

The Tragedy of the 'Royal Oak'

Mr. Winston Churchill stated in the House of Commons, October 17:

"THE battleship 'Royal Oak' was sunk at anchor by a U-boat in Scapa Flow approximately at 1.30 a.m. on Oct. 14. . . .

"When we consider that during the whole course of the last war this anchorage was found to be immune from such attacks, on account of the obstacles imposed by the currents and the net barrages, this entry by a U-boat must be considered as a remarkable exploit of professional skill and daring

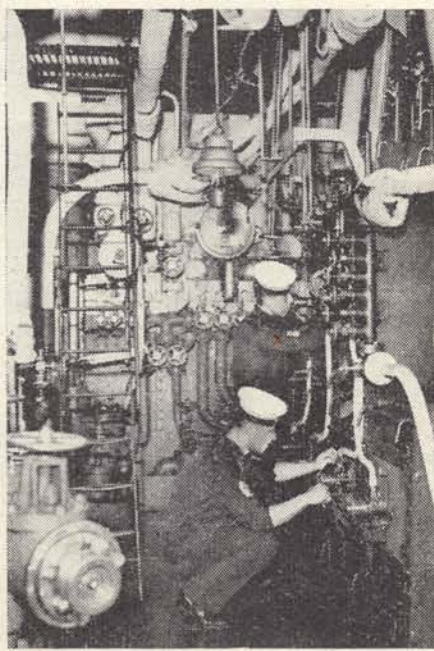
"It appears probable that the U-boat fired a salvo of torpedoes at the 'Royal Oak,' of which only one hit the bow. This muffled explosion was at the time attributed to internal causes, and what is called the inflammable store, where the kerosene and other such materials are kept, was flooded. Twenty minutes later the U-boat fired three or four torpedoes, and these, striking in quick succession, caused the ship to capsize and sink. She was lying at the extreme end of the harbour, and therefore many officers and men were drowned before rescue could be organized from other vessels.

"The lists of survivors have already been made public, and I deeply regret to inform the House that upwards of eight hundred officers and men have lost their lives."

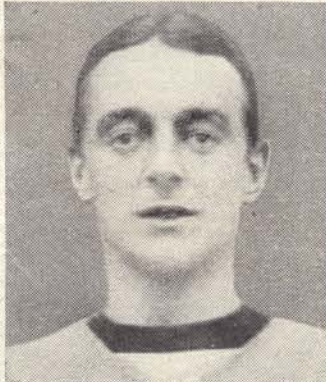
"The Admiralty immediately announced the loss of this fine ship. Serious as this loss is, it does not affect the margin of security in heavy vessels, which remains ample."



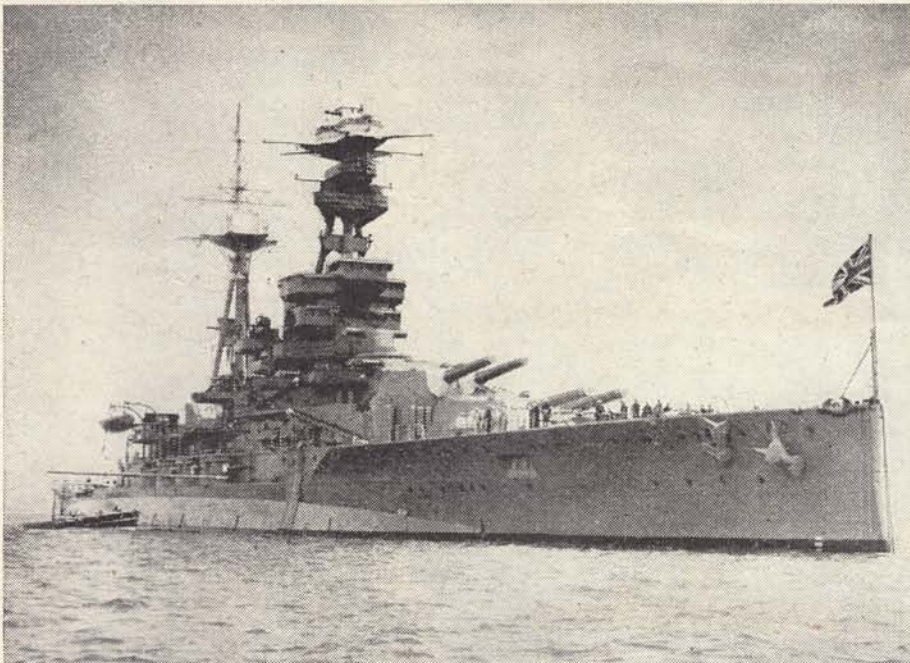
Pathetic scenes were witnessed when the lists of survivors of the "Royal Oak" were scanned by relations hoping to find their men.



Here is the boiler-room of the "Royal Oak." In such a catastrophe the engineers and stokers are in the most dangerous position in the ship.



Four of the officers who were rescued from the "Royal Oak" are seen above. They are, left to right, Captain W. F. Benn, R.N., Commander R. F. Nichols, R.N., Lieut. Anthony H. Terry, R.N., and Lieut. Bernard B. Keen, Royal Marines. Photos, Topical, Wide World and Fox



H.M.S. "Royal Oak" was a battleship of 29,150 tons laid down in 1914. She was in action in the Battle of Jutland, but in 1934 was withdrawn from the First Battle Squadron and reconditioned at a cost of £1,000,000. She was recommissioned in 1936. She carried eight 15-in. guns, and twelve 6-in. guns as her main armament.



Scapa Flow, the land-locked Orkneys harbour, was the Grand Fleet base in 1914-18.



Eye Witness Stories of Episodes
and Adventures in the
Second Great War

We Were Rescued from the 'Royal Oak'

In the early hours of October 14, 1939, when the battleship "Royal Oak" was torpedoed in the harbour at Scapa Flow, 810 officers and men lost their lives. Those who managed to survive the ordeal had great difficulty in reaching safety, as is shown by the following stories reprinted from the "Daily Telegraph" and "Daily Express."

VINCENT MARCHANT, 18, of Doncaster, described how he was asleep in his hammock when the first explosion occurred.

"I ran to the upper deck to see what happened," he said. "There was a second explosion twenty minutes later, followed by a third and then a fourth. By that time the ship was tilting. She was sinking rapidly.

"Remembering what happened on the 'Courageous' and the lesson that taught us, I stripped myself of all my clothing and, tying my safety belt around my waist, dived into the water. Searchlights were playing over the surface and I could see hundreds of heads bobbing around.

"Great volumes of oil started to belch up to the surface. My eyes started to smart and the faces of all the men swimming in the water turned a greasy black. I was caught in a searchlight for several minutes and saw that two of my pals were swimming alongside me. Later, however, they had cramp and disappeared.

"A small boat passed near at hand with someone on board shouting for survivors. I 'ahoyed,' but they evidently did not hear me and the boat disappeared into the darkness.

"I swam and swam for I don't know how long, but I must have gone about a mile and half when I felt the rock under me. I scarcely remember what happened after that. It was like a nightmare.

"I have just a vague recollection of climbing up the sheer face of a cliff about 20 to 30 feet high.

"Another figure was climbing behind me, but he slipped and crashed among the rocks below. He must have been killed or drowned. I lay down on the top of the cliff and lost consciousness.

"Then I heard someone shouting from the direction of the sea. They told me not to try to climb down again as they would send someone along the top of the cliff."

Another survivor was Paymaster-Lieutenant Harrison, of Glasgow, whose birthday was just fifty-eight minutes old when the first explosion occurred. This is his story:

"I was in the mess at two minutes to one when I heard a minor explosion.

"I was just about to open a parcel from my wife—a birthday present—but I replaced the string and went up on deck.

"Three minutes after I left the mess there was a violent explosion. I was pitched forward.

"Then there came another explosion. I joined a queue and was making to go overboard on the port side when there came a fourth explosion.

"I managed to get to a canvas lifeboat, but after I had clung to it for a while another poor fellow arrived almost exhausted. I hoisted him into my grip on the boat and swam away.

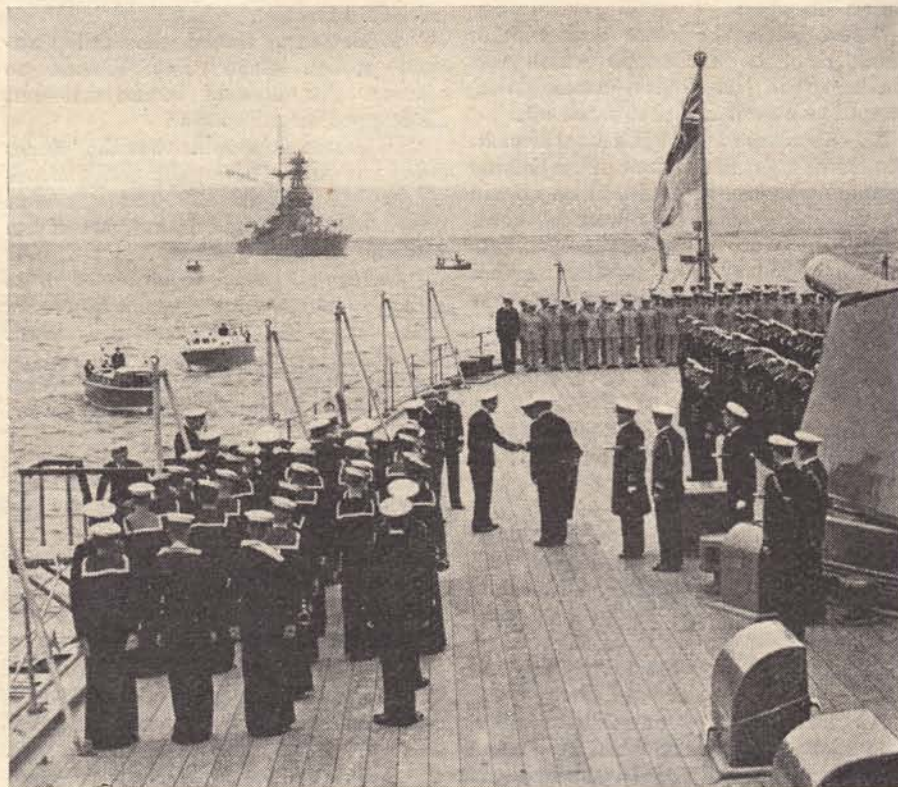
"A piece of wreckage came along and I used it for swimming support. Later I bumped into a log, and with wood support under both arms I swam to a drifter and was taken aboard.

"It was a lucky birthday for me."

Lieutenant Harrison still has his birthday present. He was clinging to it when he was rescued.



Rear-Admiral H. E. C. Blagrove was among the officers lost when the "Royal Oak" went down. He had been appointed Admiral Superintendent of Chatham Dockyard as from October 2. Photo, Keystone



H.M.S. "Royal Oak" was one of the ships inspected by the King during his visit to the Home Fleet in Weymouth Bay, June 20-23, 1938. His Majesty is here seen coming on board the ship. The "Royal Oak" then formed part of the 2nd Battle Squadron. Photo, L.N.A.