

# **ULTRAVISION**films

Presents

## **ROHNA CLASSIFIED**

It's time to tell the truth

A FILM BY JACK BALLO

58 MIN / USA / COLOR / B&W / ENGLISH

**Website & Trailer:** [www.RohnaClassified.com](http://www.RohnaClassified.com)

**Film Stills, Photos and Movie Poster:** [Press Kit](#)

**Outreach Campaign:** [Distribution](#)

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## **LOGLINES**

It's time to tell the truth.

Was there a cover-up... or was it just conveniently forgotten?

## **SYNOPSIS**

A British transport ship equipped with non-functioning lifeboats and inadequate lifebelts was sunk by one of the first radio-guided missiles ever used in war. 1015 US soldiers were killed in the classified attack that remains the greatest loss of life at sea in the history of any US war.

ROHNA CLASSIFIED is a new film that uncovers classified documents revealing that neglect and oversight contributed to the large number of casualties. The government deflected responsibility by declaring the disaster classified indefinitely and ordering all survivors to remain silent. The casualty families were stonewalled and most of them went to their own graves never knowing what happened...their boys just never came home.

It's time to tell the truth.

# ROHNA

CLASSIFIED



*"It's not that we forgot.  
It's that we never knew."* — Charles Osgood

ULTRAVISION FILMS PRESENTS ROHNA CLASSIFIED  
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY JACK BALLO  
PRODUCED BY JACK BALLO, MICHAEL WALSH AND HAYLEY BRICKER

[www.RohnaClassified.com](http://www.RohnaClassified.com)

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

By Jack Ballo

I live in an old house in New Jersey that has been in my wife's family for over 100 years. While moving things around in the attic one day, I found a box of 23 letters from a soldier who wrote home to his mother. The soldier was my wife's great uncle, an uncle she never knew anything about. It was as if he never existed, but he existed to me. I heard his voice in those letters and I knew that I had to tell his story.

I had a lot of questions about the attack itself, but the fact that most of the families of the casualties never knew what happened to their sons is what moved me to make this movie. The few historians who even know about the Rohna attack would tell you that it stayed classified due to an oversight, as if the War Department forgot to declassify the files of the largest loss of life at sea in the history of US war. "It was lost in the shuffle," is what one historian said. My feelings about this are very different; I don't believe that 1000 mothers who lost their sons under such mysterious circumstances allowed the War Department to forget the Rohna disaster.

Ken Burns meets Dateline NBC is how I describe the Rohna Classified documentary. The film starts by taking a historical look at life in the late 1930s to the early 40s from the perspective of WWII veterans who were just kids with dreams, trying to figure out their future. 1015 of those kids were killed on their second day of war when one of the first radio-guided missiles ever used in war was steered straight into their ship.

I went into this filmmaking journey always thinking about the mothers of the soldiers who were not only misled by the US War Department, they were abandoned by them when they needed them the most. While researching for the film I would think about Pat Tillman's mother and her unwavering commitment to find out the circumstances behind her son's death in Afghanistan. Later I learned that, like the Tillman story, there are many other similar stories in recent years where military officials misled or lied to Gold Star families. Apparently, avoiding embarrassment and responsibility for mistakes in the military has been going on for a long time. Maybe this documentary can bring attention to this problem and make a change in policy that prevents this injustice from taking place.

My original goal for this documentary was to simply shed some light on the secret attack. However, after several trips to the National Archives I started piecing together important facts of the attack and the secrecy surrounding it that have never been brought up before. Documents that I discovered started to tell a story about a conflict, but it wasn't a conflict involving the war. It was a conflict between War Department officials regarding how much information to give to the casualty families about the

attack, if any at all. The Bureau of Public Relations was adamant about telling the casualty families that their boys died, but War Department officials refused their request and sent out "Missing in Action" telegrams to all of the casualty families even though they knew the soldier's were dead.

It would be five agonizing months before the families would receive another War Department telegram stating that their loved one died without any other information. It's hard to imagine the heartache and suffering the families of the casualties went through over those five months living with a false hope that one day their son or husband would walk through the door again.

I learned a lot about the War Department's handling of the attack from the documents and reports discovered in our research, but I already had a pretty good understanding of what went wrong on the day of the attack. The cables and pulleys that were needed to release the lifeboats were all rusted together and then painted over with heavy black paint making most of them impossible to release. The lifeboats were unusable thus forcing every soldier who was not killed by the blast to jump off the burning, sinking ship into freezing cold water with nothing but a lifebelt; a lifebelt that had to be inflated. Instead of wearing naval life jackets that would have protected them from the cold temperatures and keep them above the harsh waves, they were issued lifebelts that they didn't even know how to use. These M1926 lifebelts were designed for amphibious assaults. They would be worn by soldiers as they departed landing crafts on beaches. They were not designed for soldiers on ships that were traveling through the rough and dangerous waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

The documentary points out problems, lots of problems, but I am well aware that war time is difficult and mistakes will happen. I also realize that decisions get made at all different levels of authority and that we may never get all the answers. However, the film does ask important questions. The same questions that I believe the parents and wives would have asked War Department officials 80 years ago if they had known the truth.

In 2008, my co-producer, Michael Walsh, had the insight to interview Rohna survivors. Looking back, the survivors firsthand accounts were instrumental in getting the story from the men who were there. In the documentary, they talk about the problems with the lifebelts and lifeboats as well as other aspects of the secret attack. Michael, who was my story consultant, interviewed a total of 45 survivors over twenty years and wrote two books about their experiences on that fateful day. He also scoured through 95 eyewitness statements that he found at the National Archives from survivors whose accounts of the attack didn't exactly line up with the War Department's initial reports of the attack.

I believe that ROHNA CLASSIFIED can have an important impact on society while educating people about the secret disaster. Honoring the forgotten soldiers and getting this film into the history books is important, but there's something about the pain that the parents and wives went through not knowing how their loved one's died that still haunts me. Especially because I learned that the heartache trickled down to their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews and the injustice of it carry's on in the casualty families today. To make matters worse, in my research I learned that Gold Star families are still misled and lied to by military officials today. Maybe there is a lesson here, maybe it's time to have this conversation.

My other hope for this film is that it makes its way into schools and colleges. I'm concerned that the youth of our nation look at WWII as an ancient war without any understanding of it's importance to our freedom or the sacrifices that were made. I made a conscious effort to include an educational component to the documentary. The film highlights some important events of WWII that puts the Rohna story in context while teaching us, or reminding us of this dark time in America's history.

# FILM TEAM

## **Jack Ballo**

### **Producer / Director / Writer**

Jack Ballo launched Ultravision Films in 2007 after working in video production for over 20 years. He has produced several award-winning humanitarian films and documentaries. His first film, *Wrong Turn* (2008), was followed by *Elio* (2010) and then *Before You Leave* (2012). Ballo co-wrote the screenplay *The Doo Dah Man* (2015) Flatiron Pictures, based on his own life experience. He produced the critically acclaimed Tent City documentary *Destiny's Bridge* (2016). His last film, *Brothers* (2018) was screened in eight different countries, winning film festival awards around the world. His wife, Barbara is the great niece of Joseph Pisinski, one of the soldiers killed in the Rohna attack. They now live in the same house where Joseph Pisinski grew up. Ballo found letters in their attic that Sgt. Pisinski wrote home to his mother that led him to learn about the Rohna.

## **Michael Walsh**

### **Producer / Story Consultant**

Michael Walsh is a video producer with over 35 years of experience in producing programs that have won Aegis, Telly, Golden Slate and IFCA awards. He became involved with the Rohna story when his stepfather took him to a Rohna Reunion in 2001. His interest in the story led him to writing two books, *Rohna Memories I* and *Rohna Memories II*, about the sinking of the HMT Rohna. Walsh has interviewed and filmed over 60 survivors, rescuers, experts and relatives of servicemen who were aboard the Rohna on the day of the attack. He's a historian; researching original materials, letters and the formerly classified Rohna documents preserved at the National Archives. Walsh has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Rhode Island and a Master of Science degree from Rhode Island College.

## **Hayley Bricker**

### **Producer / Research**

Hayley Bricker is a recent Rowan University graduate with a BA in Radio, Television and Film with a concentration in Production as well as Film Studies. She has a minor in Anthropology and a Certificate of Undergraduate Studies in Italian. She has worked freelance for independent filmmakers in the Philadelphia area as a Production Assistant, Cinematographer, Director of Photography and 1st Assistant Director. Her Great Uncle, Harold Bricker, was a member of the 853rd Engineer Battalion aboard the Rohna, and was a casualty of the attack. Hayley is very excited to begin her career post college here with Rohna Classified!

## **Cynthi Stefenoni**

### **Consulting Producer**

Cynthi Stefenoni has been an assistant director member of the Directors Guild of America since 1987. Her credits include numerous television shows (e.g. Sisters, Lois and Clark, JAG, Boston Legal, Zooey 101), TV movies (including, PeeWee's Playhouse Christmas Special (1988), Cagney and Lacey (1991) Return to Mayberry (1997) and films (e.g. Dear God (1998), Waking Madison (2007), Torn (2008), The Fixer/ Burn Country (2015)). In addition, she has taught at the San Francisco Digital Film School as well as lectured at the American Film Institute. She has been a consulting producer on various films and has produced the Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival--named one of Movie Maker Magazines 25 coolest film festivals--since 2012. She currently serves on the Board of The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association where she has been the assistant producer of the TRSMA reunions since 2012. She is the daughter of Rohna survivor Alfred Stefenoni.

## **Ann Good**

### **Research**

Born in England to a former RAF bomber pilot and a Women's Auxiliary Air Force flight mechanic, Ann Good was raised in Canada. Following a career in the field of international development, Ann learned about Rohna Classified as the result of a genealogy course assignment; her mother's older brother, Private Henry William Bly of the Royal Medical Army Corps, was lost in the Rohna tragedy but the family knew very little about the incident. Since becoming involved in the project, she has uncovered new information to tell the British perspective of the story. Working from her retirement post in Ottawa, Ontario, Ann has been collaborating with a British military historian and a Canadian genealogist, based in London, England, who have access to the British National Archives in person and have helped identify key sources of WWII documentation relevant to the Rohna.