Artefact of the Month February 2011:

Armour piercing 6-inch shell from Ness Battery, Stromness

Cat No: 2000.121.1 & 2
from Scapa Flow Visitor Centre and Museum at Lyness,
Hoy, Orkney Islands

This example of a British 6-inch armour piercing shell dating to WWII has been on display in the Boiler Room of the Scapa Flow Visitor Centre and Museum for sometime and is often overlooked by visitors, so this month I have decided to bring it to the attention of the ODIN community.

On closer examination, it is evident that the shell has suffered considerable damage, most likely caused by being fired and hitting something solid. The copper band visible at the base of the right hand fragment is known as the driving band. This band begins life smooth and when fired, engages with the rifling of the barrel such that the impression of the rifling is pressed into the copper. The shell is also missing the two caps which sat over the point of the projectile. The first was designed to prevent the shattering of the shell casing on impact and the second outermost ballistic cap which was designed to reduce aerodynamic drag during flight. The absence of both caps, the slight damage to the point of the shell and the fracture that broke the projectile in two would suggest that, although not filled with explosive, the shell had certainly hit a very solid object.

According to the catalogue entry, the two pieces were found near Braebuster in the north of Hoy, southwest across Hoy Sound from Ness Battery, a distance of some 4.5km. The Ness Battery Fort Record Book shows that practice shoots were carried out regularly to keep the Royal Artillery gun crews well drilled in loading and firing their guns. This shell was most likely fired during one of these practice shoots. With such an interesting provenance, I hope you will agree that it is quite a fascinating piece of wartime history that is certainly worth a second look the next time you pay a visit to the Scapa Flow Visitor Centre and Museum at Lyness.

Gavin Lindsay