for history. We were cruising at sea, off Cape St. Vincent, with fifteen sail of the line, when the Admiral first received information that the Spanish fleet, twenty-eight sail of the line, were come down the Mediterranean; and a day or two afterwards that twenty-seven sail were in our neighbourhood, one being left at Gibraltar with ten or twelve frigates, making in all thirty-eight or forty sail. We were fifteen, and four frigates. He determined to attack them. On the night of the 13th, the weather being fine, but thick and hazy, we heard their signal-guns, which announced their vicinity, and soon after day-light we saw them very much scattered, while we were a compact little body. We flew to them as a hawk to his prey, passed through them in the disordered state in which they were, separated them into two distinct parts, and then tacked upon their largest division. The CULLODEN and CAPTAIN, Commodore Nelson's ship, were the first that brought them to close action. I by chance became the Admiral's leader (for the circumstances were such as would admit of no regular order), and had the good fortune to get very early into action. The first ship we engaged was the *SAN SALVADOR DEL MUNDO*, of 114 guns, a first rate; we were not farther from her when we began than the length of our garden. Her colours soon came down, and her fire ceased. I hailed, and asked if they surrendered; and when by signs made by a man who stood by the colours, I understood that they had, I left her to be taken possession of by somebody behind, and made sail for the next, but was very much surprised on looking back to find her colours up again, and her battle recommenced. We very soon came up with the next, the *SAN ISIDRO*, 74, so close alongside, that a man might jump from one ship to the other. Our fire carried all before it; and in ten minutes she hauled down her colours; but I had been deceived once, and obliged this fellow to hoist English colours before I left him, and made a signal for somebody behind to board him, when the Admiral ordered the *LIVELY* frigate to take charge of him. Then making all sail, passing between our line and the enemy, we came up with the *SAN NICHOLAS*, of 80 guns, which happened at the time to be abreast of the *SAN JOSEF*, of 112 guns; we did not touch sides, but you could not put a bodkin between us, so that our shot passed through both ships, and, in attempting to extricate themselves, they got on board each other. My good friend, the Commodore, had been long engaged with those ships, and I came happily to his relief, for he was dreadfully mauled. Having engaged them until their fire ceased on me, though their colours were not down, I went on to the *SANTISSIMA TRINIDAD*, the Spanish Admiral Cordova's ship, of 132 guns, on four complete decks—such a ship as I never saw before. By this time, our masts, sails, and rigging, were so much shot, that we could not get so near her as I would have been; but near enough to receive much injury from her, both in my men and ship. We were engaged an hour with this ship, and trimmed her well; she was a complete wreck. Several others of our ships came up, and engaged her at the same time; but evening approaching, and the fresh Spaniards coming down upon us, the Admiral made the signal to withdraw, carrying off the four ships that had surrendered to our fleet.

The ships longest and most engaged were, CULLODEN, Captain Troubridge; CAPTAIN, Commodore Nelson; the BLENHEIM, Captain Frederick; and PRINCE GEORGE, Rear-admiral W. Parker and Captain Irwin. I had eleven men killed, and many wounded—every body did well. I am persuaded there will be no complaints of this little fleet; and when the disparity of force is considered, the taking two first-rates, with two flag-officers, is a new thing. I have got a Spanish double-headed shot fired from the *SANTISSIMA TRINIDAD*, which I intend as a present to your father, to put amongst his curiosities: it weights 50 lbs. These are no jokes, when they fly about one's head. God bless you! my dearest love; may you ever be happy!