

# The man who sank the Royal Oak

by Dana G. Prescott



Here, for the first time, is the story of the German master spy who grimly plotted for 16 years to destroy the pride of the British Navy

**I**N THE CHILL DARKNESS of a mid-October night in 1939, the thin stem of a periscope pierced the surface of the harbor of Scapa Flow, where the British fleet lay at anchor. The periscope slithered through the murky waters, scanning the line of cruisers, destroyers, subchasers and battlewagons, until caught in its crosshairs was the huge silhouette of the 29,150-ton H.M.S. *Royal Oak*. A split second later, two torpedoes spit forth. Suddenly, the night was rent by two terrific explosions. Within minutes, towering flames had turned the sinking battleship into a funeral pyre for over

800 of His Majesty's 1,200 sailors. Morning headlines blazed forth to a stunned world:

BRITISH BATTLESHIP SUNK!

U-BOAT SCORES HIT;

370 RESCUED!

The British Admiralty remained silent as to where the *Royal Oak* was when she was sunk. But Captain Guenther Prien, 31-year-old commander of the submarine that sank the *Royal Oak*, reported to jubilant Germans that she was "sunk at her base, within fortified waters and amidst the whole fleet."

Strangely enough, in spite of the tumultuous acclaim that the Nazis

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accorded Prien and his crew, their enthusiasm was erroneously placed. The man who *actually* sank the *Royal Oak* was never publicly credited.

He was Alfred Wehring, who for 16 long years had planned thoroughly—and in utter obscurity—to bring about this master stroke against the British Navy. Then he chose to vanish into the oblivion that successful secret service operatives so much desire.

Wehring was an officer in the Imperial German Navy during World War I, and saw action against the *Royal Oak* at the battle of Jutland. In Spain he served as a naval attaché under Walter Wilhelm Canaris—the crafty, formidable Canaris who was one of the chief figures in German intelligence during World War I, and who would head the much dreaded Nazi secret service in World War II. Canaris pegged Alfred Wehring as a man whose finesse and knowledge of naval architecture might one day prove invaluable.

Then, in 1923, Hitler began his power struggle. Canaris called Wehring in and told the Kaiser's ex-naval officer that England was to be his "permanent" secret service assignment, and that he was to keep a close watch on the British fleet.

Not long afterwards, Wehring left for Switzerland where he wangled a job as a salesman of jewelry and watches. For three years he studied at one of the best watchmaking schools in Switzerland, and then was graduated as an expert watchmaker. To have a solid "Swiss"

background, he took a solid Swiss name: "Alfred Ortel." A few months later, in 1927, Alfred Ortel, armed with a newly-forged passport, emigrated to England. When he passed through customs, nothing in his bearing suggested that he had ever trod the bridge of a German battlegewagon.

As Alfred Ortel, Wehring became a man of sincere warmth and friendliness. He was most careful not to lose the "common touch." He also let it be known that he had a zealous interest in the sea and in the ships that sailed it. That he preferred a seaport town was natural. What better place could Wehring have selected than the Orkney Islands coast town of Kirkwall? Situated as it was on Pomona Island, Kirkwall was conveniently near the British naval base at Scapa Flow.

Kirkwall welcomed the Swiss watchmaker with his genial smile, his skillful hands, and his inherent love of the sea. Ortel found these simple seafaring people delightful—perhaps it was because he remained a sailor at heart; perhaps for them, too, this great love of the sea explained Ortel's intense interest in the activities at Scapa Flow.

Ortel, the watchmaker, prospered. Within a few years he became the owner of a well-stocked jewelry and watch shop. He was often consulted by the captains of the larger Kirkwall ships regarding the proper setting of chronometers and watches. He mingled graciously with Kirkwall's best society, and yachting and fishing became two of his hobbies—at least as far as his friends could

tell. In 1932, Alfred Ortel became a British subject. His "relatives from Switzerland" often came to see him. They seemed genteel folk, spoke German in cultured tones, and were well dressed. Mail came from an aged "father" in Germany.

The years passed. Hitler ranted at Prime Minister Chamberlain. Then came Munich . . . and finally Hitler's blitzkrieg on Poland in September, 1939.

Alfred Ortel shook his head sadly, spread the Union Jack up over his shop door and, along with all other good Britishers, dug deep to buy bonds to pay for this fearful war. No longer was he a Swiss neutral, he explained tearfully to his many friends in Kirkwall, he was now a loyal subject of King George! He regretted that his age kept him from taking up arms against Hitler.

**T**IRELESSLY, Ortel devoured periodicals, books and reports, especially shipping reports. At his modest home he spent long hours with his ears glued to an ancient radio set, listening to the war news.

The roadstead at Scapa Flow, extending east and west some 15 miles and about 8 miles wide, quickly became alive with naval activity. Two very narrow passageways mark its only entrances—Holm Sound at the east end; Hoy Sound at the west end. Kirkwall nestles on the coast of Pomona Island, just north of the western entrance, and lies a scant few miles due west of the Island's southeast tip. Both passages had been further narrowed by sunken hulks, purposely scuttled at these

3. strategic points. A maze of strong fortifications—mines, steel nets and sunken piles—protected the British fleet within Scapa Flow.

The war was scarcely a month old when Alfred Ortel—ever mindful of his *true* purpose of being at Kirkwall, and his instructions personally given to him by Canaris 16 years before—managed to learn that certain obstructions were out of place at the eastern entrance to Scapa Flow. How he acquired such top secret knowledge is unknown.

Alfred Ortel moved swiftly. Low scudding clouds, he casually mentioned to his clerks one bleak October day, meant a storm. Since there probably would be few customers, the clerks were welcome to take the rest of the day off. Ortel closed his shop and sauntered home. He wanted no appearance of haste.

When the old clock struck four, Ortel drew up a chair in front of his antiquated radio set and flipped a switch. Within the ancient cabinet a high-powered short-wave transmitter and receiver hummed to life. Deftly, Ortel turned to a certain frequency and spoke in guarded code, holding a small hand microphone close to his mouth. He poured out the words in sharp, guttural German—then repeated his message slowly. His listener must make no mistake—there was no margin for error now. . . .

A Nazi naval attaché in neutral Holland relayed the message to *No. 14 Bendlerstrasse, Berlin, attention of Walter Wilhelm Canaris!* (Bendlerstrasse was the home of the German War Ministry.) Canaris acted

instantly—his confidence in Wehring's skill was about to pay off. All German U-boats in European waters were alerted in code to stand by for urgent orders. A naval attaché in Holland had coded instructions to radio-contact the Kirkwall operative—a certain watchmaker known as Ortel. Nazi patrol charts showed clearly that the submarine under the command of Captain Guenther Prien was nearest—in the waters adjacent to Scapa Flow. The orders given him were simple: "MAKE THE KILL TONIGHT!" Prien's U-boat proceeded at once to Holm Sound, the eastern passage to Scapa Flow, then surfaced at the southeast tip of Pomona Island, opposite Kirkwall.

Prien cut the engines, then stood on the steel grating of the conning tower deck. He scanned the dim outline of the shore with his powerful night glasses, but there was nothing in sight. The North Sea slapped softly against the hull of the submarine. Then suddenly, off the starboard bow, a tiny light blinked from the shore. A long flash—two shorts—another long flash!

Prien gave a hushed order. A sailor manned a collapsible rubber boat, lowered it and moved silently toward the flashing light. Minutes later he returned with a grim-faced passenger—Ortel, the watchmaker of Kirkwall. Prien and Ortel silently shook hands, then Prien ordered the boat aboard and they hurried below. Seconds later the submarine slid cautiously beneath the surface of Holm Sound.

No navigating officer in the British fleet knew the waters around

Scapa Flow as did Ortel. Hadn't "yachting and fishing" been his hobbies during the past 16 years? He had systematically charted the great roadstead, pin-pointing with deadly accuracy the bearings of *all* defenses—from Holm Sound on the east to Hoy Sound on the west. Ortel, with his carefully marked chart before him, took over at the wheel while Prien concentrated his efforts on the preparations for the "kill."

The U-boat maneuvered under half throttle, inching along foot by foot, and twisting past obstructions into the waters of Scapa Flow. It took split-second timing to dodge the cunningly contrived defenses, sometimes with only a few feet to spare on either side; sometimes with less than a fathom of water under the keel.

Silently the *Unterseeboot* swung into the open waters of Scapa Flow. The U-boat's crew was quietly jubilant. Naval history was being made. Prien and Ortel cautioned them against undue optimism—a false move now could mean sudden death! Prien ordered the periscope up. Ahead, British warships were dimly silhouetted against a dark skyline—cruisers, destroyers, subchasers and battlewagons of huge proportions. Down the line moved the U-boat, while Prien studied the ships at a safe distance.

Still more cruisers and destroyers, then another battleship loomed large in the periscope. Prien called to Ortel to confirm what he saw.

"Ja, the last one in line," nodded Ortel. "That's the *Royal Oak!*"

Prien ordered the torpedomen to

load the forward tubes. The great bulk of the *Royal Oak* loomed larger, riding silently at anchor. She was low in the water, massive, solid, with deck armor ranging from one inch to four in thickness, and 13-inch thick "anti-torpedo blisters" along her sides, extending below her waterline. She was the pride of the British Navy, and her eight death-dealing 15-inch guns bristled menacingly from their turrets. Prien ordered the engines stopped when the U-boat was abeam the *Royal Oak's* starboard quarter.

Distance and bearings were carefully checked by Prien. Ortel marveled at his precision.

"Prepare to fire!" ordered Prien.

The U-boat's commander again peered intently into the sighting lens of the periscope. Slowly, he raised his hand above his head; a second passed as he waited for the crosshairs to "zero in" on the target—then his hand swept downward. . . .

"Fire one!"

Number One torpedo sped destruction toward the great British battlewagon. Up went Prien's hand again . . . then swished down!

"Fire two!" snapped Prien.

Number Two torpedo was away a split second after the first had blasted through the *Royal Oak's* 13-inch "anti-torpedo" armor with a tremendous underwater explosion . . .

the second explosion was even greater. Prien checked results through the periscope. Ortel then stole a quick glance. What he saw he would not soon forget!

Prien turned the U-boat sharply about and headed for the east passage under full throttle against the strong currents. A slip-up now meant their own destruction, so Ortel again took over the throttle and worried the U-boat through tortuous Holm Sound.

Out in the open waters of the North Sea, the U-boat's crew went berserk with joy. Nazi discipline went by the board.

But Ortel, the watchmaker from Kirkwall, was entirely forgotten. He sat apart, features immobile, a far-away look in his eyes. His 16-year-old mission had been accomplished. Now he was leaving England forever—that was all that mattered. . . .

Two days later Alfred Ortel—he was now Wehring again—was in Berlin, making a personal report to Canaris at No. 14 Bendlerstrasse. Even as they talked, the sounds of a tumultuous ovation for Captain Guenther Prien and his crew came to their ears from the street below. But the two men were not interested in celebrations. It was enough for Alfred Wehring that the tight-lipped Canaris *knew who sank the Royal Oak!*

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