

HOMEFRONT

Two survivors of WWII disaster meet



Herman Vinnet (left) and Rubin Firstman talk about their World War II experience at the Mariposa senior living complex in suburban Lake Worth Beach. Vinnet and Firstman survived the sinking of the HMT Rohna in the Mediterranean Sea on Nov. 26, 1943. THOMAS CORDY/THE PALM BEACH POST

Both 98, in 1943 they were aboard ship when it was hit

Jorge Milian Palm Beach Post
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LAKE WORTH BEACH — Before meeting last month in a suburban Lake Worth Beach senior living complex, Herman Vinnet and Robert Firstman hadn't been together since November 1943, when they found themselves dog-paddling in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea after their military transport ship was struck by a German missile.

Vinnet, of Boynton Beach, and Firstman, of Lake Worth Beach, were two of around 2,000 U.S. servicemen headed to India on the ill-fated HMT Rohna, a British ship. More than 1,100 people, most of them Americans, were killed in what marks as the greatest loss of troops at sea by an enemy attack in U.S. history.

Vinnet and Firstman, both months short of their 99th birthdays, are believed to be among a small number of Rohna survivors still alive.

The men had never met until a story on Firstman's World War II experience was published on Veterans Day last month in The Palm Beach Post.

"Find out who he is and get together," urged

"Each of us just fought the best he could for his own life."

Herman Vinnet
Survivor of the sinking of the HMT Rohna

Marilyn Rauch, Vinnet's 90-year-old girlfriend. Vinnet drove — "Of course," he responds when surprise is expressed that he still drives — to Firstman's apartment last month and the men spent nearly two hours reminiscing.

"It was a wonderful experience," Firstman said. "The amazing thing is how similar our stories were."

Vinnet and Firstman are native New Yorkers who were attending college — Vinnet at St. John's University and Firstman at Brooklyn College — when they enlisted into the Army Air Force.

Both had chosen to change their names — Vinnet was formerly Heman Vinitzky and Firstman was Rubin, not Robert — when they boarded the Rohna on Nov. 26, 1943, in Oran, off the coast of Algeria.

A few hours later, the ship was hit by a remote-controlled, rocket-boosted missile fired from a German bomber that knocked out all communication and left servicemen fending for themselves.

"Nobody knew what was going on," Vinnet said. "Do we go? Do we stay?"

Remaining on the doomed and sinking ship was no option.

As the Rohna sank, listing severely to one side, Vinnet climbed to the high side of the ship — around three stories above the surface — and then used a rope ladder that got him close enough to the water to jump.

"Those people who went on the low side were in trouble because the waves were bringing them right back toward the ship," Vinnet said.

One of those people was Firstman, who managed to get away from the Rohna after he latched on to an empty oil barrel that fortuitously came floating along.

Picking the right side of the ship to jump from didn't keep Vinnet out of trouble. After en-

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tering the water, he was forced to swim past burning pools of oil that left him with burns on both arms. Vinnet would receive the Purple Heart for his injuries.

Getting past the floating fires, Vinnet grabbed onto a hatch cover that came off the Rohna. He and several other men hung on for their lives.

Some distance away, Firstman was doing the same. "You really didn't think much, just acted," he said.

Vinnet and Firstman not only endured hours in the frigid water in nearly complete darkness but they also avoided getting mowed down by German pilots machine-gunning anything that moved in the sea.

Eight decades later, they still become emotional telling their stories.

"There were so many different sources of losing your life — we were lucky," Vinnet said when asked why he and Firstman survived.

"That's all you can say. It certainly wasn't any special ability that I had or Bob had. Each of us just fought the best he could for his own life."

Vinnet and Firstman were among 600-plus soldiers that were rescued by the USS Pioneer, a minesweeper that had been part of the convoy that included the Rohna.

Because it was impossible to swim, those in the water had to hope the minesweeper approached them closely enough to grab onto a rope ladder and pull themselves on deck.



Herman Vinnet, left, and Robert Firstman visit at the Mariposa senior living complex in suburban Lake Worth Beach. Vinnet, of Boynton Beach, and Firstman, both 98, survived the sinking of the HMT Rohna in November 1943.

THOMAS CORDY/PALM BEACH POST

"There were many, many boys who came close to it but didn't have the strength to get on deck," Vinnet said.

Firstman was nearly one of those. Exhausted and disoriented, Firstman said he didn't have the strength to climb the remaining steps of the minesweeper's rope ladder when somebody reached down from the deck and pulled him onto the ship.

In a memoir that he is writing, First-

man refers to being saved by the "hand of God."

"It must have been," he said.

Vinnet and Firstman served out their military careers and returned home where they enjoyed long careers as an accountant and jeweler, respectively.

Vinnet, widowed twice, has two children, eight grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. He and Rauch have been together for 14 years. First-

man was married 70 years to his wife Elaine, who died three years ago. They had two children and four grandchildren.

Neither man shared much of their death-defying experience with family over the years.

That's a common theme with a lot of World War II veterans, but a requirement among Rohna survivors.

The incident was classified by both the U.S. and British governments, possibly because they feared the impact on the public's morale if it learned the Germans were using remote-controlled weapons to fight.

The guided missile that hit the Rohna was among the first of its kind.

It was decades before what happened was declassified.

"The survivors were told never to talk about this attack again," said Jack Ballo, the director and producer of "Rohna: Classified," a documentary about the disaster. "And they took that seriously."

Ballo said he knows of only three living Rohna survivors, including Vinnet and Firstman.

Firstman said he thought he was the only person remaining to have lived through the Rohna disaster, but was glad to find Vinnet.

The men have gotten together again since first meeting and have become friends.

"It's easy for them to talk to someone who was there, who experienced it," Ballo said.

"That's what these two are doing right now. They can talk about it and feel OK talking about it because they know each other understands."