HMS Royal Oak

by Peter Rowlands

On the night of Friday 13th October 1939, HMS Royal Oak, a 600 foot long 29,000 ton Dreadnought battleship, was sunk by torpedoes from a German U boat which had penetrated the British Navy's main anchorage at Scapa Flow in Orkney. 833 men lost their lives and the 2nd World War was just six weeks old.

Fortunately there were survivors, thanks mainly to the heroic work of the skipper and crew of the tiny tender
Daisy2. No more than 100 feet long and just 15 feet wide, she managed to rescue 386 men from the icy, oil covered waters of Scapa Flow in total darkness in the early hours of Saturday morning.

Some of the 833 escaped only to die of their wounds and they are buried in the Naval cemetery at Lyness on the nearby island of Hoy and a remembrance plaque was placed on the wall of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, the capital of Orkney. Royal Oak's bell was added to this display when it was found by Navy divers in the 1970's. Recently a copper plate book has been added which lists the names of all those who lost their lives and every Monday a page is turned in remembrance.

A display of photographs and the ships nameplate in thick brass letters is on display at the Lyness Museum together with one of the battle ensign flags raised on the wreck of the Royal Oak each year by navy divers. The brass letters were removed illegally by an amateur diver in the 1970's. It appears that in 1994 the diver's conscience got the better of him and they were handed over to the Navy who mounted them and presented them to Orkney Islands Council in 1995.

HMS Royal Oak now lies in 30 metres of water, almost upside down with her upturned keel reaching to just 5 metres of the surface. A wreck buoy marks her hazard to shiping.

Each year Navy divers, survivors and members of the British Legion go out to the buoy on Friday 13th and conduct a moving ceremony over the water. Wreaths are laid and navy divers descend to the wreck to remove the old flag and raise a new one in remembrance of those who lost their lives.



Royal Oak was the last battleship to be built at devonport dockyard, Plymouth

HMS Royal Oak was built in the Naval dockyards at Devonport, Plymouth during World War 1. She was fitted with an awesome array of firepower starting with eight 15" guns - the largest guns ever fitted on a British Naval vessel. They each weighed 100 tons(102 tonnes) and were capable of hurling 17cwt (876kg) shells onto targets up to 18 miles (29km) away. Supporting her main armament were 6 and 4 inch side guns together with anti aircraft guns and even four submarine torpedo tubes although these were later removed.

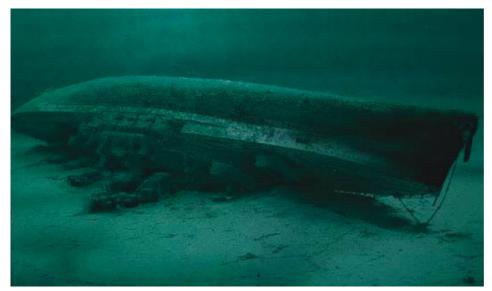
HMS Royal Oak served at Jutland in World War 1 when her 40,000 horse-power engines could achieve speeds in excess of 20 knots but by 1939 she had difficulty keeping up with the more modern ships built between the wars and was posted to the north east corner of Scapa Flow to provide anti-aircraft cover.

Shortly after midnight, Gunther Prien, Commander of German U boat U-



Gunther Prien, commander of U-47

47, was lying off the east coast of Orkney. Leading into the British Navy's main anchorage at Scapa Flow were four narrow channels between islands which had been further restricted by sinking blockships. Prien chose Kirk Sound where, on a fast incoming tide, he was able to navigate though a gap and into the calm waters of Scapa Flow.



An artists impression of how Royal Oak lies on the seabed of Scapa Flow in 100 feet of water



Identical 15" guns from her sister ships Ramilles and Resolution are on display outside the Imperial War Museum in London

Once inside the Flow Prien surveyed the scene and found only one capital ship. Fortunately all but the Royal Oak had left just a few days before fearing possible air attacks. Had they not, Gunther Prien could have drastically altered the course of World War 2.

Shortly before 1am Prien fired his first salvo of torpedoes which scored a minor hit on the bows of Royal Oak. Those on board thought there must have been a small internal explosion and no alarms were raised. Being in the harbour of Scapa Flow, the furthest thought from their minds was that this could have been a torpedo attack. Twenty minutes later Prien had reloaded and fired his second salvo which scored three perfect hits

amidships.

Despite being fitted with extra thick sides to her hull, Royal Oak listed heavily to starboard as explosions ripped her open, seawater rushed in and balls of ignited cordite raced through the ship incinerating most of the crew. Within ten minutes she turned over and sank, her 15" guns adding to the momentum as they swivelled in their turrets. Their barrels hit the seabed first followed by the flying bridge which was crushed as the rolling hull came to a rest. A small 50 foot Admirals barge, moored alongside, was also dragged down in the disaster.

As skillfully as he had entered, Gunther Prien left Scapa Flow through Kirk Sound again and returned to



Sandy Robertson was the first diver to go down and establish the cause of the sinking

Germany for a heroes welcome. The war was just six seeks old and Britain had suffered a major loss. Rumours spread that she might have been sunk by sabotage but local salvage diver Sandy Robertson was hired to dive on the wreck the day after she sank. The scenes this young 30 year old hard hat diver saw haunt him to this day. Hundreds of bodies lay around the ship but his job was to find out why she had sunk. On his first diver he found the main torpedo holes and on his second he recovered the propellors of two electric driven German torpedoes.

In the 1950's the large bronze propellors were removed by the Navy and a small amount of plundering was carried out by amateur divers in the 70's and 80's but HMS Royal Oak is an official war grave and off limits to divers.

In 2000 I was granted a special permission to work with the Navy diving team to document the wreck on both stills and video so have been fortunate to spend many hours on this wreck which must be the largest, most intact naval wreck in shallow water in the northern hemisphere. Having produced an earlier video to mark the 50th anniversary of her sinking I was familiar with her layout and detail so was able to complete the project diving twice a day for two weeks in September followed by a shorter trip on the 61st anniversary.

Dives were no decompression, twenty minutes maximum so time was of the essence to capture the wreck on film.

Despite the job in hand, a dive on the Royal Oak never diminishes the awe you have as you swim over the growth encrusted hull towards the main rails where the hull meets the deck. What was a rolling slope ends abruptly at the rails as the deck slopes back under the ship leaving you hanging over a steep drop into the cold, dark green water. Visibility is rarely more than 10 metres so it is some time before you glide down into the gloom before the seabed becomes visible. All the time you are concious of a dark shape one way and the lighter green of open water the other.

At the bows the damage from the first torpedo attack is immediately evident but the graceful line of the bow beckons you down to the huge links of anchor chain which loop down from the ship to the seabed at 30 metres. On a good day you can look up and make out the dark upturned hull silhouetted against the lighter green background.

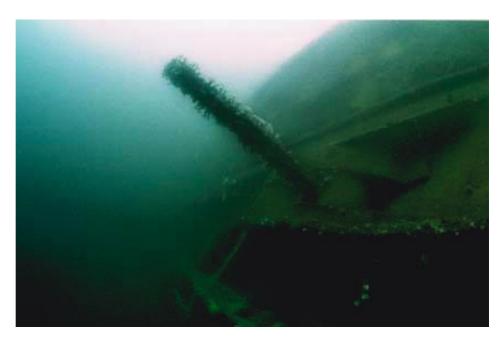
Swimming on the seabed towards amidships you come across the first of the twin 15" gun breaches. Unfortunately the barrels are buried in sand under the wreck but the breaches are visible despite being under the wreck at 30 metres. The main control wheels are still intact and the overall scale is most impressive. These breaches are over 8 feet in diameter and identical guns are on display outside the Imperial War Museum together with the shells they fired.

Finning towards the second turrets you pass crushed carly rafts which could have saved so many lives but now lie on the seabed, some of their airtight compartments crushed by the pressure of water. Slightly further aft is the Admiral's barge which would have been used to transfer officers to and from the ship. This timber hulled vessel has deteriorated considerably over the years and her engine block has become exposed as the timbers rotted away.

From here the main superstructure looms out and stretches to your left. The metal of the main funnel and fighting top lie distorted and crushed. In her floating state, the roof of the fighting top would have been about 30 metres from the deck and would have hit the water at an alarming rate as the ship heeled over and sank so quickly.

Finning further aft, the breaches of the rear 15" guns lie on the seabed having ripped themselves away from the deck which runs towards the stern rails. These are now covered in a thick marine growth of plumose anemones and dead men's fingers. They provide a riot of colour to this sombre watery grave.

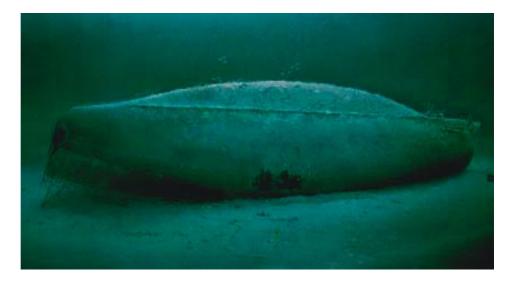
Rising up to about 20 metres and finning back along the ship you can see the huge single rudder silhouetted against the Scapa Flow daylight and a row of 6 inch side armament guns lie above the main companionway. There are several large doors still tightly bolted shut and one can only imagine the panic there must have been to try and open these in time to escape. Most portholes are open and several survivors have described how they managed to squeeze out of them to



Royal Oak had twelve 6" guns - 6 on each side



The remains of the timber hulled Admirals barge which was tied alongside



An artists impression of the starboard side showing the three main torpedo holes



Oil which seeps from the upturned hull is collected in a cage and emptied every week



A diver inspects one of the torpedo holes

safety as the water rushed in. In pitch darkness they took the decision to swim out through the porthole in the hope of rising to the surface where the cold night air must have smelled its sweetest despite the oil covered freezing cold water. Some swam as far as the nearest cliffs nearly a mile away but many perished in the attempt as the water sapped their energy.

Rising up and over the huge, whale-like hull around amidships you can drop down onto the starboard side which seems to be a vast expanse of smooth metal until the gaping torpedo holes appear and explain why such a large ship sank so quickly. There are in fact three holes but so accurate was

Gunther Prien that they are hard to seperate and so large that you can swim into them and only just be able to see the sides. Nothing is recognisable inside except mangled, distorted and flattened metal and there is an eerie lack of marine growth compared to the rich growth at the stern.

Small amounts of fuel oil have always seeped from the upturned hull. As it emerges from minute holes and cracks, it forms into perfect black droplets which rise slowly from the wreck meandering and weaving their way to the surface, where, on calm days, they dissipate in a rainbow of colours.



Anti-aircraft guns protected the bridge area



The Churchill Barrier across Kirk Sound

The oil provides a poignant visual reminder to the Orcadians that Royal Oak was providing anti aircraft cover for the capital Kirkwall but in recent years this seepage has increased as the hull deteriorates. The Ministry of Defence have placed a cage over the wreck to contain the escaping oil and in 2001 they plan to tap into the hull and pump the oil out. This is a complicated project in a unique situation. There are several unknown factors such as the variable condition of the hull and the precise location and amount of the oil. Royal Oak remains a war grave but the necessary work will not disturb the inside of the wreck and the oil must be removed to avoid a major spillage.

Once the oil is removed, Orkney will no longer have a visual reminder but Royal Oak will always be remembered by the Orcadians, the survivors and those families who lost fathers, brothers, sons and relatives on the night of Friday 13th October 1939.

The tragic loss of Royal Oak brought a long term benefit to Orkney as the decision was made by the Admiralty in 1940 to build permanent barriers across the Eastern entrances to secure the Naval Base of Scapa Flow. These





Christopher Kilford, grandson of Dorothy Golding (right) places her casket in the wreck to reunite her with her husband, Bandsman Arthur Golding, who went down with the ship.

became known as the Churchill Barriers which took over four years to build. Most of the hard work was done by Italian prisoners of war who completed the task with pride. As a memorial of their time in Orkney they converted a Nissen hut into a moving tribute using only discarded materials. Paper was painted to resemble solid stone, old metal was reformed into an altar screen and brass turned into candle holders. The result is one of Orkney's most popular tourist attractions and a special Mass is celebrated in the chapel on the nearest Sunday to the

Navy divers raise an ensign on the upturned hull every year on the anniversary of her sinking

anniversary of the sinking of the Royal Oak.

The 61st anniversary of Royal Oak's sinking saw a unique event in naval history when the Ministry of Defence granted a special permission for the ashes of Dorothy Golding, wife of Bandsman Arthur Golding who went down with the ship, to be taken down and placed in the wreck. There have been several instances where ashes have been scattered on the water over the wreck but this was the first time the MoD had allowed such a burial on a recognised war grave anywhere in the world.

Dorothy's nephew, Brian Otway, carried his aunts casket during a service of remembrance over the wreck attended by over 50 people.

After the service the specially weighted casket was transfered down to a small diving boat in which Dorothy's grandson, Christopher Kilford, a qualified scuba diver, was waiting to take his grandmothers casket down to the wreck. They passed a Naval salute as they made their way to the site and prepared to take the ashes on their final journey.

Dorothy never remarried after the tradgedy and mourned her husband for 61 years. She died aged 94 on Remembrance Day 1999, and her family requested permission to reunite the couple once again. Christopher took his grandmothers casket down to a part of the wreck at 20 metres and laid her to rest with her beloved husband.

The 50 minute video includes underwater images of the wreck which have never been seen before and there are interviews with survivors and Orcadian Sandy Robertson who was the first diver to go on the wreck the day after she sank. Also included is coverage of the ashes of Dorothy Golding being taken down by her grandson, Christopher Kilford, and placed in the wreck to reunite the couple once again.

The finale is the unfurling of a battle ensign on the upturned hull by a Royal Navy diver on the anniversary of her sinking and the final credits include the names of all those who died in the tradgedy.

Royal Oak may be sunk, buried and invisible to those on the surface but for the time being the oil provides a permanent reminder of all of those brave men who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the name of peace. May they continue to rest in peace.

Peter Rowlands ©2001

The following men lost their lives:

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Abbott, S.E.	Blackborough, J.W.	Chadwick, T.	Deacon, W.J.	Golding, A.	Hocking, J.R.
Ackerman, A.G.	Blagrove, H.E.C	Chalk, R.G.	Dear, A.J.	Goodyear, J.C.	Hodgson, A.R.
Adams, W.P.	Blenkiron, N.	Challenger, A.L.	Deighton, E.C.	Goorlay, J.R.G.	Hodgson, J.S.
Agnew, C.W.	Blood, S.	Chappell, W.G.	Derbyshire, R.	Gorsuch, E.D.	Hodson, F.H.J.
-	Blyth, H.B.	Cheesley, W.H.G.	Derry, J.O.H.	Gough, E.J.	Holland, C.
Alberry, J.					
Allen, A.F.	Boening, J.	Chesman, W.E.	Diaper, S.T.	Gough, T.E.	Holyoak, E.
Allen, P.L.	Bold, P.W.	Chick, A.	Dickie, W.A.	Gowan, J.D.	Hotton, L.W.T.
Amos, E.J.	Bonello, S.	Church, O.	Doe, S.P.	Grace, V.M.	Hudson, J.C.
Anderson, E.	Bonner, W.C.	Clacher, W.H.	Doggett, I.E.	Graham, G.M.	Huggins, H.S.
Anderson, H.L.	Borland, D.A.	Clackson, R.G.	Dowding, P.W.G.	Graham, P.W.C.	Hughes, F.E.
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Anderson, R.F.	Bottomley, R.J.	Clark, A.H.	Downes, A.F.	Graham, S.	Hughes, T.
Anderson, W.B.	Bowden, R.C.	Clark, A.J.	Draper, B.H.	Graham-Brown, J.L.T.	Hughes-Rowlands, R.
Anderson, W.T.	Bowen, J.	Clark, F.H.	Druce, A.	Gray, A.	Hull, E.C.
Andrews, E.H.	Bowhay, W.J.R.	Clark, J.	Duncalf, T.	Gray, E	Hull, R.G.
Andrews, G.C.	Boyd, T.A.	Clark, R.L.W.	Dunk, C.A.	Gray, H.W.	Humber, J.F.
Andrews, W.E.			Dunk, W.W.	Grech, J.	
,	Boyes, L.S.	Clarke, F.H.			Hunt, A.V.
Annell, F.W.	Boyle, W.	Clarke, R.E.	Dyer, H.	Green, F.	Hunt, E.G.
Armfield, L.	Brading, C.E.	Clements, E.F.J.	Eade, J.H.	Green, F.A.	Hunter, F.
Armitage, F.C.	Bradwick, A.H.	Clementson, J.	Easton, F.	Green, R.	Hunter, J.
Armstrong, G.H.	Bramley, R.J.	Cloute, E.C.	Ede, F.	Greenwood, L.	Hurst, F.
Arnd, R.	Branch, H.	Cock, C.H.	Edwards, A.	Griffin, H.	Huscroft, R.W.
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Ashby, K.	Bridges, J.G.C.	Coffin, L.J.	Edwards, J.F.	Griffiths, E.J.	Hussey-Yeo, A.J.
Ashwin, A.W.	Bright, H.	Colbourne, F.E.	Edwards, R.G.	Griffiths, J.R.	Hutchcocks, T.
Atherton, J.	Brightman, G.R.	Colbourne, J.W.F.	Edwards, W.R.A.	Grindey, A.E.	Hyde, A.J.
Atherton, N.	Briscoe, E.	Colbran, P.B.	Efemey, R.B.	Grogan, J.	Hyde, G.M.
Atkinson, J.	Britton, T.F.	Coleman, E.W.	Elliott, R.	Giusti, I.	Ing, R.
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Atkinson, T.E.	Brookin, J.F.	Coleman, J.A.	Eltringham, N.	Gutteridge, R.G.N.	Jack, J.D.
Attard, F	Broughton, A.E.	Coleman, M.G.N.	Emery, A.	Guy, R.	Jackman, J.J.
Attard, L.	Brown, A.G.	Collins, G.A.	Emery, F.C.	Hales, J.	Jackson, L.T.D.
Attfield, H.G.	Brown, D.A.J.	Collins, R.	Evans, B.	Hall, H.J.	Jackson, T.W.
Azzopardi, A.	Brown, H.	Comber, A.E.B.	Evans, J.E.	Hall, J.	Jacobs, W.A.C.
Baigent, G.H.	Brown, H.W.	Connor, F.	Eyers, C.E.	Hall, K.E.	Jago, L.
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Bailey, C.W.	Brown, J.	Connor, R.J.	Fairbrother, J.W.	Hall, W.R.	James, L.J.
Bailey, E.R.	Brymer, E.A.	Conroy, F.	Farr, E.W.	Hamblin, G.A.	James, R.
Bain, R.	Buckett, S.V.	Cook, G.J.	Farrell, R.	Hamblin, H.J.	James, V.L.
Baker, A.E.	Bucknall, A.G.	Cooke, F.A.	Fenn, T.R.P.	Hammond, J.S.	Jay, V.G.U.
Baker, A.W.	Budge, J.	Cooper, L.L.	Finlay, M.B.	Hammond, W.L.	Jelley, L.J.
,			Fisher, B.L.	Hance, T.R.	•
Baker, W.G.M.	Bull, A.N.	Cooper, N.			Jenkins, E.J.A.
Baldwin, A.S.	Burden, A.E.	Cope, J.R.	Fisher, J.B.	Harkin, P.R.	Jenkins, T.S.
Ball, R.J.	Burnham, P.	Coreschi E.	Fitch, C.E.	Harle, G.	Jennings, R.E.
Ballard, E.F.	Burns, A.	Cornelious, K.T.	Flogdell, A.E.	Harley, J.A.H.	Jewell, A.
Balls, H.E.	Burns, J.E.	Cornelius, H.J.	Flounders, A.	Harper, R.R.J.	Jewer, S.A.
Barber, A.S.	Burrows, R.W.	Cornish, C.F.	Ford, W.J.	Harris, G.J.	Jobson, J.B.
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Barber, F.	Burt, E.H.	Cousins, H.J.	Forsey, H.S.	Harris, K.J.	Johns, P.H.M.
Bargery, A.E.	Burtenshaw, C.H.	Cox, E.	Foster, D.C.	Harris, N.H.	Johnson, F.W.P.
Barker, E.H.	Burton, J.W.	Cragg, W.	Foster, G.W.	Harris, P.W.	Johnson, T.W.
Barnes-Moss, H.W.	Butler, A.A.	Craven, A.	Foulger, A.	Hawkins, K.R.J.	Johnston, A.J.
Barnfather, R.N.	Butler, A.E.	Cree, J.D.B.	Fowler, J.W.	Hawkins, W.J.	Jones, C.E.
Bartlett, A.	Butler, A.E.	Crockett, J.S.	Foyle, A.A.	Hayes, T.	Jones, H.
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Bartolo, J.	Bydawell, L.R.J.	Crofts, E.A.	Francis, H.A.	Hayward, J.G.	Jones, H.G.
Bealing, F.C.	Cachia, J.	Cross, E.V.A.	Franckeiss, E.L.	Heather, C.W.	Jones, S.
Beange, J.	Cairns, J.	Crosswell, W.H.	French, C.	Helmore, W.L.	Jones, T.J.
Beddall, H.	Campbell, C.H.	Cumbes, R.W.	Fuller, C.W.	Hemestretch, C.W.	Jordon, F.
Bedwell, H.	Campbell, D.	Cumming, L.T.J.	Furbear, T.G.	Hemsley, C.F.	Jordon, H.D.
Beechey, A.C.	Campsie, C.	Cummings, H.	Furby, E.A.	Henstridge, C.	Judge, P.R.
Beer, A.E.	Cannon, R.J.	Cunningham, E.W.	Furlong, J.	Heslop, C.	Kane, R.C.
Bell, R.W.	Capel, C.W.	Curtin, C.	Furnell, L.T.	Hicks, A.E.	Kearey, A.
Bendall, R.F.J.	Card, A.R.W.	Curtis, H.H.W.	Gallagher, J.W.	Higgins, J.J.	Keel, J.
Bennett, W.	Carnegie, A.K.	Cutler, J.A.	Gibbons, J.A.	Higgs, H.H.	Keel, W.
Benney, C.E.	Carpenter, E.G.	Daniels, G.	Gibson, G.	Highfield, J.E.	Kemp, L.H.
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Beswick, H.W.J.	Carr, F.C.	Darnell, G.T.	Gibson, S.J.	Hill, A.	Kempster, A.
Betts, H.J.	Carter, G.W.	Daughtrey, A.	Gile, W.H.	Hill, D	Kennedy, R.H.
Betts, W.T.	Carter, J.	Davey, C.B.	Gill, G.E.	Hill, D.	Kennedy, W.T.
Billyard, N.	Carter, R.W.H.	Davie, R.C.	Gill, H.W.	Hill, E.F.	Kennett, E.H.
Binnington, A.	Carter, W.F.	Davies, H.R.	Gillis, G.W.	Hill, S.	Kent, H.A.J.
Binns, F.B.	Cartwright, W.	Davies, M.C.	Glasspool, H.	Hillier, C.W.	Kenworthy, J.
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Binsley, G.F.	Cass, L.	Davis, J.F.	Godley, S.G.	Hingston, E.	Kersey, H.A.
Birtchnell, C.E.	Cast, R.I.	Davis, R.E.	Godwin, T.G.	Hiscock, F.J.	Kidby, W.F.
Black, J.	Chadwick, J.C.	Daysh, A.	Godwin, W.	Hixson, H.H.	King, C.E.M.

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