

## HMT Rohna: What really happened? & Why the secrecy?

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It was when American filmmaker Jack Ballo discovered a 75-year-old box of letters in his attic that his curiosity was piqued. Looking into the context of the letters he realized that he had stumbled on a WWII disaster that had been a closely guarded secret at the time. “The greatest loss of US life at sea was left out of the history books, along with the story of the British and Indian crew killed in the secret WWII attack.” Together filmmaker **Jack Ballo**, author **Michael Walsh**, and a team of researchers including researcher **Ann Good**, are working on a documentary to understand, remember and share the story of this chapter of Second World War maritime history.

The *HMT Rohna* history team are pooling their skills to trace the truth of what happened on 26 November 1943, in the missile attack that saw over a thousand people sent to a watery grave in the Mediterranean off the coast of Algeria. Why does this story mean so much to them? Of the small team of film professionals and researchers, all of them had a family member who was on the *Rohna*, or was a member of the convoy, on the day that *Rohna* sank. The connection of Ann Good (lead on the research into the British aspect of the disaster) is that her uncle, Private Henry William Bly (Royal Army Medical Corps), lost his life that day.

### **Who were the casualties?**

With the sinking of *HMT Rohna* over a thousand people lost their lives:

- 1,015 US troops
- 108 Indian Lascar crew
- 31 British troops
- 3 American Red Cross workers

These numbers account for approximately half of those aboard, and the casualty figures were perhaps unnecessarily high due to non-functioning lifeboats and life belts that were not fit for purpose.

It is worth noting that while the majority of the casualties were American, the *Rohna* was actually a British troop ship.

### **What happened?**

Troop ship *Rohna* was part of a convoy en route to India to fight the Japanese and was sailing off the coast of Algeria at the time of the attack. She was sunk as a result of a hit by Hitler's secret weapon – the Hs-293 Radio-Guided Missile.

### **Why was it kept a secret?**

The radio-guided missile that struck *HMT Rohna* was one of the first to be used against the Allied Forces. The significance and secrecy of the weapon was such that the US War Department classified the *HMT Rohna* attack, ordering all survivors of the sinking to remain silent. Similarly, the War Office and British military classified their documentation surrounding the sinking. Most survivors did not disclose anything about the horrifying event they lived through. To this day the descendants of those who sailed on that last fateful voyage of *HMT Rohna* are questioning why this significant tragedy should have remained so undiscussed.

## How did Jack discover the letters?

He was living in a house that had belonged to his wife's family for 100 years, and one day was sorting through the attic. It was then that he stumbled on the letters. "I found 23 letters that were written from a soldier to his mother," said Jack. "I brought them downstairs, and I started reading them. And they were just amazing – these heartfelt letters. He's nervous. He's homesick. He's brave. He's going to war for his country. I just learned so much about him - and when you read somebody's letters you begin to understand them. I was really touched by this."

But what was the context of these letters? Who was the person who penned them back in the 1940s? And what could be learned about their life?

"I knew that my wife had an uncle who died in WWII. And that's all I knew. There was never a word said about him. Nobody knew anything about what happened to him. So... I did a Google search," continued Jack, "and I found a book by Michael Walsh, called ***Rohna Memories***, and that book had my wife's uncle's name in it." Jack read the book, noted that there was a Rohna Survivors Memorial Association – and he and his wife went along to one of the gatherings. It was here that Jack discovered that author Michael Walsh had about 15 years previously – filmed some of the survivors talking about the once-secret sinking. "These interviews were amazing," recalled Jack, and thus the idea was born for the *Rohna Classified* documentary that Jack and Michael are now co-producing.

## What were the next steps?

As the events surrounding the sinking of the *Rohna* were classified at the time, the researchers have been working thoroughly to piece together the story. To provide context to the *Rohna* survivor memories, the researchers have been tracing information relevant to people on board other vessels in the convoy to help to shed light on the situation on the ground.

Researcher Ann Good has been instrumental in investigating and pulling together the stories of the British involvement and casualties. This is research that is very close to her heart, her uncle being one of those to lose their lives in the sinking. Ann: "I have seen an eyewitness account that he and other medics survived the actual hit, and they started tending to the wounded and they brought them up to the upper deck. But then they were dealing with conditions of steam and fire, and it was very difficult." Poignantly just before they sailed the RAMC group on the *Rohna* had sent a mimeograph message of Christmas greetings. "I have seen only two of those cards that were sent," said Ann. Largely there is an absence of paperwork however. Ann: "I have not seen any documentation or notification of death for my uncle. All that I have is his certificate."

A further tantalizing letter has come to light, recounting the story of a gunner, on

the coast, who had the Axis bomber in his sights. The bomber that was to fire the missile that sank the *Rohna*. "But the phone rang," recounts Jack, "and he was ordered not to engage."

The story of the sinking of the *HMT Rohna* is one that has long been shrouded in mystery and with each new piece of information that the researchers uncover it only grows more interesting.

### **Find out more**

To find out more, please see the links below:

The website of the Rohna Survivors Memorial Association may be found at <https://rohna survivors.org/>

The list of known British casualties of the HMT Rohna attack can be viewed at: <https://rohna classified.com/rohna-roster>

To view the trailer and obtain further details, see [www.rohna classified.com](http://www.rohna classified.com)

### **Can you help?**

- Do you have connections to the *HMT Rohna*?
- Was your ancestor one of the survivors? Or were they one of the casualties?
- Did your ancestor sail in that last convoy of which the *Rohna* was a part?
- Do you have relevant photos, stories, documentation?

If so the *HMT Rohna* research team would be very interested to hear from you. Please email [ann.good.international@gmail.com](mailto:ann.good.international@gmail.com)

[HMT Rohna: What really happened? & Why the secrecy? - Family Tree \(family-tree.co.uk\)](http://family-tree.co.uk)