

Unraveling the Secret Behind the HMT *Rohna*

Caitlin McHugh

This statement is in remembrance of the historical and tragic sinking of the British troopship HMT Rohna on November 26, 1943 in the Mediterranean Sea off the North Africa coast. Those of us who experienced and survived that ordeal, and the hundreds of families who lost loved ones, stand together today in commemoration of that loss. The tragic loss of 1015 soldiers of more than 2000 aboard the Rohna marked the greatest loss of American military personnel at sea during wartime in our history. It also introduced the deadly results made possible by the use of radio controlled guided missiles. The weapon released at dusk from a bomber overhead crippled the Rohna in its initial blow. The vessel sank within an hour's time. The success of that attack immediately resulted in a cloak of secrecy by the Allied Forces, that, ironically, lasted over 50 years. -¹

The universally provided justification for the “cloak of secrecy” that kept the story of the *Rohna* disaster submerged within the depths of the United States and British military records is that the Allied governments did not want the German military to realize the success of their Henschel 293, a new and frightening technology that the Allies had yet to perfect. The shocking and tragic event occurred while the ship was transporting troops to the China-Burma-India Theater of World War II as part of Convoy KMF-29. Only a few writings of the *Rohna* sinking exist; it is absent from most history books and military histories of World War II. Writings that do exist consist of a few scattered newspaper and internet articles claiming that necessary military censorship was exercised. Survivors and veterans who knew of the sinking accept that the general public, including the families of those who perished, could not be informed of the details of the sinking because the guided missile was “a new device and we didn’t want the Germans to know if it was successful

¹ "Memorial Service for the Victims Aboard the Hmt Rohna," transcribed speech, in *Camden County, N.J., The Rohna Disaster WW II Memorial*. New Jersey, Camden. 27 July 2002, Robert M. Brewer, <http://www.dvrbs.com/Rohna/Camden,NJ-WW2-HMTRohna.htm>.

or not.”² This explanation is oversimplified and unenlightened, as it is founded on false information about the Germans’ knowledge and overlooks critical facts about the *Robna* sinking and its aftermath. British and American military records, survivor accounts, and the work of a few dedicated historians reveal a complex, multiple-causation explanation for the preservation of the *Robna* secret. The reason for the fifty-year “cloak of secrecy” is a combination of three factors. The first contributing factor is that during the war, the Allies felt it was necessary to keep the success of the guided missile a secret from their own civilians, not the Germans, to preserve home-front morale. Secondly, the deplorable condition of the ship and the disgraceful behavior of the British Indian crew led to a desire to conceal the details of the event even after the defeat of Germany and the conclusion of the war. Finally, due to the presence of American soldiers on a British ship, the American and British bureaucratic webs caused the event to become lost in government papers. Subsequently, the family members of those who died were left painfully uncertain about the fate of their loved ones. The story of the men who tragically died on the *Robna* and those who survived was left untold, unacknowledged and unremembered.

The standard justification for the secrecy surrounding the *Robna* is that the British and American Allies did not want the German military commanders to know that one of their guided missiles had successfully sunk the HMT *Robna* during a Luftwaffe air attack on Convoy KMF-29. This explanation is flawed because it depends on the assumption that the Germans were unaware that the bomb had hit and sunk the *Robna*, causing a significant loss of life. The author of *Forgotten Tragedy: The Sinking of Hmt Robna* and professor of History Carlton Jackson directly refutes this premise: “The Germans knew the success of the Henschel 293—it was in all their newspapers—and they wanted its news spread all over the world, especially to the US and the UK.”³ Jackson also provides direct evidence from Major Hans Dochtermann, the German pilot flying the plane that released the successful Hs 293, who said in an interview that the German military knew the missile had successfully sunk an Allied ship and was, in fact, unsatisfied that only one missile had made contact.⁴ German planes also returned to the Mediterranean as the ship was sinking to photograph the carnage and to strafe struggling survivors in the water who were visible in the dark by the light of the

² William Dobbs interview by Caitlin McHugh, October 11, 2009, audiotape (in Caitlin McHugh’s possession).

³ Carlton Jackson to Caitlin McHugh, e-mail, November 10, 2009 (in Caitlin McHugh’s possession).

⁴ Carlton Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy: The Sinking of Hmt Rohna*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 1997), 131.

burning ship. On these strafing missions, which caused additional loss of lives, the German military gained further evidence of the terrible blow it had dealt the Allies.

Although the Americans had a missile called Project MX 108 that was equivalent to the German guided HS 293, it was still in the experimental phase and had not been successfully employed in the attack on the *Robna* in November 1943.⁵ The knowledge that the Germans had a superior weapon, which had killed so many American soldiers and British officers, would have distressed the Allied civilian populations and GIs in other theaters of the war; it would have been “demoralizing” to the war effort and the confidence of the Allied people in their militaries.⁶ The reality that the Germans were ahead in military technology was both frightening and embarrassing.

The British and United States military commanders and their respective governments feared that if the details of the *Robna* sinking were made public in 1943, then the war effort would be seriously undermined. As John Fievet remembers, the survivors of the *Robna* were given strict orders not to talk or write about what had happened: “I was told, if you try to write home about the *Robna* you’ll be subject to court martial, you cannot tell your family what happened to you.”⁷ When the *Robna* survivors arrived in the China-Burma-India Theater, the original destination of the *Robna* and convoy KMF-26, they found that most people there had never heard of the *Robna*. This censoring by top military officials was so complete that most of the soldiers, officers, and military personnel in the China-Burma-India Theater were completely unaware that 1015 American men had been lost at sea. It was as if the *Robna* had never existed and the men on her had simply disappeared.

It may be tempting to accept that the wartime censorship deliberately cultivated the American public’s ignorance purely for their protection benefit and was the only reason that the *Robna* sinking was concealed. However this explanation does not account for why the information was not immediately divulged when the war was won and Germany was defeated. All that resulted were a few nondescript newspaper articles that did not give the name or location of the ship and attributed the attack to a German submarine. The question remains of why there was a “marked reluctance”⁸ to divulge information about the

⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶ Interview with Carlton Jackson, in: “The Rohna Disaster: WW II’s Secret Tragedy,” prod. New York : A & E Television Networks, (History Channel, 2001).

⁷ Michael Walsh, “An Interview with John Fievet,” in *Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy* (New York, 2005), 17.

⁸ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 146.

Robna to the families, some of whom were only ever told that their sons or husbands were missing in action.

There are several disturbing facts: the *Robna* was shockingly overloaded and the officers and crew grossly unprepared for the dangerous situation encountered; all safety measures available to the GIs in an emergency, consisting of lifeboats, life rafts, and life vests, were severely inadequate. According to the *Robna* Memorial Association Website, created in 1998, the events, which occurred after the *Robna* was struck by the guided missile “were so shameful that the secrecy continued for decades.”⁹ The despicable condition of the ship and the inept and cowardly actions of the crew compose the second factor contributing to the secrecy of the *Robna*, which continued after the war. The details of the sinking were deliberately concealed so as not to embarrass both the British and the United States governments.

The *Robna* was severely overburdened, rendering it susceptible to complications following an attack. The *Robna* was originally a civilian ship designed to hold 100 people comfortably. On the fateful transport mission in 1943 from Oran, Africa, to India, the HMT *Robna* was carrying 2193 military personnel and 195 crew members, roughly twenty times its capacity. The result of this massive overloading was that the men were crowded below deck in appalling conditions. The ship was old, rickety, and rusted, which had deadly consequences when the bomb struck. William Dobbs was a member of the 31st Signal Battalion Core, whose men were divided between the *Robna* and its sister ship the *Rajula*. While on board the *Rajula*, William writes in a letter home: “I spent the worst 35 days of my life on that ship[;] we were practically starved, went on a hunger strike, not enough latrines or washing facilities, sleeping quarters, slept on tables, on floors, on barrack bags and any other place a body could squeeze.”¹⁰ Similar conditions existed on the *Robna*. As a result, the tightly packed ship was vulnerable even before leaving the harbor.

Water travel through the Mediterranean Sea in 1943 was as safe as walking through a minefield. The area of the Mediterranean Sea between Algeria and Tunisia was called “Suicide Alley” because of exposure to air attack from German-occupied France.¹¹ In the month of November 1943 alone, the Germans had sunk the *Mont Viso*, *Santa Elena*, *Marnix Van St. Aldegonde*, *USS Beauty*, *Nivose*, *Carlier*, *HMS Jela*, *Birchbank*, and the *Empire Dunstan* (Dutch, French, British and American Allied

⁹ The *Robna* Survivor Memorial Association, 2000, <http://www.robna.org/>, (15 Oct. 2009).

¹⁰ William Dobbs to Steven Wolf. September 9, 1945 (Personal Collection, Scotch Plains, NJ).

¹¹ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 18.

ships) in the Mediterranean with U-boats and air bombings.¹² Safely exiting the Mediterranean was not the only challenge: “The word was out that leaving the Suez Canal was dangerous because of Japanese subs.”¹³ In addition to the volatile conditions of the seas entered, the *Robna* held the most exposed position in the convoy, the second position, called “Coffin Corner”. The ship in “Coffin Corner” was likely to get hit by a bomb that was aimed at a ship in the first position.¹⁴ The convoy to which the *Robna* belonged also lacked the adequate air support required in case of an enemy air attack. The ships in the convoy were carrying men for the final thrust to defeat Japan.¹⁵ Despite the vital importance of Convoy KMF-26, composed of twenty-four ships, much of the RAF air protection previously positioned in the Mediterranean had been transferred to Britain as part of the buildup for Operation Overload in preparation for D-Day.¹⁶

In view of these dangerous circumstances, the correspondingly lax safety precautions existing aboard the *Robna* were even more inexcusable. Prior to the attack, there was a general disorganization and lack of communication among the British officers in the convoy. There was not an established commander of the convoy and the British did not bother to assign radio code calls to the ships of the convoy.¹⁷ The result of this blasé attitude was a lack of vital communication between the convoy and escort ships during the attack. In addition, for an unknown reason, the *Robna* lacked “barrage balloons, devices to entangle invading aircraft or their weapons.”¹⁸ All twenty-three other ships in the convoy had barrage balloons. This was probably a careless oversight that placed the *Robna* at an even greater disadvantage and risk.

There were several lifeboat drills conducted each day on the *Robna*, but the events that followed the missile demonstrated that these “drills” were neither useful nor thorough. Carlton Jackson concludes that the “utter chaos”¹⁹ after the missile struck “could have been avoided had there been prior exercises in evacuating a stricken ship.”²⁰ During the lifeboat drills, the troops were only told in what order to go to the top deck and in which area of the deck to wait for a lifeboat: “The men were told that the *Robna*’s Indian crew would handle lifeboats and rafts.

¹² Ibid., 3.

¹³ Dobbs interview, audiotape.

¹⁴ “The Rohna Disaster: WW II’s Secret Tragedy.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁹ Walsh, “An Interview with John Fievet,” 9.

²⁰ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 59.

No further instruction was given on how to launch them.”²¹ On the contrary, the Indian lascar crew did not know how to operate the lifeboats, and therefore when it became necessary to evacuate the ship there was no one aboard who knew how to properly work the lifeboats. Many of the *Robna* survivors’ reports tell of the lascars running around, screaming and hacking wildly in their attempts to lower the lifeboats. *Robna* survivor Fred Panion reports, “The East India crew was of no use to us. They did nothing to help.”²² Far from helping, the Indian crew actually hindered the soldiers by taking the usable lifeboats for themselves, “row[ing] away and [leaving] the GIs to do the best they could.”²³ From their actions, it is clear that the crew was never trained on how to proceed if emergency evacuation was required. The British officers not only deceived the men into believing that the lascars could operate the lifeboats, they placed the lives of the American men in the hands of an incompetent crew, which promptly abandoned them, leaving the young men to save themselves.

Fifty years later, when survivor John Fievet criticized the actions of the lascar crew in a documentary about the *Robna*, the British defensively replied, “Well, the Lascar were not regular Navy personnel, they were conscripts picked up from anywhere.”²⁴ This is a poor excuse for the miserably handled security on the *Robna*; when employing the lascar on their ships, the British Navy assumed responsibility for their proficiency and actions. The crew of a ship reflects its command, and the British command alone was to blame for the lascar’s lack of training and the GIs’ ignorance of the lifeboats; it is without question that someone on board the *Robna* should have been trained to operate the lifeboats. Ironically, the aforementioned trained Navy personnel, the British officers who were supposedly in command of the ship, also did little to alleviate the panic and restore order on the top deck. With nobody “giving orders”²⁵ and all precedents established by the lifeboat drills forgotten, many men were unnecessarily killed in the ensuing chaos. As Jackson reasons, many lives may have been saved if the men had merely been instructed on ship attack procedures, including proper lifeboat drills.²⁶ If equipment had actually been employed during the drills, perhaps someone would have noticed that not only was the crew

²¹ “The Rohna Disaster: WW II’s Secret Tragedy.”

²² Michael Walsh, “Fred Panion: Rohna Survivor,” in *Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy* (New York, 2005), 109.

²³ Walsh, “An Interview with John Fievet,” 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵ Micheal Walsh, “The Real Thing,” in *Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy* (New York, 2005), 92.

²⁶ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 62.

unable to operate the lifeboats but also that the lifeboats themselves were nonfunctional.

The appalling condition of the lifeboats aboard the *Robna* was one of the most unnecessary factors that contributed to the *Robna* tragedy. The cables holding the lifeboats in place as well as “the latches, davits, and blocks”²⁷ had become rusted with age, causing them to be “impossible to lower.”²⁸ Compounding their immobility, most of the lifeboats had been accidentally painted to the sides of the ship while it was being spruced up at port in Oran. The GIs, who were unfamiliar with the lowering equipment and became increasingly panicked by their inability to release the lifeboats, frequently resorted to cutting the ropes of the lifeboats in order to extricate them. Most of the time this resulted in the lifeboats emptying their contents into the sea or falling violently from the great height of the tilted ship, killing the men who had already jumped into the water. Sometimes, as the lifeboats were being lowered, the rotted and weak ropes holding them broke, dropping the boats thirty feet and killing all the men inside, said Robert Brewer: “I don’t remember any one of the boats going down orderly.”²⁹

If by a miraculous chance the GIs were able to lower a boat successfully and if they prevented it from capsizing, the GIs found that the lifeboats were too decrepit to last in the rough seas. In one of the most shocking evidentiary testimonies regarding the poor condition of the lifeboats, survivor Sgt. Ernest H. Horton indicates that he swam to what he thought was safety inside a lifeboat until “someone put their foot through the [lifeboat] we were in.”³⁰ The lifeboats of the *Robna*, which “killed hundreds of men”³¹ in the process of being lowered, saved very few lives. In summary, of the twenty-two lifeboats available to the 2,388 people aboard the ship, only two of the six successfully-lowered lifeboats “worked properly.”³² The fatal fiasco resulting from the defective lifeboats could have been rectified if the safety equipment on the ship had been maintained.

There were similar problems with the 101 rubber life rafts aboard the *Robna*. The life rafts, like the lifeboats, had adhered to the ship from the paintings and were difficult to release. Survivor John

²⁷ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 66.

²⁸ Micheal Walsh, “Death! An Instant Away,” in *Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy* (New York, 2005), 30.

²⁹ Interview with Robert Brewer, in “The Rohna Disaster: WW II’s Secret Tragedy,” prod. New York : A & E Television Networks, (History Channel, 2001).

³⁰ Michael Walsh, “Sgt. Ernest H. Horton,” in *Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy* (New York, 2005), 105.

³¹ Walsh, “Death! An Instant Away,” 31.

³² Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 64.

Canney had observed GIs who were struggling to untie the ropes that connected the life rafts to the ship, noticing that “the knots were too old and tight to get more than a couple overboard.”³³ The life rafts also dropped violently into the water when successfully liberated, crushing any GIs below who were attempting to flee the ship.

When the lifeboats and life rafts proved useless, many GIs were forced to rely solely on their life vest as a means of survival. Like all other aspects of the *Robna*, the life vests were another example of inadequate equipment and poor instruction. While the British military was responsible for practically all of the previously mentioned safety debacles, the life vests were American-supplied. The GIs lack of understanding of the life vest proved disastrous once the missile struck:

These devices, unlike the Mae West variety, more commonly used, which were worn like a jacket around the upper chest, these were more like a donut worn belt-high around their waists. Once inflated by the gas cartridge on the belt, the soldiers that had made the mistake of jumping into the sea with their gear, created a high center of gravity, which forced many of them under water, head first. Being exhausted, they were unable to right themselves and drowned.”³⁴

Lives could have been saved if the GIs were trained in life vest safety. Many survivors felt that had they practiced using the life vests in the water, much of the confusion and panic over how to use them would have been averted. Others felt that the Mae West life vests would have saved many more lives and were angry that they had not been issued the best type available.³⁵

There are significant discrepancies between the British and American official reports concerning the sinking of the *Robna*. The American records were created from multiple survivor accounts recorded during interviews by the War Department as part of boards of inquiry into the *Robna* sinking. The final summary GI accounts, in the form of AG Files 704 dating May 4, 1944 from the National Archives, make striking observations and conclusions. For instance, the record states that during the interviews the survivors “unanimously condemn[ed] the conduct of the Indian crew.”³⁶ The record cites the “condition of the

³³ Michael Walsh, “John Canney-Letter Home,” in *Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy* (New York, 2005), 19.

³⁴ Michael Walsh, “Robert J. Porter,” in *Rohna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy* (New York, 2005), 24.

³⁵ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 64.

³⁶ Memorandum to: Chief, Casualty Branch, A.G.G., 5 May 1944, AG Files 704, (National Archives, Washington, D.C.), 3.

ship's equipment and the conduct of its crew"³⁷ as one of the most influential factors that contributed to the loss of life on the ship, ranking second only to the fire and damage caused by the actual explosion. Other factors that contributed to the great loss of life in the *Robna* tragedy were the rough seas and the German strafers; indicatively, the British equipment and British crew are the only components of the disaster, which could have been improved. Michael Walsh believes that these conclusions by the United States government, demonstrated clearly in the records, were part of the reason for the heightened secrecy both during and after the war.³⁸ The errors of the British, concisely and accurately presented in the records, were so glaringly obvious that if the information had been made public, the British government would have been in an awkward situation, obligated to justify its carelessness and defend its military procedures. If details of the sinking were released, it may have resulted in outrage by the family members of those who perished on the *Robna* and public concern over the reliability of the British Allies. For instance in 1960, a man named Colonel Virden took an interest in the *Robna* tragedy. The Pentagon denied him permission to write a book about the *Robna*, stating that "any writing on the subject might possibly be embarrassing to the British government."³⁹ Once the decision was made that military censorship would be necessary to protect national morale and preserve confidence in the British Allies, it was easier, after the war, to keep these records and all other information about the *Robna* concealed rather than to contend with the intricate and complicated consequences.

In addition, in event of a public revelation of the *Robna* details, the United States government would have faced questions about the life vests provided for its troops. Interestingly, the AG Files 704 conclude that "[f]aced with the desertion of the Indian crew, the failure of the ship's equipment, the disastrous results of the awkward effort of the troops to lower the boats, the growing confusion and impending panic," the troops were forced to depend "only on their lifebelts."⁴⁰ Although not stated in AG 704, there were further inquiries into the effectiveness of the lifebelts: "Almost every subsequent board of inquiry into the *Robna* tragedy recommended improvements in life belts worn by American personnel."⁴¹ Families of the victims would have wanted to know why

³⁷ Memorandum to: Chief, Casualty Branch, A.G.G., 5 May 1944, 3.

³⁸ Michael Walsh to Caitlin McHugh, e-mail, November 13, 2009 (in Caitlin McHugh's possession).

³⁹ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 156.

⁴⁰ Memorandum to: Chief, Casualty Branch, A.G.G., 5 May 1944, AG Files 704, 4.

⁴¹ Jackson, *Forgotten Tragedy*, 64.

the problems with the life belts had not been observed sooner and why the realization of life belt deficiency was made at the expense of their sons and husbands. In 2009, since the details of the *Robna* tragedy have been released and awareness has been raised about the condition of the life belts, Carmine Langone, nephew of John Langone who died aboard the *Robna* found it “inexcusable” that the GIs were supplied with defective life belts.⁴² Any problems with the lifebelts should have been observed and “rectified” immediately.⁴³

The British accounts of the lascar, life rafts, lifeboats, and life vests in some cases contain half-truths to disguise concerns, while at other times appear to be total fabrication. A report from Lieutenant Commander of the *ATHERSTONE* to the Commander and Chief of the Mediterranean Station, blames the explosion of the bomb for “render[ing] useless many of the life boats on the port side.”⁴⁴ This statement contains facts that are true but obscures the reality that the boats were useless even before the missile struck. A report from 2nd Officer J.E. Wills of the *Robna* describes how the troops were “unaccustomed to the ship”⁴⁵ and therefore “became slightly panicky.” Slight panic is a blatant understatement when compared to the numerous GI descriptions of the chaos and bedlam that occurred on the top deck. While the officer acknowledges that the troops were unaccustomed to the ship, he does not deem it necessary to provide an explanation. This confidential document raises questions: why were the troops unaccustomed to the ship, and who was responsible for familiarizing troops with the ship? Officer Wills also writes that all the life rafts on the *Robna* were released.⁴⁶ This outlier description appears to be false because most GI reports, containing information regarding the life rafts, state that many were unable to be released. Lt. Commander of the *ATHERSTONE* also falsely indicates that both the crew and officers remained on the ship while all GIs were helped off the ship. The Statement of the Third Radio Officer- S.S. “*Robna*” contains even more absurd testimony directly contradicting the official conclusions recorded in the National Archives and numerous survivor testimonies. The Statement articulates that the lascar crew “acted quite calmly” and that the American lifebelts were observed to be “superior to any other I have

⁴² Carmine Langone to Caitlin McHugh, e-mail, October 25, 2009 (in Caitlin McHugh’s possession).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ James G. Bennett, “Report of Proceedings,” in *The Rohna Disaster: WW II's Secret Tragedy* (Philadelphia, 1999), 189.

⁴⁵ James G. Bennett, “Report of an Interview with the 2nd Officer, Mr. J.E. Wills,” in *The Rohna Disaster: WW II's Secret Tragedy* (Philadelphia, 1999), 185.

⁴⁶ Bennett, “Report of an Interview with the 2nd Officer, Mr. J.E. Wills,” 185.

seen.”⁴⁷

In addition to an active desire to protect home-front morale and hide the negligence of the British officers and crew, bureaucratic indifference further contributed to the fifty-year “cloak of secrecy” enveloping the *Robna*. Once the *Robna* secret was submerged, the contradictory documents were scattered between Great Britain and the United States. Because the ship was British and the soldiers were American, “incredible intelligence snarls” resulted, and there was no clear coordination of record keeping between the two countries.⁴⁸ The *Robna* records were handled so poorly that it was often the case that survivors could not receive “recognition or recompense”, because no records could be produced on the subject.⁴⁹ The story of a wife’s difficulty in proving that her husband, a *Robna* survivor, had been injured in “an attack the government wouldn’t acknowledge for more than fifty years”⁵⁰ is an illustration of what anyone seeking further information about or involvement with the *Robna* faced. She had to file “document upon document with government agencies across the country” before finally obtaining the Purple Heart for her husband.⁵¹

It was not until the 1967 Freedom of Information Act that the United States government was forced to begin divulging secrets about the *Robna*. The government did not formally acknowledge the HMT *Robna* sinking until House Concurrent Resolution 408 in 2000. There was never any formal notification sent by the government to the family members of those who perished on the *Robna*, many of whom later died without ever knowing the details of their loved one’s fate.

Even now that the cloak has been lifted, the majority of Americans have never heard of the *Robna*. Charles Osgood stated the problem of the *Robna* phenomenon in his 1993 Veteran’s Day broadcast: “It’s not that we forgot. It’s that we never knew.” The reasons for this lack of knowledge are still misunderstood by the small population of Americans that do know about the *Robna*. While the Congressional Resolution recognized that the secret was inappropriately kept for too long, it gives no explanation for why this occurred. The 1015 men who died aboard the *Robna* and in the waters of the Mediterranean gave their lives for the safety and security of the United States; they deserved more from their country. Their deaths accounted for approximately a third of

⁴⁷ James G. Bennett, “Statement of the Third Radio Officer-S.S. “Rohna” Officer, Mr. J.E. Wills,” in *The Rohna Disaster: WW II's Secret Tragedy* (Philadelphia, 1999), 191.

⁴⁸ Jackson to McHugh, e-mail, November 10, 2009 (in McHugh’s possession).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Walsh, “Fred Panion: Rohna Survivor,” 112.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

the total men lost at sea in transportation during World War II; the *Robna* sinking was the single greatest loss of lives at sea during a war in United States history. The magnitude of this loss will never be appreciated, as now the story is too old to be fully valued and respected. The secret should have surfaced soon after the war ended. Government deficiencies and embarrassment should have been discarded and bureaucracy should have been more attentive. Maybe then the families of those who gave their lives aboard the *Robna* could have obtained closure. Maybe then the survivors could have been honored and those that perished paid tribute to and remembered. Maybe then the HMT *Robna* could have taken its due place next to the celebrated and observed disasters such as the RMS *Lusitania* in the Atlantic and the USS *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor and earned its rightful place in the hearts and minds of the American people.

Sources

- Bennett, James G. *The Robna Disaster: WW II's Secret Tragedy*. (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 1999).
- Letter from William Dobbs to Steven Wolf. Yunnanyi, China, 9 September, 1945. Personal Collection.
- "Memorandum to: Chief, Casualty Branch, A.G.G., 5 May 1944," AG Files 704, National Archives, Washington D.C., 1944.
- Personal Correspondence with Carlton Jackson, November 10, 2009.
- Personal Correspondence with Carmine Langone, October 25, 2009.
- Personal Correspondence with Michael Walsh, November 13, 2009.
- Robert, Brewer M. "Memorial Service for the Victims Aboard the Hmt *Robna*." Address. Memorial Service for the Victims Aboard the Hmt *Robna*. New Jersey, Camden. 27 July 2002. In: *Camden County, N.J., The Robna Disaster WW II Memorial*. <http://www.dvrbs.com/Robna/Camden,NJ-WW2-HMTRobna.htm>. 2 Nov. 2009.
- The Robna Disaster: WW II's Secret Tragedy*. The History Channel. New York, New York. Television. 2001.
- The Robna Survivors Memorial Association Website*. Robna Survivor Memorial Association, 2000. <http://www.robna.org/>. 15 Oct. 2009.
- Jackson, Carlton. *Forgotten Tragedy: The Sinking of the Hmt Robna*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 1997).
- Walsh, Michael. *Robna Memories: Eyewitness to Tragedy*. (New York: I. Universe, Inc., 2005).
- William Dobbs, interview by the author. Scotch Plains, NJ. October 11, 2009.

