The Royal Oak sinking

In the first weeks of World War II, in the early hours of 14 October 1939, HMS Royal Oak was sunk by torpedoes from a German U-boat.

The sinking of the Royal Oak entailed the biggest loss of boy sailors in any single Royal Navy engagement before or since. Many people have heard of the Royal Oak and Scapa Flow, but they may not know about this loss of young life.

Out of the 833 sailors lost, some 120 fatalities were boys aged between 14 and 18.
The Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow

When war was declared, the Grand Fleet gathered at Scapa Flow, the vast Royal Navy anchorage in Orkney, just as it had in 1914. From there the Royal Navy could attack the German Fleet if they tried to break out into the North Atlantic.

HMS Royal Oak was part of the fleet that assembled at Scapa Flow. 600 feet long by 100 feet amidships, with 13-inch thick steel armour plating in places, and carrying eight 15-inch guns, she was one of the biggest battleships in the Royal Navy. As a brand new heavy battleship Royal Oak had fought in the Battle of Jalland in 1916.

It would be wrong to think that Royal Oak was in harbour - Scapa Flow is a great land locked bay covering many acres with a depth never less than 10 fathoms. It had been the main northern base of the British Fleet since 1812 and was the site of the scuttling of the German Imperial Fleet in 1919.

In October 1939, the Royal Oak was lying at anchor about a mile offshore towards the north-east extent of Scapa Flow. Here it was acting as anti-aircraft cover for Kirkwall and the onshore Netherbutton Radar Station.
14 October 1939 – the sinking of the Royal Oak

HMS Royal Oak was torpedoed between 1.00 and 1.30 am on Saturday 14 October 1939.

It was torpedoed by the German U-boat U-47 under the command of Kapitan-Lieutenant Günther Prien. U-47 fired one salvo of three torpedoes just after 1.00 am. Two missed, and one struck the bow and anchor chain of Royal Oak.

Captain WG Benn and Commander Ralph Lennox Woodrow-Clark were together at this time inspecting the damage to the Royal Oak. It was the last time Captain Benn saw Commander Ralph Lennox Woodrow-Clark alive. Some 15 minutes later U-47 fired another salvo and all three torpedoes struck the starboard side of Royal Oak.

The ship sank within 10 minutes.

Hundreds of men and boys were trapped within the sinking ship. In the water, hundreds more fought for their lives - trying to swim for shore through thick fuel oil in freezing temperatures.
The rescue ship Daisy II

As HMS Royal Oak sank beneath the surface, the small trawler boat Daisy II came to the rescue of survivors in the water.

Daisy II was the Royal Oak’s ‘tender’ – a small boat that was used to transport men and supplies to and from land. As the Royal Oak sank, the skipper of Daisy II, John Gatt, lit her lights and the five-man crew began to haul the surviving sailors aboard.

Daisy II became so over laden that it was in danger of capsizing.

Due to the heroic action of John Gatt and the crew of the trawler Daisy II, 386 survivors from the Royal Oak were rescued.

John Gatt RNR was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. The grateful friends and relatives of the men he saved presented the Skipper with a silver watch.

Günther Prien and U-47

Kapitan-Lieutenant Günther Prien became one of the first German heroes of World War II. After he and his crew had been feted by Adolf Hitler, Prien wrote a book and became the most celebrated U-boat Commander of the War.

Prien was killed leading U-47 in an attack on a north Atlantic convoy on 8 March 1941. Depth charges dropped by the British destroyer HMS Wolverine sank the U-boat off Iceland with the loss of all hands.

Image © The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland  www.nms.ac.uk
Aftermath of the Royal Oak sinking

There is evidence that Winston Churchill - then First Lord of the Admiralty - had been warned by the Chiefs of Staff that Scapa Flow’s defences were woefully inadequate and that the entry points were ‘not properly netted’.

The old steel nets from WWI had rotted, rusted or broken up. Churchill immediately issued an order stamped ‘urgent’ calling for new nets, blockships and booms to be installed. None of this had been done by the middle of October. The Navy tried to cover up the initial report after the Royal Oak had been sunk.

When Churchill was told of the tragedy he is said to have wept quietly for the terrible loss of life. He said, ‘Poor fellows, poor fellows, trapped in those black depths’. But reflecting on the courage of the U-boat crew he also apparently murmured, ‘What a wonderful feat of arms’.

Shortly after the Royal Oak sinking, the law was changed to prevent boys under the age of 18 being engaged in active Navy Service without parental or very special permissions. Initially Churchill opposed the change to the law.

The full anti-submarine defences that Winston Churchill ordered at the beginning of the War were not completed until 1942. They are to this day referred to as the ‘Churchill barriers’.
The Lyness Royal Naval Cemetery and the Royal Oak memorial, St Magnus Cathedral

In the Royal Navy Cemetery at Lyness, on the Orkney Island of Hoy, lie the graves of Commander Ralph Lennox Woodrow-Clark and 25 of his fellow crew members.

The site of HMS Royal Oak is an official war grave and diving is prohibited. The official Royal Navy diving team replace the White Ensign at the stern of the battleship every year.

The MOD diving team regularly ‘top off’ the remaining oil from her tanks to avoid any environmental damage.

A memorial plaque to those lost in the tragedy was unveiled within St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall in 1948, together with the ship’s bell. The ship’s bell of the Royal Oak was recovered from the sea bed of Scapa Flow.

In St Magnus Cathedral and on the shore of Scapa Bay you can read the names of all those lost in the Royal Oak disaster.

More than a hundred are listed as ‘Boy’.
Lest We Forget

David Turner, historian and author of ‘Last Dawn - The Royal Oak Tragedy at Scapa Flow’ lost his uncle, Commander Ralph Lennox Woodrow-Clark, aboard the Royal Oak. David was only nine-years-old but still remembers the day vividly.

“It was a dark and cold winter evening and I had arrived home from school to find my mother crying in the kitchen of our home at Laira in Plymouth.

I asked “why are you crying, Mummy”? She told me that the BBC Home Service had reported late that morning an announcement by the Secretary of the Admiralty:

‘It is with regret that I have to announce that the battleship HMS Royal Oak has been sunk, it is believed by U-boat action, fifteen survivors have been landed.’

My uncle, Ralph Lennox Woodrow-Clark RN, my mother’s elder brother, was a Senior Officer on the Royal Oak when she was sunk at Scapa Flow on 14 October 1939.

His grave is in the Royal Navy Cemetery at Lyness on the Orkney Island of Hoy.”
“Educated at the Royal Naval Colleges of Dartmouth and Greenwich his future had promised promotion to the highest ranks within the Royal Navy.

The untimely death of my uncle was made even more harrowing to his family and friends when it became known that he had been promoted to the Rank of Commander and was due to leave Royal Oak to take up a new post in one of His Majesty’s Royal Navy capital ships.

I made a promise to my mother that day that I would visit his last resting place. In September 2003 I kept my promise to my mother and travelled to the Royal Navy Cemetery at Lyness, a site of sorrow, to place a wreath at my uncle’s grave and flowers over the battleship in remembrance to those who died.

In 2007, I returned once again to Lyness to bring my mother’s ashes to the foot of my uncle’s grave, fulfilling one of my mother’s dying wishes.”

David Turner, August 2009

Commander Ralph Lennox Woodrow-Clark RN
“When the tragedy of the sinking of HMS Royal Oak at Scapa Flow in World War II finally passes out of direct human memory, we as a nation will say farewell to a generation of people who, for all their human failings, gave and lost so much in the pursuit of a War, the effects of which are still felt today, some lessons still not learned.”

David Turner

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The Royal Oak

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