

LOCAL

Returned mail was first vague clue that NJ loved ones died in WWII troop ship bombing

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As a young girl, Susan Gorman was fascinated by an old cookie tin stuffed with mysterious treasures — ribbons from a military uniform, faded black-and-white photographs, coins from China and a paper ticket for admission to a movie in an Army tent that read: “Admit one survivor.”

The items were from her father's time in the U.S. Army during World War II.

John Vangi, who grew up in Hoboken and lived in Jersey City after returning home from the war, was one of the lucky ones. He was aboard the HMT Rohna on Nov. 26, 1943, when the British troop transport ship was attacked by radio-guided missiles and sunk in the Mediterranean Sea.

The bombing killed more than 1,000 U.S. soldiers, including 77 from New Jersey. It was the country's greatest loss of life at sea by enemy action in World War II.

Details of the attack were classified for decades. Vangi and other survivors were told not to speak about it upon returning home.

“When I was little, my father never talked much about it,” said Gorman, who now lives outside of Nashville, Tennessee. “He would tell us little things, about how he was in Africa and China. Sometimes, he would say how he was “sunk” during the war. But he never spoke about how this terrible thing had happened.”

The disaster is the subject of an upcoming documentary by New Jersey filmmaker Jack Ballo, whose interest was sparked by the discovery of letters sent from a homesick young soldier to his mother.

NJ's historical buildings: In war and peace, these armories in NJ are civic treasures

The letters, found four years ago in the attic of Ballo's Middlesex County home, were sent by his wife's great-uncle, Joseph Pisinski, during his service in World War II. Intrigued, Ballo then came across a book about the attack by Michael Walsh, which named Pisinski as one of its casualties at age 23.

The family's loss was made greater by the lack of information from the U.S. War Department, Ballo said, which sent a telegram informing them Pisinski was missing in action. Months later, another was sent telling them he wouldn't be returning home.

"The pain of losing a son in war is bad enough, but when you never know what happened, there's no funeral or headstone to visit, you don't have any closure," Ballo said. "His sister lived to be 99 and almost never talked about her brother to the rest of the family because of the pain she went through."

The Rohna departed North Africa on Nov. 25, 1943, and was travelling to the China-Burma-India Theater to support the allied war efforts.

The next day, a radio-guided missile hit the side of the ship as it made its way through a section of the Mediterranean Sea known as Suicide Alley because of the frequency of German attacks. More than half of the 1,981 American soldiers onboard were killed.

There are several theories about why the bombing's details remained classified for so long. Some historians think the government didn't want the enemy to know how successful the attack was. Others believe it was to conceal from the families of the dead the ship's poor condition and problems with the lifeboats, Ballo said.

It wasn't until decades later that more information was released and newspapers began running stories about casualties and survivors.

Returned wartime mail a clue

Nearly 80 years after the attack, some families are still piecing together what happened that day.

The first indication that something was wrong for one Clifton family was a letter sent to Joseph Nugent, a private in the U.S. Army, announcing the birth of his niece, that was returned undeliverable. A little later, the family received a telegram saying the soldier was missing in action.

Jennifer Lorenzo — whose mother was the niece mentioned in the returned birth announcement — says her grandmother didn't talk much about what happened to her brother Joseph, who had left the family's Clifton home to serve in World War II and didn't make it back.

COVID's uncounted victims: After bouts of COVID, decorated war vet withered away, with family rarely allowed to visit

Lorenzo learned later that her grandmother's reticence was rooted in uncertainty. Nugent, who worked for a railcar builder in Clifton before joining the Army, was among the Rohna casualties.

"I always knew something happened to him, but we didn't know what," Lorenzo said. "I thought my grandmother just didn't want to talk about it. But she really didn't know anything."

As a history major in the 1990s, Lorenzo began researching her great uncle's story online and found the Rohna Survivors Memorial Association, a group dedicated to telling their story.

With no cemetery plot to visit, family members have memorialized their loved ones in other ways.

To mark the bombing's 50th anniversary, for instance, survivors and family members reunited in what would become an annual tradition organized by the Rohna memorial group. In June, they'll meet again to reconnect, remember and share their stories.

Column: America stripped him of his dignity. Yet this NJ veteran still chose to serve

Lorenzo, now a high school social studies teacher in Rockland County, New York, tells her students about her great-uncle every Memorial Day. A street in Clifton — Nugent Drive — is named after him. And she is working to get him a plaque at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

"It's family history, but it's also U.S. history, and almost nobody knows about it," she said. "His story deserves to be told."

Nugent's 12 siblings all went on to live long lives. When Lorenzo's grandmother learned the circumstances of her brother's death, "it was almost closure," Lorenzo said. "It was no longer a mystery for her."

'Uncle Billy died at sea'

Patricia Stush always knew that her grandmother's younger brother died in World War II, but it wasn't until finding the Rohna group online that she learned the details of his service.

"We grew up hearing that Uncle Billy died at sea but didn't know much about it," said Stush, who lives in Westwood.

Burke was working at Western Electric when he was drafted at 23. When he left their Jersey City home for war, he told Stush's grandmother, "I love you and I'll be back, and everything will be fine." But he never returned.

Until her death 10 years ago at 93, Mary Brennan, Stush's grandmother, would share memories of her "good-hearted, handsome, smart younger brother," whose photo she kept on her wall, Stush said.

"The experience of all these pieces coming together has been incredibly meaningful for our family," she said. "Every person's life matters, and their story matters, and we're carrying that on."

There are just three Rohna survivors left. Ballo said he felt an urgency to tell their story. His film, "Rohna: Declassified," which he made with the author Walsh, is planned for release next year, to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the attack.

Vangi, who went on to serve in Africa and India, returned home in 1945 and found a job at the Lipton Tea Company, where he met his wife, Agnes. The couple had three daughters and he later joined the post office, where he worked until his retirement. He died in 1997 at age 76.

Although he didn't talk of it, Vangi always seemed haunted by his experiences in the war, Gorman said.

"He was the merry mailman, but there was a bitterness to him," she said. "I always wondered what happened that gave him this angry streak. Did he have nightmares? I wish I would have asked him more."

It wasn't until the 50th anniversary of the attack in 1993, when he was interviewed by a local newspaper, that Vangi began sharing his memories of the night he and a friend jumped 50 feet into the Mediterranean Sea to save their lives after the bomb hit. He was able to hold on to the rope of a lifeboat that had capsized until a rescue ship arrived. He never saw his friend again.

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