

## HMS Royal Oak – A tribute to sacrifice by Dilip Sarkar M.B.E.

When HMS Royal Oak was torpedoed at anchor by U-47, on the night of October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1939, 833 members of her crew perished. To put that figure into perspective, throughout the entire 16 weeks of that epic aerial conflict now known as the 'Battle of Britain', fought high over England during the summer of 1940, 544 RAF airmen perished throughout that fight to decide these islands' fate. But within a matter of a few minutes at sea, given the human compliment of a warship, that figure could be multiplied several times over. Had the Royal Oak been on the high seas, instead of at anchor in home waters, with a full compliment on board, then the loss of life would have been even greater. Later, for example, when HMS Hood was sent to the bottom by the German battleship Bismarck, 1,415 men died. Indeed, at Bismarck's nemeses soon afterwards, 2005 German sailors paid the price. These statistics put into harsh perspective the great price at which freedom was bought between 1939-45. The sacrifice involved is just as relevant now, as it was then, and should never be forgotten.

Talking in statistics, however, does not convey the tragedy of the occasion. To appreciate that, it is necessary to talk to the relatives of the casualties, as I began doing shortly after returning from the Seastyle expedition to Scapa Flow in June 2003. This, of course, must be undertaken with the utmost sensitivity, but I am pleased to report that all welcomed the project most enthusiastically. The objective is to collate as many photographs and accounts of the casualties as is now possible all these years on, with a view to hopefully publishing a permanent record in tribute to their sacrifice. For the purposes of this introductory article, therefore, I have randomly selected several sailors who perished on HMS Royal Oak, to be representative of the human loss involved with such an event. In so doing, we lift these long lost souls from sterile statistics to become, once more, warm flesh and blood with feelings and family.

### Petty Officer Henry A Kersey.



PO Kersey joined the Royal Navy at HMS Ganges as a 15-year old 'Boy' on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1920. His son, Mr Wally Kersey, remembers: -

Our first knowledge of the sinking of HMS Royal Oak in Scapa Flow was on the 9 a.m. news, Saturday, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1939. My Dad's mother, who worked in a Brighton Hotel, was sent home to be with us. We were all in a great state of shock. We were also joined by our uncle, Mum's brother, who stayed with us all day, doing all he could and collecting newspapers that listed the survivors' names. Mum seemed to know that Dad had not survived; she had a dream that the worst had happened. Then, at 1.30 p.m. on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> October, we received the official telegram regrettably announcing our father's death.

(Petty Officer Henry A Kersey on his wedding day.)

When we lost Dad I was 13, my brother Pete was nine and the youngest, David, was five. I can still remember how we used to count the months, weeks and days until Dad's return from various commissions, which lasted anything up to three-and-a-half to four years away from home. This time, however, there would be no homecoming, no matter how distant. His death was a great shock, which deeply affected our Mum. She was brave, however, and somehow kept going for our sakes. She was faced with a big drop of income, but when she applied to the Admiralty for help all that was offered was to put the eldest son on a training ship and the other two in a naval home - this, I am pleased to say, she refused! Mum had to go out to work long hours to keep us all together, and the sacrifices she made I will never forget.

## Able Seaman Arthur Edward Bargery

His sister, Mrs Margaret Warburton recalls painful memories: -



When Arthur was killed he was just 20-years old. I was only nine and naturally proud of my big brother and missed him very much when he joined the Royal Navy in 1938. All of my friends thought that he was very 'dishy' (1938 word!) when he came home in uniform.

Arthur was a very gentleperson and many of his friends were surprised when he joined the Navy, but unless you had money it was difficult to get a job in the professions. Arthur thought that he would get ahead quicker in the Royal Navy, which he loved, and his letters were always cheerful and interesting.

Music was Arthur's big love and he played the piano very well. I sang all the popular songs and he encouraged me.

(Able Seaman Arthur E Bargery, with a friend who experienced Dunkirk but survived the war.)

We received a letter from Arthur, posted on board HMS Royal Oak on the Friday morning. It arrived on the morning of Saturday, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1939, by which time, unknown to us, the ship had already been sunk. In the letter, Arthur asked me to save him the song sheet from the News of the World newspaper and this, of course, became an extremely poignant memory.

That Saturday morning our father was at work, and as he left a colleague called out to him that the Germans had sunk one of our battleships, the Royal Oak. Poor Dad came home in a terrible state to find that we already knew, as there had been a special edition of the South Wales Echo printed, which I had run out and bought. It was a terrible way for us to hear of the tragedy.

Friends from all over Cardiff came to visit, as ordinary people had no telephones in those days, they just got on buses or walked, bringing with them biscuits, cakes or flowers, but most of all love and support. I don't remember going to bed that night, but the next morning mother went to church whilst Dad and I poured over the lists of survivors published in the newspapers. As we did so without success, Dad said that he felt hope was fading away. Then, at 4 p.m. that fateful Sunday afternoon, the telegram boy came bearing official news that Arthur was amongst those 'missing'.

There followed many tributes to Arthur, from people he had worked with, gone to school with, and, of course, his peers, many of whom were also to perish during the war. My parents were always proud of him,

and had faith that his life was not sacrificed in vain.

## Chief Petty Officer William Small

Keith Small remembers: -

My father was born in Southampton, one of six children, two boys and four girls. My mother was also from Southampton and after they were married they went to live in Portsmouth, and thence to Fareham where I spent my childhood.

When the Royal Oak was lost my mother was left with three children still at home, my brother Ray was eight, I was five, and Shirley was four.

I can remember that when the news came through on the wireless, our neighbours from both sides came dashing round to our house. I also remember the local policeman coming to the door with official news that our father was amongst those lost.

As you can imagine, things were hard for Mum with three young children to support. She had to go out to work and even take in lodgers to make ends meet. Mum also lost her parents during the war when their house was hit during the bombing of Southampton. Shortly after the war my brother contracted TB, and died in 1956. That hit Mum very hard, it was like losing her husband all over again, although when Dad died she had to pull herself together to provide for us children. When Ray died it was harder for her. Mum's health was always poor from then on, and she eventually died of cancer in 1963.

### First Class Boy Harry Spencer



Like the Bargerys, 17-year old Harry Spencer's family also received a letter from him written from the Royal Oak on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> October 1939. The letter talked of plans for Christmas, during which leave Harry proposed to bring a shipmate home to Mexborough. One of eight children, before joining that Navy aged 16; young Harry had worked at Denaby Main Colliery. The open sea and wind in his face was obviously more appealing than life down the pit, but sadly the sea soon became Harry Spencer's grave. There were over 100 'Boys' on HMS Royal Oak, many of whom died during the catastrophe.

What is clearly emphasised by the foregoing accounts is not only the tragedy of personal human sacrifice aboard HMS Royal Oak, but equally the grief and suffering faced by those left behind. In many cases this included financial hardship, given that the family patriarch and breadwinner was lost. Of course do not forget that in those days women were not yet liberated in what was still a male dominated society. Although certain women did go out to work, it was not commonplace, and definitely not the daily and perfectly accepted occurrence that it is today. So for mothers like Mrs Kersey, finding a job and working to keep her family together was no mean feat, and a commitment not to be underestimated.

(First Class Boy Harry Spencer.)

(The official telegram reporting the death of Harry Spencer.)





The next time you dive a shipwreck, especially one involving loss of life, please do spare a thought for those who perished and the relatives left behind. Although wrecks become artificial reefs and havens of marine life, that is not the reason that most ended up on the bottom. They frequently went down in violent and tragic circumstances, so treat them with respect: look, but don't touch.

Of Course HMS Royal Oak is a war grave, and therefore a Prohibited Site under the Protection of Military Remains Act, 1986. As such the wreck is now off limits to recreational scuba divers, although before the Act was passed it was dived frequently.

(At the Lyness military cemetery, 23 of the 833 men lost with HMS Royal Oak are buried. This is the grave of 30-year old Petty Officer Frankeiss.)

Indeed, before 1986, recreational divers recovered several important artefacts, including the ship's bell and remains of Prien's outstanding torpedoes (the first had been recovered shortly after the sinking by a local hard hat diver). One unscrupulous diver, however, removed the brass letters Royal Oak from the wreck and kept them for himself; eventually conscience prevailed and these are now displayed in the museum at Lyness. Recently, Bob Anderson, skipper of the Orkney dive boat MV Halton has dived the wreck as part of an MOD commissioned survey, and he describes the experience as 'eerie'. That this should be the case is not surprising, considering that the remains of many of the 833 casualties must still be trapped within the ship.

Every year Royal Navy Clearance Divers visit HMS Royal Oak to monitor the oil leakage and place a White Ensign on the wreck. Survivors and the relatives of casualties also gather annually, some in the

(Of the 23 burials, five men of the Royal Oak could not be identified. This is one of them, an 'Unknown Sailor of the Second World War')  
Orkneys for a pilgrimage to the wreck site, and others at the Royal Naval Memorial on Southsea Common near Portsmouth. Clearly HMS Royal Oak is not forgotten, which is as it should be.

In respect of the ongoing research into HMS Royal Oak, the author would like to thank the following: -

Lesley & Elwyn Harper, Bob Anderson of MV Halton, Peter Rowlands, Mr Ken Toop of the HMS Royal Oak Association, Andy Long, Chris Gale, and all of those relatives who have relived painful memories with such dignity.

Anyone wishing to learn more of HMS Royal Oak, and in particular view underwater footage of the wreck, should watch the excellent video produced by Peter Rowlands and available via [www.hmsroyaloak.co.uk](http://www.hmsroyaloak.co.uk), and in any case Peter's website includes a host of information. I can also recommend Rick Joshua's excellent site [www.u47.org](http://www.u47.org).

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## HMS Royal Oak: Two Survivors Speak by Dilip Sarkar MBE

My previous two articles featuring HMS Royal Oak have concentrated on the catastrophe itself and the stories of both the casualties and those left at home. Although certain survivors' accounts have been published frequently, we are fortunate to have recorded the memories of many whose recollections have, so far, largely gone untold. In this article two survivors speak for themselves and in so doing give us an insight into the terrible events befalling the Royal Oak's crew that fateful night in 1939:

### **Boy First Class H.E. Pocock**



I joined HMS Royal Oak at Portsmouth in June 1939. We sailed to Weymouth where I was part of the 'Royal Luggage Party'. We collected the Royal Family's luggage from the railway station and took it out to the Royal Yacht. Then we sailed to Scapa Flow, from where we were to operate. I thought that it was great to be in the Royal Navy, but little did I know how dark the days ahead would soon become. When war was declared, on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, we were anchored in Kirkwall Bay, and a big cheer went up from all the ship's company.

We then went out on patrol but the sea was really rough, in fact there was six inches of water sloshing about on the Boys' Mess Deck. It was a relief to get back into the calm waters of Kirkwall Bay, with a run ashore for a couple of days.

Then, at about one o'clock in the morning on October 14<sup>th</sup>, there was one almighty bang! I felt it good and proper as my hammock was up against the side of the ladder, so I could step into my hammock as I was a bit on the short side. This saved my life. With that bang we all jumped out of our hammocks, wondering what had happened. A Chief Petty Officer came running through on his way forward and told us to get back into our hammocks, which, being just boys, we did. At least 50 hammocks were slung in the Boys' After Mess Deck, so it was packed by today's standards. I looked across to my three mates and smiled, giving thumbs up. Things began to quieten down, but a few minutes later there was a bigger bang that nearly threw me out of my hammock. Out went the lights and you could feel the ship begin to turn. Chief Petty Officer or no Chief Petty Officer, I knew that there was big trouble. As the ladder was alongside of me I was up and through the escape hatch. The big main hatch was down, as the ship was not at action stations but on stand-by, so only one man at a time could get through the small escape hatch. As I did so I lined myself up for the next ladder, leading up to the Galley Deck. I then started moving forward with my arms out, and moving my legs carefully as it was so dark that I couldn't see a thing. I said to myself, 'Mum, help me out of this one'.

It seemed a lifetime until I caught hold of the ladder, and you could feel the deck listing over. As I went up the ladder I called out "Is anybody there?" The only response was a loud hissing sound. I was scared going up in the dark, so dark that it was as if you were blind. Anyway, up I went and out into the night air. It was still fairly dark outside, and I had to crawl on all fours down the ship's side, working towards the bows and going slowly into the sea. As they say that you can get sucked back into the ship as it goes down, I swam like mad away from it. I started to swim towards the shore, as I felt more at ease out in the open, and I was actually a very strong swimmer. Then I saw the drifter, Daisey II, and went after it. When the crew pulled me aboard they said that the Royal Oak had gone under. I shed a few tears, knowing that my mates had no chance of getting out.

I was covered in oil, but when transferred from the Daisey to HMS Pegasus they washed it off and gave me a pair of overalls, which must have been intended for a seven-foot tall man! The legs were treble folded up and the crotch hung down below my knees! It was laughable, but that's all I had on, with a pair of tropical issue shoes, also too big, until we got to Portsmouth. That night some Kirkwall residents put us survivors up so that we could catch the train first thing in the morning. They were a wonderful lot of people.

As survivors we were entitled to six weeks shore leave, but when we Boys mentioned it the officers had us out on the parade ground. They told us that we could either report straight to HMS Manchester, or go home and await call up, which could have meant joining the army. So it was straight off to HMS

Manchester, where, as it turned out, I could not have had a worse action station - telephone exchange, right down the bottom of the ship with hatch slammed down and clamp put over from outside. Every time you went into action you prayed that we wouldn't get hit, as I could never have got out of there.

On HMS Royal Oak I was one of 162 Boys, of which 125 were lost. Of the 37 survivors, only 18 saw the war through safely.

### Royal Marine Bandsman A.L. Fordham



*(Royal Marine Musician Alfred Fordham pictured with two tennis players on board HMS Royal Oak and off Torquay, 'Courtesy Day' 1938. Note the ship's bell, now preserved as a memorial to the ship's company who lost their lives and on display at St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney).*

Having been interested in music at school, I sought a musical career, enlisting in the Royal Marine Band Service at Deal, Kent, in 1933. I was 14-and-a-half-years old and became a 'Band Boy'.

After training I was drafted to my first ship, HMS Glorious. I paid off Glorious in 1937, and after six weeks leave joined HMS Royal Oak, on which I served until that terrible night of October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1939.

That night I was asleep in my hammock when at about 1.10 a.m., many of us were woken up by a noise and the ship was shuddering. Nobody knew what had happened, and we wouldn't have thought a torpedo

possible as we were in harbour.

*(Alf Fordham pictured in July 2003, aged 85-years)*



I stayed in my hammock, which probably saved my life. I saw the Gunnery Officer pass by, who looked very worried. Then over the tannoy "Take all magazine temperatures", which sounded very worrying.

About 10 minutes after having been so rudely awakened was a most violent explosion, which seemed to lift the ship out of the water. We all jumped out of our hammocks. I stopped to put on my trousers, which saved my life, as if I had run forward to gain access to the Quarter Deck I would have run straight into the most intensely hot orange flame, which suddenly shot through the door, missing me by a few feet. A cordite magazine had exploded and vented where it could. Seeing this I reversed my direction. Then the lights went out and it was pitch dark. A group of us tried to open the door leading aft through the officers' quarters, but couldn't get the cleats off properly in the dark. After a couple of minutes, Musician Ned Kelly, bless him, shouted, "Stand back! Stand back!", and methodically went round the many cleats and successfully got the door open - through which many men poured.

Upon reaching the Quarter Deck, in the darkness I could just about make out dozens of men attempting to get on the drifter Daisy II, which was fortunately tied up alongside. After a few minutes, however, I suddenly realised that the deck was slanting under my feet, so I started to run to the stern, intending to jump off, but I didn't make it. Suddenly I slipped down some distance and hit the water, going down miles it seemed. As I got back to the surface something touched my back, and I thought that the ship was coming down on top of me, so I did a very fast swim away. It was so dark that I had not seen the ship going over

to starboard, nor see her sink. The water was extremely cold and I was smothered in thick oil. I have no idea how long I was in the water - well over an hour I think - until picked up by the heroic crew of Daisy II. The little boat was bursting with survivors and we were all taken aboard HMS Pegasus, an elderly seaplane carrier. There we were treated with much kindness, and were given rum, cocoa, a bath and clean clothes.

The next morning we were taken to SS Voltaire, where we awaited transport south. Then another unexpected experience - we were lying off the base at Lyness and suffered our first air raid. The old battleship HMS Iron Duke, which was lying nearby and being used as a depot ship, was damaged. The SS Voltaire was a huge liner, however, and we were very nervous, as it seemed such a good target.

Later we were taken to Thurso and joined our train travelling south. During the night journey we were awakened by a bang and the carriage shook violently. A goods train was being shunted onto the same line, but fortunately, as we were both moving slowly, no one was hurt.

We 10 survivors out of 15 band members eventually arrived at Deal. We were kitted out with new uniforms and sent on survivors' leave. Subsequently I served on two more ships during the war and became a civilian again in 1948.

It is interesting to note that both Pocock and Fordham were both rescued from the bitterly cold sea by the drifter Daisy II. Had that vessel not perchance been moored up alongside HMS Royal Oak at the time of the disaster, and therefore immediately on the scene carrying our rescue work, there is no doubt that the loss of life would have been far greater. In fact, of the 424 officers and men rescued out of a complement of over 1,200, some 360 owed their lives to Daisy II. Later, this feat was formally recognised when the skipper, John Gatt, was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. One member of the crew, Johnnie Duthie, recently published his account of the night in question, *Lest We Forget Daisy II*, and is recommended reading. Both foregoing survivors' accounts are representative of the 360 who lived to tell the tale. Many more accounts have been collated, and it is expected that these, together with the casualties' photographs and stories, will in due course be published in a new book. Having written 17 previous books regarding the air war, naval history is an exciting new avenue of research for me; nonetheless, the survivors' experiences are no less harrowing, the casualties' stories equally moving, and it is vitally important that this crucial first hand material should also be recorded. The ultimate objective is that the book arising will provide a permanent record for future generations, although, due to the march of time, we are only just in time to consider such a project given that both the survivors and many relatives are now in the winter of their years.

Finally, should any readers have any useful information, the author can be contacted at: -

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