

Thomas Herbert TARGETT

Born: 1922

Parents: Eldest son of Mr and Mrs T.H. Targett of Chichester, Sussex

School years: 1930s?

Civilian Occupation: On leaving School he joined the Royal Navy as a Boy Sailor at 17.

Armed Forces Record

Service Rank: Ordinary Seaman

Service Record: HMS Royal Oak

Service Base: Scapa Flow Orkney

Service Number: P/JX 157496

Date of Death: 14 October 1939



The White Ensign

[HMS Royal Oak underwater](#)



The Royal Oak at anchor 1937

Britain and France declared war on Germany on 1 September 1939 as a response to her invasion of Poland. For Britain at least there existed a 'phoney war', that is, hostilities had not broken out. This abruptly ended after six weeks during the night of 14 October 1939.

Admiral Karl Donitz, head of the German Navy's Kriegsmarine U-boats, chose U-boat Commander Kapitän Leutnant Günther Prien *U47* for the mission.

Donitz believed that a successful attack on Scapa Flow would deliver a huge psychological blow to the United Kingdom. It would also be revenge for the humiliation of the scuttling of the German fleet at Scapa Flow after WW1.

Prien in *U47* slipped undetected into Kirk Sound, Scapa Flow, Orkney on an ideal moonless night. For over an hour he made several surface sweeps round the vast Royal Navy anchorage,

thought by most of the Admiralty to be impregnable from submarine attack, before he sighted HMS Royal Oak anchored half a mile offshore and attacked.

The first torpedo caused a dull thud leading to confusion in the 31,000-ton battleship, many of the crew of thinking a small explosion had taken place on board. Prien launched a second torpedo which failed but after taking twenty minutes to return to his firing line launched a third salvo which struck the battleship amidships. This followed an enormous explosion and a fire broke out. The weather was fine so most of her hatches were open. The ship heeled over alarmingly and it took just thirteen minutes to sink in 100 feet of water. Of the ship's complement of 1,234 officers and men 834 crew, many of them boy sailors/cadets were lost including 'old boy' Thomas Herbert TARGETT. Seven ratings/boy sailors from West Sussex went down with their ship.

U47 slipped out of Kirk Sound as easily as she had got in. For Germany, this was a huge propaganda coup. Prien was awarded the 'Kings Cross of the Iron Cross First Class' by Adolf Hitler who had sent his personal plane to fetch him. Winston Churchill described the raid as "a remarkable feat of professional skill and daring". However, in terms of superiority in warship numbers between the protagonists the loss of the Royal Oak made little difference. The 'Revenge' class battleships built during or after WW1, of which the Royal Oak was one of five, were ageing. Several attempts to refit her to increase her speed were unsuccessful and she would not be able to take on the advanced capital ships built by the German Navy. However, the loss to the nation's morale was enormous.

The once 'mighty' Royal Oak was designated as a war grave.

Thomas Herbert TARGETT was 17.

Aftermath: The fate of U47. In ten patrols Gunther Prien went on to sink thirty ships. The last signal was received from the U-boat in the North Atlantic from close to the Rockall Banks. Her sinking was attributed to HMS Wolverine which had maintained a sustained depth charge attack on an 'unknown' submarine on 7 March 1941. However, another theory was that she was struck by one of her own torpedoes malfunctioning into a circling path. This had happened to two U.S. submarines. All that is definitely known is U47 failed to return to base.

Tribute to Thomas Herbert TARGETT aged 17 – School Notes – 'The Martlet' December 1939

'It is with deep regret that we record the death of the first of our Old Boys in the War. Thomas Targett, a boy gunner in the Royal Navy, lost his life in the sinking of the Royal Oak, and our sincere condolences go out to his parents and to his brother in the School. His lively personality and abundant energy made him conspicuous at School and the same qualities that made him popular with us gained for him the liking of his fellows in the Navy.'

Commemorated

Chichester High School for Boys

Chichester War Memorial