A short historical note on the 1622 fleet

In 1622 Dom Francisco da Gama, fourth Count of Vidigueira, was appointed 22nd Viceroy of India.

Dom Francisco da Gama was born in 1565 as the son of Vasco da Gama, third Count of Vidigueira, and great-grandson of the famous navigator who, after discovering the sea route to India, became India's second Viceroy. At the age of thirteen, he was part, with his father, of King Sebastião's fateful North Africa campaign. He fought by his side and saw his father killed; he was himself made prisoner.

He was ransomed in 1595 and returned to Lisbon. Early in the following year he was appointed 16th Viceroy of India, replacing Matias de Albuquerque, and took his post in Goa, capital of Portuguese India, on May 22nd 1597. For three years he performed his government duties under quite difficult circumstances such as lack of funds and ships, and the constant threat from the English in the South and the Mongols in the North. As ingrained corruption reached deplorable proportions, he was forced to undertake deep reforms.

However, the rigour he imposed and the military victories he obtained were not enough to avoid deep uneasiness surrounding his administration and controversial personality.

Twenty-two years had passed since his return from India when he left Lisbon on March 18th 1622, again headed for Goa. He sailed with the fleet headed by capital ship *Santa Teresa*, captained by Dom Filipe Lobo. *Santa Teresa* was seconded by flagship *São José* under the orders of Captain Dom Francisco Mascarenhas and warship *São Carlos* under the command of Francisco Lobo, where the Viceroy sailed. The *São Salvador* galleon and three more warships were also part in this major fleet.

As they passed by São Tomé, the three warships lost contact with the rest of the fleet; it is known that they managed to arrive in Goa without major upset.

During the voyage, the crew of *São José* was afflicted by disease, which also infected the Captain and Pilot. With communication with the other ships very poor, the *São José*, which sailed last, fell unusually far behind the other ships.

On the night of 22nd July as the four ships sailed off Mongicual, close to the Isle of Mozambique, an Anglo-Dutch war fleet attacked.

The Anglo-Dutch fleet attacked the *São José* with four ships, which was made easier as her isolated position made her an easier target.

The four ships turned their cannon at the *São José*, while a ship sailing more to the North intercepted the *São Carlos* as she turned to come to the distressed flagship's rescue. Both ships fought all night and morning of the 23rd against the Anglo-Dutch fleet but, by the end of the day, the *São José* virtually stopped all resistance.

With the Captain sick and the Pilot fallen in combat, the ship itself badly damaged by enemy fire, most of her sails torn to pieces – indeed her main mast broken – the crew decided to go ashore in a desperate attempt to escape the enemy and gain some time to repair the ship.

However, in the process of retreating to land, a sandbank in Mongicual (now known as Infusse) blocked the passage. The *São José* hit the bottom of the reef, lost the rudder and was completely out of control. In a last attempt to stop the ship the crew dropped the anchor, but she was dragged to deeper waters off the coast, where the ship finally broke apart and sank the day after.

The Anglo-Dutch fleet, assured of the tragic end of the *São José*, decided to chase the *Santa Teresa* and the *São Carlos*. In a merciless pursuit it followed them up to the entry to the Isle of Mozambique. There, fearing the firepower of São Sebastião fort, they decided to turn back and safely plunder the spoils of the *São José*.

For some inexplicable reason, the *Santa Teresa* and the *São Carlos* had already passed by the islet of Goa when they ran aground on a sandbank (today known as "Banco de São Lourenço"), very close to the comforting protection of São Sebastião fort.

The *Santa Teresa* immediately keeled dangerously to port, losing her artillery and beginning to take water over the ship's rail. Father Jerónimo Lobos described the scene this way: "Only the upper cargo deck could be saved, but the rest of the cargo and the artillery were lost."

Everything that could be rescued was taken ashore and the *Santa Teresa* was burnt to prevent the enemy from taking the spoils. The *São Carlos* was more fortunate and was not stuck. With the change of the tide she sailed again and was driven by the current to a reef near São Sebastião fort. There, all her cargo was recovered. On the evidence of some accounts the ship was completely stripped down.

Meanwhile the Anglo-Dutch fleet sailed back to Mongicual where the majority of the survivors of the *São José* was made prisoner and all the cargo they could lay their hands on was plundered. Reports from the time mention one hundred prisoners and three or four hundred drowned as well as the loss of a significant part of the precious cargo.

After this fateful episode, Dom Francisco da Gama eventually reached Goa, quite some time after the ships that had sailed with the fleet.

For six years Dom Francisco administered the Portuguese territories of India; but his reputation and the powerful intrigues mounted by his many enemies eventually got the better of him and all his possessions were seized by the Crown. In 1628 he received the order to hand the government to the Bishop of Cochim and returned to Europe in disgrace. He died at Oropesa in 1632 on his way to Madrid where it is thought he was going to try to prove his innocence to the Court and King Filipe the Third of Portugal.

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