

Southover Bonfire Society Remembers HMS ROYAL OAK

The year 1939, the month October, the day Saturday 14th. It was 01:16 and in the next 13 minutes some 835 men were to lose their lives; this was no phoney war.

In late 1913, Sir Eustace Tennyson D'Encourt (Director of Naval Construction), received instructions to construct a new type of battleship. It appears that at the time he would have to work under restrictions almost certainly not to his liking, but this matter was dictated by the circumstances. Oil was the fuel of the future but Great Britain was short of guaranteed supplies, so it was decided that this new class of vessels would be coal-fired. Despite the fact the country had no shortage of high quality coal, this was not considered to be the way forward for the modern navy. This new class of ships was to be smaller, slower, but above all, cheaper than her predecessors, the Queen Elizabeth Super Dreadnaughts. However, there was to be one advantage; the Revenge class were to carry the heaviest guns ever mounted on ships of the line. The Royal Oak was the fourth in the class, and thanks to a timely deal with the Persian Oil Company, she was automatically upgraded with oil-fired engines.

The keel was laid down in Devonport dockyard on the 15th January 1914, she was launched on the 17th November that year, and commissioned on the 1st May 1916 as the eighth RN vessel to take the name 'Royal Oak'.

Serving during the battle of Jutland, she was credited with hits on the Defflinger and the Wiesbaden, after this on the 5th November 1918 she was reassigned to the 1st battle squadron. She was also one of the ships that escorted the German High Seas Fleet to their internment at Scapa Flow where they were to be scuttled.

Royal Oak had several refits; the first in 1922, with a second in 1924, when she was fitted with what was thought to be an effective underwater protection system known as 'bulging', this involved fitting a water-tight chamber on either side of the ship. The probable major gain was in stability, but by adding four metres to her beam the cost was a reduction in speed. There were further refits in 1934 and 1936, but such was the increase in weight that they left her sitting very low in the water and further reduced her top speed to just over 20 knots.

During the Spanish Civil War, Royal Oak carried out several non-intervention patrols, and was involved in several incidents, one of them being where she came under fire from the Nationalists. (Friendly fire, nothing new there then)!

In 1938 she returned to the Home Fleet as flagship of the 2nd Battle Squadron. At the outbreak of the Second World War on September 3rd 1939, she was sent to Scapa Flow where in October she received orders to join the hunt for the German battleship Gneisenau. This had been sent to the North Sea as a diversion, in order to allow the pocket battleships Graf Spee and Deutschland to make good their escape into the Atlantic Ocean. The hunt proved to be fruitless, and the return to Scapa Flow called the Royal Oak's capabilities to question; almost certainly because her low freeboard the severe weather conditions caused problems and with a top speed of 20 knots she could not keep up with the Fleet steaming requirements.

Following reports of German reconnaissance plans, the Fleet at Scapa Flow was ordered to disperse, on the assumption that a bombing raid could be imminent. Royal Oak was instructed to remain on station, as her armament gave her a proven anti-aircraft capability, which the islands' fortifications were lacking.

Scapa Flow had been re-activated as an anchorage at the outset of war in 1939, and although it had been home to the British Grand Fleet during World War I, the inter war years had seen the emergence of the more convenient Rosyth as the port of choice. Scapa Flow was a natural harbour situated in the centre of the Orkney Islands, surrounded by a ring of smaller islands which were in turn separated by shallow channels. It was theoretically the perfect harbour capable of holding the entire fleet. Although thought to be virtually impenetrable, the underwater threat had been realised during World War I when two U-boats found their way in; it was however to be a short war for the crew of U18. On the 23rd November 1914; they were rammed, run aground and captured. The U116 was not so fortunate, being detected by hydrophone and destroyed with the loss of all hands. To prevent a repetition of this, Block Ships were sunk at all of the critical entrance points, whilst the three widest channels were controlled by floating booms, operated by tug boats. It was considered the no U-boat Commander would be neither foolish nor daring enough to attempt an entry and remain undetected.

Karl Dönitz, the Commander of the German U-boat Fleet at the start of World War II was a resourceful and ruthless tactician, and he expected the same from his captains and crews. Despite his experience and good relationship with Hitler, he didn't have the amount of U-boats he hoped for at the outbreak of war. Hitler was at this time still enamoured of his pocket battleships, which were tying up the Allied Naval resources across the world's oceans. It is probable that had Dönitz had his way at the onset of war, the outcome may well have been very different. As it was he, like the rest of the German High Command had to impress in order to gain favour. Dönitz knew exactly how to do this; he had been observing Scapa Flow long before the start of hostilities, and as he well knew, it was the scene of one of Germany's most humiliating hours, when the High Seas Fleet had been scuttled in 1918. If he could reverse the situation and send the best part of the Home Fleet to the bottom of Scapa Flow he would become a legend overnight. Hitler and the German people would be indebted to him, and he may then get the extra U-boats and men he so desperately wanted.

Dönitz worked closely with all his Captains, all of whom deserved their rank despite their comparative youth. An outstanding officer was Kapitanleutenant Gunther Prien. Dönitz duly summoned him to a briefing where he outlined his plans for a daring raid on Scapa Flow. According to information gathered from the latest reconnaissance pictures, if Prien could get inside the defences, he would have a field day. The sinking of just one warship in this location would be a severe set back to the British as this may well cause the Home Fleet to be dispersed, which would allow the German vessels to break out into the Atlantic Ocean. All of which would be an immense boost to German morale. The mission was set for the night of the 13th of October 1939.

At 00:27 on the 14th October, Prien successfully navigated his way through the outer defences of Scapa Flow, entering from the east via Kirk Sound, passing to the north of Lamb Holm, a low lying island between Burray and Mainland, U47 surfaced and began to make her way through the block ships. At one point she snagged herself on one of the cables, and during their attempts to free the submarine the crew found themselves caught in what they thought was a searchlight, but Prien swiftly realised it was the headlights of a car on Mainland. Re-doubling their efforts, the crew worked their way free of the obstruction.

Unfortunately for them, they were to find the harbour virtually empty, as the majority of the Fleet had departed. Good seaman that he was, Prien had used his fair share of luck so far and now it was the turn of the British. There were four ships lying in the anchorage, including the newly built cruiser HMS Belfast, these vessels were only just four miles from the U47, but they remained totally unnoticed by Prien and his crew. Returning to the exit point, U47 spotted a Revenge class battleship, with astern of her what was thought to be a Renown class battlecruiser, (this was in fact the WWI Seaplane Tender 'Pegasus').

Prien ordered all four bow tubes to be loaded and at 00:58, U47 fired three torpedoes, the fourth lodged in its tube. At 01:04, one of the three struck the bow of the Royal Oak, severing the starboard anchor chain, the subsequent noise waking more men than the original torpedo strike. Onboard, the first thought was that there had been an explosion in the forward inflammable store; orders were given to check all magazine temperatures whilst the majority of the crew carried on sleeping, totally unaware that they were under attack.

At this point Prien turned U47 about, and fired a torpedo from the single stern tube, missing once again. The bow tubes being reloaded, Prien turned back towards the target and fired another three torpedoes. At 01:16 all three hit the Royal Oak amidships and within seconds she had developed a fifteen degree list to starboard. Water ingress through the portholes now below the waterline was at such a rate that the list rapidly grew to forty five degrees, she could not remain afloat. At 01:29 the Royal Oak sank, thirteen minutes after Prien's third attack. Of the men in the water that attempted to swim the half a mile to the shore, only a handful were to succeed.

The tender, Daisy 2, (skipped by John Gatt RNR), had been tied up on the port side of the Royal Oak. She only just managed to free her mooring lines as the Royal Oak started to list to starboard, but between 01:30 and 04:00 she rescued some 386 men from the water. Gatt was later to receive the Distinguished Service Cross.

As the mighty Royal Oak settled on the seabed, taking with her the lives of 835 of her crew, U47 slipped out of Scapa Flow. It was not until the remains of a torpedo were found the following day that it was realised that the Royal Oak had been sunk by a U-boat.

Gunther Prien and his crew were to become national heroes, as was Dönitz. On returning to port, Prien was flown directly to Berlin where he received the Iron Cross 1st Class and the Knights Cross, the crew were all awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class and Dönitz was promoted to Rear Admiral and Flag Officer. However, he did not get the extra U-boats he requested.

Like so many of the U-boats, the heroes of Scapa Flow were not to see the end of the war; U47 went missing on the 7th March 1941 whilst attacking Convoy OB293, and to this date there is no official report of what became of her or her crew. It is known that in less than two years at sea, (238 days), they sank 30 ships with a gross tonnage of over 196 808 tons. It is said that fortune favours the brave, but if there is any luck to be had, then it has to be said that given the devastation caused by the available U-boats we were both fortunate and lucky that Hitler did not accede to those requests made by Admiral Dönitz.

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Matt Street 2009