

HISTORY OF SCAPA FLOW - TIMELINE OF EVENTS

[1812] Maritime Surveyor to the Admiralty, Graeme Spence, recommended Scapa Flow as a Royal Naval anchorage.

[1909] The Royal Navy first use Scapa Flow in large numbers.

[1916] On the 31st May the Grand Fleet and the High Seas Fleet finally met in the Battle of Jutland.

[1917] On the 9th July HMS Vanguard, a 19,560 ton St Vincent class battleship, blew up at anchor off Flotta in Scapa Flow. At 23.20 hours the anchorage was rocked by a huge explosion which showered neighbouring ships with wreckage and human remains. HMS Vanguard had not been lost to enemy action, as was first thought, but to unstable cordite in one of the ship's magazines, which overheated and caused the catastrophic explosion.

[1917] On the 2nd August, South African born Squadron Commander Edwin Harris Dunning, DSC, RNAS, made naval history by being the first pilot to land an aeroplane on a moving ship, HMS Furious.

[1918] On the evening of the 28th October the German U-boat UB 116, commanded by Kapitänleutnant Hans Joachim Emsmann, attempted to penetrate the defences at Scapa Flow and sink as many ships as possible. At 23.30 the UB 116 was sighted when it came up to periscope depth to check its position. A button was pressed which detonated the mines and sank the UB 116.

[1918] On the 11th November Germany signed an Armistice with the Allies which brought World War I to an end. Kaiser Wilhelm II had been forced to abdicate on the 9th November and was given exile in the Netherlands. As part of the Armistice, Germany had to withdraw all troops back to within its own borders, surrender artillery guns, machine-guns, all aircraft, submarines and most of its navy. The surrendered ships of the High Seas Fleet sailed first to the Firth of Forth on the 20th November, then north to Orkney, most of them arriving from the 23rd – 27th November, while others arrived later. 74 ships were interned at Scapa Flow.

[1919] On the 21st June Scapa Flow witnessed the sinking of the German High Seas Fleet, scuttled at the command of Rear-Admiral Ludwig von Reuter. The negotiation of surrender terms between Germany and the Allies was on the verge of collapse as the Allies demanded reparation that would have ruined the German economy and meant paying costs until 1988. As negotiations at Versailles reached a critical point von Reuter remained in the dark, relying on five day old copies of The Times for information. If Germany didn't accept the surrender terms by the 21st June then a state of war would once again exist between them and the Allies. Fearing the Royal Navy would seize his ships in the event of a breakdown of the talks, von Reuter arranged with officers to scuttle their ships at his order. He didn't know that the surrender talks had been extended and would not be signed until the 28th June. On the morning of Saturday 21st June, von Reuter's suspicion was aroused when the ships of the Royal Navy left Scapa Flow to carry out torpedo practice. He thought that they would return at speed and capture his ships, which were unarmed and incapable of sailing. He hoisted the signal flag 'Paragraph eleven confirm', the order to scuttle the fleet. 52 of the 74 ships had sunk, while the others (mostly destroyers) had been beached by the returning Royal Navy ships.

[1924] Cox & Danks began salvage in Scapa Flow having bought the remaining German destroyers and two battleships from the Admiralty. Cox raised 26 destroyers, 1 light cruiser, 4 battlecruisers and 2 battleships between 1924 and 1931.

[1939] On the night of the 13th/14th October, during high tide, the German U-boat, U-47, slipped past the bow of the blockship Seriano in Kirk Sound. He found the old World War I battleship HMS Royal Oak at anchor off the Holm shore, providing anti-aircraft cover for Netherbutton radar station and the eastern side of Scapa Flow. At 01.04 hours Prien fired his first salvo of torpedoes from the U-47's 4 bow tubes, one of which misfired and effectively put it out of action. He scored only a minor hit right forward on the bow. The impact was felt onboard, but was dismissed as an internal explosion in a paint store. U-47 turned and fired its stern tube, but again missed. A third time the U-47 took aim with its 3 remaining bow tubes and this time, at 01.16 hours, all 3 found their mark, tearing a hole in the starboard side of the ship's hull and sinking her in under 15 minutes. The explosion inside, followed by a massive fireball, killed around 120 of the boy sailors who were asleep in the area that was hit. New revised figures indicate that 834 men and boys were killed that night. U-47 managed to escape detection and slipped out through Kirk Sound, this time hugging the coast of Lamb Holm. The U-47 and its crew returned to Germany to a hero's welcome.

[1939] On the morning of the 17th October, just three days after the sinking of HMS Royal Oak, 4 JU 88 bombers attacked the Fleet in Scapa Flow around 10.20 hours. During that raid one of the JU 88s was shot down, crashing by the banks of the Pegal Burn on Hoy. This was credited to the 226 Battery anti-aircraft guns, manned by Territorial Army recruits from Orkney and Caithness. This was the first enemy aircraft to be shot down by anti-aircraft guns in the war.

[1941] Admiral Tovey ordered the battlecruiser HMS Hood and the battleship HMS Prince of Wales, along with 6 destroyers, to sail from Scapa Flow in pursuit of the German battleship Bismarck and the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen. The ships sailed through Hoxa Sound; the Hood would never return.

[1943] The battleship HMS Duke of York, the cruiser HMS Jamaica and four destroyers left Scapa Flow and were heading north to intercept the German battlecruiser Scharnhorst, along with five destroyers. At 09.24 hours of 26th December the Scharnhorst was attacked and sank with the loss of all but 36 of her crew of 1,700.

[1957] On the 29th March Scapa Flow ceased to be a naval base as part of a series of cuts to the Royal Navy's budget. The White Ensign was hauled down for the last time at Lyness, but there were no high-ranking officers to witness the final chapter of this once great harbour and the only ship present was a humble boom defence ship, HMS Barleycorn.