

# **U-47 in Scapa Flow: The Sinking of HMS Royal Oak 1939**

Osprey Raid series No. 33 (2015)

By Angus Konstam; illustrations by Peter Dennis

£11.99 / \$18.95

## **Review by Jonathan Aird**

### **Contents:**

Introduction

Scapa Flow in The Great War

Origins

The Plan

The Raid

Analysis

Conclusion

### **Comments:**

Osprey's Raid series is somewhat akin to their longer running ó and more extensive ó Campaign series in that the books concentrate on a particular event in great detail giving suitable historical context for the story as well as detailing the participant forces etc. Where the Raid series differs is that the events are, typically, quite small-scale in the forces involved and the events also encapsulate a single bold (for want of a better word) undertaking that took place in a short time period. These may have been events that happened almost spontaneously or they may have been the result of meticulous planning ó but in either case there is an element of óderring-doö involved.

öU-47 in Scapa Flowö represents the carefully planned end of the spectrum, with information gathered by aerial reconnaissance and meteorological predictions driving the attack date. In essence, the raid can be described in a couple of sentences -- a German submarine penetrated the defences at Scapa Flow. Many of the capital ships were elsewhere at the time but U-47 found and sank the elderly battleship HMS Royal Oak and then escaped back to the safety of the open sea.

Angus Konstam takes this description as a jumping-off point for a description of the opposing navies of Britain and Germany in 1939 and also a history of the fleet anchorage at Scapa Flow and of the defences that faced Captain Gunther Prien when he took U-47 into these perilous and shallow waters. The details of the raid are unfolded as a gripping story told in a compelling way by one of Osprey's better authors. Angus Konstam conveys both the claustrophobic conditions and the tension aboard U-47, as well as the general confusion that its actions provoked. It's fascinating to read through the individual effects of the seven torpedoes that were launched from a near-perfect firing position at a sitting duck target riding at anchor and blissfully unaware of its peril. As the first struck home it took the crew some time to realise they had even been attacked ó the initial response being to check for some self-inflicted damage from the various dangerous storages to be found on a British warship at this time.

As a book on World War II naval warfare its flawless -- the background sets the scene well, the main description of the raid is thriller-like in its intensity, and the summary of the outcomes is chillingly related. Couple this with the many evocative photographs of the main protagonists

including U-47 and its captain, and some splendidly evocative double-page paintings -- one of U-47 edging its way into the harbour and another of Royal Oak's final minutes -- and one has a very inspirational book. There are many good maps, and a fine double-page map/time-line which plots U-47's course and adds key points along the way. It's a fascinating story, exemplarily well told. If, at the end, one was to conclude that Prien as well as being a bold submariner was also blessed with a surfeit of good luck, then it would hardly be an unfair inference. As background, Angus Konstam tells of the fates of those no less bold submariners who had attempted to and failed to undertake similar attacks in World War I.

Overall, an excellent book from Osprey, a good read which is also full of interesting snippets for the wargamer. Do your rules, for example, allow for as many torpedoes to be launched to sink just one ship? Similarly, would your ship's crews know they've been torpedoed right away -- or is there a period of denial whilst the truth is ascertained? Perhaps only when the ships are safe in their anchorages, but even so it's thought provoking. A highly recommended title for WWII wargamers.

