Twitter Thread by Russ



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Just because.

Here's an interesting story about a man you've almost certainly heard of, think you know stuff about, but probably weren't taught any of the good, funny, ludicrous stuff that makes it really interesting.

It's long. You might hate it. I'll take that chance...

In 1588, Spain launched a huge fleet with the aim of overthrowing Elizabeth I and conquering England (sorry Britain, I'm taking about the "it's still just England" era).

At least in part, they did this to stop our pirates from being such a monumental pain in their arse...

As the 130 Spanish ships approached our coast, the English packed our most ancient and decrepit boats with junk, set them on fire, and shoved them into the Spanish lines.

The Armada scattered, and the weather took care of the rest, driving them towards the Dutch coast...

Thus, the great military achievement of the Elizabethan era was settled by a combination of a typical English summer, and an aquatic bin fire.

But somebody had to come out of it a hero, and that somebody was Sir Francis Drake...

The things you know about Drake are practically all false: he didn’t finish his game of bowls before being bothered to defeat the Spanish – that story didn’t appear until some 40 years after the events, and bad weather kept in in Plymouth: not fannying around with ball games...

And Drake wasn’t knighted by Queen Elizabeth on the deck of the his ship, the Golden Hind: a visiting French diplomat did that, and Elizabeth was retrofitted into the story during the Victorian era...

But the demands of propaganda predate Dominic Cummings, and British culture cannot have an innate stoicism unless our heroes do something stoical, ideally at moments of national crisis, and in front of eyewitnesses who can do lightning-fast woodcut illustrations...

The truth?

Aged about 12, Drake became apprentice to a neighbour who owned ship that traded with France.

By his early-20s, he was ready for his first foray into piracy and slave-trading, and without wishing to undermine a national legend, he was an absolute bloody shambles...

He raided Portuguese settlements in West Africa, stole as many of their recently captured slaves as he could, then headed off to the Americas to offload the cargo.

But somehow, he managed to fail to sell the slaves, even at a knock-down price...

The 90 slaves were released without payment, and remarkably the expedition (with a business plan of stealing something in high demand, and then selling it for pure profit) still managed to made a loss

God knows, I don’t want to elicit sympathy for the slavers, but ...

... this was a bit like letting a casino go bankrupt: you have to wonder how inept the management must be.

Anyway, the next year Drake was back, determined to make a better fist of things. If anything, it got worse...

This time, he tried to do honest trading on the Mexican coast, with the knowledge of the local Spanish authorities. But the Spanish in Spain weren't happy, and ordered him gone.

Drake was attacked in port, 2/3 of his ships sunk, and he only escaped by swimming out to sea.

(This is probably because Drake was, as we'd describe it now, a bloody maniacal pirate bastard who, before he went to Mexico, killed and robbed his way around the North Atlantic on a regular basis)

Still, he felt aggrieved that his "honest" job still got him attacked...

So he decided to make the Spanish suffer.

In 1572 he formed an alliance with escaped African slaves in Panama, and between them they planned a surprise attack on a Spanish mule-train of silver and gold being exported from the Spanish empire in Peru...

As it was transported overland through the thick jungle where the Panama Canal now sits, Drake attacked the convoy, and liberated the loot. But he was injured in the melee and was bleeding heavily. He abandoned all the cash, plus his newfound slave friends, and scarpered...

All his slave friends were captured and killed. But he didn't pause to grieve for long: his plan had nearly worked, so the following year he decided to surprise the Spanish by doing...

exactly the same thing again

This time, if anything things went a bit TOO well...

When the dust cleared after his second not-so-surprising surprise attack, Drake found himself in possession of 20 tons of silver and gold, and nowhere near enough manpower to carry it.

They separated out the more valuable gold, and buried the silver...

(This event probably gave rise to the legend that pirates bury their treasure).

Drake's party, weighed down with literally tons of gold, then began the laborious trek back through 20 miles of pathless, mountainous jungle, to the shore where their raiding boats awaited...

Except, whoops! the boats weren't there. Gone. Washed away, probably. And the vengeful Spanish were in hot pursuit.

Drake quickly cobbled-together a flimsy driftwood raft and, dignity intact, half-sailed, half-sploshed his way out to his flagship to get aid...

He and the gold made it back to England, where he fully expected a hero’s welcome.

But in his absence, the English had signed a truce with the Spanish, which made it impossible for Drake to be officially acknowledged.

The Crown still took its half the money though. Obvs...

And so, after four failed attempts, Drake’s first taste of success led to him abandoning all his silver and most of his men, and then losing half his remaining profits to a monarch who officially refused to accept he even existed

Still, he put it down as a “win”.

Drake’s major achievement, other than the Armada, was the first circumnavigation of the globe under a surviving captain

Magellan was the first circumnavigation, but Magellan himself lacked the foresight to stay alive to the end of the journey, so Drake gets the plaudits...

When he landed in California, Drake *claimed* the local Indian tribe placed a hat on his head. He *claimed* this had made him king. Bollocks, obviously

But back in London, lawyers used this hat-based rumour to justify taking over the whole of America. So Drake got knighted...

His uncharacteristic run of good luck continued with the Armada business, and so he decided to capitalise on it by launching... The English Armada!

(He wasn't a fan of original ideas, Francis)

And off he went to finish off the last few bits of the Spanish navy...

The English fleet consisted of 6 galleons, 60 armed merchant vessels, 80 assorted smaller ships, and 23,000 men.

The Spanish fleet was reduced to one galleon and 1,500 men.

In a stunning return to form, Drake failed dismally, losing 20 of his own vessels and 12,000 lives...

As he fled home, morale amongst Drake’s remaining fleet was unsurprisingly low

So, seemingly just to cheer himself up, he decided to attack the defenceless coastal town of Vigo, which he pounded with cannon for four days before landing and setting the remains on fire...

Yet even though Vigo was undefended, he still managed to lose another 500 men in the utterly pointless attack.

Back home, his disgrace was such that he was barely allowed near so much as a gravy boat for six years, and when he did return to the sea few could call it a success...

He failed in his planned conquest of the Azores and the Canary Isles.

And then, perhaps feeling European war wasn’t his true metier, he led another a campaign against the Spanish in Central America.

You’ll be astonished to hear it didn’t go swimmingly...

He lost the battle of San Juan, buggered up a raid on Puerto Rico, and was nearly killed in a skirmish off El Morro. Loss after loss.

And then, finally giving up on the sea, he decided to assault Panama by land, which worked out about as well as any of his previous ventures...

Most of his men died of dysentery in the jungle, and then, on 28 January 1596, Sir Francis Drake also shat himself to death, and was buried at sea between the wrecks of two scuttled British ships.

And as metaphors go, that’s pretty on-the-nose.

End of thread.