

**Maritime Rescue Institute
Coastal Notes – 12 July 2005**

Over the past few weeks there have been numerous memorials, tributes and celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War. Of course, the politician most connected to that difficult era of our history has to be Winston Churchill. Ironically, a major wartime structure named after him was officially opened 60 years ago, just in time for the war to finish. The Churchill Barriers were constructed to protect the Fleet in Scapa Flow, Orkney following the daring raid by Captain Prien that led to the sinking of the Royal Oak, just one month into the war.

Scapa Flow is one of the largest sheltered harbours in the world, covering around 120 square miles of deep sheltered water. In 1914, the Navy established a base there to protect the Northern Approaches. Although Scapa Flow was sheltered it was also extremely vulnerable to attack, because of the many channels between the islands around its perimeter. Accordingly, the southern approaches facing the Pentland Firth were defended and redundant ships were sunk in the gaps between the islands to block the passages. Scapa Flow was now thought to be impregnable. This feeling was heightened by the fact that 2 U-boats attempted to breach the defences and both were destroyed.

So it was until October 14th 1939. Captain Prien was set the task of penetrating the defences to sink as much of the British Navy as possible. He reckoned that he could manoeuvre his U-boat between the blockships in one of the channels at the top of the tide. Nobody expected that this was possible, given that the channel was narrow, there were 3 sunken ships to evade, and a 10 knot tide to contend with – all to be done under cover of darkness.

With great daring, on a frosty night when the sky flamed with the Northern Lights, Captain Prien entered Scapa Flow. It took just 4 torpedoes, and 20 minutes, to sink the Royal Oak; 833 sailors died that night. With equal daring and skill, he successfully made his escape by the same route.

This was an enormous shock. Within a month Winston Churchill had visited Orkney and ordered that work begin on constructing four permanent causeways to close the channels. The causeways total almost two miles in length. 40,000 cubic metres of rock was encased in wire cages and dropped into water up to 70 feet deep from overhead cableways. These were topped off with 300,000 tonnes of massive concrete blocks. The blocks were cast on the islands and then were brought to the cableways by a network of railways – the only time trains have run in Orkney. The barriers took five years to build and were officially opened by the First Lord of the Admiralty on May 12th 1945.

Many Italian prisoners-of-war worked on the project. A lasting masterpiece was left by some of the prisoners in the form of the Italian Chapel. The Chapel started life as a Nissen hut, but was transformed by the genius of its designer into a wonderful example of the human spirit rising above adversity. Beautiful trompe l'oeil painting, intricate lights created from bully beef tins, and an altar made of concrete blend together to form a truly magnificent little building.

Although both the Churchill Barriers and the Italian chapel were wartime creations, they have endured into peacetime, fulfilling practical and spiritual roles in the community.

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