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Hi, Michael



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A short war, a long mourning: Niece misses Detroit WWII vet she never knew

Redford woman's father never recovered after her uncle died in catastrophic but little-known troopship sinking that claimed 1,015 American lives.

Neal Rubin, The Detroit News

Published 11:29 PM EDT May. 30, 2021 | Updated 11:50 PM EDT May. 30, 2021

Bill Schneider's war lasted two days. The battle to learn what happened to him lasted decades.

He was Darlene Stanley's uncle, though they never met. He was her father's little brother, and not knowing how Bill died at the height of World War II haunted Harvey Schneider for the rest of his life.

"It just killed my dad," said Stanley, 65, approaching another Memorial Day at her home in Redford Township. "He was the oldest boy. He felt responsible."

He wasn't. In a sense, Harvey was a victim, too — of the worst seagoing loss of life from enemy action in American history, and the likely cover-up of the most catastrophic attack virtually no one has ever heard of.

Bill Schneider of Detroit, it turned out, died off the coast of Algeria on the day after Thanksgiving in 1943. A U.S. Army Air Forces private in the 853rd Engineer Battalion, he was aboard a rickety Indian cargo ship converted into a British troop transport and sunk by an innovative rocket-boosted glide bomb developed by a brilliant Austrian who later did important work on missiles for the American Navy.

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The HMT Rohna was carrying nearly 2,000 Americans, a crew of 195 and a few dozen others when it was attacked. Of the 1,138 who died, 28 were Michigianians.

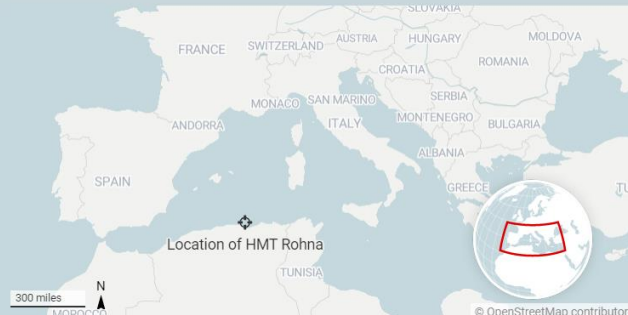
PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL WALSH

The HMT Rohna was carrying nearly 2,000 Americans, a crew of 195 and a few dozen others when its convoy was attacked by German heavy bombers and their menacing radio-guided weapons. A winged, 12 ½-foot-long Henschel Hs 293 dart with a 650-pound warhead struck the port side at the back of the Rohna's engine room, burrowed deep into the ship and exploded, 15 feet above the waterline.

Of the 1,138 men who died when the Rohna burned and sank, 1,015 were Americans and 28 were Michigianians. Some were killed on impact, some in the flames, some in the Mediterranean Sea. Some lost their lives to a lack of training, inferior safety equipment, faulty maintenance and possibly the dereliction of the crew.

The Rohna's resting place

The HMT Rohna was carrying nearly 2,000 Americans, a crew of 195 and a few dozen others when its convoy was attacked by German heavy bombers and sunk off the coast of Algiers Nov. 26, 1943.



Map: Tom Gromak, The Detroit News • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

A few, betrayed by their life belts and poor instruction, drowned with their feet in the air, unable to right themselves in the oil-slicked waves.

It wasn't until 2008 that the Schneider family learned any of that.

They knew Bill and his siblings had been raised in orphanages after their father abandoned the family. Knew that he loved cars. Knew that he had Harvey's name and address stamped into his dog tags as next of kin.



Pvt. Bill Schneider was living with his older brother's family before he joined the Army Air Forces during World War II. Harvey Schneider's name and address were stamped into Bill's dog tags.

COURTESY OF DARLENE STANLEY

Then Stanley's brother in Toronto stumbled across the [Rohna survivors' website](#), picked up the phone and said, "You're not going to believe this."

By then, their father had been dead for 21 years.

"He always wondered. Always wondered. He never knew," Stanley said, and for just a moment, she wept.

"Sorry. I get choked up," she said, and then she was back in the present, talking about the past. "There were stories about him being shot down over the Mediterranean. All these rumors. All we knew was, his body was never found."

The destruction of the HMT Rohna and the fog that still hovers over the calamity is the subject of a partially completed documentary by a New Jersey filmmaker who found his inspiration tucked away in his wife's ancestral home.

Jack Ballo, 61, said he's driven to keep raising money and finish "[Rohna: Classified](#)" because "it's almost the last chance to get the names out there. It's about making people aware of what happened before it's lost forever."

For nearly a generation, the story of the Rohna was confidential. For longer than that, survivors kept their pledge of secrecy, one that came with a threat of court-martial.

The truth was carefully buried, even if most of the casualties never were.

■ A proud soldier



Pvt. Bill Schneider, in training camp with the U.S. Army Air Forces.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DARLENE STANLEY

Sgt. Joseph Pisinski grew up in the house in the borough of South River where Ballo works six days a week on his film. He was a never-seen great-uncle to Ballo's wife and a proud soldier: After his promotion, he signed a letter to his mother "Sgt. Joe."

Ballo discovered 23 of his heartfelt letters in the attic. Intrigued, he did an online search and found not only Pisinski's name but an eventual co-producer.

Michael Walsh of Newport, Rhode Island, has self-published two books about the Rohna. "[Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy](#)" and its sequel are transcripts of interviews with survivors, rescuers and witnesses.

Pisinski turned up on a list of the dead in the back of the first one.

Walsh's connection to the sinking is the USS Pioneer, the minesweeper that battled German airplanes, high swells and dangerously cold water as it rescued 602 of the survivors and watched the convoy steam away.

His stepfather, Don Dupre, served on the Pioneer, though not on that voyage. Dupre wanted to attend a Rohna reunion in Tucson, Arizona, and Walsh accepted his invitation to come along — mostly, he confessed, because he likes the city.

"When I met the people there," he said, "I just kind of fell in love with them."

A video producer by occupation, "I started to do what I do," filming interviews, Walsh said. With each subsequent reunion — they're scheduled for online next month and Salt Lake City next year, with only two survivors known to still be alive — he aimed better equipment at more subjects.

His footage makes up much of the documentary, and what might otherwise end up on a cutting room floor is preserved in the books.

It was through Walsh, for instance, that an Army cook from the Upper Peninsula described the German aircraft as "a bunch of buzzards circling."



Crew members from the minesweeper USS Pioneer pose for a group photo in China in late December 1945. Twenty-five months earlier, the Pioneer rescued more than 600 survivors from the HMT Rohna.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL WALSH

Ted Hartner grew up in Stephenson, on the Wisconsin border. He was aboard the SS Banfora, behind the Rohna, on the way to Burma to install communications equipment with the 96th Signal Battalion.

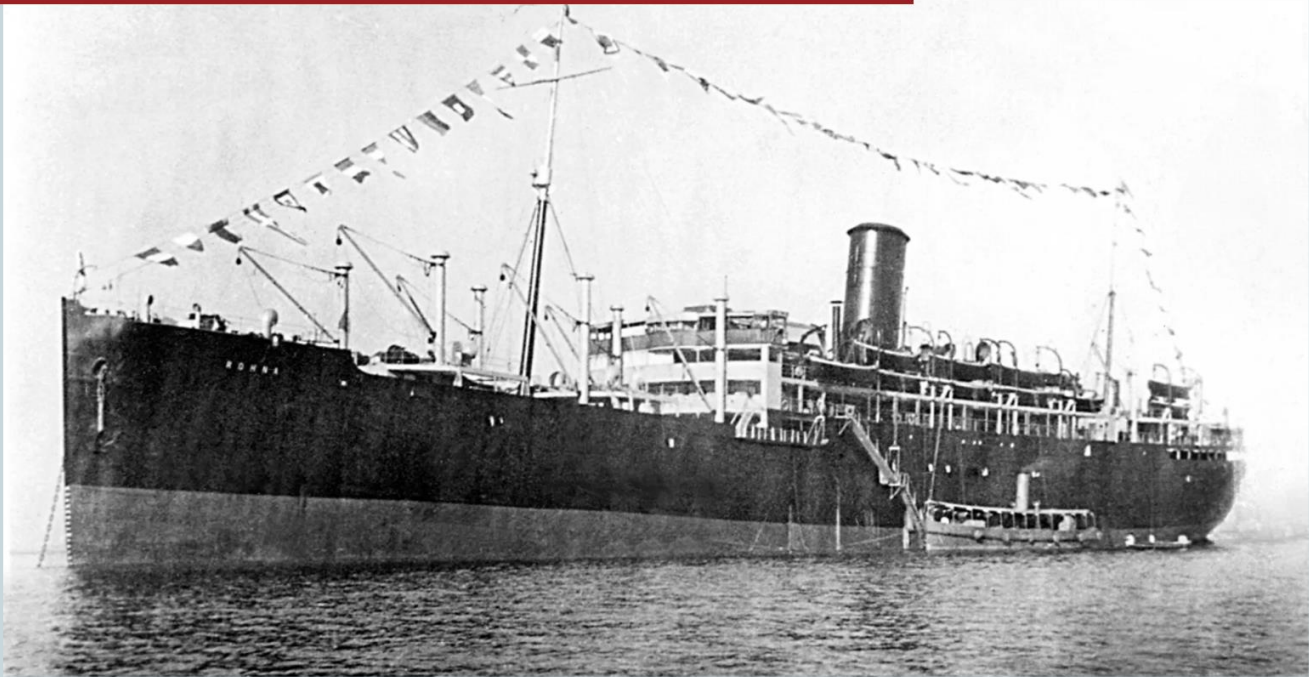
"I see the water all full of men, and the guys jumping off the boat, they had to be jumping right on guys in the water," he said. "And there were — one life raft was hanging there on one rope and the hole in (the Rohna), you could drive two 2 ½-ton trucks side by side through there."

■ Upside down in the water

HMT stood for His Majesty's Transport. There was little majestic about the ship beyond its name.

Built in 1926 for the British India Steam Navigation Company, it carried cargo and passengers to ports above and below the Suez Canal until it was requisitioned as a troopship in 1940. Much of the retrofitting was done with wood, which turned into kindling and projectiles when the bomb struck.

Witnesses later told of lifeboats painted to the frames from which they were supposed to slide. Black paint covered rust spots on the chains holding the boats.



The HMT Rohna was built in 1926 as a passenger and cargo liner for the British India Steam Navigation Company. It was requisitioned by the British as a troopship in 1940 and sunk by a German bomb in 1943.

[Hide caption](#) ^

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL WALSH

In the Navy, Ballo said, sailors were given the life jackets known as Mae Wests, equipped with a light and whistle and built to ride the waves. The soldiers aboard the Rohna had life belts, designed for amphibious invasions, and were never told to pull them up to their armpits.

"Some of them got upside down as soon as they got in the water," he said, "and they drowned."

Survivors have told Walsh, 69, that the lifeboat drill the day they left port amounted to being told, "This is your lifeboat station. The crew will take care of everything."

Instead, it took care of precious little.

Six of the lifeboats were destroyed by the explosion. Others on the port side couldn't be lowered past the distended hull. Ultimately, only eight of 22 lifeboats were launched, and most capsized.

The captain of the Rohna, TJ Murphy, was Australian, and he was among the five officers and four U.S. soldiers who abandoned ship last, some 90 minutes after the missile struck. They tossed out the final few of 101 life rafts and leaped.

The ship's officers were largely British. The rest of the crew of 195 was mostly from India, and a point of contention even 78 years later is whether they folded under pressure or were simply accused of it in a British navy where bigotry was standard.

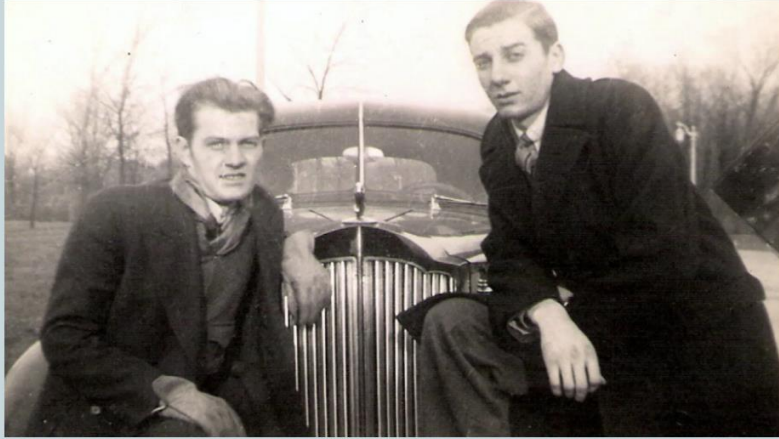
Ballo pointed out that one Indian crewman was later honored for bravery, and that 122 crew members were among the dead.

Walsh said he also tries to be cautious on the subject. "They were basically conscripts. They weren't super-trained sailors."

From what he's been told by survivors, however, "the Indian crew, almost to a man, got the hell out of there."

That left amateurs, many of them still teenagers, to fend for themselves.

"For most of these soldiers, it was literally their second day of war," Ballo said.



Brothers Larry and Bill Schneider of Detroit, who both served in World War II, pose with their older brother's Packard, circa 1942. Larry survived the war; Bill did not.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DARLENE STANLEY

Bill Schneider, 20, was in that group: a year of training, a liberty ship to Oran, Algeria, three or four weeks of acclimation and then a convoy to Mumbai for what was supposed to be relatively tame duty, building airstrips or stringing phone lines in what was known as the China-Burma-India Theater.

Instead, the war department sent his brother a telegram.

■ 'Torture for the mothers'

The telegrams are one of the oddities that stand out to Ballo and Walsh.

They went out in early January, and all they said was that a son or brother was missing in action. The notifications of death didn't arrive until late May.

"I have documents dated Dec. 25 saying the war department knew they were dead," Ballo said. "They still sent out telegrams giving false hope to the families. That's five months of torture for the mothers."

Records suggest that the British wanted to keep the incident as deeply under wraps as they could, and the United States had no objection. They were loathe to let the Germans know how effective the glide bomb had been or to panic the public about a weapon only the enemy had.

It wasn't until February 1944 that the U.S. government announced the loss of more than 1,000 soldiers on a troopship, and the name of the ship wasn't released until June 1945. The initial inference was a submarine attack, and when the sinking was later attributed to German bombers, the type of bomb wasn't mentioned.

Meantime, the allies had learned to jam the radio signals controlling the Henschel Hs 293, rendering it far less effective.

Still, the sinking of the Rohna wasn't declassified until 1967 — and by that point, few noticed.

Ballo surmises that the British were embarrassed by the condition of the ship and the conduct of the crew. Maybe the war department simply forgot to lift the veil after Germany and Japan surrendered, though years of letters and phone calls from families would make that unlikely.



Pvt. Bill Schneider of Detroit was awarded the Purple Heart after his death at sea in November 1943.

COURTESY OF DARLENE STANLEY



Working from a photograph, artist Darlene Stanley drew this portrait of her uncle, Bill Schneider, who died before she was born when his troopship was sunk by an innovative German bomb.

ARTWORK COURTESY OF DARLENE STANLEY

“A lot of parents of these boys went to their own graves without knowing what happened to their sons,” Ballo said.

In Taylor, so did an older brother.

Harvey Schneider didn’t serve in the war. He was married with kids, and he was a welder building tanks, too valuable on the home front to lose.

“He never got over it,” Stanley said. “There were times you knew he was lost in it.”

Stanley was affected, too. She finds herself wishing she had known Uncle Bill and feeling cheated that she didn’t.

“He was a car dude,” she said. “He’d be so cool as an uncle.”

An artist, she drew a picture of him years ago, based on a photo. She wanted to be true to him, but also to the family.

The sketch is soft, even wispy. You could almost say he looks like a ghost.

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