

HMS ROYAL OAK: A Legacy of Sacrifice, Resilience, and Remembrance

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HMS ROYAL OAK holds immense significance in British naval history and occupies a special place in the hearts of many as a symbol of resilience and sacrifice and remains an enduring focal point for remembrance. This article explores her storied past, tragic loss, and enduring importance to the Royal Navy and the Clearance Diving Branch. It also captures continuing activities by Charlie Squadron of the Diving & Threat Exploitation Group (DTXG) to honour her legacy a very poignant and personal act of remembrance.

HMS ROYAL OAK, the eighth ship to bear the name, was a Revenge-class Dreadnought battleship commissioned in 1916. She first saw combat at the Battle of Jutland during World War I. However, it was during World War II that she would etch her name into history in a tragic and unforgettable way. In the early hours of 14 October 1939, she was struck by a torpedo, followed by three more, fired from the German submarine U-47 under the command of Kapitänleutnant Günther Prien. Prien had managed to penetrate the defences of Scapa Flow, a location previously considered impregnable to submarines. The second salvo struck midships, causing catastrophic damage and sending the ship to the seabed in just 13 minutes. Of the 1,234 men and boys aboard, 835 tragically lost their lives, including 134 boy sailors under the age of 18 the largest such loss in a single Royal Navy action.

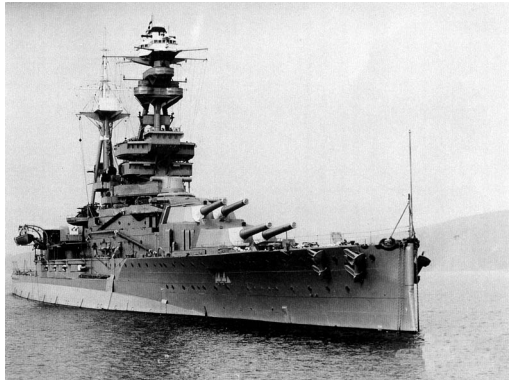
The sinking of HMS ROYAL OAK was a devastating blow to the Royal Navy and the British public. It was one of the first major losses suffered by Britain in World War II and served as a stark reminder of the dangers of modern warfare. Initially, the cause of the sinking was unclear, as Scapa Flow was thought to be impenetrable. However, divers sent down the following morning discovered remnants of a German torpedo, confirming the means of attack. The Kriegsmarine and Nazi propaganda ministry quickly capitalised on the success of the raid. Upon their return to Wilhelmshaven, Prien and his crew were hailed as heroes and awarded the Iron Cross First and Second Class, with Prien later receiving the Knight's Cross from Hitler. The attack exposed the vulnerability of Scapa Flow and prompted Churchill to order the construction of concrete causeways, later known as the Churchill Barriers, to seal its approaches. These barriers, built by Italian prisoners of war, were completed in September 1944. Despite the tragic loss of life, the sinking became a potent symbol of British resilience and determination in the face of Nazi aggression.

Since the early 1980s, Royal Navy clearance divers have maintained a close and enduring relationship with the people of Orkney, the Kirkwall Branch of the Royal British Legion, and the HMS ROYAL OAK Association, which represents the families of former crew members. This bond was forged when divers recovered the ship's bell, which now hangs in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall for all to see. In recognition of this special connection, Charlie Squadron was granted the prestigious title of Honorary Freemen of the Orkney Islands in 2021. To commemorate the fifth anniversary of this honour, the Sqn will exercise their right to march through Kirkwall in 2026.

In October 2025, Charlie Sqn returned to Orkney to conduct our annual duties at the site of the wreck, conducting extensive underwater surveys to evaluate the condition of the ship and confirm the integrity of the oil tanks. The results of the survey were reassuring, despite the 85 years underwater the structure and tanks were found to be sound, ensuring the continued protection of the surrounding waters and the abundant marine life that now thrives around the site. The wreck serves as a unique and challenging training ground for Clearance Divers. Its remote location, combined with strong tidal currents, low visibility, and a complex structure, provides an unparalleled environment for developing and refining essential underwater skills. This helps ensure that today's Clearance Divers, who are maintained at very high readiness to conduct In Water Maintenance and Repair (IWMAR) in support of both SUBFLOT and SURFLOT, are fully prepared to meet any operational challenge they may encounter.

The visit was also marked by several poignant and significant acts of remembrance. The most emotive being the interment of the ashes of Alison Greenhalgh, the daughter of PO Stoker Robert Edwin Clarke, who was lost aboard on that tragic night when his daughter was just 3 years old. Her remains were carefully returned to the wreck to rest alongside her father, which was witnessed from the surface by her son and grandsons, creating a deeply emotional and memorable occasion for all involved. During the ceremony, CO Charlie Sqn, Lt Cdr Balfour MBE RN conducted a short ceremony including a heartfelt prayer and the reading of Crossing the Bar by Tennyson, adding a personal and reflective tone to the proceedings. Another highly symbolic act was the raising of the Battle Ensign over the wreck creating a powerful and emotive image that symbolises the enduring respect and remembrance for the ship and her crew. The Ensign will remain in place for the next 12 months, standing watch over the wreck and serving as a reminder of the sacrifices made by those aboard.

HMS ROYAL OAK is not just a sunken battleship; it is a symbol of sacrifice, courage, and a memorial of remembrance, as well as a site of immense historical importance. The wreck remains a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made by those who served in the Royal Navy during World War II and stands as a testament to the courage and bravery of the sailors who fought for their country and paid the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom we enjoy today.



HMS ROYAL OAK



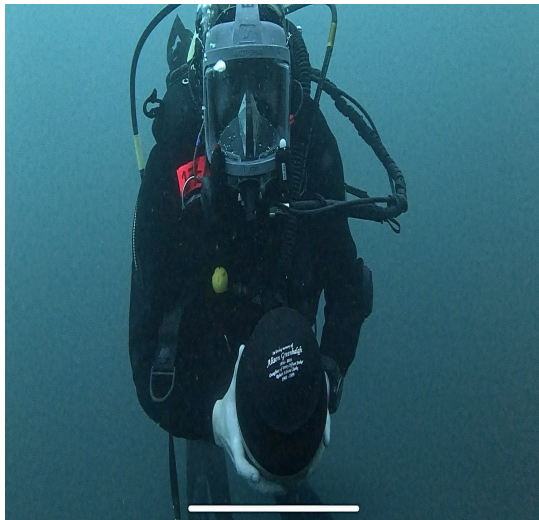
As she lays now in 34m of water



Battle Ensign flown over the wreck.



The Ships bell at Magnus Cathedral



Interment of ashes



Tot of Pussers Rum for those lost onboard