Vigo Bay, on the northwest coast of Spain, provides a remarkable land-locked natural harbor. It is entered by means of an inlet from the sea that ends in a narrow neck, broadening out again to form a large lagoon-shaped bay, flanked on all sides by steep hills. Here ships could lie safely at anchor, protected from the elements by the land and by a boom and defensive forts built at the narrow opening into the bay. Here the Spanish fleet that, in 1702, had brought back fabulous riches from the New World, thought it would be unmolested by the depredations of the impertinent English.

This fleet was one of those which sailed periodically from the coasts of South America laden with the products of Mexico and Peru. As occasionally happened, the annual sailing of such fleets was postponed for one reason or another — weather, war, buccaneers, or lack of suitable ships — and the fleet that sailed in 1702 was one of these. It carried three-years’ accumulated cargoes that, according to the documents of the Casa de Contratación included pearls, emeralds, and amethysts; native silver in ingots and pieces of eight; native gold in doubloons; cochineal, indigo, and ambergris; wood from Campeche, Nicaragua, and Brazil, mahogany and redwood; cotton; tobacco in rolled leaves and powder; tanned skins and rawhide; balsam of Peru and Tolu, jalap, sarsaparilla, sassafras, bezoar; tamarind, quassia, cocoa, ginger, sugar, and vanilla.

Exactly what quantities of these goods the ships carried is not known. In order to cheat Spanish customs, it was common to reveal only about half the total cargo on the ship’s manifest! However, when the Silver Fleet of 1702 left the Havana roadsteads it was reputed to be the richest that had ever sailed.

Philip V of Spain was urgently in need of the fleet’s cargo. France and Spain were now close allies, for the throne; but the Grand Alliance had united England, Holland, Austria, Prussia, and Hanover against Louis and war was imminent. Gold was urgently needed to shore up Philip’s kingdom, and into a Spanish port they would go. Their orders were to deliver it to their own king, and into Spanish ports they would go.

The fleet made good time, but on calling at the Azores its commanders learned that the threatened war had already broken out. British and Dutch ships were blockading Cadiz. The Spanish commander, Don Manuel de Velasco, immediately summoned a council of war on board his flagship, the Jesus Maria-Joseph. The French commander, Châteaurenault, suggested that the fleet should make for Brest or La Rochelle, thus evading the forces which were certainly keeping watch over the coasts of England and those which were harrying Spain. But the Spaniards would have none of it. The French king was in need of money himself; and such a large treasure might prove too tempting. Their orders were to deliver it to their own king, and into a Spanish port they would go.

Vigo, on the north coast, was an obvious spot. The fleet would thus evade the English at Cadiz and also benefit from the safe anchorage. Without difficulty the “stately Spanish galleons” made their way along the fjord-like channel and through the neck into the bay where they dropped anchor off the little port of Redondela.

The fleet, now felt itself safe, the precious, much-needed treasure had been brought home. But there were problems. The traders of Cadiz claimed that — by virtue of a privilege they enjoyed — nothing could be disembarked. Thus the tedious Spanish bureaucracy, which was so often the cause of delays and disaster resulted in the treasure staying aboard the ships until the squabbles of authority could be resolved. The commander was not particularly concerned, for the bay seemed impregnable; but he sent for instructions from the Captain-General of Galicia, the Prince de Barbazon, who in turn referred to the court in Madrid. Several days passed before the messenger arrived with orders to unload the gold and silver destined for the treasury; the rest of the cargo must remain in the ships until the legal tangle could be resolved. There was no hurry: The English had suffered a defeat at Cadiz, and had raised the siege some five days after the Silver Fleet had sailed into Vigo. The English had then split up, some sailing north, some south — there was nothing to be feared.

The rest of this story is the result of a quirk of fate and a typical example of “careless talk.” One of the ships of the English fleet put in to Lagos to take on water. The Anglican chaplain grasped the opportunity to take a stroll ashore and visit an inn where, in conversation with a stranger newly arrived from Cadiz, he learned that the Silver Fleet, which should have come into Cadiz, had perforce diverted to Vigo. Hastily downing his drink, the chaplain returned to his ship to report the news. The captain at once weighed anchor and contrived to catch up with the rest of the English ships, under the command of Adm. Sir George Rooke.

This fleet consisted of 50 warships and 100 transports carrying 12,500 soldiers, and the formidable force immediately turned about and sailed for Vigo. It arrived there on 21 October, and with the calm weather on board a strong armed and boldly led force, sailed up and down making plans, finally anchoring outside the bay on 23 October.

The presence of the English fleet was soon known to the Spaniards. In the month which had passed since the Silver Fleet arrived, much work had been done in unloading the ships, but the Spaniards now redoubled their efforts. Following the orders from the court, the king’s share of the treasure had at once been disembarked. On 19 October, Gen. de Velasco, the fleet’s commander, announced that all the royal silver from the Capitanas and much of that from the Almirante had been sent to safety.

The British fleet was divided into four parts: two making plans, finally anchoring outside the bay on 23 October.

A contemporary source — the memoirs of nobleman Don Goyanes Reimondez — mentions “more than 3000 carts, each drawn by four oxen” having been sent to Vigo Bay; but many of them were still loading when the English fleet launched its attack. Vigo was a small port, ill-equipped to handle large numbers of merchant ships and the unloading was a slow and lengthy process.

At midnight on 25 October, the English landed 4000 men. Half the force assaulted the fortress on one bank, the other half the second fortress. With covering fire from the ships anchored outside the bay, they soon took the fortifications. There was still the defensive boom to