The Last Survivors of the HMT Rohna: Sergeant Saul Gurman

By Michael T. Naya, Jr.

On December 7, 1941, life changed for millions of men and women throughout the globe. It was the day that the Japanese launched a sneak attack on American naval and air bases in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. For countless young men and women, they could never have expected that they would soon be serving their country in uniform. One of those young men was eighteen-year-old Saul Gurman. Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor Saul had been forced to grow up at a young age. At sixteen he began working for his father who had become sick and was in the hospital. The Gurman's owned a kosher poultry business with several employees. Every Wednesday, Saul would head into Boston to buy poultry from farmers who had traveled from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. From there he would take it to a slaughterhouse where the rabbi prepared the meat specially according to the Jewish religion. Upon graduating from high school in 1941, Saul's father pushed for him to get a job.

One day instead of applying for a job he hiked up Commonwealth Avenue which is today B.U. ballpark football field. In his own words he commented,

"As I hiked up commonwealth avenue directly opposite was the old armory and there was a sign in the window that said help wanted. It was an automotive store and I walked in, and it just so happened I had my report card in my pocket. I showed it to him, and the manager commented, he says, 'well you got a lot of B's and C's, no A's.' I told him a quick tear drop story that I had to help my mother since my dad was ill but that I used to go to my brothers-in-law store in Salem, Mass on Christmas since it was known for Christmas lighting. We used to sell a lot to the public. I said I worked for Makos Automotive during Christmas vacation. He said he was an account of ours, I said you can call him and tell him I'm here. I don't even think I told him I was related to him; my brother-in-law was smart enough to say he was a hard-working kid. They hired me on the spot, and I caught a company that was making remarkable growth."

Between July, 1941 to January, 1942, Saul worked there rebuilding parts for vehicles. There they manufactured fuel pump kits, water pump kids, generator kits, distributor parts, and overall material being reused due to the outbreak of war. Saul recounted the wave of patriotism spread throughout the country following the attack on Pearl Harbor,

"I left there in January and my father refused to allow me to enlist when the war broke out because my oldest brother was caught in the first draft in 1940. Within three days of Pearl Harbor the troop transport left from Brooklyn Navy Yard. It was in the American division, infantry, and they got three days out when the Japanese attacked, and they made a turn around and rushed back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard high speed and they went to work painting zig zag patterns on the hull which makes it look backwards when it's going forward. This was done to confuse sub-mariners and they made it to Australia and Port Moresby where they were training. That was one of the first places the Japanese tried to invade, and he landed on seven islands as back up to the marines. A lot of people and history hasn't talked about it, including Buna

which I believe they were in the Fiji Islands. When I lost my job, I said my father won't let me go so I am going to look for a war job, something I can contribute to.

I went to the Bethlehem Steel Yard in east Boston, directly opposite to Charlestown Navy Yard. I applied for a job there and as luck would have it, at lunchtime the company I worked for I would fool around on the hydraulic press on the water pumps. I played around on the Chevy's and other items that required a thirty-ton press. While filling out the application my finger slipped and instead of thirty tons, I put three hundred tons and I got hired immediately to work in the hydraulic press to make steel plates that would be used as replacement on ships that rusted out. I worked at that for two months until they found out my age, I looked much older than my age at the time.

On September 19, 1942, a runner came down from the main office and said you better get home, your mother just received a telegram and she's discouraged. When I got home it said my brother was missing in action, I won't tell you the rest of it other than he turned out fine and came home on a hospital ship on the West Coast. He lived to eighty-seven years old and was on the S.S. Dorchester when she sank."

On September 21, 1942, Saul enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps. The day that his father returned home from the hospital, Saul wanted to get his father's permission to enlist in the U.S. Army. He explained how he asked his parents to enlist,

"I said 'I want you're blessing but even if you don't give it to me, I'll be gone tomorrow morning when you wake up. since you won't give me your blessing I'm going to bum up to Canada and join the Royal Air Force. They don't ask any questions and as long as your blood is warm, they let you join.' He said, 'you have my blessing.' I told him I was going to go into Boston where they are advertising for Army Air Corps personnel at the New Orleans base. I went on the train two days to the New Orleans Army Air Base. I had good mechanical aptitude because of that automotive job so out of the one hundred I wound up in the top six. I got a furlough for Christmas and that was funny because when I was told to report to the commanding officer I came into the office and he said, 'hey Gurman, I didn't know you were Jewish.'

I said, 'I forgot to bring my horns with me when I joined!' He had a good laugh and was a young graduate from West Point and was a nice guy. Anyway, he said 'what does Christmas mean to you?' I said, 'a good time.' He said, 'look I got married men who would give you one of their arms to be home for Christmas with their family.' I said 'hey, by all means. He said, 'I guarantee you I'll give you papers on New Year's Day.' On New Year's Day I went to the Sugar Bowl game and at half time somebody knew where I was sitting, and they came and got me and said the MPs are looking for you.' I said 'what?' He said, 'they have a jeep waiting for you to take you to the air base since your papers came through.'"

From New Orleans Saul was sent to B-17 training school in Amarillo, Texas to become a flight engineer. While there he joined the camp football team of which he had played in high school. On the first day of scrimmage, he injured his elbow and was sent to the camp doctor. After

resetting the elbow, a cast was made for Saul to wear temporally. While recovering, the men who had been in his squadron left for gunnery school. After confronting the flight surgeon, he informed Saul he would need rehabilitation. He was sent to Chanute Field, Illinois hospital where he recovered. While he recovered the U.S. Army starting picking men at Chanute Field to be sent to China. There they would operate as ground crew for the brand-new B-29's coming off the assembly line in Wichita, Kansas. Two thousand men had been gathered and were sent from Hampton Roads, Virginia to Oran, North Africa. Saul was on the second convoy that left Oran the day before Thanksgiving. Since he had worked in a shipyard, he was familiar with operations that were occurring on board such as rehabbing the cargo ships used in the war. Many of the ships used had been cargo ships with plates, upgrades, and armament added onto them for the war effort.

Saul recalled the November 26, 1943, attack on the HMT Rohna as clear as the day it had occurred. He recalled the following,

"I was up on the bow on the Rohna and that was around 3:30 P.M. to 4:45 p.m. Suddenly I heard a roar from a formation of planes. I looked up and they had to be four or five miles away. I said, 'oh we're going up to Italy to bomb again.' I couldn't figure it out because when we left Oran it was a monsoon season, all of our air strips were shut down. I took a second look and said, 'oh my god, they're swastikas.' Suddenly above that formation and just a little further back I saw two spitfires coming down and make a pass at the bombers. Three of the bombers lit up with fire and just then an English officer came up and said, 'you better get below, we're in for it!' As I turned to go down, I happened to look about half a mile or three quarters of a mile ahead of us and it was the English corvette, a British corvette who was coming back full steam to put up as much anti-aircraft fire as they could.

Suddenly, it was a string of bombs that fell so close to it that it was like in a movie. It came out of a spray and all the pom pom guns were going, that's when the British officer said to me, 'yank you better get below, you're in for it!' We hadn't even sounded general quarters yet. I go down to my deck which was deck two and it was quiet there. Some men were reading, some were playing cards, whatever. When I was watching the action before it was like being at a football game. I'm standing by myself there cheering and when I got to my deck, I said 'hey we just shot down three German bombers.' Some guy yelled out 'blow it out your ass Gurman!' I don't know if it was two minutes later, but we got straddled by a string of bombs, not one hit the ship. Of course, the Rosary beads came out. There was complete silence there and we had racks of small bombs and they fired them off. There was a swishing sound as they came out of the rack! Boy, they made a noise, maybe fifteen minutes later when the glide bomb hit the ship it felt like, to me it felt like the whole ship had been lifted out of the water. The lights went out, we were in the forward part of the ship and nowhere near the engine room when it got hit."

After the Rohna had been hit with a Henschel Hs 293 glided bomb launched by the Luftwaffe all sailors went topside. Saul recalled the sinking and the evacuation efforts that were underway,

"Somebody yelled out all of a sudden from above 'abandon ship! Every man for himself!' I'll never forget those words, every man for himself. When I got to the deck, my first sergeant was right there, his name was Smith. He knew I had worked in the shipyard, and he said 'Gurman, these men aren't going to abandon ship.' As the guys came out, I put them on either side of the hatch, checked their lifebelt, told them they needed to have it under their armpits, to take off their jacket, helmet, anything that weighs anything, take off your shoes and get off the goddamn ship. We kept doing that until nobody was coming out of the hold. When I came back to Smitty I asked, 'what else he wanted me to do?' He asked, 'if I could launch the life raft on the railing.' I asked, 'do you have a knife' and he said 'yeah.' I went back up to where I was in the beginning at the bow, I tugged at the ropes and launched a dozen, fifteen or twenty-five-men life raft and I couldn't go any further since the fire was on the main portion of the ship.

I turned around, came back, and asked, 'what else?' That's when I had a good laugh because he pointed at the twenty-five-man life raft that slid down on a track made of angle ion. I laughed, he said 'why are you laughing?' I said, 'I worked on installing those in a shipyard.' I got up there and another guy named Freeman who was an aerial gunner came up there with me. I looked at the safety locks and unfortunately, in my professional opinion from 1939 when the British government took that ship away from the Dutch East India company and made it into a cargo ship, I understood what a ship that carried a little bit of cargo and about a hundred or two hundred carriers. The locks were frozen, finally freeman came back, and I had smashed my helmet, my helmet was like a tin can that you kick until it is no longer a tin can. I really hammered my helmet into almost a flat, he came with a fire ax.

Even though the ship was dead in the water, I don't know how many times I swung at the safety, and I finally hit the opening and broke the safety on that. Unfortunately, that was a very sad part of the story because some of the guys that were watching me doing it were yelling the guys in the water. The goddamn thing must have weighed over two and a half tons and these guys have their arms up in the water. It was supposed to hold twenty-five men on it. I had to let her go, for the second one I did the same thing. For years I couldn't get that monkey off my back until three or four years ago on one of the websites on the computer there was a report by a British woman who was a news reporter. She was talking about what they did on the other side of the ship. She mentioned that the guys that launched the twenty-five-man life raft on that side of the ship killed guys in the water. That was the first time I had relief from that incident.

I can't remember what else I did really. I helped a couple of wounded guys by tying a rope around them and lowering them into the water. I don't know if they survived. It's just ironic that the same British officer came up to me and said, 'you better get off the ship yank she's going down fast.' I looked around and there was nobody else on her. I read an article that said six or seven men were on the ship at the end. I don't know if I was included in that number. I got off my helmet, shoes, jacket, after I walked all the way up to the bow. The bow was all the way in the air sliding all the way down backwards into Davy Jones locker. I climbed up to the point, removed my jacket, helmet, shoes, everything and I just looked at the horizon and took one step off, pointed my toes, my arms to the sides and when I hit the water, I swear I didn't think I was going to come up. I didn't know if the ship was forty or fifty feet from the water line, I came up

and that was the only time I panicked, I came up on a bunch of ropes, I started thrashing around, and I still hadn't inflated my life belt. I just started to dog paddle and finally started looking around and I don't know it must have been five, ten, fifteen minutes later I heard a voice cry out. I swam over and it was a guy floating and I said, 'where's your lifebelt?' He said, 'I don't know.' I asked, 'what's wrong with you?' and he said, 'my legs are broken.' I said 'what?' He said, 'my legs are broke.' I took off my life belt, put it around him, and instead of breaking open the capsule that had the gas to open the chambers, I used the hoses and blew them up as big as they would go because I decided I would use him for flotation.

Those life belts were designed to be used only on boats that were landing craft when you invade an island or whatever. They were not life vests, they weren't life jackets, they were just around the waist of each guy. Anyways, I kept pushing him in front of me and I don't know if it was an hour or two, but I saw a red light bobbing in the distance. I headed for it and when I got there, there was a lifeboat overturned with guys hanging all around. Who the hell was sitting on the top of the hull singing nothing can stop the army air corps except that goddamn Freeman! Anyways I grew up on the waterfront, I knew how to flip a boat over. I yelled out if there was anybody who rode a lifeboat. Freeman yelled out yeah and we got one more guy and we started to ask the kids, I was twenty or twenty-one, the kids could have been sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, they said 'It's gonna kill you I'm not gonna let go.' We decided we better not try, we floated and floated, and I think the moon came out because the silhouette on the horizon was the HMT Clan Campbell, a cargo ship, a brand-new victory ship."

After spotting the survivors of the HMT Rohna, the skipper of the Clan Campbell treaded the water. By treading the water, the tide ran towards the ship, and this allowed for the curet to take the survivors over to her. Saul recalled being picked up by sailors of the Campbell,

"I swam around between the overturned lifeboat and the hull of the Campbell. I yelled to a seaman because nobody was coming down from thirty feet above to help us. They just had some rope ladders and some big rope things they hang down when they're hauling cargo aboard a ship, so the cargo won't smash against the hull, it protects the ship and the cargo. I started up the rope ladder and I didn't even see him on the other side of the hull of the ship was a kid I befriended when I was stationed in Texas. His name was Robert Flores and we hit it off well together while we were in Amarillo.

I'm climbing up one rope ladder, he's on the next one. That's when I got the seaman on the deck to throw down the rope, I made a sling, and we slid the guy with the two broken legs on the hull of the ship. Some guy came up from the other side of the hull who pulled him, and I pushed, and we got him on the hull of the overturned lifeboat. They hoisted him up and I started to climb up the rope ladder and that's when I almost didn't make it. Just after I got him hoisted up, I was between the hull of the ship and the hull of the lifeboat, and a nice little wave came along and when I hit the hull of the ship, I was half unconscious. Finally, I sort of got over the whack to my head and face and I started to climb the ladder and Bob Flores was on the one after the lifeboat was pushed away completely by some guys. We were climbing and he yelled out to me,' I don't think I'm gonna make it.' That's when the seaman who lowered the rope to me without a doubt

was a Scotsman, I can hear him, he said 'wrap your arms through the rope ladder laddie' with a thick accent. I wrapped my arms in the ropes of the ladder, that's when Bob yelled 'he's not gonna make it and he fell into the water.' I started pounding my elbow which was the injured one from the states because it rocked. I yelled either 'your limp or you go back in the water.' I made it to the railing and the seaman grabbed the hair on my head and pulled me over the railing. He walked me down to the galley, walked me in there, and gave me a half mug of hot rum. I burned my gullet swallowing it. I lost my high school graduation ring since my hand shrunk from the time I was in the water, and they handed me a burlap sack which had a stencil on it. They were bundles from Britain. In this sack was a turtleneck sweater made by a woman who had her name in there on an envelope just saying hello, hope you never get to use this, something like that, you know."

After being rescued the men of the HMT Rohna were taken to Phillipsville, France. There Saul's commanding officer was Gus Keevicz. They loaded the survivors on boxcars, 'forty and eight' as Saul said. They slept on the ride and were taken to Baserti, France where intelligence officers of the OSS were. Saul recalled an incident that occurred during his interview,

"I'm sitting there with the OSS officer and I'm staring at him, and he said why are you staring at me? He didn't tell me his name, but he asked me for my name, he said 'you don't know me Mack and I don't know you.' He continued with his questions and suddenly the bulb popped out, I yelled out 'Revere Beach' and he turned out bright red. When I was a youngster, I had an uncle who had a hot dog stand on Revere beach and my uncle would let me have a few days off and be a beach bum. I would sleep in the hot dog stand, get up in the morning, get some toast, a glass of milk and that was breakfast. I didn't have to worry since I could eat all the hot dogs I wanted. He was working in the next booth to my uncles which was a game of chance, where you put a dime down and they gave you six worn baseballs and they had six wooden milk bottles that they put in a triangle, one on top of another, and if you knocked all six off the stand you won a doll. He worked that booth there.

Well, of course he was still very standoffish, and I finished answering his questions and he said 'okay, tell the next guy to come in.'"

Saul and the survivors of the Rohna were bivouacked on top of a small mountain in Baserti. They were kept comfortable at their camp and were safe from German artillery bombardments. Growing restless, Saul and another young soldier decided to hike to the docks. While there they saw the loading of half-tracks, tanks, and other vehicles used by the Army. Suddenly, they spotted a Lieutenant or Captain driving a German jeep. The dockmaster told the young Lieutenant, he 'couldn't take it with him.' Saul, cunningly commented,

"I had a twenty-dollar gold back in my wallet and I yelled out, hey Lt. how much do you want for the jeep? I pulled out the twenty-dollar gold back which was known as invasion currency. All the guys were paid with gold backs on the American money. He said you own the jeep, while I'm not supposed to have it or drive it, we took off and drove to where we were bivouacked. We had

to go around in circles to get up there and someone already told Gus Keepvics that Gurman (me) had a German jeep.

He said what are you crazy you could go to the guardhouse. I said wait a minute Lt. you are authorized to have a jeep because of our transportation. He said 'Okay', and I said,' okay Lt. if there's a day you have nothing to use it for, would you make out an official ticket so I can go to Tunis.' He said, 'Tunis, where the hell is Tunis?' I said, 'it's seventy miles away but it's got a red cross club there with good stuff from the states.' He said 'yeah, I'd let you go.' I don't know how soon we did but we headed for Tunis, when we got there, we had to go through a checkpoint to get in there. We showed the trip ticket to get in there and spent an hour or two at the club because seventy miles in a wartime country took a while to get there. We got in the checkpoint and a guy said, 'Gurman look!' He explains that just outside the checkpoint was a civilian bus stop and who the hell is dressed like a Frenchman but the OSS officer that interrogated us in Baserti. He had bread under his arm, the stripe on his arm, like a real Frenchman. We get past the MP, and he spotted us and realized we recognized him, and he just made a move with his head which meant no. We understood that and as we went by and he mouthed some words about stopping which chirard picked up. We drove about a third of a mile down and just parked and so enough he walked down and said, son of a gun you guys are smart. You're going back to Baserti? I said sure hop in!

I drove back to Baserti and this was Christmas Eve day, and he says I owe you guys a drink. I said there's no bar, the whole city is blown to bits. He said what you see you don't see, follow my directions. Sure, enough we drove up in front of a building half bombed out. He said pull your jeep under the stairs. He walks up the stairs and the next thing, we heard a little bit of an engine, sure enough they got the top that they are using for the headquarters, branch or whatever. He said don't forget what you see you don't see. We walked into the kitchen, there was nothing to sit on, so he walked over to a cabinet under the sink and slides out a case of six bottles of cognac. Well, I don't remember when it happened, but we passed out and slept on the floor throughout the night and woke up Christmas morning and he had some hot coffee going and he said, 'okay boys you got to leave and thanks for not blowing my cover.' We shook hands, no name, and the last question I said to him, 'anyway I can get in touch with you down at the dock?' He said 'yeah.' He gave me directions as to what I should do and we left, went back to our outfit, there was no roll call every day, where were you gonna go AWOL to? It was only two days later, and I left word 'you know when we're leaving?' He left me a message that we were leaving January 7, 1945. I couldn't hold back and got ahold of my commanding officer Gus. I said, 'Gus don't say anything, I know were leaving around January 7.' He said, 'goddamn you Gurman, where do you get all of your information?' Anyway, New Year's Eve Day a guy comes back and says, 'hey guess what, the pioneer is docked."

In total the Pioneer had saved 606 sailors from the HMT Rohna out of the total 715. Because of her status the commanding officer of Saul's camp sent an invitation to the officers of the Pioneer to join them for dinner on New Year's Day. Together with fellow officers the commanding officer arrived in the camp. While there Saul asked his commanding officer,

“What do you say? We’ll only be here a week or so more, why don’t we give the jeep to the pioneer? They complained that they don’t have transportation when they get into port.”

After giving the German jeep to the Pioneer Saul and the survivors of the Rohna remained in Baserti for another week. The survivors of the Rohna were loaded on the Rajala, sister ship to the Rohna. There they sailed to Bombay (present day Mumbai). After arriving there they were transported to Camp Divalavie. After arriving there Saul was scheduled to provide ground support for the B-29’s that were later transported to China. Once in China these bombers would fly missions bombing Japan. By the time Saul and the survivors arrived the B-29’s had already been transported to Tinian of which was taken by the U.S. Marine Corps.

As a result of the movement Saul was designated as a propeller specialist. He was transported to an air strip forty miles from Burma and recalled the following,

“I was in Japanese held territory. This din Jan operation had about half a dozen of the flying tigers P-40 Warhawks and on a daily basis they made two flights per day, one was a strafing mission, and then they changed the props from a three blade to a four blade. The three-blade had bigger props on it to grab more air and they used to attach an auxiliary tank underneath the plane and on the wings, they would carry two five-hundred-pound bombs. They used to paint the tail of the plane, the nose of the prop a different color, and we used to listen to Tokyo Rose at night and she would be telling us how many squadrons we had in the area. I was assigned there with only one other person who was on the Rohna and neither one of us spoke about it because we were sworn to secrecy for life when they assembled all 715 of us back in Baserti, North Africa. The OSS made us raise our hands again like we were just joining the war and made us swear that we would never speak about it for the rest of our lives.”

When asked how he felt about the Rohna being classified for so long he commented,

“The sinking really didn't get known around the country until Tom Brokaw broke the news in the year 2000. It’s a disgrace that they kept it a secret! There were 1285 next of kin families that didn’t know what happened to their loved ones. Until last year or the year before I think that figure has been reduced to the 800’s that they have not found any next of kin to send the Purple Heart to. The saddest part of all is that in a lot of the records in the fire in St. Louis, Missouri. I gave a deposition in either 1951 or 1952. I had two classmates that somehow wound up on the Rohna but not in my group. One was in the 332nd Fighter Control squadron, they almost lost the whole squadron, his name was Paul Cattleman, and the other guy's name was Heiman.

When I discovered the association in 2000 when Tom Brokaw announced it on his nightly newscast about the Rohna it was the split picture on the tv showing him live interviewing three of the survivors. Oddly enough the other half had a still photo and that's when I broke down because it was exactly in the position as when I left the ship. It was sliding slowly down into Davy Jones Locker. That’s when I left the ship.”

Saul arrived in the United States on January 1, 1946, after traveling up the Henry Hudson River in five degrees weather from Karachi, India, he had finally made it home. From there they were transferred to a large barge and transported to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. After returning home he got engaged to his high school sweetheart, Eva whom he had met Christmas vacation of their sophomore year of high school. Together they remained married until her passing on May 5, 2012, at the age of eighty-eight. Today, Saul is ninety-nine years old and still maintains a residence in Beverly, Massachusetts. He will celebrate his 100th birthday in June and is an active member of the HMT Rohna Memorial Association.