

The role of Devon's militia during the Spanish Armada crisis

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The precise role of Devon's militia during summer 1588 has, until recently, been shrouded by the recurrent tendency of historians to misinterpret the primary function of the militias in the southern maritime counties. The basic idea put forward has been that their main role during the Armada crisis was to march in-step with the Spanish and English navies, shadowing them as they progressed eastward along the Channel. Lindsay Boynton seems to have been the earliest proponent of this idea, writing in 1967 that:

...there were mobile forces, of indeterminate number, which remained in the maritime counties to shadow the Armada ... as the Armada made its way up the Channel, they moved with it to cover as far as possible the landing-places along the coast.¹

This premise has been largely supported by subsequent scholars with James McDermott writing as recently as 2005 that:

...as the composite host shadowed the Armada passed eastward along the English coast, "old" formations – those that had come furthest from the west – dropped out and returned home as the bands of the counties into which they advanced joined it.²

Indeed, with specific reference to Devon's militia, John Roberts has suggested that 'it seems probable that these men moved along inland more or less in step with the Armada's progress

up the Channel.'³ Yet in spite of this firmly entrenched view, Neil Younger has recently refuted the idea, arguing that in reality:

...aside from the intrinsic improbability, in the context of Elizabethan military capability, of a massed force moving along the south coast with no overall commander or staff, there is no solid evidence that such a movement took place, or even that it was planned in any detail.⁴

However, if the militias in the southern maritime counties did not coalesce into a shadow army, what was their true function during the Spanish Armada? This article answers that question by utilising Devon as a case study.

As late as March 1588 the Privy Council were gearing up to repel what they believed would be two separate Spanish attacks: an amphibious assault somewhere along the south coast of England or Wales and a primary Spanish attack spearheaded by the Duke of Parma, who had gathered his forces across the English Channel in Flanders, in either Kent or Essex.⁵ However, Simon Adams has crucially revealed that by mid-July 1588 the Privy Council had received new intelligence that suggested Spain's forces intended to launch just one coordinated attack on London.⁶ Essex therefore became the centre of the Privy Council's defence preparations because, as Sir William Monson observed:

...if an enemy land on [the] Essex side, he may march directly to



London without let, impeachment, or other impediment, but by the encounter of an army ... [whereas] if an enemy land in Kent he is kept by the river of Thames.⁷

Consequently, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was commissioned as a lieutenant-general and instructed to begin mustering an army, composed of approximately 1,500 horsemen and 11,000 militiamen from the Home Counties, at a strategically advantageous location on the north bank of the River Thames. Leicester thought Tilbury to be the 'most apt place' to concentrate the bulk of his forces and throughout August 1588 he utilised the port as his headquarters.⁸ However, while the Privy Council were seemingly confident that the Spanish intended just one coordinated attack on the capital they could not neglect the possibility of an attack elsewhere along the south coast.

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Spanish Armada, off the Start Point near Plymouth.

Nor could they be certain that Leicester's army would successfully repel a Spanish onslaught in Essex. With this in mind it was deemed essential that the militias of the southern maritime counties adopted a mutual aid initiative and that a reserve army of militiamen should be instructed to muster near London to defend the Queen in the event that Leicester's army failed. Devon's militia played a crucial role in both of these contingency measures.

The mutual aid initiative in the southern maritime counties – or, the forces to 'impeach the landing ... of th'enemy upon his first descent' – has been described by Younger as 'by far the least understood' element of the Privy Council's defensive strategy owing largely to the reluctance of historians to dismiss the idea of a shadow army.⁹ The true role of the militia in each southern maritime county was to act as a skirmish force, resisting any Spanish landing

attempt in the first instance and, once that became futile, delaying the enemy's advance inland as much as possible in order to buy time for reinforcements to arrive from neighbouring counties. As Sir Thomas Scott put it in reference to the role of east Kent's militia:

...by keeping the thenemy from Landing by disordering or deminishing some p[ar]te of his forces or at the leaste by staying of him for a tyme: Wherby thenland p[ar]tes of this Countie and other Counties adioyning may be in the more forwardnes to staye the enemy from speedy passage to London or the harte of the realme.¹⁰

Thus, the mutual aid part of the Privy Council's defence strategy would only be initiated in the specific location that the Spanish chose to attack. For example, in the south-west, if the Spanish attacked Falmouth, Cornwall's

4,000 trained militiamen would be reinforced by 4,000 from Devon and 3,000 from Somerset. If Plymouth or Tor Bay was targeted, Devon's 4,000 trained militiamen would be supported by 2,000 from Cornwall, 3,000 from Dorset, 2,000 from Wiltshire and 4,000 from Somerset. And if Poole was assaulted, Dorset's 4,000 trained militiamen would be aided by 4,000 from Devon, 4,000 from Somerset and 2,000 from Wiltshire. Similar arrangements were put in place further eastward thereby ensuring that all of the key ports along the south coast of England – from Falmouth in Cornwall to Yarmouth in Norfolk – were defended by a fighting force that ranged between 11,000 and 20,000 men.¹¹ Of course during the actual event the English naval forces were able to prevent the enemy from landing on the south coast, successfully harrying the Spanish fleet towards Calais. This ensured that the mutual aid initiative

Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester
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Henry Carey, 1st Baron Hunsdon
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was never actually initiated despite Henry Whitfeld's unsubstantiated claim that, 'amid beating drums and waving flags, seventeen thousand soldiers marched into Plymouth and encamped on the Hoe; and eleven thousand more continued the journey to Falmouth to resist the attack if it fell there.'¹² In reality, the navy's success freed Devon's militia, along with the militias in the other southern maritime counties, to begin preparing for their secondary function: joining the inland counties to form the army that would defend the Queen in the event that Leicester's army in Essex failed to thwart the anticipated Spanish attack on the capital.

The London army, which was to be placed under the command of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, was by far the largest force that the Privy Council planned to muster during the Armada crisis and, if it had been required, would have represented England's last line of

defence. The Council's orders to muster the main bulk of this force – which numbered over 40,000 footmen and 4,000 horsemen – were issued between 23 and 28 July 1588.¹³ Devon was ordered to send 2,000 footmen who were 'to be at London' on 10 August. To put this into context, 2,000 men was only the seventh highest contribution: Somerset was ordered to provide 4,000 men; Norfolk and Suffolk 3,000; Gloucestershire and Sussex 2,500; and Wiltshire 2,300. In addition, an arrival date of 10 August gave Devon's militia more time than any other contributing county to make ready. Clearly, this did not reflect Devon's inability to levy more than 2,000 men; after all it has already been revealed that the county was expected to provide Cornwall and Dorset with 4,000 men under the mutual aid initiative. However, one possible reason why Devon's contribution was relatively modest was the fact that the

two western-most counties had been in a state of military readiness longer than any other region during the run-up to the Armada. It is therefore feasible that the Privy Council was reluctant to impose too great a burden on either Devon or Cornwall over and above the mutual aid initiative – a possibility that is supported by the fact that Cornwall's militia was not required to contribute at all to the London army. Another possibility was that the Council wished to maintain its hitherto impressive defensive flexibility. After all there was no way of predicting the eventual success of the English fleet once it had harried the Spanish into Calais and, as Simon Adams has pointed out, there were nagging 'fears in August [1588] that the departure of the Armada northwards [to Scotland] was a feint ... as part of a plan to double back'.¹⁴ Thus, if the naval skirmishes had played out more evenly, the Spanish may well have felt strong enough to retreat westward and gain a foothold in the West Country to await reinforcements. Completely draining the militia from the south-west for service in the London army would have left England's back door wide open to that threat.

Of course in reality the Armada crisis of 1588 was all but over by 3 August with the Privy Council ordering those troops that had commenced their journey to the capital to return home to their respective counties so that they did not enter into the Queen's pay.¹⁵ Indeed, with the scraping of the London army on 3 August it seems highly probable that Devon's levy of 2,000 militiamen, who still had a week to go before their allotted arrival date in London, never



left the county. The Devon militia's practical role during the Armada crisis was therefore restricted to mustering within the county to repel a possible amphibious Spanish assault on the Devon coast and to make ready 4,000 militiamen to serve as reinforcements in the event of a Spanish attack in either Cornwall or Dorset.

References

- Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia, 1558-1638* (Routledge and K. Paul, London, 1967), p. 160. In contrast, Conyers Read made no such claim when writing in 1960. Instead he wrote: 'it seems likely that ... large forces were stationed in the maritime counties along the channel. One list puts this figure at 21,272 fighting men' (Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1960), p. 417).
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- John Roberts, *Devon and the Armada* (Gooday Publishers, East Wittering, 1988), p. 257.
- Neil Younger, 'If the Armada had Landed: A Reappraisal of England's Defences in 1588', *History*, 93:311 (July, 2008) [hereafter Younger, 'If the Armada had Landed'], 328-54 (p. 334).
- The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA], State Papers [hereafter SP] 15/30 fol. 186; Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Fifteenth Report, Appendix, Part V. The Manuscripts of*

the Right Honourable F. J. Savile Foljambe (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London, 1897) [hereafter HMC Foljambe], p. 32.

- Simon Adams, ed., 'The Armada Correspondence in Cotton MSS Otho E VII and E IX', in *The Naval Miscellany*, vol. vi, ed. by M. Duffy (Naval Records Society, 146, 2003) [hereafter Adams, 'Armada Correspondence'], pp. 37-92 (pp. 80-1).
- M. Oppenheim, ed., *The Naval Tracts of Sir William Monson in Six Books*, vol. ii (Naval Records Society, 1902), p. 283.
- TNA, SP 12/213 fol. 38.
- HMC Foljambe, p. 45; Younger, 'If the Armada had Landed', p. 333.
- TNA, SP 12/212 fol. 64.
- TNA, SP 12/213 fol. 141. For examples of arrangements further eastward see: *Acts of the Privy Council* [hereafter APC], xv, p. 269; TNA, SP 12/213 fol. 55.
- Henry Francis Whitfield, *Plymouth and Devonport: in Times of War and Peace* (E. Chapple, Plymouth, 1900), p. 54.
- APC, xvi, pp. 171, 186 and 195-6; HMC Foljambe, p. 57; TNA, SP 12/213 fol. 114.
- Adams, 'Armada Correspondence', p. 50.
- APC, xvi, pp. 215-6.

Further reading

Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia, 1558-1638* (Routledge and K. Paul, London, 1967).
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