Battle of Cape Saint Vincent

The Victory vs. Santisima Trinidad: two of the greatest ships of the age of sail meet in the on of the opening battles of the Anglo-Spanish war.

In October 1796, the Spanish declared war on the British, beginning the Anglo-Spanish war. The British fleet, heavily outnumbered in the Mediterranean, had no choice but to concede the area to Spanish rule.

In the first few months of 1797, 27 Spanish ships of the line left Cartagena enroute to Brest in order to join the French fleet. From there they would sail to Cadiz to escort a merchant fleet – but fate in the form of fierce wind would intervene.

Spanish Admiral Don Jose de Cordoba y Ramos watched helplessly from the quarterdeck of the mighty *Santisima Trinidad* as his fleet was blown out into the Atlantic, forcing him to claw his way back to Cadiz. He no doubt cursed his fate, though he had little to worry about; at his command were thousands of men, as well as just over 2400 cannons.

While the Spanish were experiencing their bit of misfortune, the British would have surprisingly good luck. Admiral Sir John Jervis had assembled a fleet of 15 ships of the line off of Cape St. Vincent, though he still had no idea where the Spanish fleet lay. He had orders to intercept them before they were able to link up with the French fleet, and time was running out.

Enter Commodore Horatio Nelson. Commanding the HMS *Captain*, he managed to sail right through the Spanish fleet, completely undetected due to a heavy fog. Though he was able to find Admiral Jervis and tell him where the Spanish were, he was unable to count how many ships the Spanish fleet had. Undeterred, Jervis gave the order to find the Spaniards.

The Spanish, still trying to keep their fleet in order through the fog and find their way to Cadiz, were not well prepared for a fleet engagement. In the early morning hours of 14 February, the British sailed straight at a fleet that would outnumber them nearly two to one – and pull off one of the most spectacular victories of the Age of Sail.

Scenario: The Battle of Cape St. Vincent

Fleet Lists

This scenario uses the fleet lists from the Fighting Sail rulebook, as well as the supplemental entries listed after the scenario. Players should agree on a points total that suits their taste, though the standard 300 points is a good place to start. To represent the Spanish advantage in numbers, the Spanish fleet gets 50% more points than the British – so in a 300 point game, the Spanish would get 450.
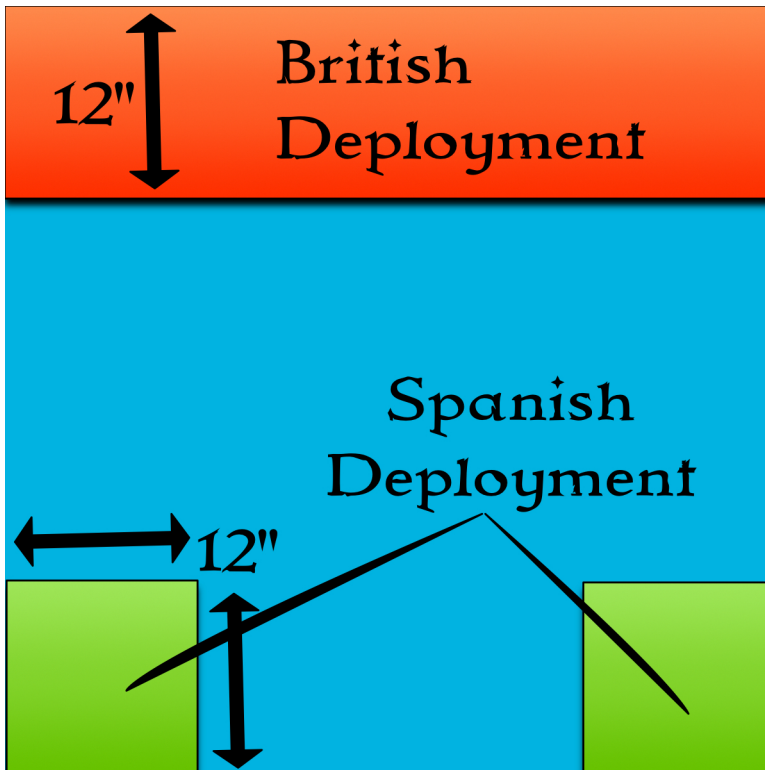
Setup

This is a battle between the British and Spanish fleets. An area of 4'x4' works best. Players take turns placing fog one at a time, until 6 fog patches have been placed. Fog may not be placed closer than 3" next to another fog patch.

The British player chooses a table edge. The wind will go from the British player's right to left side.

The Spanish player deploys first, on the opposite table edge. They must deploy at least half of their fleet within 12" of their left table edge, while at least a third of their fleet must be deployed within 12" of their right table edge.

The British player then deploys their fleet within 12" of their table edge. The British player may choose to be the first or second player for the first turn.

Special Rules

The Spanish fleet has been caught off guard by the British, and is not completely ready for battle. Indeed, the Spanish ships were still firing their signal guns in the fog to make sure they didn't run into each other. As such, at the beginning of the game, the Spanish player rolls on the following table for each of his ships:

Confusion Table

1: The ship starts the game with an anchor token and a damage token.
2-5: The ship starts the game with an anchor token.
6: The ship's captain is alert, and its crew ready; the ship suffers no ill effects.

Furthermore, whenever the British player wins the initiative for the turn, he may choose to be the second player instead of the first for that turn.

Special Ordnance

Neither side may use special ordnance for this scenario.

Objective

This scenario uses the standard objective – reduce the enemy fleet's morale to zero! The first player to do this is the winner.

Legends of the Battle of Cape St. Vincent

To add some more historical flavor to your games, you may choose to include the following ships and characters to your game:

Britain

Admiral Sir John Jervis (Admiral from 1787-1801)

Admiral Jervis' naval record covers most of the great wars of the age of sail: the Seven Years' War, the American War of Independence, the French Revolutionary war, and of course the Napoleonic Wars. He was an extremely strict but pragmatic man, insisting on a high level of discipline but also highly supportive of officers and sailors that he felt met or exceeded his high standards.

Special Rules
- **Admiral**: Jervis can be included in your fleet as your admiral at a cost of 13 points.
- **Organizer of Victories**: First, second, and third rate ships in your fleet get +1 discipline, including your flagship.

"The die is cast, and if there are fifty sail I will go through them." – Admiral Sir John Jervis, on the outset of the battle

Commodore Horatio Nelson (Captain from 1779-97)

Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson is of course covered in the Fighting Sail rulebook (page 35), but since he was a captain at the time of this battle, he is presented here so that he may captain one of the British ships.

Special Rules
- **Distinguished Captain**: You may include Commodore Nelson as one of your ship's captains (but not your admiral) for 9 points. Furthermore, he may only be made captain of a ship of the line, not a frigate.
- **Bold**: His ship gets +1 sailing.
- **Marksman**: His ship may reroll 1's when rolling its gunnery dice.

Spain

Admiral Jose de Cordoba y Ramos (Admiral from 1789-1797)

Admiral Cordoba had been sailing around the world since the young age of 13. No stranger to battle, he had fought bravely against many of Spain's enemies, as well as exploring much of the South Pacific.

Special Rules
- **Admiral**: You may include Cordoba in your fleet as its admiral for 10 points.
- Once per game, you may remove a damage token from one of your ships. You may choose to use this ability after a ship has failed its roll to remove the token itself.
- Veteran Sailor: your squadrons may combine fire while within 9" of each other.

The Battle and Aftermath

As the British emerged from the fog and approached their enemies, the true numbers of the Spanish fleet became apparent: there were no fewer than 27 ships, while the British had a mere 15. By the time Admiral Jervis had a complete assessment of the enemy fleet's size, he had already committed his fleet to battle and couldn't realistically withdraw without putting his men in serious danger.

The Spanish fleet was divided into two groups, one larger to the west and a smaller group to the east. Admiral Jervis pointed his fleet right between the two groups, in order to maximize the number of guns he'd be able to bring to bear on the numerically superior foe.

Admiral Cordoba was more concerned with completing his mission of linking up with the French fleet. He had the British outnumbered, but he chose to sail north and escape the British attack rather than face them head on. It was a sensible decision, and would have worked had it not been for the bold moves of Horatio Nelson.

Nelson saw that the Spanish intended to sail away, and knew that if the British were forced to chase, the resulting battle would be a stalemate at best. The British needed a decisive victory on this day, and Nelson was willing to disobey orders to achieve it.

Breaking away from his line of battle, he sailed the HMS Captain straight towards the towering Santisima Trinidad. Nelson had just over half the guns that the Trinidad carried, and to make matters worse she was supported by no fewer than five other Spanish ships.

In the ensuing battle, Nelson's ship was blasted to shreds. Barely able to continue drifting forward, he lashed the ship to the Spanish San Nicolas, boarding and capturing her. There was no time for celebration however, as the San Jose quickly came to her compatriot's aid and fired on the raiding British. Nelson made the bold and unprecedented move of boarding the San Jose from his newly-captured prize, taking two ships for the price of one.

This daring action along with the support of several other British ships slowed the Spanish fleet enough to allow the rest of the British to catch up and stop the Spaniards from escaping. Even the massive Santisima Trinidad briefly struck her colors before being rescued by a pair of third rates and limping to safety.

By 4pm, the battle was over, and was a resounding victory for the British. They had captured four Spanish ships, including two first rates, as well as inflicting terrible casualties on the Spanish navy while suffering relatively few themselves.

Admiral Jervis was made a noble peer and given the title of "Earl St. Vincent." Nelson had disobeyed orders and as a result his action wasn't represented in Jervis' official account of the battle. Success was hard to argue with, so he suffered no real consequences and was even made a Knight of the Order of Bath.

The British victory at Cape St. Vincent successfully contained the Spanish fleet, as well as weakening the French naval abilities in other areas of the sea. Nelson returned to the Mediterranean a year later, leading the fleet that would eventually rout the French at the Battle of the Nile.