

## Tragedy in Scapa Flow

- I never knew my Uncle Jack, my mother's twin brother, as he died five years before I was born, at the age of nineteen. He was in the Royal Navy and was serving on the battleship HMS Royal Oak when it was torpedoed and sunk in Scapa Flow, in the Orkneys, on 13/14 October 1939 at the start of World War Two.

Scapa Flow were two words that I knew and liked the sound of from an early age, unaware of the full meaning of them – I now know differently. It was a terrible tragedy but the family never talked about it – it was the way that they coped with grief in those days. I lived with my grandma and spent many hours listening to her memories and family stories. I think this was the start of my lifelong love of social and family history. She never talked about Jack though, and I never remember seeing any photos of him around the house. My mother was seven months pregnant at the time, with my older sister Mary, and it must have been a terrible shock to lose her twin brother.

My mother, Gladys May Wilshaw, and her brother, John Thomas Wilshaw (Jack) were illegitimate, born in 1920, at 66 Well Street, Biddulph, North Staffordshire. Their mother was Mary Annie Wilshaw and they lived with their grandparents, Thomas and Mary Ellen Wilshaw (nee Webb). In the 1921 census there were twelve occupants, parents Mary Ellen and Thomas, their seven children and three grandchildren, which included Jack and Gladys, aged one. The men of the family were all miners. In 1927 the twin's mother, Mary Annie, married William Henry Cooper, a widower, with a son called Billy. They went to live at 14, Shaw Street, Biddulph. I understand that Jack was a very likeable lad, with a good sense of fun, but I do not think he was very happy with the new situation, as he joined the Royal Navy in 1937, at the age of seventeen. He was previously employed by Cowlshaw Walker Co Ltd, an engineering firm in Biddulph.

The following Christmas he sent a greeting card home, with a photo of HMS Aurora on the front. There is a photo of him on HMS Excellent as part of a field guns crew competing in a tournament, but later he served on HMS Royal Oak, an old battleship, and was there when war was declared with Germany I have three letters of his that he sent to his mother, but there are no dates on. In one he says:

*“There isn't much news at present only that we are definitely not going back to Portsmouth before September, and I shall be getting 14 days leave, but I don't know when. There is not much more news only you remember when I was at HMS Excellent I was in a field gun crew competing in a tournament and one of my mates took a photograph of us and he happens to be on this ship with me and he gave me one so I am sending it home for you to see your good looking son in on a tough picture. The two men dressed in blue are petty officers.*

*I must tell you we are still not afraid of Hitler or anybody else. Must close now with lots of love and kisses from your ever loving son, Jackie”* followed by rows of kisses.

Jack's twin sister, Gladys, was married on Boxing Day 1938, to Alfred Parkinson. The wedding was at Knypersley Church, and Jack and one of his mates are on the wedding photo, in their naval uniform. He was home on leave in June 1939 and this was the last time they saw him as in September of that year war was declared on Germany. Jack was killed on October 14<sup>th</sup>, only six weeks into the war.

In another letter Jack writes:

*“I was very surprised when I heard over the wireless that we had declared war on Germany but you must*

*not worry mother because I am ok then I won't. Hitler had it coming to him anyway, so it won't last long. I am very sorry that I can't tell you anything about the ship because I am not allowed to, you see someone else reads my letters before you do. Well mother dear I will close this short letter hoping you and Dad and family will not worry and write to me often. With lots of love and kisses from your ever loving son Jack.  
PS Please don't worry."*

In the third letter Jack says

*" We have been in Scotland now for over a week at a place called Invergordon. I have been here before with the home fleet, and I don't like the place very much especially with the weather we have been having. You know proper scotch weather, always raining and we look like being up here for a week or two. You see we are going on a cruise around the north west of Scotland. We shall stop at different places on the coast, I don't know the names of them. I shall be getting 14 days leave but I don't know when. I do hope I shall have a bit better weather than we have had this last week. We went to sea last Monday and we were nearly all washed overboard, but we got through alright."*

In the book 'The Sinking of HMS Royal Oak in the words of the survivors' by Dilip Sarkar a survivor, Bert Pocock, recalls:

*" I joined the Royal Oak at Portsmouth in June 1939. Royal Oak then sailed to Scapa Flow. I was a Boy 1<sup>st</sup> Class, and I thought it was great to be in the Royal Navy; little did I know what dark days there were ahead. At Scapa Flow we anchored in Kirkwall Bay, and were there when war was declared on Germany, 3rd September 1939. A big cheer went up from all the crew, boy were we going to show 'em! The officers were called together by the Captain, W.H.Benn, and drank the toast 'Damnation to the Enemy'. Then the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill himself came on board and spoke to us, It was very inspiring." Then we went out on patrol. The sea was really rough, there were six inches of water splashing around the Boys' Mess Deck, as a result of which it was only possible to sleep on the tables and benches there. So it was good to get back into Kirkwall Bay and have a run ashore for a couple of days."*

In the autumn of 1940 German U-boats had become a real threat, sinking an average of 5-6 ships a month. Slowly the British perfected submarine detection and weapons and the situation eased. Commodore Donitz was in charge of the U-boats and within days of the outbreak of war he began plotting how to get a U-boat into Scapa Flow, the most important British anchorage, to wreak havoc with the Royal Navy's Home Fleet. It would be a great coup and shatter British morale. Attempts had been made to penetrate Scapa Flow in the First World War but had been unsuccessful – there was an old score to settle.

Donitz had a personal vision of when Germany would have 300 U-boats operating in 'Wolf Packs' and able to blockade Britain and force a surrender. There had been reconnaissance flights and the Home Fleet had been seen in Scapa Flow. Donitz wanted more information, so he sent out U-14 to report on the currents in Scapa and also the defences. He needed to choose the right man for this very dangerous mission. Gunther Prien was commander of U-47 and at the age of thirty-one, had spent half his life at sea. He did not hesitate when asked to take on the challenge.

The stretch of water, called Scapa Flow, was in the centre of the circling islands of Orkney. It was one of the largest natural harbours in the world and considered to be one of the safest. It was eventually to become, as it had been in the First World War the impregnable main anchorage of the British and Allied navies in European waters. However at the start of the Second World War, after twenty years of peace, it's defences were not in a good state and in name only was it still 'Impregnable Scapa.' It was precisely because of the undefended state of the anchorage that, on the night of 13/14 October 1939, it was almost deserted. The main threat was

considered to be from the air. Scapa was blacked out and the islands were sparsely populated. It was not like the busy harbour at Portsmouth. Scapa was enormous and deserted. The actual naval base was at Lyness, ten miles away.

It was thought that Scapa was safe from submarines and surface attack, and the Home Fleet's main fear was attack from the air. German reconnaissance bombers operated from Norway over the Orkneys photographing and studying the anchorage. On 26<sup>th</sup> September, the Home Fleet left the Orkneys and forayed across the North Sea. On return the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Charles Forbes decided for safety reasons to disperse the fleet, leaving HMS Royal Oak to provide air cover in case of attack. This was a wise decision as indicated by subsequent events. She was positioned in the north-east corner of Scapa, together with the twenty-five year old aircraft carrier HMS Pegasus, and only 1,000 yards from the shore.

The Royal Oak was an old battleship which is why on the fateful night, she was left in Scapa, she was too slow to keep up with the rest of the fleet. She was built at Davenport between January 1914 and May 1916 at a cost of two and a half million pounds. In 1939 there was virtually no life-saving equipment left, most of the early rafts had been smashed in a gale. There had been no general issue of life jackets yet and the crew did not worry because they were safely in harbour, behind defences which so far had proved unpenetrable for the whole of the First World War. There were four entrances to Scapa Flow, all close together, all narrow and only one of them navigable – Kirk Sound. The channels had been obstructed by the sinking in them of blockships filled with concrete. There were anti-submarine nets, minefields, booms, and patrols. Local skippers thought it was impossible to get through the channels, except at certain conditions of the tide. However there were concerns that some of the blockships had moved over the years, but these concerns were ignored. The commanding officer of the Royal Oak was Captain W.H. Benn and his Senior Executive Officer was Commander R.F.Nichols.

On the night of October 13/14<sup>th</sup> 1939 the U47 daringly sneaked through the blockade and fired her torpedoes. One hit near to the stores and also where the young boys slept, but it was thought to be an internal explosion and some of the crew, who had been awakened, went back to sleep again. More torpedoes followed and they hit HMS Royal Oak at 1.15am. She was the first of five Royal Navy battleships and cruisers sank in the Second World War. The loss of life was heavy – of 1,234 men and boys 833 were killed that night or later, from their wounds, The ship was lying at anchor and most of the crew, dead tired, had turned in early, glad to be back in the safety of Scapa, where they could relax. Only officers and petty officers wore pyjamas, the crew slept in singlets and shorts. The hatches were closed and, after pushing and struggling up the ladders, many could not be opened. Some of the crew were killed by the explosions. It was pitch black dark and many drowned as the freezing water poured in. The ship capsized in fifteen minutes. Most died after managing to swim to the surface, only to be choked by fumes from diesel fuel pouring from the ship's tanks. One survivor said that it was like trying to swim through treacle. After his daring feat Gunther Prien, in U-47, escaped undetected.

Whilst individual bodies were being taken from the water, the crew of the drifter Daisy 11, under the command of Skipper John Gatt, were bravely picking men up until Daisy herself was in danger of capsizing under the weight of numbers. John Gatt was a tall, burly man from Aberdeenshire and was part owner of the vessel. It had been taken over by the Admiralty at the start of the war and was detailed to attend on the Royal Oak when in Scapa. She took men ashore, fetched stores and on the 13<sup>th</sup> she was carrying mail. With the sea around him covered in thick black oil, and screaming men, Skipper John Gatt, suddenly found himself directing a major rescue operation. Gatt's crew of six, all Orkney fishermen, rescued 360 men from the freezing oily waters and could take no more – there were oil covered bodies everywhere. The sailors in the freezing cold water were singing to keep their spirits up – the sounds of 'South of the Border' and 'Roll Out the Barrel' could be heard. The skipper and his crew spent the night trying to clean fuel off the survivors, a

near impossible task with just hard soap. There were also many who were badly burned from the cordite. Suddenly all the yelling, screaming and explosions stopped and there was a deathly silence – the Oak had gone. Only one decoration was ever awarded in connection with the sinking of HMS Royal Oak and it went to Skipper Gatt and no man deserved it more. No praise could be too high in respect of their efforts to save Royal Oak survivors.

The survivors were glad to be alive but were in shock. Some were on board HMS Pegasus where they were given, rum, cocoa, a bath and clean clothes. Some were on board SS Voltaire, a huge liner, awaiting transport south. Some were put up by residents in Kirkwall. A survivor said that they were very kind to them, a lovely lot of people. A Court of Enquiry into the sinking began in Thurso on 18<sup>th</sup> October. All survivors were given forms to complete with a set of questions: (a) where were you at the time of the first – second – third – fourth explosions? (b) how many explosions did you hear? (c) did you see any flash, fire, smoke? (d) how did you get away? (e) who else was with you?, Some of the survivors were taken by train to Thurso and joined their train to return to Portsmouth, which was a thirty hour journey. They did have a very good breakfast in Perth and a good late meal in London. Upon arrival at Royal Navy Barracks, Portsmouth they had a cold meal and a packet of ten cigarettes each – over 400 of them. Next was a really good sleep, after which they were re-kitted and sent on fourteen days survivors' leave.

The sinking was eagerly seized on by the Nazi propaganda service and they claimed Lieutenant Prien, the commander of U-47, as the first hero of the war – hero because he had penetrated the defences of 'Impregnable Scapa' where every previous attempt had failed. As the U-47 headed home they listened eagerly to news bulletins. A British Admiralty report confirmed that HMS Royal Oak had been sunk. When the news reached Germany there was a frenzy of enthusiasm throughout. The U-47 was escorted into Wilhelmshaven by two destroyers to cheering crowds and music. Donitz had travelled there, conferring the Iron Cross 1<sup>st</sup> class on Prien and the 2<sup>nd</sup> class on the rest of the crew. Later they were greeted by Hitler and dined with him. Prien's victory exorcised the ghosts of the Kaiser's navy's defeat in 1918. It increased Hitler's confidence in the U-boats and the nation realised that the hated Royal Navy could be beaten. Donitz was promoted to Rear-Admiral and Commander of U-boats. After the attack a comic had circulated amongst Prien's crew, the men being amused by the drawing of a bull charging an invisible target with lowered horns and steaming nostrils. When nearly home one of the crew, using white paint, reproduced the drawing on the conning tower's side: so it was that Prien would become known as 'Bull of Scapa Flow', a symbol of aggressive spirit, an example to all Germans.

There were still a lot of doubts about what had happened, as it all happened so quickly. When Prien gave his account of the attack there were so many errors and discrepancies, some of the locals doubted if he had ever been in Scapa. There was even talk of it being sabotage, as the first explosion had seemed to be from the area of the stores. There were very often stores, left unguarded, waiting to be loaded with the name of the ship on, and civilians around. It was common talk among the survivors that some stores had been left for twenty-four hours on Lyness jetty, with Royal Oak's name on them. There were four British battleships blown up at anchor in the First World War, one of them in Scapa. The blockships were checked for any movement but there were no signs of any U-boat entry.

On the morning of Saturday the 14<sup>th</sup> the Admiralty announced that the Royal Oak had been lost, 'believed by U-boat action' and issued the first fifteen names of survivors – what a terrible time this must have been for anxious families. I still have the telegram sent to my grandma. It reads:

“DEEPLY REGRET TO REPORT DEATH OF YOUR SON JOHN  
T WILSHAW A B SSX 20377 ON WAR SERVICE

## REAR ADMIRAL R N BARRACKS PORTSMOUTH”

The news was a shattering blow to British national pride and morale – especially as the ship had been lost within Scapa Flow. The Admiralty ordered a team of divers at Scapa Flow, to look for mainly evidence of U-boat attack. A search by every available vessel found no trace. Sandy Robertson, a local commercial, salvage diver was sent for from his cottage on Hoy at 3am. It was very upsetting for the divers as there were many bodies, indicating that a large number of the 883 who died had died inside the ship, while trying to get out – it must have been a terrible sight. Sandy found three big holes in the ship's hull Then he found a crucial piece of evidence: the propeller of one of Prien's torpedoes. Once salvaged there was no more argument.

Only 26 bodies were recovered from the Flow. The dead men were brought to Lyness and some survivors were asked to identify them – some refused to do it. On Monday the 16<sup>th</sup> they were buried in the Lyness Naval Cemetery, some with unnamed graves. There was a funeral party who marched to the cemetery. A Navy honour guard led, followed by the survivors of the disaster, who wore overalls as they had lost their uniforms as a result. There is a Scapa Flow Visitor Centre and Museum at Lyness.

Slowly the British perfected submarine detection and destruction tactics and weapons. In March 1941 three of the top U-boat 'aces' were sunk in the North Atlantic: U-47 failed to return from a North Atlantic patrol and was presumed lost. Anxious hours passed and after a few days, U-47 was still missing and a signal was received from headquarters that news of Prien's likely loss was to be kept top secret, not even the crew's next of kin were to be notified. Frau Prien rang to ask for news of her husband but was not told. In the middle of April Hitler still refused permission for the news to be released. It would be such a blow to German pride and morale. Only on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1941, ten weeks after the loss of U-47, was the news released. It was later confirmed by British records that U-47 had been sunk on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1941 by the corvettes *Camelia* and *Arbutus*, and the destroyer *Wolverine*.

After the war, from the 1960's onwards, scuba diving became accessible to the masses and recreational diving became increasingly popular. The impressive wrecks remaining at Scapa Flow were regularly visited by divers from all over the world. There was no law to prohibit diving or protect these sites from souvenir hunters. This was until 1986 when the Protection of Military Remains Act was introduced and certain sites became 'protected places,' including crash sites of aircrafts, and wrecks such as the *Royal Oak*, where human remains are present. Today a green conical buoy bobs above the wreck proclaiming:

*'This marks the wreck of HMS Royal Oak and the grave of her crew.  
Respect their resting place. Unauthorised diving prohibited.'*

It is a National War Grave and every year a moving act of remembrance takes place afloat, at the *Royal Oak* buoy, attended by members of the bereaved families. Royal Navy divers also visit the site, hoisting a white ensign underwater on the wreck.

Mrs Dorothy Golding lost her husband in the tragedy. He was Bandmaster (Royal Marines) Arthur James Golding, aged thirty-five. After the death of her husband Dorothy joined the Royal Marines and served with them until the end of the war. She then started work at the Royal Navy training establishment at nearby St Vincent where she met hundreds of young sailors. She had always wanted to travel to Scapa Flow but as she was unable to do so she asked her nephew to promise he would visit the *Royal Oak*'s war grave site and scatter flowers for her. She died on Remembrance Day in 1999, aged ninety-four. Dorothy was reunited with her husband on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2000, when her ashes were carried by her grandson, Christopher Meikle-Kilford, and lovingly placed inside the wreck of the *Royal Oak*. This moving act of remembrance reunited Dorothy and Arthur sixty-one years to the day after the attack on *HMS Royal Oak*. The service was led by the Kirkwall

Minister, attended by family members, Naval Officers and members of the Royal British Legion. Also on deck were young sea cadets and naval divers who gave her the traditional farewell salute before Christopher began his descent to the wreck below. The following inscription was fastened to the casket:

*In memory of Royal Marines Bandmaster Arthur J Golding  
& All Those Who Perished With Him on This Ship,  
HMS Royal Oak, on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1939.  
And His Wife Dorothy FMM Golding WRNS, Royal  
Marines, Ret'd.  
Now Reunited With Him This Day, October 14<sup>th</sup>,  
2000.  
We Shall Remember.*

The Portsmouth Naval Memorial at Southsea commemorates the many seamen who lost their lives during both World Wars. Every October, the HMS Royal Oak Association holds a service of remembrance at Southsea.

In 1993 my husband and I toured part of Scotland and I said that I would like to go over to the Orkneys, to visit Scapa Flow. We took the car ferry from Scrabster to Stromness, passing the huge Old Man of Hoy. We loved the islands but there was always a cold wind – I think this is why there was such an absence of trees. We stayed in a B&B with an elderly couple and it turned out that the owner had been on Home Guard duty on the night of the tragedy. He told us how dark everywhere was and you could just make out some of the sailors scrambling over the cliffs, slipping, as they were covered in oil.

There was so much to see and not many tourists then, before the huge cruise ships started calling there. We saw Scapa Flow of course and the buoy that marks the spot where the Royal Oak went down. We visited the Stones of Stenness Circle and Scara Brae, a neolithic settlement, which was a magical place. It had been uncovered by a storm in 1850. We also saw Maeshowe, a chambered cairn. It looks like a grassy mound but was thought to have been built about 2,800 BC tomb, and is one of the largest tombs on Orkney. We also crawled into the Tomb of Eagles. There is also the Ring of Brodgar Stone Circle and Henge. Checking on the internet all these places seem to have visitor centres now and online booking - there are also shuttle buses. When we visited there were very few people and we roamed freely everywhere, driving ourselves.

Winston Churchill was very upset about the sinking of the Oak and of course he wanted to make sure that it did not happen again. Writing after the war he said “ It was only the U-boat menace that ever really worried me” The Churchill Barriers were built to link all the islands, using great blocks of stone and built by Italian prisoners of war. Scapa Flow was to be made secure again – a safe harbour once more. While they were there the Italians made an amazing chapel, built in a prefabricated hut on Lamb Holm. They used all reclaimed wreckage - It was truly beautiful. After the end of the war the chapel fell into disrepair but the artist returned later and it was restored and blessed again. It can still be visited today. We also went to St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, where there was a huge book listing all of the lives lost that fateful night. It was in a glass case but a lady attendant removed it, and placed the book open on the page with the name of John Thomas Wilshaw – Able Seaman. The bell from the ship was also displayed. It was so peaceful in the Cathedral and we were all visibly moved by the sadness of it all.

On a visit to the Biddulph Chronicle office many years ago I found a photo and article about Jack on the front page

'Congleton Chronicle Friday October 20<sup>th</sup> 1939.

### **BIDDULPH MAN LOST ON ROYAL OAK.**

*A 19 year old Biddulph sailor, A.B. John Thomas Wilshaw was among the victims of the sinking of HMS Royal Oak. His parents, Mr and Mrs W Cooper of 14, Shaw Street received the news early on Monday morning. A telegram from the Naval Barracks, Portsmouth read briefly ' Deeply regret to report death of your son on war service '*

*A week before the tragedy Mrs Cooper received a letter which concluded 'Well mother I think that's all for now, only I don't want you to worry about me, because I am OK, and it takes a lot to keep me down dear.'*

*AB Wilshaw had been in the navy for 2 years and was last home on leave in June. A smart progressive man, he had recently passed his exam for first class Gunner. A former scholar of the Biddulph Council School, he played cricket for the Knypersley 2<sup>nd</sup> XI and was regarded as a promising player.'*

I was reading Bill Ridgway's book on Knypersley and there was a chapter on Knypersley Cricket Club. I was moved when I came to a part that said:

*'The Chairman proposed a minutes silence to commemorate the loss of Jack Wilshaw, a promising cricketer, who had gone down with the Royal Oak'*

Apparently he played for Knypersley 2<sup>nd</sup> XI. I believe he was a very good cricketer.

I remember, when I was small, a friend of Jack's came to visit my grandma. He may have been one of the survivors and wanted to share his memories of Jack with her, and to pay his respects. I thought it was good of him to come. My grandma never recovered from her loss. She never used to go out much but was a lovely lady and always made visitors very welcome. The only time I recall her mentioning Jack was when a robin came regularly and she said the bird was Jack re-incarnated. She died of cancer on New Years Day 1961, aged sixty-four, and her ashes were scattered in the sea as she requested.

Some time in the 1960's there was a letter in the Biddulph Chronicle from a lady who lived at Wilmslow. She was asking about Jack Wilshaw, if anyone had known him or had knowledge of him. I got in touch and it turned out that the lady had been friends with Jack, when she was a young girl. I went to see her and took some photos to show her. After all those years she still thought of him, but there are some people we never forget.

There were 1,234 men and boys on board HMS Royal Oak on that fateful night, some boys as young as fifteen. There were 37 boys left out of 163.

At least 50 men tried to swim to the shore half a mile away, but less than 20 reached it.

There were 401 survivors

The bodies of 799 were never found.

The official death toll for Royal Oak has varied over the years owing to confusion over similar names, lost records, and delayed deaths. The currently accepted figure of 835 deaths was determined in 2019 after research by a team of local historians.

Although my Uncle Jack died before I was born, his loss at such a young age had a profound impact on the lives of our family. Through my interest and research into the Scapa Flow incident, I have been able to recreate some memories of him and his tragic death. His name appears on the Cenotaph War Memorial in Biddulph and is a permanent and lasting memory of his sacrifice.

My mother, his twin sister, never spoke of Jack. I lost my twin sister, Margaret, in 2011 and still miss her as I felt she was such a part of me – there is a special bond between twins - someone you can share laughter and tears with, and is always there for you. Margaret and I did the research on Jack together and when my husband and I returned to the Orkneys Margaret and her husband came with us. My mother suffered periods of depression throughout her life and she and my grandma both took sleeping tablets. Mother died of cancer in 1979, aged 59. I wonder how many more families continue to experience sadness because of the tragedy on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> in Scapa Flow, eighty-five years ago.

Note: There are many sites on the internet about the Royal Oak, with information and video clips. There is a good one by Peter Rowlands [hmsroyaloak.co.uk](http://hmsroyaloak.co.uk) , with family photos, a list of all those who lost their lives and much more. I am grateful to Peter for his support and also would like to thank my brother-in-law, Kelvin Lawton, for proof reading for me. There are a number of books about the disaster but in my research for this article I just used two books. They were 'Black Saturday' by Alexander McKee and 'The Sinking of HMS Royal Oak' by Dilip Sarkar.

Elizabeth Lawton 2024