

From Volume One of Winston Churchill's  
'The Second World War'

Amidst all these preoccupations there burst upon us suddenly an event which touched the Admiralty in a most sensitive spot.

I have mentioned the alarm that a U-boat was *inside Scapa Flow*, which had driven the Grand Fleet to sea on the night of October 17, 1914. That alarm was premature. Now, after exactly a quarter of a century almost to a day, it came true. At 1.30 a.m. on October 14, 1939, a German U-boat braved the tides and currents, penetrated our defences, and sank the battleship *Royal Oak* as she lay at anchor. At first, out of a salvo of torpedoes, only one hit the bow and caused a muffled explosion. So incredible was it to the Admiral and Captain on board that a torpedo could have struck them, safe in Scapa Flow, that they attributed the explosion to some internal cause. Twenty minutes passed before the U-boat, for such she was, had reloaded her tubes and fired a second salvo. Then three or four torpedoes striking in quick succession ripped the bottom out of the ship. In less than two minutes, she capsized and sank. Most of the men were at action stations, but the rate at which the ship turned over made it almost impossible for anyone below to escape.

An account based on a German report written at the time may be recorded:

At 01.30 on October 14, 1939, H.M.S. *Royal Oak*, lying at anchor in Scapa Flow, was torpedoed by *U 47* (Lieutenant Prien). The operation had been carefully planned by Admiral Doenitz himself, the Flag Officer (Submarines). Prien left Kiel on October 8, a clear bright autumn day, and passed through Kiel Canal—course N.N.W., Scapa Flow. On October 13, at 4 a.m., the boat was lying off the Orkneys. At 7 p.m.—Surface; a fresh breeze blowing, nothing in sight; looming in the half darkness the line of the distant coast; long streamers of Northern Lights flashing blue wisps across the sky. Course West. The boat crept steadily closer to Holm Sound, the eastern approach to Scapa Flow. Unfortunate it was that these channels had not been completely blocked. A narrow passage lay open between two sunken ships. With great skill Prien steered through the swirling waters. The shore was close. A man on a bicycle could be seen going home along the coast road. Then suddenly the whole bay opened out. Kirk Sound was passed. They were in. There under the land to the North could be seen the great shadow of a battleship lying on the water, with the great mast rising above it like a piece of filigree on a black cloth. Near, nearer—all tubes clear—no alarm, no sound by the lap of the water, the low hiss of air pressure and the sharp click of a tube lever. *Los!* (Fire)—five seconds—ten seconds—twenty seconds. Then came a shattering explosion, and a great pillar of water rose in the darkness. Prien waited some minutes to fire another salvo. Tubes ready. Fire. The torpedoes hit amidships, and there followed a series of crashing explosions. H.M.S. *Royal Oak* sank, with the loss of 786 officers and men, including Rear-Admiral H. E. C. Blagrove (Rear-Admiral Second Battle Squadron). *U 47* crept quietly away back through the gap. A blockship arrived twenty-four hours later.