

The Sinking of HMS ROYAL OAK

The 1939 Scapa Flow Tragedy

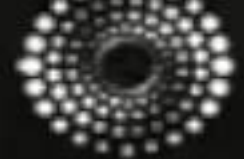
An examination of Britain's greatest naval disaster of the Second World War

With
Rear Admiral (Retired) **Simon Hardern**

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The 1939 Scapa Flow Tragedy

An examination of Britain's greatest naval disaster of the Second World War

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To enhance your enjoyment of this presentation, I often use Artificial Intelligence (AI), including OpenArt AI and ChatGPT, to restore and enrich the clarity and fidelity of older illustrations and photographs, and to bring my imagination to life through visualisations that make the impossible wonderfully tangible!

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ENRICHMENT
SERIES

Contents

Historical Context

The outbreak of war and Britain's naval supremacy

Scapa Flow

Britain's impregnable fortress of the north

The Attack

U-47's daring penetration and fatal torpedo strikes

The Aftermath

Casualties, consequences and lasting legacy of tragedy



An Everchanging World – 1914 to 1938

1914–1918
World War I



1917
Russian Revolution



1919
Treaty Of Versailles



1929
Stock Market Crash



1933
Rise Of Hitler And The Nazis



1939
Start Of World War II



1914

1917

1919

1929

1933

1939

Start of World War II – 3 September 1939

- Britain declared war on Germany following the invasion of Poland
- Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain addressed the nation



The Home Fleet Anchorage at Scapa Flow



Strategic Location

A natural harbour in the Orkney Islands covering 125 square miles, positioned to control access between the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean, making it ideal for intercepting German naval movements



Naval Importance

Home to the British Grand Fleet during World War I and the Home Fleet in 1939, considered the most secure anchorage in British waters and vital for protecting Atlantic convoys





Strategic Position Controlling North Sea Access

Strategic Anchorage

Scapa Flow is a vast, sheltered body of water in the Orkney Islands, long prized as one of the safest natural harbours in northern Europe

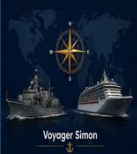




10 miles/16 KM

HMS ROYAL OAK

15 miles/24 KM



Protective Naval and Air Stations on the Orkneys





Protected Against the Elements and the Enemy



Coastal Guns

Batteries, like those at Hoxa Head, guarded all approaches



Anti-Submarine Nets

Nets, sensors and patrols blocked U-boats



Air and Sea Cover

Royal Air Force and Fleet Air Arm patrols provided constant defence



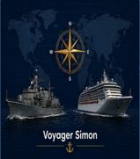
Anti-Submarine Nets





Sunken Block Ships – What Good Looks Like





Sunken Block Ships – A Problem



But It Had Weaknesses



Submarine Threat

Advances in U-boat design and tactics made Scapa Flow vulnerable to surprise attack, particularly from midget submarines



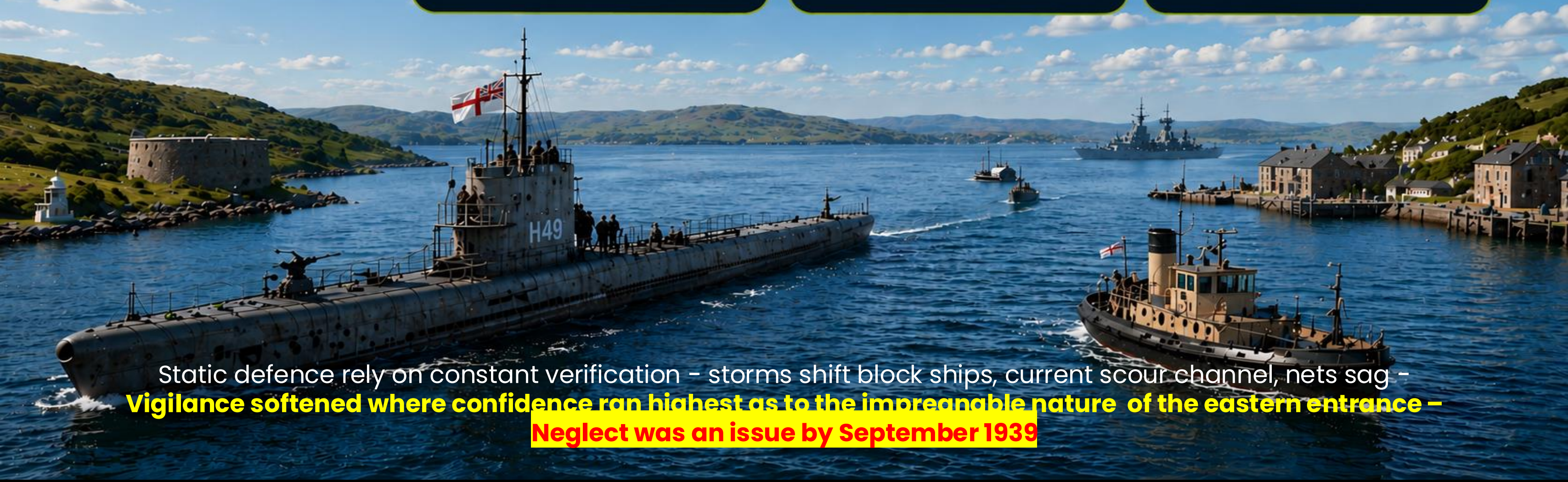
Limited Detection

Outdated detection equipment and poor night-time visibility made it difficult to spot enemy submarines



Reliance on Static Defences

Heavy reliance on fixed defences and blockships created a false sense of security

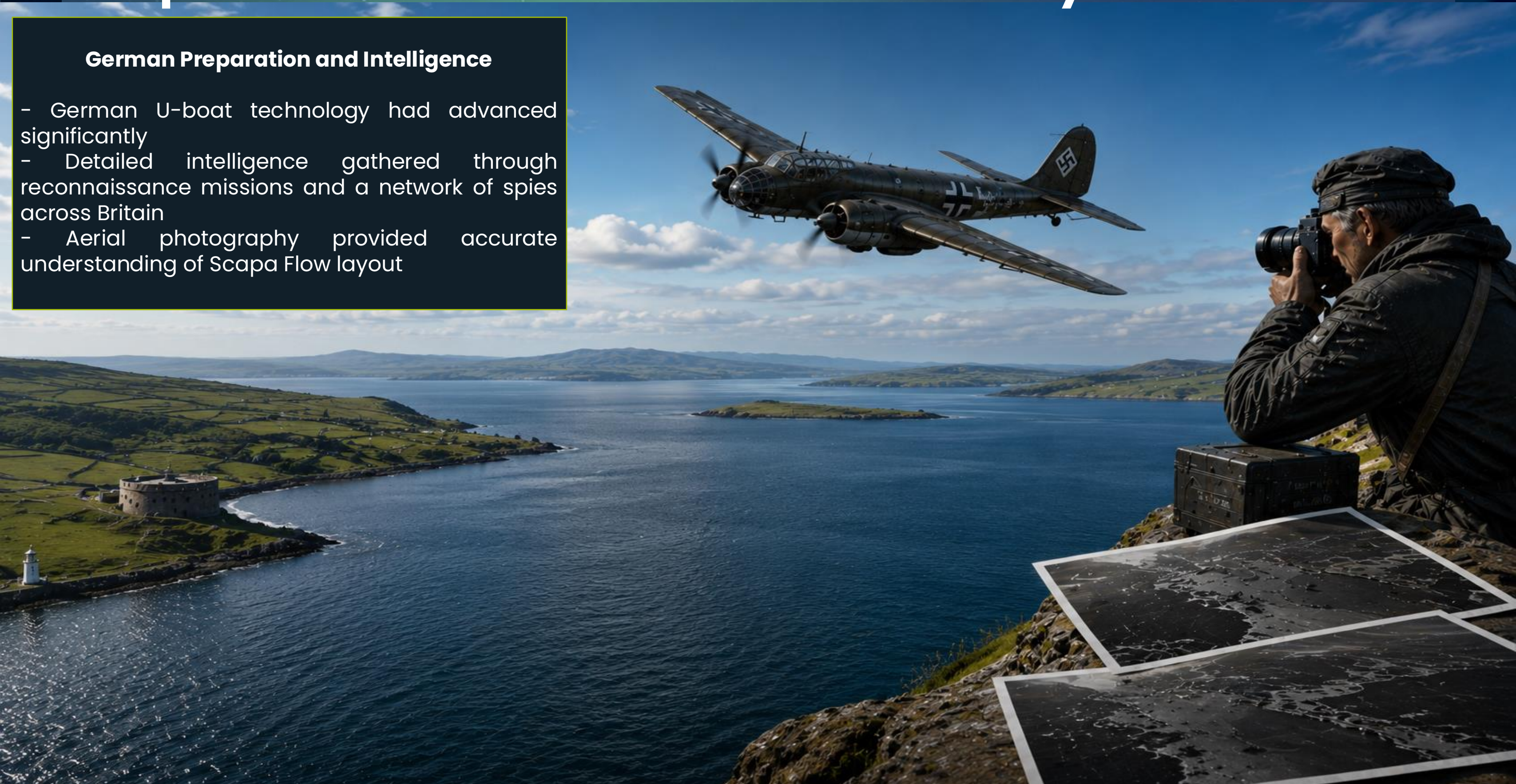


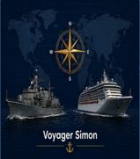
Static defence rely on constant verification – storms shift block ships, current scour channel, nets sag –
Vigilance softened where confidence ran highest as to the impenetrable nature of the eastern entrance –
Neglect was an issue by September 1939

Scapa Flow – Threats to Home Fleet Safety

German Preparation and Intelligence

- German U-boat technology had advanced significantly
- Detailed intelligence gathered through reconnaissance missions and a network of spies across Britain
- Aerial photography provided accurate understanding of Scapa Flow layout





HMS ROYAL OAK – The Ship

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THE
PODIUM
ENRICHMENT SERIES



HMS VICTORY

HMS ROYAL OAK

Portsmouth Harbour – 1920

HMS ROYAL OAK – The Ship and Her Career

A Revenge-class Battleship

Launched in 1914, HMS ROYAL OAK was a formidable battleship that served through two World Wars and played a vital role in the changing face of naval warfare



Key Facts

Launched: 1914



Displacement: 29,000 tons



Armament: Eight 15-inch guns



Top Speed: 21 knots



Joined the Grand Fleet:
Scapa Flow, 1916



Capabilities



Powerful Armament

Eight 15-inch guns provided strong firepower for battlefield dominance



Strong Protection

Heavy armour offered excellent protection against enemy fire



Ocean-going Endurance

Designed for long-range operations with high seaworthiness.



Anti-aircraft Role

By the 1930s, equipped for anti-aircraft defence duties



Slow but Steady

Modernised by 1939 but considered too slow for front-line operations.

A Life of Service

1

Built
(1914–1916)



Built by Harland & Wolff
in Belfast, Northern Ireland

2

First World War Service
(1916–1918)



- Served with the 4th Battle Squadron
- Fought at the Battle of Jutland

3

Between the Wars
(1919–1938)



- Served with the Atlantic and Mediterranean Fleets
- Conducted training cruises, port visits
- Involved in the “Royal Oak Mutiny” in 1928

4

Changing Role
(1930s)



- Modernised but considered slow by the 1930s
- Training and anti-aircraft roles
- Suitable for home waters

5

On the Eve of War
(1939)



- Largely at Scapa Flow for anti-aircraft defence duties

HMS ROYAL OAK – Movement in the Days Before

1 German Sortie Detected

9 October



- Overnight, CinC Home Fleet warned of German heavy unit sortie
- 1320 hrs RAF Hudson from 224 Sqn sighted GNEISENAU, KÖLN, and 9 destroyers off Lister Lighthouse (Lindesnes LH) southern Norway steaming north
- Purpose: sink Allied shipping, entice out Home Fleet, draw into U-boat trap and range of German bombers

2 ROYAL OAK Deployed

9 October



- 1930 hrs ROYAL OAK sailed with destroyers MATABELE and STURDY
- Tasked to patrol west of the Shetlands as a blocking force
- Not deployed with main fleet due to reduced speed below 20 knots
- Positioned as backstop against breakout by GNEISENAU



HMS MATABELE



HMS STURDY

3 Storm and Isolation

10 October



- Force encountered severe Atlantic weather
- Destroyers lost contact with ROYAL OAK in heavy seas
- Attempts to regain escort failed
- Ship forced to abandon patrol and return to Scapa Flow



Heavy seas and poor visibility made contact and navigation extremely difficult

4 Return to Anchorage

11 October



- Early hours 11 October ROYAL OAK re-entered Scapa Flow
- Anchored northeast sector, approx 1500 yards south of PEGASUS
- PEGASUS – former seaplane carrier (ex ARK ROYAL)



HMS PEGASUS
(ex ARK ROYAL)

5 Strategic Misjudgement

11 October



- Luftwaffe attack expected, fleet dispersed to Loch Ewe and other anchorages
- ROYAL OAK retained at Scapa Flow to strengthen air defences
- Anti-aircraft capability considered valuable despite vulnerability
- Ship began repairs after storm damage and loss of Carley floats



Storm damage caused structural issues and washed away many of her Carley floats

ROYAL OAK

Anchored northeast sector of Scapa Flow

PEGASUS

(ex ARK ROYAL)
Approx 1500 yards north

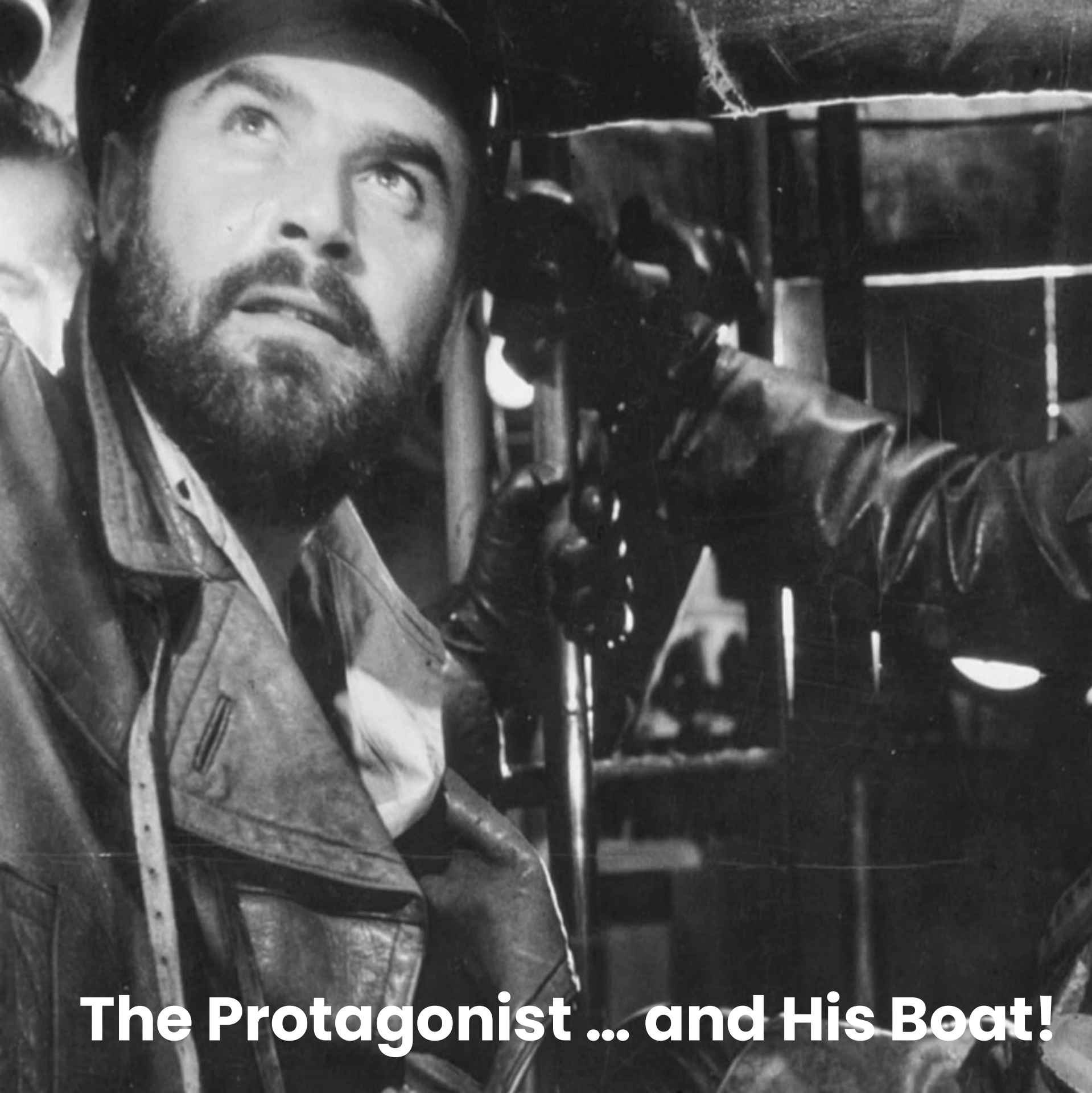


HMS ROYAL OAK – The Ship's Company

On the Night of 13 October 1939 ...

HMS ROYAL OAK carried a Ship's Company of 1,234 ... many were young sailors, including 163 'boy sailors' aged between 15 and 18 years

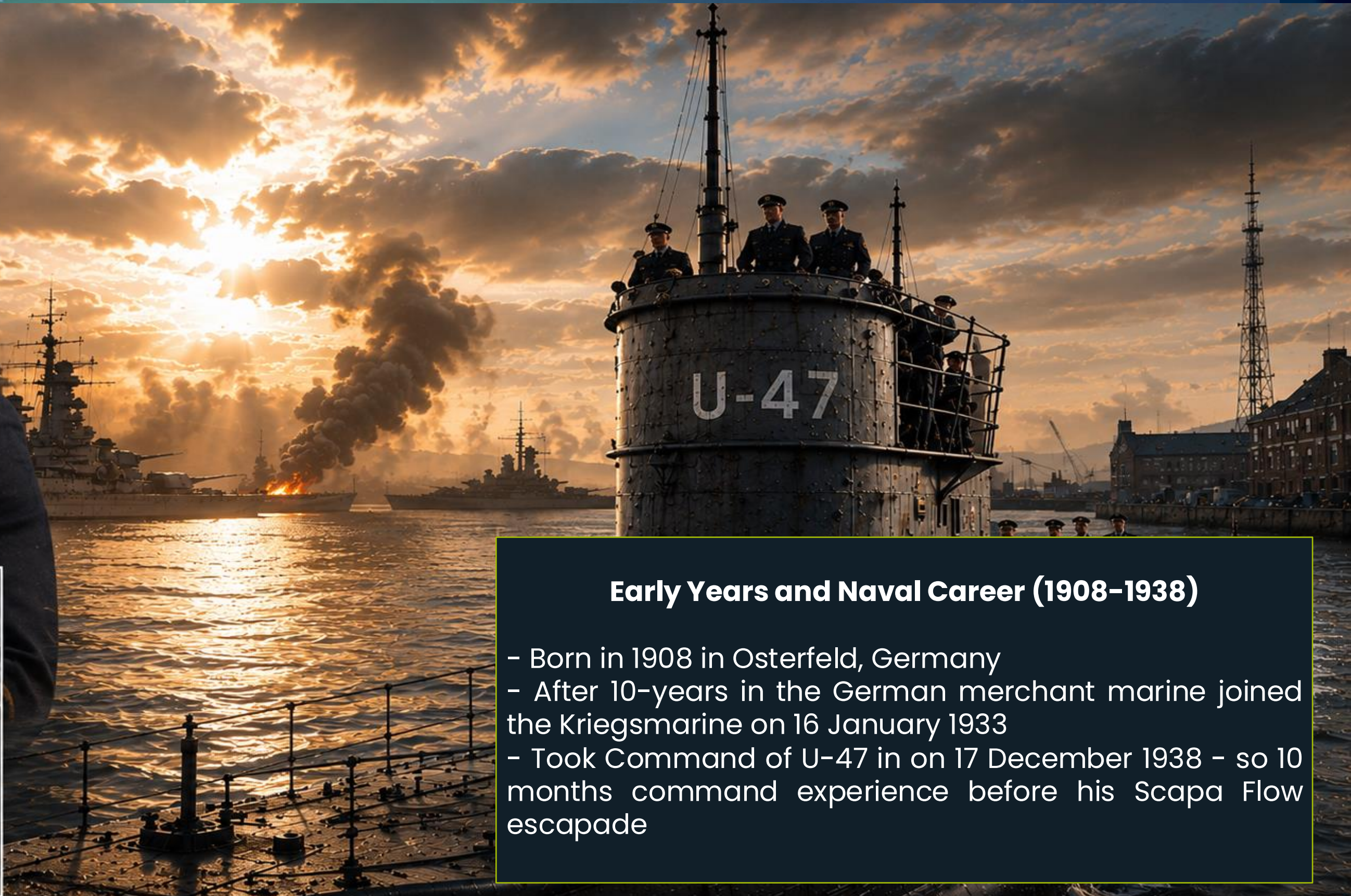




The Protagonist ... and His Boat!



The Early Life and Career of Gunther Prien



Early Years and Naval Career (1908–1938)

- Born in 1908 in Osterfeld, Germany
- After 10-years in the German merchant marine joined the Kriegsmarine on 16 January 1933
- Took Command of U-47 in on 17 December 1938 – so 10 months command experience before his Scapa Flow escapade

U-47 – Capable – But Still Rather Than Me!

The U-47 – Type VIIB Submarine

- Built for stealth rather than spectacle – 66 m long (one half the size of the Ocean View Buffet) – designed to slip quietly through the sea
- Approximately 44-man crew

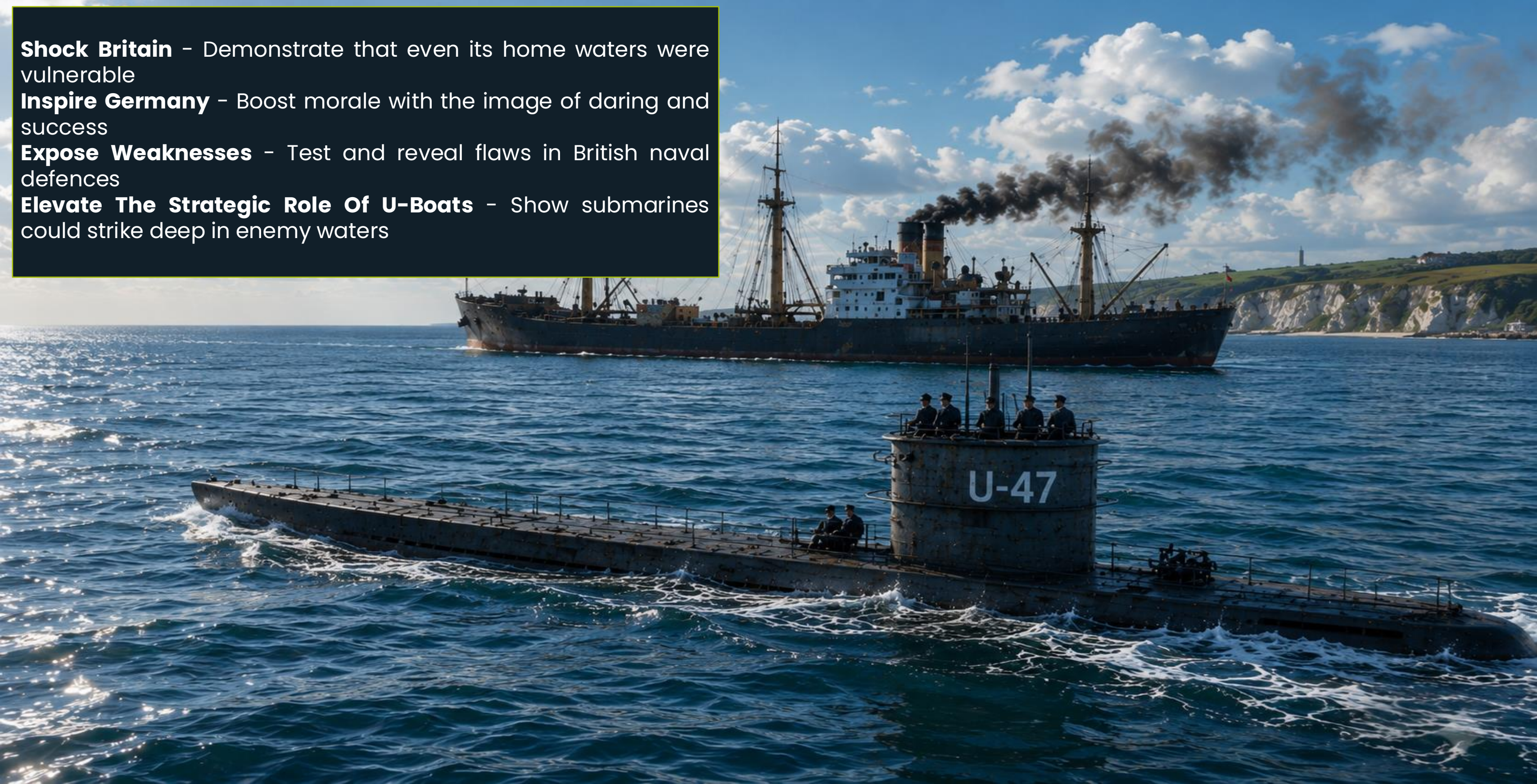


Armament and Power Generation

- Forward-mounted naval gun used against merchant ships to conserve torpedoes
- 4 torpedo tubes in the bow and one in the stern
- Total of 14 torpedoes carried
- Diesel engines used for surface running and charging batteries and then electric motors for silent underwater movement

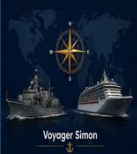
U-47 – The Mission

Shock Britain – Demonstrate that even its home waters were vulnerable
Inspire Germany – Boost morale with the image of daring and success
Expose Weaknesses – Test and reveal flaws in British naval defences
Elevate The Strategic Role Of U-Boats – Show submarines could strike deep in enemy waters



U-47 - The Mission





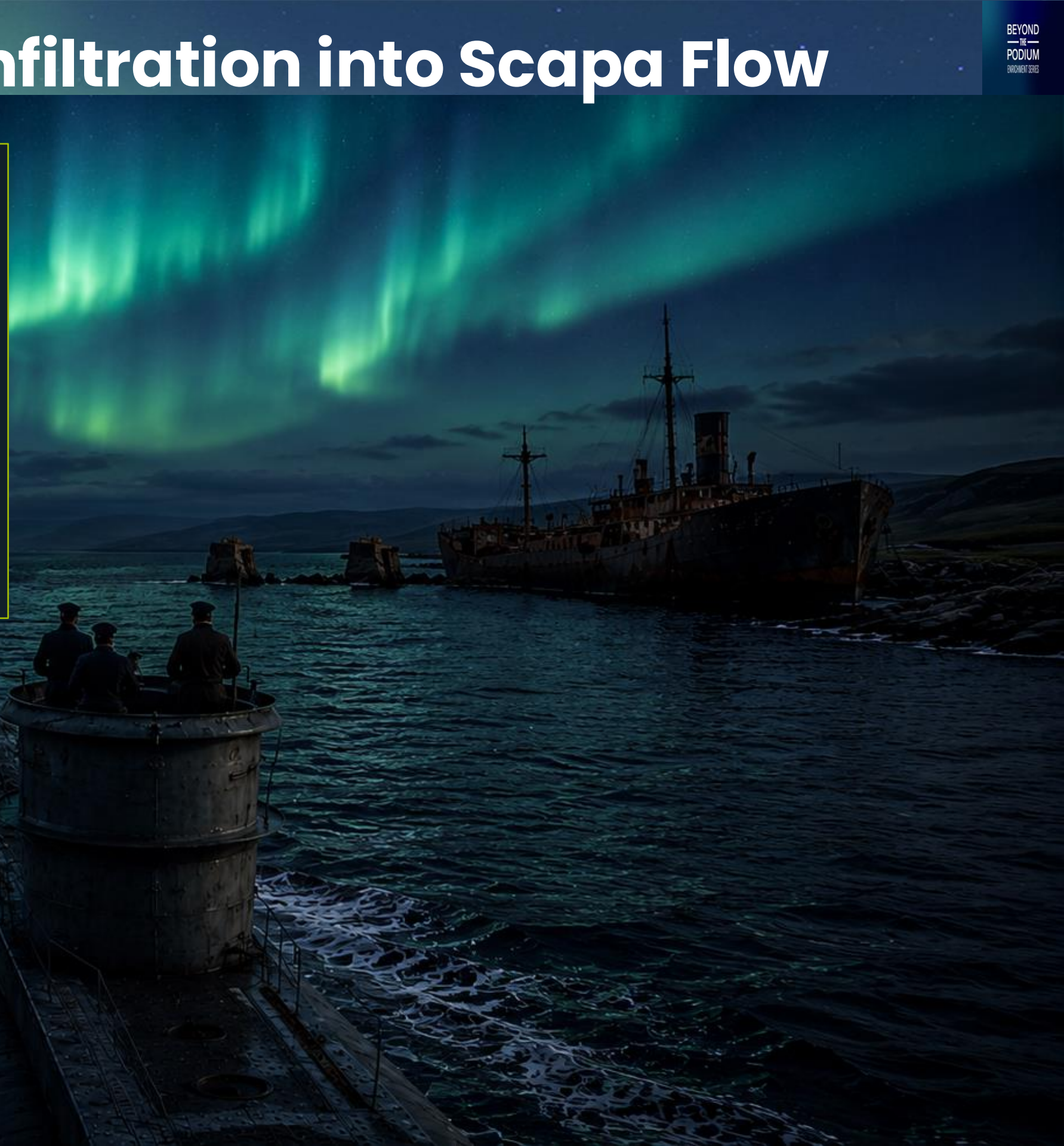
U-47 – The Passage to Scapa Flow



REF: 24724 00:04:22:00

U-47 – The Approach and Infiltration into Scapa Flow

- On the night of 13 October 1939, U-47 surfaced east of South Ronaldsay (Orkney Islands) and began her approach to Scapa Flow through the narrow Kirk Sound passage between the Burray and the Mainland islands
- Prien navigated his boat through treacherous waters using only surface visibility provided by the northern lights illuminating the night sky
- The submarine successfully passed through gaps between shifted blockships that were supposed to seal the entrance

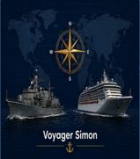


U-47 – The Approach and Infiltration into Scapa Flow

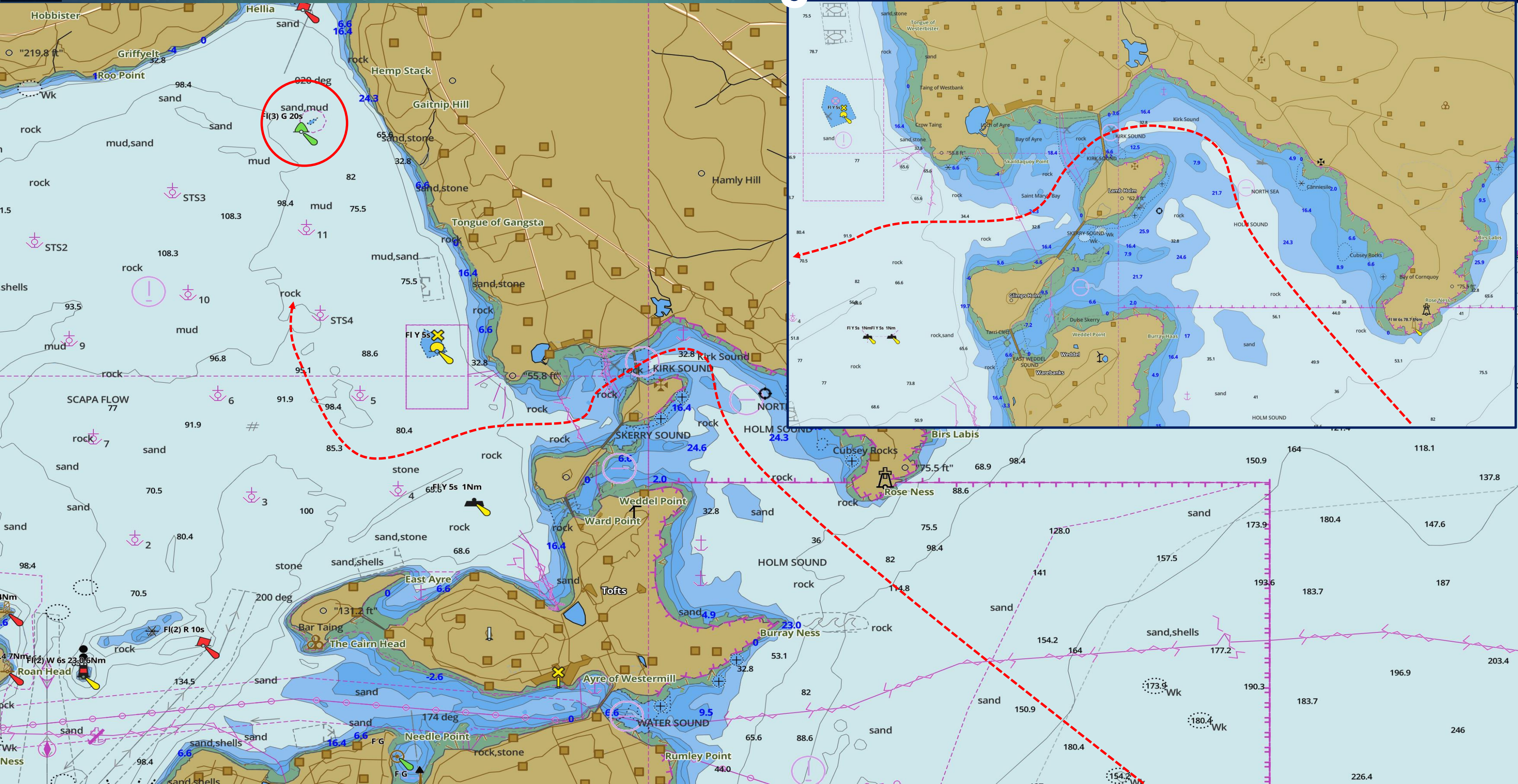
Why The 13 October 1939?

– Full Moon – Low Water at just after midnight ... so slack tidal stream (otherwise up to 7–9 knots)





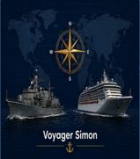
U-47 – Incredible Feet of Navigation



U-47 – Daring Navigation through Kirk Sound Block Ships

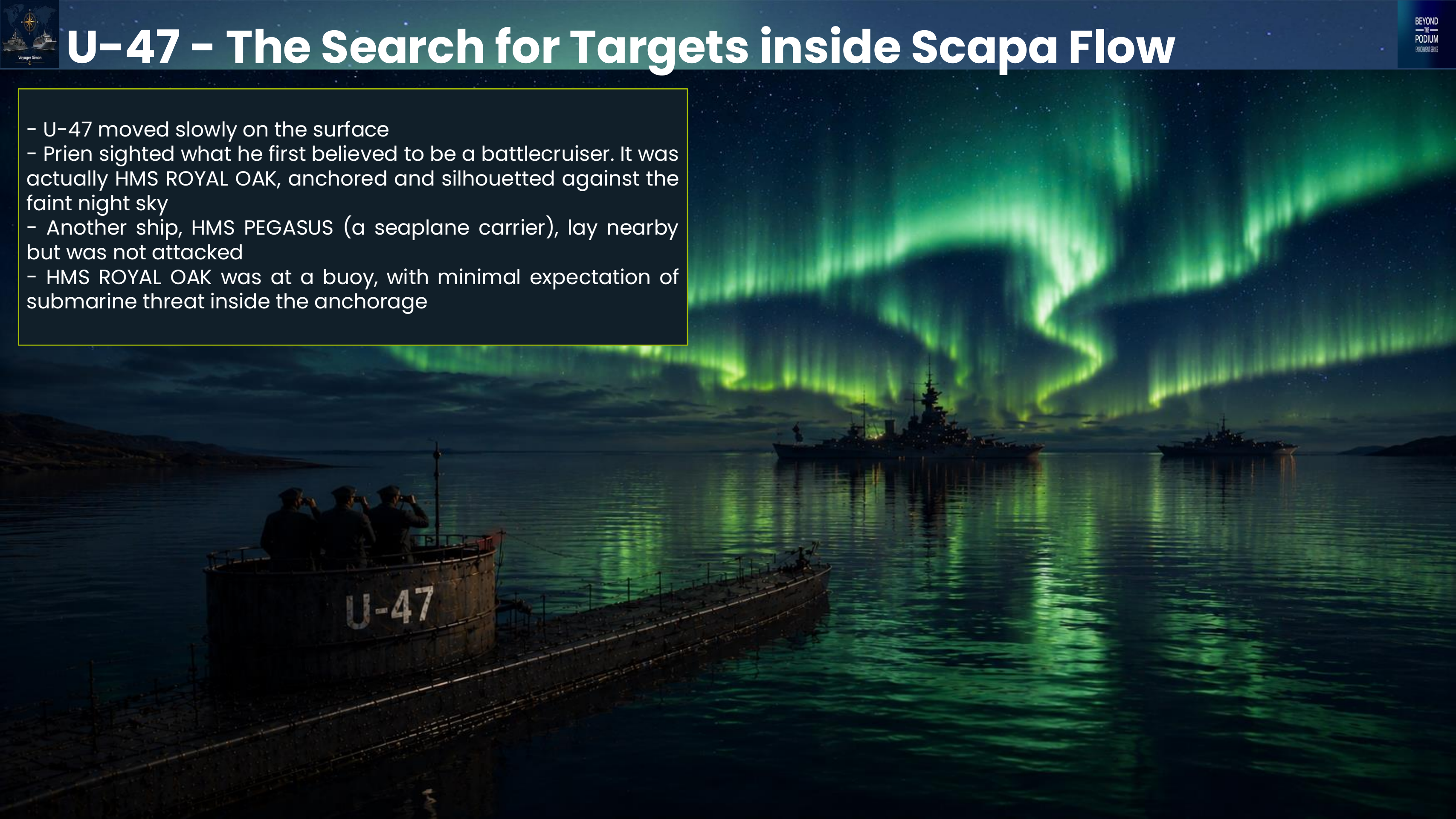
At just after low water and on a flooding tide U-47 manoeuvred around the Block Ships – she grazed one of the Block Ships ... but sustained no damage





U-47 – The Search for Targets inside Scapa Flow

- U-47 moved slowly on the surface
- Prien sighted what he first believed to be a battlecruiser. It was actually HMS ROYAL OAK, anchored and silhouetted against the faint night sky
- Another ship, HMS PEGASUS (a seaplane carrier), lay nearby but was not attacked
- HMS ROYAL OAK was at a buoy, with minimal expectation of submarine threat inside the anchorage



U-47 – On Arrival in Scapa Flow



U-47 – First Salvo against HMS ROYAL OAK

At approximately 00:58, Prien fired a spread of three torpedoes:

- One torpedo hit the bow of HMS ROYAL OAK
- The explosion was muffled and confusing
- Many aboard thought it was an internal accident or minor explosion
- The ship did not immediately sink, and few men went to action stations

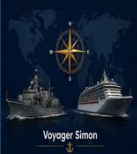


U-47 – Second Devastating Salvo against HMS ROYAL OAK

Prien considered departing Scapa Flow but quickly changed his mind and had his crew quickly (in about 18 minutes) reload the bow tubes and repositioned his Boat:

- At about 01:16, he fired another spread of torpedoes – two torpedoes struck midships and one detonated near the magazine
- A massive internal explosion tore through the ship and HMS ROYAL OAK listed heavily within minutes





U-47 – Going in for the Kill











13

Minutes

The time it took for HMS ROYAL OAK to list, roll, capsize and then sink completely after the fatal torpedo strikes, leaving hundreds of men trapped below decks with no time to escape the rapidly flooding compartments

835

Lives Lost

386

Survivors

126

Boy Sailors Died

15

Unaccounted
For

The Attack Aftermath – Confusion

- British forces initially did not realise a submarine had attacked
- Some believed it was an air raid or internal explosion
- No immediate, coordinated anti-submarine response occurred – it was this confusion gave Prien his escape window



U-47 – Makes Her Escape – Still Un-Detected

U-47 thought it might have been seen on the approach back to the Kirk Sound but, incredibly, they missed the Boat. He came up to full speed and exited out into the North Sea for passage back to Germany





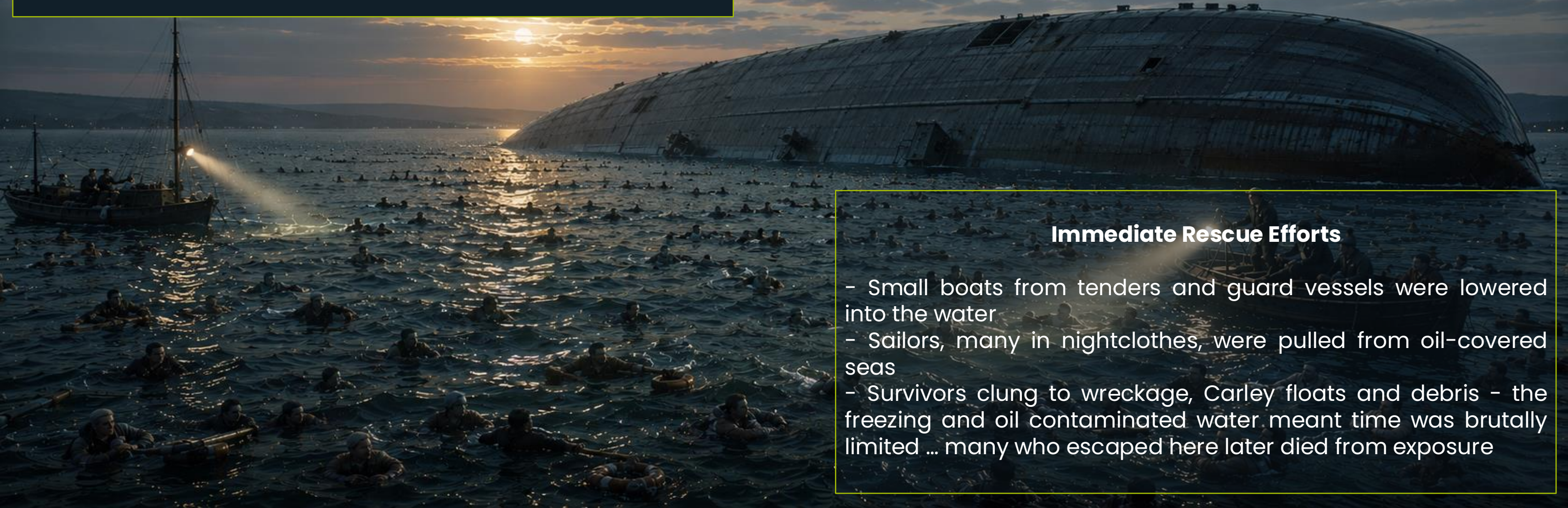
The Attack Aftermath – Rescue and Recovery

Conditions in the Anchorage

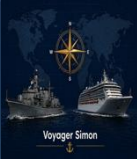
- Some rescue craft were initially delayed by uncertainty over what had caused the explosion
- Searchlights swept the water, but ships were reluctant to show lights for fear of another submarine
- Burning oil on the surface created both light and hazard
- Countless acts of courage occurred as sailors repeatedly went back into the water to pull out survivors

Immediate Rescue Efforts

- Small boats from tenders and guard vessels were lowered into the water
- Sailors, many in nightclothes, were pulled from oil-covered seas
- Survivors clung to wreckage, Carley floats and debris – the freezing and oil contaminated water meant time was brutally limited ... many who escaped here later died from exposure







The place where the German U-boat sank the British battleship was none other than Scapa Flow, Britain's greatest naval base

William Shirer

American war correspondent William Shirer captured the world's astonishment at this audacious feat. The propaganda value to Nazi Germany was immense, demonstrating that even Britain's most secure harbours were vulnerable to German submarine warfare, boosting home front morale whilst shocking Allied nations

DO IT NOW!

To do it now means to begin immediately to live the life you've always planned. To make this hour of today the starting point of all that is good in your life. It means to act now—right now—without delay. Tomorrow may never come.

The Evening News

AND SOUTHERN DAILY MAIL

No. 18,242. (26th Year)

PORTSMOUTH & SOUTHSEA, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1939

Extra
Special

ONE PENNY.



ROYAL OAK SUNK BY GERMAN SUBMARINE

OVER 1,000 OFFICERS AND MEN ON BOARD

Second Big Loss Of The War

PORTSMOUTH COMMISSIONED; DEVONPORT MANNED

Mediterranean Incident Recalled

THE Royal Oak, one of Britain's latest and finest battle cruisers, with 29,500 tons displacement and 1,100 officers and men, was torpedoed in Scapa Flow yesterday and is believed to have foundered.

This loss of the Royal Oak was announced by the Admiralty in a short notice this morning, in which it is stated that the second big ship to have gone down since the outbreak of war was manned by Portsmouth.

The battle cruiser is one of the latest and most powerful vessels afloat.

The Mediterranean incident to which reference is made is that which resulted in the exchange of fire between the Royal Oak and French ships when the British vessel was enforcing the blockade.

AMERICA'S WARNING TO ALL

(Reuter's Service.)

WASHINGTON, Friday.

President Roosevelt, addressing a press conference, said that any Power which should attempt to extend this war beyond the European continent would be making "a very big mistake".



The Royal Oak.

FIRST LIST OF SURVIVORS

Others To Come

OFFICERS AND MEN LANDED

The first list of survivors from the Royal Oak was received late last night. It includes 197 officers and men who were picked up by destroyers and other vessels which went to the assistance of the stricken ship.

Admiralty authorities stated that other lists would be issued as soon as compilation was completed.

HITLER HAS COLD FEET

No "Sugar-Coated" News

A member of the British Government, speaking today, said that news from the Front was not, and could not be, sugar-coated.

"What we in this country and across the Empire have to face is a stern fact," he said. "It is that we are in a war of national existence, a war in which defeat would mean the destruction of our way of life."

TURKEY'S PACT WITH RUSSIA

Isolated Report

IN KEEPING WITH ALLIES' INTERESTS

A Reuter message from Ankara says that reports of a Russo-Turkish pact are without foundation. High Turkish official circles state that Turkey's policy is one of strict neutrality in keeping with the interests of the Allies.

TO-DAY'S MOVES IN BALTIC DRIVE

Scandinavian Ready

ARMIES OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN STAND BY

King Gustav Calls Conference

WITH vigilant eyes front on the position of Finland, a special conference was held in Stockholm when Finland and Sweden took the most recent step any aggressors, on the heels of the Soviet invasions, have yet to be confronted; conveyed it from Stockholm; on Wednesday, at the bidding of King Gustav V.

Action in Sweden may be foretold when mobilisation declared nationwide today and tonight the hotel desk had seen Swedish male and women of a thousand in broader appeal to the Call of Finland and a generous offer of Swedish funds; must now be watched.

BULLETIN

(Reuter's Service.)

The British Air Ministry announced tonight that one enemy aircraft was destroyed and another damaged in an air battle over the sea this afternoon.

Two of our aircraft were slightly damaged.

LATE NEWS

LONDON, Saturday.

The Admiralty announce that arrangements are being made to salvage the guns and other material of value from the Royal Oak if the depth of the water permits.

The Attack Aftermath – Strategic Implications

The sinking of HMS ROYAL OAK fundamentally changed Royal Navy strategic thinking and forced immediate reassessment of submarine warfare threats in home waters

Naval Impact



Loss of major capital ship



Psychological blow to fleet morale



Questioning of base security



Strategic Changes



Dispersal of Home Fleet



New anti-submarine priorities



Enhanced reconnaissance patrols



Defence Review



Immediate investigation into Scapa Flow defences revealed shortfalls in anti-submarine protection systems

Tactical Evolution



Royal Navy accelerated development of improved submarine detection and depth charge technologies

Intelligence Focus



Increased emphasis on intelligence gathering and submarine activity monitoring

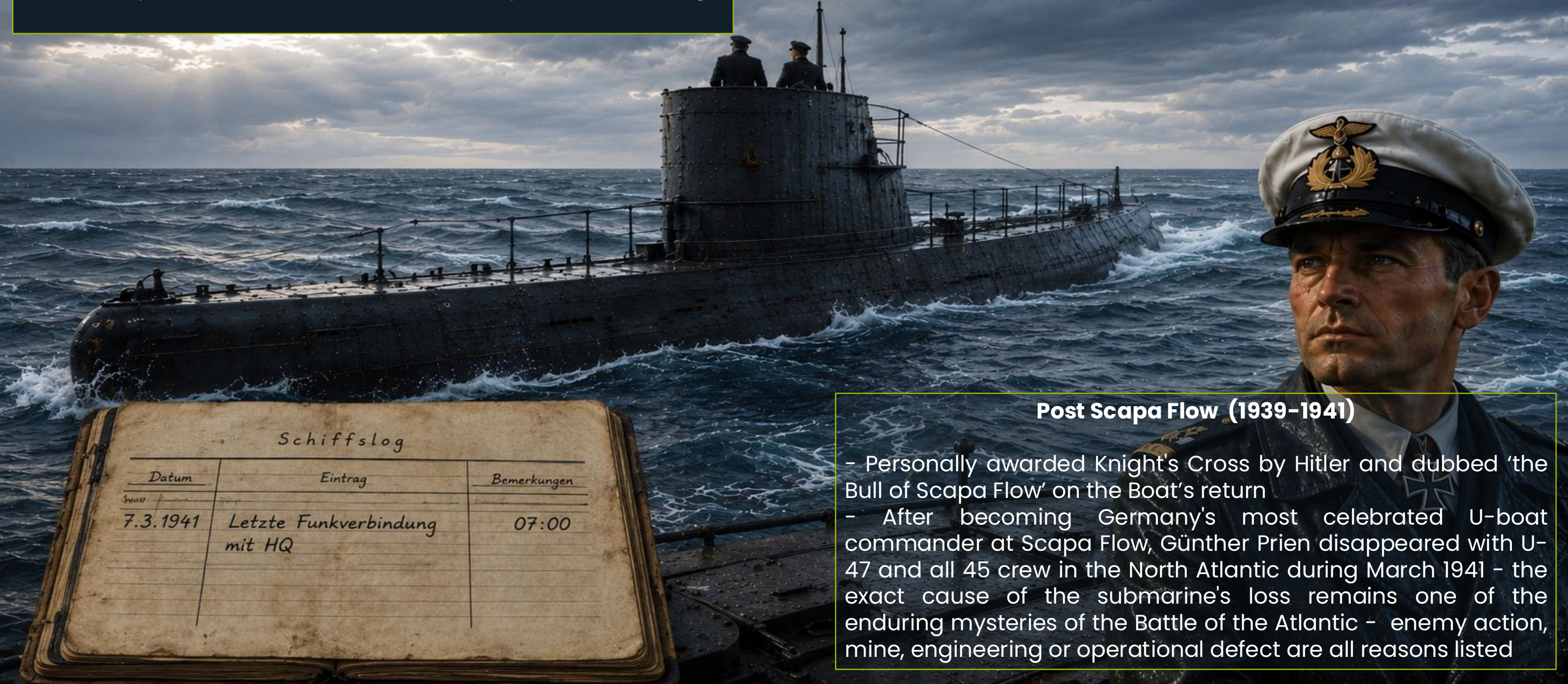


U-47 – A Hero's Homecoming



The Life and Career of Gunther Prien Post Scapa Flow

U-47 sent its final message on 20 February 1941 while operating against Allied convoys in the North Atlantic. The submarine failed to report in thereafter and was officially listed as missing



Post Scapa Flow (1939–1941)

- Personally awarded Knight's Cross by Hitler and dubbed 'the Bull of Scapa Flow' on the Boat's return
- After becoming Germany's most celebrated U-boat commander at Scapa Flow, Günther Prien disappeared with U-47 and all 45 crew in the North Atlantic during March 1941 – the exact cause of the submarine's loss remains one of the enduring mysteries of the Battle of the Atlantic – enemy action, mine, engineering or operational defect are all reasons listed

Schiffslog

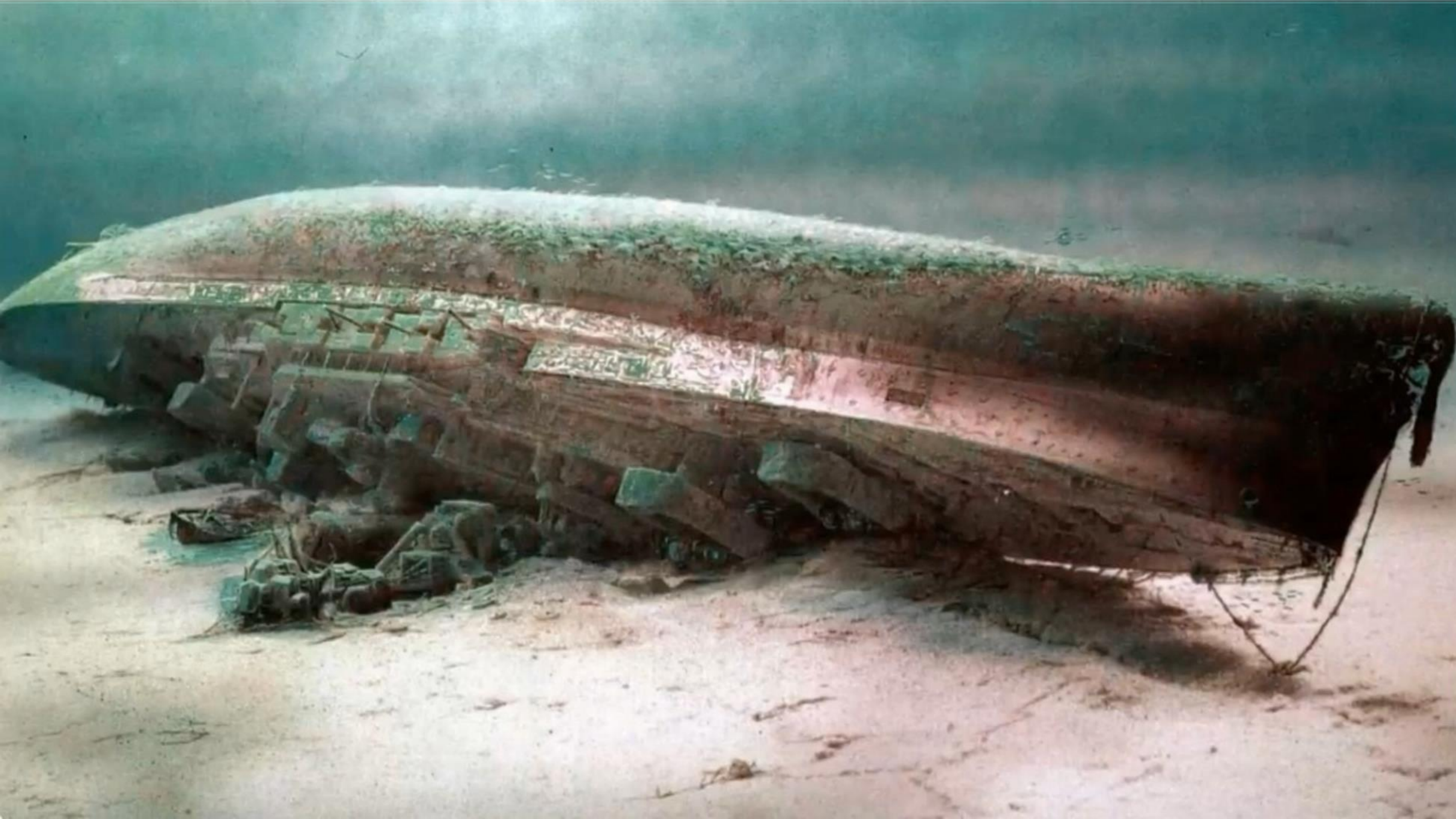
Datum	Eintrag	Bemerkungen
7.3.1941	Letzte Funkverbindung mit HQ	07:00

The Wreck Today

HMS ROYAL OAK rests on her starboard side in Scapa Flow, serving as both a war grave for 833 sailors and a protected historic wreck.

The site is marked by a green buoy and remains largely intact after more than 80 years underwater, still releasing small amounts of oil as a reminder of that night in 1939

A Protected Site, the wreck lies in 100 feet of water and is designated as a controlled site under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986







HMS ROYAL OAK memorials honour the 835 crew members who lost their lives.

The most prominent sites of remembrance are located in Orkney.



Memorial Garden, Kirkwall

A dedicated Memorial Garden near Kirkwall featuring a granite obelisk



Scapa Flow Buoy

A green Admiralty buoy marking the exact underwater war grave site



St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

The cathedral houses the ship's recovered brass bell and a formal Book of Remembrance



Modern plans are also underway to build a brand new visitor centre overlooking the bay

Additional permanent monuments stand across England to mark the disaster on a national scale.



Portsmouth Naval Base

A 9-foot stone obelisk stands outside Victory Gate at HM Naval Base Portsmouth – the ship's former home port – which was unveiled by descendants to mark the 85th anniversary



National Memorial Arboretum

A dedicated stone and tree also sit within the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire



Together, these widespread sites ensure the heavy sacrifice of the crew is continuously remembered by both local communities and the Royal Navy



Memorial Garden, Kirkwall



Scapa Flow Buoy



St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall



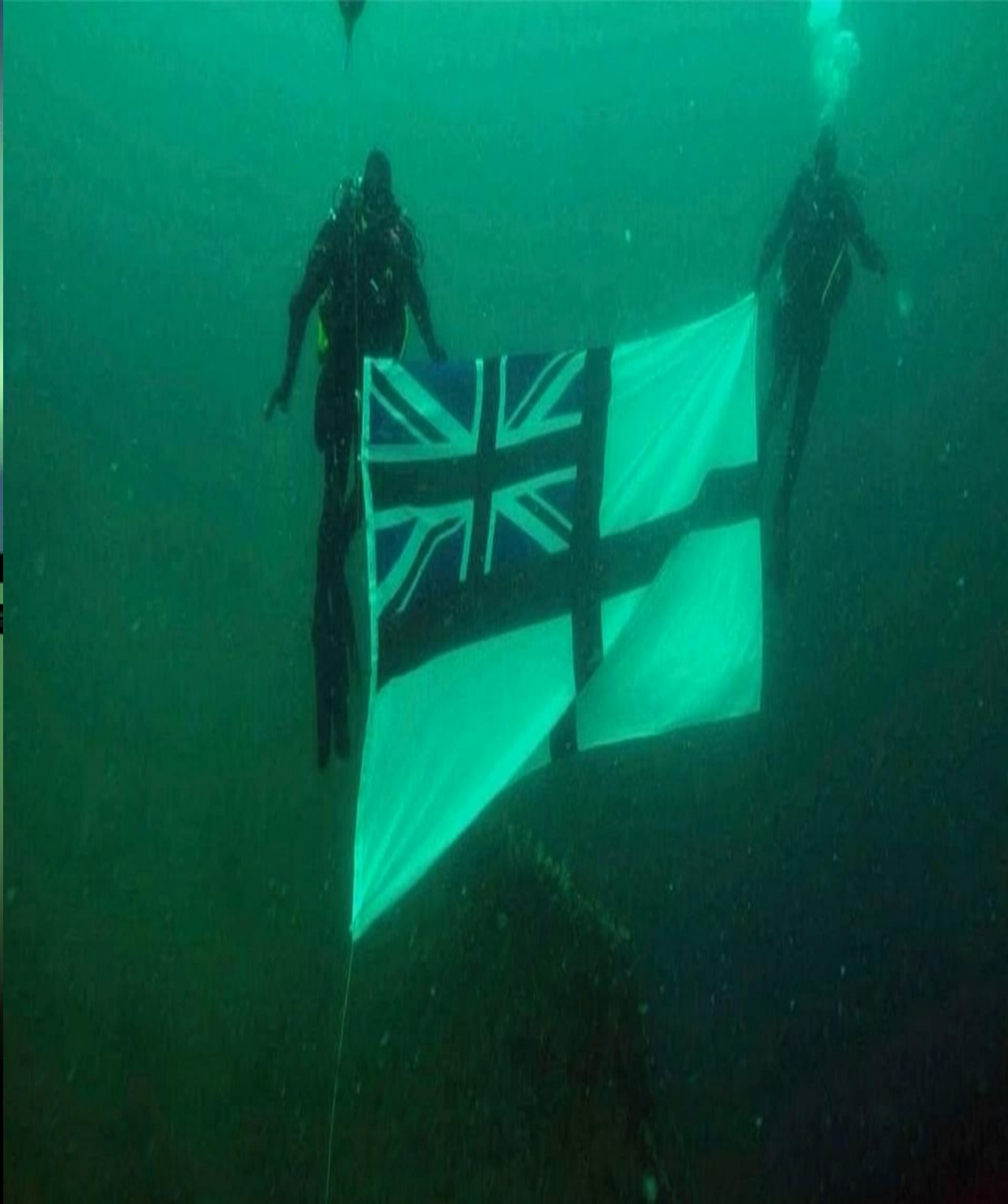
Proposed Visitor Centre overlooking the bay

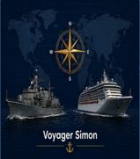


Victory Gate, HM Naval Base Portsmouth



National Memorial Arboretum, Staffordshire





Next Presentation (See App and Celebrity Today)

BEYOND
THE
PODIUM
ENRICHMENT SERIES

Ruler of the Waves

How Britain Built, Held and Lost
Maritime Supremacy



With
Lord Admiral of the Fleet, Admiral Lord

BEYOND
THE
PODIUM

ENRICHMENT
SERIES



Thank You



Voyager Stories

www.voyagerstories.com

The Port Briefing Series

Landfall

Lerwick

Capital of Shetland - Britain's northern, Norse frontier

“ Shetland in a Nutshell

A scatter of wild, treeless isles where Scotland meets the Atlantic and the North Sea - Scottish in law, but Viking to the bone, with seabird cliffs, ancient brochs, and the endless light of a northern summer



Port Day

Sunday 12 July 2026

A short orientation before you step ashore

www.voyagerstories.com

The Port Briefing Series

Landfall

Inverness/Invergordon

Gateway to Inverness and the Scottish Highlands

“ The Highlands in a Nutshell

A working firth of fleet anchorages and oil rigs that opens, just down the road, onto the Scotland of the postcard - Inverness, Loch Ness, Culloden and a glen of single malts



Port Day

Monday 13 July 2026

A short orientation before you step ashore

www.voyagerstories.com