

The Rohna Attack

November 26, 1943

“It’s not that we forgot. It’s that we never knew.” —Charles Osgood

The Rohna attack remains the largest loss of life at sea by enemy action in the history of US War. Hitler’s secret weapon, the radio-guided missile killed over one thousand American soldiers. The War Department declared the Rohna attack classified indefinitely, ordering all survivors to remain silent while stonewalling the families of the dead soldiers. The consequences of the secrecy rippled through generations as next-of-kin are now questioning the circumstances surrounding the classified attack.

THE ROHNA ATTACK

The HMT Rohna left North Africa on November 25, 1943 with 1,981 American soldiers on board. The Rohna was part of a 24-ship convoy heading to the China-Burma-India Theater to support the allied war efforts against Japan. The ships were venturing down Suicide Alley, a dangerous stretch of the Mediterranean Sea known for German attacks.

The following day, 21 German bombers carrying one of Hitler's secret weapons attacked the convoy in two separate waves without any successful hits. As the allied troops within the convoy let out a sigh of relief, one last bomber plane returned and launched the last radio-guided missile of the attack straight into the side of the Rohna.

It was the greatest loss of troops at sea by enemy action in US history.

The attack killed 1,015 US soldiers. It's estimated that 300 men were killed on impact, and most of the remaining soldiers died either trying to get off the sinking ship or in the water waiting to be rescued. Unbeknownst to the troops who were aboard the overcrowded ship, there were only 22 lifeboats — and most of them were non-functioning.

One of the first guided-missiles ever used against the US.

The Rohna attack was historic in many ways. Besides being the largest loss of troops at sea by enemy action in US history, it was one of the first radio-guided missiles ever used against the US. The War Department swiftly classified the attack ordering all of the 966 survivors not to talk or write home about it under a threat of court-martial. By the time the war was over, most of the survivors went home with their painful story buried deep inside as they tried to forget their secret tale of that fateful night.

The War Department classified the Rohna attack indefinitely.

The War Department's decision to classify the Rohna attack indefinitely kept the story out of WWII history books. It was virtually never mentioned for 50 years. The families of those who were killed in the Rohna attack were never told what happened to their loved ones. There were no War Department phone calls, letters, or visits made providing information that would bring closure to the families. Most of the bodies of the soldiers were never recovered and in most cases, there were no funeral services or burials for the forgotten soldiers. Six months after the attack, the Gold Star families back home finally received one short paragraph confirming the death of their sons and husbands in a telegram that also stated that there was no information available. That was it; the boys just never came home.

The Rohna attack was left out of the history books.

While the War Department was holding back information about the Rohna attack from the public, they were also misleading 1,015 families giving them false hope that their loved ones were still alive even though the War Department confirmed the casualties shortly after the attack. All of the Gold Star families went through unnecessary pain and anguish from not knowing the truth. Things only got worse for the families who were desperate to find out information about how their boys were killed. The stonewalling continued as most of the Gold Star families went to their own graves never knowing anything about the Rohna attack or how their hero died. The historic attack was covered-up, left out of the history books and forgotten along with the men who were killed that day.

THE ROHNA ATTACK

LESSON PLAN FOR WWII CURRICULUM

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 archived 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 the effect it has on their families when they are misled by government officials who they trusted.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-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.
- C. Avoid “present-mindedness,” and not judging the past solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

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 WWII had on the survivors and their families as well as the casualties and their loved ones.

TEACHER REFERENCES

In the on-line sources section at the end of this lesson plan, we have included a link to a free PDF file of a very informative book about the Rohna attack called “Allied Secret – The Sinking of the HMT Rohna” by Carlton Jackson.

A shorter reference to the story is told by Caitlin McHugh, A former Cornell University student, who wrote an eleven-page publication about the Rohna attack called “Unraveling the Secret Behind the HMT Rohna.” [Unraveling the Secret Behind the HMT Rohna](#)

INTRODUCTION

In this Lesson Plan students will learn about the WWII Rohna attack along with the War Department’s mysterious cover-up. Students will see the effect it had on distraught families who were searching for the truth. The Lesson Plan will open discussions about facets of war rarely talked about, giving students insight to the enemy along with an understanding of the War Department’s responsibility to families of US soldiers. In this unique story where two individuals responsible for the attack are highlighted and even humanized, the personal side of all involved in this secret tragedy will engage students in this compelling WWII story.

KEY VOCABULARY

HMT Rohna
Transport Ship
Convoy KMF-26
Luftwaffe
Bombardier
Henschel Hs-293 Guided Missile
Heinkel He-177 Bomber Plane
Classified vs Declassified
War Department

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.

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.

A family member is deployed overseas. You are able to e-mail this person 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 your loved one is alive. You are not given any information as to their last whereabouts for six months.

In a paragraph, express your thoughts and feelings about this happening to your family.

How do YOU cope with this situation?

What might be the emotions of other family members you are living with?

What possible actions would you take?

How would the steps you could possibly take NOW be 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 share how they would feel about this situation happening to them today, that they look at how it may have been handled differently 75 years ago during WWII. What options would be available for families to find out what happened to a loved one during WWII? Teacher will “summarize” the emotional toll on families.

PREVIEW VIDEO <https://youtu.be/FJs0lco9N10>

Before viewing a seven-minute preview video of a documentary about the Rohna attack, 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.

PREVIEW VIDEO QUESTIONS

1. The three Rohna survivors were all instructed by their superiors not to tell anyone about the sinking. Why do you think this was so?
2. What technology did the Germans possess that made the sinking of the Rohna so successful and how did this aspect play into making it classified?
3. Herbert Wagner was the scientist who designed the missile that attacked the Rohna. Why did an American Naval intelligence team smuggle him out of Germany and bring him to the U.S.?
4. Major Hans Dochtermann was the pilot of the plane that launched the guided missile that sank the Rohna. In the video, it indicated the remorse he had for what he had done. Does this surprise you? Explain.
5. Why is Sgt. Joe Pinski highlighted in the trailer and how was he part of the “larger picture” of the Rohna tragedy?
6. Why do you think that Darlene Berube, wife of a survivor, was never told by her husband what happened to him?

SUMMARY

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

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

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

Have students read Caitlin McHugh's report about the Rohna attack and then discuss the possible reasons that the War Department may have covered up the attack long after the war was over.

[Unraveling the Secret Behind the HMT Rohna](#)

Have a class discussion about some of the reasons why the War Department may have wanted to keep the attack classified after the war was over. Was it fair to the families of the casualties to be kept in dark about the circumstances surrounding the death of their loved ones.

EXTRA CREDIT

CONTACT DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Write a letter to the Department of Defense (formally known as the War Department during WWII). Request information about the HMT Rohna attack. Write it from your own view of the injustice that occurred to the heroes and their families. Include your own personal views on how the War Department handled the classified attack. Ask questions and express your thoughts from what you learned to honor the forgotten Rohna heroes.

Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1400

RESEARCH

Go to the Rohna: Classified website and click on "Casualty Search."

<https://rohnaclassified.com/casualty-search>

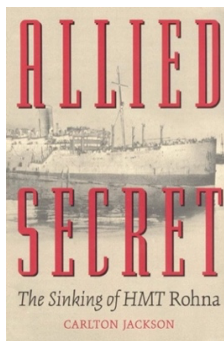
The page has a list of every US soldier who was killed in the attack. Check your state and see if one of the soldiers were from your county or state. Choose one of the names from the casualty list and research the soldier's name. If your state isn't listed, choose a name from a state close to you.

Find out if the soldier is honored at any memorials, had any newspaper stories about him or if you can find any information about his family. You may want to locate his next-of-kin to see if they are aware of the Rohna attack and explain your interest in the story. Remember, most parents of the Rohna casualties went to their own graves never knowing what happened to their boys and didn't talk much about it after the war. What a great way to honor an American hero!

CONTACT

Please contact us if you are planning to use our lesson plan. We are keeping track of the schools and would like to add your school to our list. Upon request, we would be available to supply your class with additional materials and resources. You can email our Outreach and Education Coordinator Janice Pumelia at: RohnaClassified@gmail.com

ON-LINE RESOURCES



Allied secret tells the dramatic story of the sinking of the HMT Rohna, which resulted in one of the greatest number of casualties suffered in WWII. The huge loss of life and the subsequent cover-up of the details surrounding it make for fascinating and disturbing reading. Limited publications exist on the subject, so this is a valuable resource for interested historians.

BY CARLTON JACKSON

The “Allied Secret” book about the Rohna attack is now available on-line for **FREE**. Download the book as a PDF file for easy reading.



The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association (TRSMA) is devoted to honoring the men who lost their lives in the attack as well as the survivors and those involved with the rescue efforts. Association members continue 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

Rohna: Classified is the website for the upcoming documentary. The site has a Resources page with information about the Rohna attack. There is also a page on the website that list every soldier killed in the attack by state, county and town. Family members are encouraged to complete a form on the website that includes information about their hero.



WIKIPEDIA - HMT Rohna was a [British India Steam Navigation Company passenger](#) and [cargo liner](#) that was built on [Tyneside](#) in 1926 as SS *Rohna* and requisitioned as a [troop ship](#) in 1940. ("HMT" stands for His Majesty's Transport.) *Rohna* was sunk in the Mediterranean in November 1943 by a [Henschel Hs 293](#) guided glide bomb launched by a [Luftwaffe](#) aircraft. More than 1,100 people were killed, most of whom were [US troops](#).