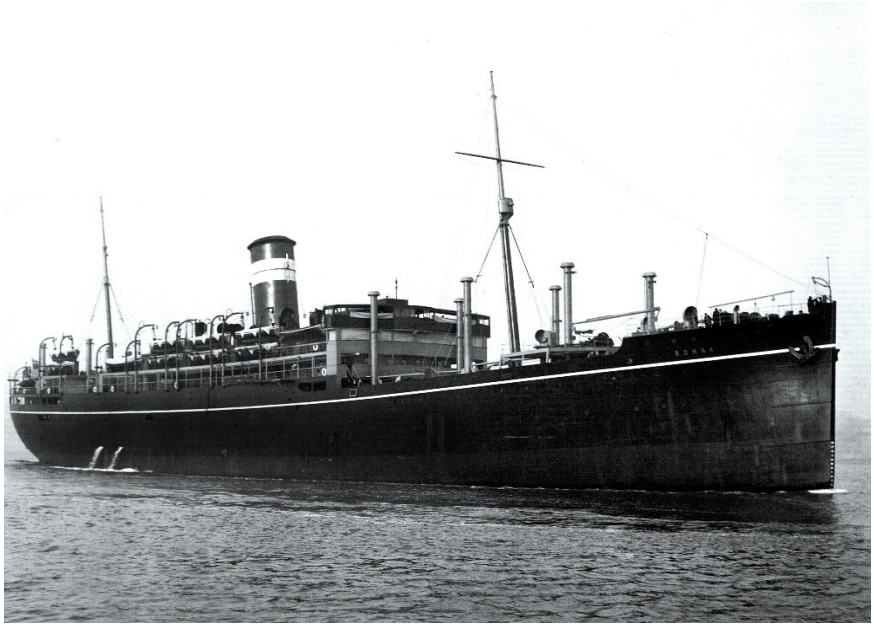

HMT Rohna
Sunk – November 26, 1943

How important is telling the truth?

INTRODUCTION

On November 26, 1943 the United States sustained its largest loss of troops at sea. Over 2,000 American, British and Indian servicemen were aboard the British troop ship HMT Rohna in the Mediterranean on their way to the China-Burma-Indian Theater of war. Traveling in a convoy, the Rohna and 23 other ships were attacked by German bombers. After a fierce fight that ended with no ships lost, a single bomber made a final run. Armed with the latest technology, a single radio- controlled guided missile set its sights on the Rohna. Many men were killed instantly by the direct hit. Rescue ships spent hours pulling survivors from the water. When the losses were totaled over 1,000 servicemen lost their lives.

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The attack of the Rohna by the German radio- controlled guided missile was immediately deemed classified by the Americans and the British and remained so for decades. Most families of casualties never knew what happened to their loved one; some are just finding out over 75 years later. There is almost no greater example of the veil of secrecy kept on German guided missile technology and the sinking of the Rohna. These lessons then, will take students on a journey through the eyes of survivors and next of kin. Through an examination of personal interviews recorded decades later, students will be able to assess the emotional impact on next of kin AND survivors who were sworn to secrecy. To engage students in even "deeper thinking" the information provided in the Rohna:Classified trailer provides a unique insight into the development of German missile technology and unbeknownst to most, its deadly effect on the men of the Rohna. Students will examine historical information from multiple sources written over a vast time period, focusing on how drawing information from these sources helps create a more accurate and detailed interpretation of the event.

In James G. Bennett's book, *The Rohna Disaster—WWII's Secret Tragedy,* he cites John Fievet's (survivor) remarks made in his speech at the Rohna Memorial Dedication Service at Fort Mitchell National Cemetery, Seale Alabama. He said, "We will never understand the position taken by the War Department when they withheld details of this tragedy from the families who lost loved ones on the Rohna. Mothers and fathers went to their graves never knowing how their sons met their fate. Some mothers went to fortune tellers hoping that they could shed some light on their son's last hours on this earth.

GRADE LEVEL

7-12

TIME REQUIREMENT

1-2 periods

OBJECTIVE

Students will analyze both primary and secondary sources relating to the attack of the Rohna in order to understand how various types of historical documentation work together to form a more complete picture of a historical event. A careful examination of these resources will enable students to describe and analyze how war affects those who experience it AND their families.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELS-LITERACY. RH.6-8.2
Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. RH.6.8.6
Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose. (for example, loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts)

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY. RH. 6-8.8
Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY. RH. 6-8.7
Integrate visual information (e.g. charts, graphs, photographs, videos, maps, transcripts) with other information in print and visual texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. RH. 6-8.9
Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

CCSS. ELA-LITERACY. RH. 9. 10.9
Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary documents.

CCSS, ELA-LITERACY. RH.11-12.9
Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 2

The student is able to appreciate historical perspectives by demonstrating the ability to:
a. describe the past on its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through literature, diaries, letters, debates, arts, artifacts, and the like;
b. consider the historical context in which the event unfolded-the values, outlook, opinions, and contingencies of that time and place; and
c. avoid "present-mindedness," and not judging the past solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 2

The student is able to differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations but acknowledge that the two are related; that the facts the historian reports are selected and reflect therefore the historian's judgment of what is most significant about the past.

HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3C

The student understands the effects of WWII at home

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association (TRSMA) is devoted to honoring the survivors of the Rohna attack, communicating and gathering with NOK and fostering the further dissemination of the Rohna story to the public at large. The website contains books, articles and other military websites helpful to families who are still looking for information about a loved one.

Rohna:Classified—This website is devoted to locating next of kin of Rohna casualties. They are in the process of producing a documentary on the Rohna expected to be released by late 2020.

Glossary Of Important Terms

HMT Rohna
Primary and secondary sources
Classified vs. declassified
Convoy KMF-26
Luftwaffe squadron
Henschel HS-293 glide bomb
Heinkel 177-bomber plane
USS Pioneer (& other rescue ships)

SCC Library Research Tutorials

Primary and Secondary Sources Video (4 minutes)
Santiago Canyon College

HOW MUCH SHOULD THE GENERAL PUBLIC KNOW ABOUT MILITARY DECISIONS?

AIM: WHAT IS THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT ON FAMILIES OF MILITARY PERSONNEL ONCE CLASSIFIED MATERIALS BECOME DECLASSIFIED?

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KEY VOCABULARY

HMT Rohna
Classified vs Declassified
Convoy KMF-26
Luftwaffe squadrons
Henschel HS-293 glide bombs
Heinkel 177-bombadier
USS Pioneer (and other rescue ships

List of Units on the Rohna

CE 853rd Engineer
AC 322
SC31st
MC44th
AC AAF Fillers
AC Ground Fillers
AC AAF Fillers
INF ASF Fillers

MAP STUDY-Map of Mediterranean and North Africa

On Smartboard-Provide students with a map of the Mediterranean where sinking took place and show areas in North Africa where servicemen were taken after being rescued. Students may also do this on their I-Pads. Geography lesson should be provided at this point. Students can later find archival images (many taken by those who survived) to show areas in Africa.

Note: The History Channel produced a video called The Rohna Disaster: WWII's Secret Tragedy which will give students a better picture of where the sinking took place. (listed in references)

DO NOW: (5-7 minutes) Please respond to the following question in a paragraph. Be ready to share what you wrote with the student next to you and eventually in a whole class discussion. Your mother or father is deployed (define word) overseas. You are able to e-mail your parent on a daily basis and have an actual conversation on a weekly basis. Suddenly the e-mails and phone calls stop. You get in touch with the unit commander. The responses are caring and polite but offer no information as to whether or not your parent is still alive. They continue to furnish polite updates but your parent is found neither dead or alive. You are given NO information as to his/her last whereabouts.

In a paragraph, express your thoughts and feelings about this very personal situation. How do YOU cope with this situation? What might be the emotions of the parent you are living with? What possible actions could/would you take?

Also - How would the steps you could possibly take NOW be very different from this same thing happening to someone 75 years ago during WWII?

PROCEDURES

Students will share their responses to this scenario. Make sure that after students personally share how they would feel about this situation happening to them today that they take a serious look at how this situation might have been handled very differently and what options they might have had to finding out what happened to a loved one 75 years ago during WWII. Teacher will "summarize" the emotional toll on families. Before viewing trailer to Rohna:Classified the teacher must emphasize that the video clip they are about to watch relates directly to their previous discussion. At this point, the teacher should supply minimal "factual" information on the attack of the Rohna. Definitions and examples of classified and declassified information should also be provided. The following questions should also be provided BEFORE viewing so that students may effectively discuss what they have seen and heard.

1. The 3 Rohna survivors were all instructed by their superiors not to tell anyone about the sinking? (not even each other) Why do you think this was so?
2. What technology did the Germans possess that made the sinking of the Rohna so successful?
1. How could this aspect play into making it classified?
2. 3.Herbert Wagner was the scientist who designed the missile that destroyed the Rohna. Why did an American Naval intelligence team smuggle him out of Germany and bring him to the U.S.?
3. Maj. Hans Dochtermann was the pilot of the plane that delivered the glide bomb that sank the Rohna. In the video, it indicated the remorse he had for what he had done. Does this surprise you? Explain.
4. Why is Sgt. Joe Pisinski highlighted in the trailer? How was he such a part of the "larger picture" of the tragedy of the Rohna?
5. Why do you think that Darlene Berube, wife of survivor Frederick Panion, was never told by her husband what happened to him?

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SUMMARY

After viewing trailer share your thoughts with the student next to you.

1. Why do you think the Rohna attack was kept classified for decades?
2. Why were so many families not informed as to where and when their loved one died?
3. Do you think it is fair that the military makes these decisions? Elaborate and explain your answer.

ASSESSMENT

1. Write a letter to a mother in 1943 who just lost a son on the Rohna. Write in the persona of a teenager in 2020. Be sure to share what you know about the attack from a 21st century perspective,

   OR

2. Write a letter to a mother in 1943 who has lost a son on the Rohna. Write in the persona of a 16 year old teenager living in 1943. Keep in mind that you do not know any of the facts. (he is MIA)

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

Examine the following 2 documents relating to the Rohna. One is an excerpt of an article published in the New York Times on January 4, 1946 about the Rohna. The other is written by a survivor, John Canney to his parents on September 9, 1945 from India.

If the attack of the Rohna was supposed to be "classified" why did the NY Times publish a report and why did a survivor tell his parents? Be sure to make note of the dates these were written.

New York Times- Published January 4, 1946:

VETERANS OF EAST REACH PORT HERE
Survivors of Rohna Sinking,
Free Tai Army Unit Among
Arrivals from Overseas

The Navy transport General arrived at Pier 88, North River yesterday with 3, 221 Army officers and men from the India-Burma and China Theaters. She left Karachi, India on Dec. 12.

Among the passengers were 888 members of the 853rd Engineer Aviation Battalion, including 150 who had survived the sinking of the British transport H.M.S. Rohna in the Mediterranean on Nov. 26, 1943, when the unit was bound for India.

The attack of the Rohna was made by thirteen German bombers off the coast of Algeria. A hit amidships sank the transport with 1, 050 casualties, 496 of whom were members of the 853rd. One of the survivors returning yesterday, SGt. Douglas Steele, 22 years old, of Salt Lake City, Utah, said he was manning an anti-aircraft gun when the transport was attacked. After the order to abandon ship, he said he entered the eater and clung to a hatch cover for three hours before he was picked up by a minesweeper and taken to North Africa.

When the unit was reorganized, it went to India, where its members won two unit citations for meritorious service.

John Canney Letter

The following letter was written by John Canney, a Rohna survivor on September 9, 1945 to his parents. (from Agra, India)

> ***Dear Mother and Father,***
>
> ***Here it is another Sunday. Another week has ended and is hopefully bringing me near to that ay when I am return home for good. It seems like a long time since I said good bye to you at the South Station, yet in a way it seems like only yesterday.***
> ***I returned to Seymour Johnson until a little later I was moved to camp Patrick Henry in Virginia. A week later I boarded the Liberty ship William S. Rawle and October 14th we set sail for Africa via the south Atlantic route. We had no mishap all the way across except plenty of rain. Finally, in late October we disembarked at Oran, North Africa. On November 23rd we boarded the English troop ship Rohna at the little port of Mers El Kabir. November 25th was Thanksgiving Day. We had a dinner of canned chicken precisely at noon, the time the ship set sail. As a result of that a good 70% of the fellows were sea-sick. On the following day at five o'clock in the evening somewhere off Algiers we were attacked y 30 German planes. The convoy was the target but our ship happened to be the unlucky one. A radio-controlled glider bomb struck our port side above the water line, traveled downward, exploded in the engine room, blowing a hole open on the other side of the ship below the water line. The ship was paralyzed, on fire and sinking. I had been below decks with most of the fellows when this happened so as quickly as possible everyone went on deck. When I arrived on deck there must have been hundreds overboard already. Some fellows were attempting to get away some rafts but the knows were too old and tight to get more than a couple overboard. Dan Daleski, myself and another fellow (Al Corbin from Connecticut) decided that it was too dangerous to go overboard during all this excitement so we found a fairly secluded part of the deck and sat down and smoked. We took off our shoes, buttoned our clothing remembering it would give us more buoyancy and inflated our lifebelts. We were lucky as we had brand new U.S. Navy double tube life belts which had only been manufactured two months previous. Most of the***

commotion on deck had subsided as the majority of the fellows were already overboard. Danny checked his watch, it was then 6:10 pm, forty minutes after we were hit. Danny then went overboard, Corbin next, and then I followed. I climbed down the cargo net which was still a good ten feet from that of an even keel. I jumped into the water and began paddling away from the ship alone. I could not see the other two fellows, so I kept to myself. I did not want to be near any panic- stricken crowd attempt to get on top of a raft. One minute I was in a valley of waves, the next riding the crest. The two rescue ships were parked about a mile away. With the help of good current, I reached one of them in about an hour. One amusing sidelight was that I did not want to lose my gold-rimmed eyeglasses so I wrapped them up in my hat. When I was in the water I found I still had the hat but no glasses so I threw the hat away.
When I finally reached the sides if the JS minesweeper the U.S.S. Pioneer, I was blinded by a wave of salt water. I put out my hand to protect myself against being thrown against her by the waves what should I grab but the bottom rung of an iron step ladder I had not seen. Another wave hit me and I went hand over hand up the ladder and was pulled aboard by two sailors. The first person I met was Corbin, a little later we found Danny, his water-proof Longines still running.
At 7:30 as the Rohna exploded and sank we had another attempted air raid and the two ship had to start their engines and move, leaving hundreds in the water. The rest of the night until about 6 am the following morning, the little minesweeper scoured the waters looking for survivors. The War dept. recently published the toll of death as having reached 1015 men, the greatest disaster of its kind in this war.

The skipper of that little minesweeper had survivors tucked away in every conceivable corner of that little ship. He was attempting to keep her on even keel as he was afraid that she might capsize from the weight she was carrying. At 8 am of November 27th, 1943, I disembarked a the little port of Phillippeville in North Africa. Our shipment was one of the luckiest on board the Rohna as we had on about 45% casualties. I am one of the luckiest fellows as I was only in the water about an hour whereas most of the fellows were in from four to eight hours and a few as much as twelve or fourteen hours,

As ever and ever, always
Your loving son, John

Websites

The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association

Rohna:Classified

The National Archives—for educators-Teachdoc.

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