

The Bismarck Tribune

Veteran's family uncovers connection to war tragedy

Ceremony to honor
Strasburg native

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Tillie Bobby of Port Sanilac, Michigan, knew that her North Dakota-raised uncle was killed during World War II, but until recently much of the rest of his life was a mystery to her.

Ralph Sitter was born and raised in Strasburg, moved to Washington state for work and then joined the military, which declared him missing in action during the war. It was only last year that Bobby uncovered the true nature of his death, while randomly searching him on the Find a Grave website and discovering his connection to the

British troopship HMT Rohna.

Eighty years after Sitter died, Tillie Bobby, a native of Edgely, and her husband, Roger, are holding a ceremony in Strasburg to honor him and others aboard the doomed ship.

"We want to send him off right like it should've been," she said.

Ship tragedy

German aircraft bombed the HMT Rohna on Nov. 26, 1943. The ship sank in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Algeria. At the time, the U.S. War Department withheld details from the public due to the then-new radio-guided bombs used in the attack, according to the Rohna Survivors Memorial Association.

It is believed to be the largest loss of U.S. Army servicemen

at sea in a single attack. About 2,000 U.S. Army Air Corps servicemen were on board, and 1,015 of them died. Sitter was one of the 793 members of the Air Corps 853rd Engineer Aviation Battalion who were on the ship.

Congress eventually recognized the sinking of the Rohna, in October 2000. But the families of survivors had been kept in the dark for years, and survivors themselves struggled to prove the event even took place.

Bobby learned about her uncle's connection to the Rohna about a year ago. There's a stone for him on a family plot in a Strasburg cemetery, but the discovery about the circumstances of Sitter's death prompted the family to request an official Department of Veterans Affairs-is-

sued marker. They were denied since Sitter already has a grave marker.

Honoring Sitter

But that didn't stop family members from honoring their loved one. They commissioned a replica to be made for placement in the family plot. This Saturday the Bobbys will hold a ceremony at 10 a.m. at the St. Peter and Paul Catholic Cemetery. It won't be in honor of just Sitter, but all those who died in the Rohna sinking.

"Every veteran deserves to have their grave marked," Roger Bobby said. He is a veteran himself and commander of the Veteran of Foreign Wars Post in Port

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PROVIDED

The marker that will be placed on the grave of Strasburg native and World War II veteran Ralph Sitter.

Ceremony

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Sanilac.

The event will be conducted similarly to a VFW funeral ceremony. The North Dakota National Guard will be sending an honor guard detail.

The Bobbys sent out an email to everyone they know, detailing the story of Sitter and the Rohna. They invite any family of Sitter and anyone from the public who wants to attend the ceremony.

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