

## **Sinking of the "Rohna"-A virtually unknown WWII tragedy**

By Michael Logue

Few people have ever heard about the sinking of the Rohna, or the 1,105 American soldiers who died in the worst at-sea disaster in U.S. history. But Charles "Dutch" Beard, a retiree from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, has not forgotten. He was on the Rohna when a German guided missile sank her during World War II.

The HMT (Her Majesty's Transport) Rohna was a dilapidated old British merchant vessel converted to troopship. She sailed from Oran, Algeria, bound for Bombay, India, carrying 1,981 U.S. soldiers, including Beard, a young lieutenant in the 853rd Aviation Battalion. The Rohna also carried seven Red Cross personnel, and 195 Indian crewmen and British officers.

The Rohna was part of convoy KMF-26. On Nov. 26, 1943, about 30 Luftwaffe bombers attacked the convoy. Several of the Hinkel 177 long-range bombers carried two Hs293 remote-controlled glider bombs, one under each wing. The Hs293 was, in effect, the first air-launched cruise missile. A rocket engine launched the bomb away from the bomber, then it glided toward its target under remote (radio) control.

One of these weapons struck the Rohna on its port side just above the waterline, the first successful war-strike by such a weapon. It exploded in the engine room, blowing a huge hole at the waterline on the opposite side.

The old Rohna sank in less than an hour. The sinking claimed 1,015 U.S. servicemen, three Red Cross workers, and 134 Indian crewmen and British officers, making it the worst at-sea disaster in U.S. history.

And Beard was headed for 12 hours of hell.

"The first thing I did was pick up all the life vests that I could that were floating near me," he recalled. "I had one around my waist and one under each arm. I had that much sense about me."

Most of his comrades were not so lucky. "Some were killed by the blast. Some just gave out."

Beard was rescued by a British destroyer, the Holcomb, and he was apparently the last survivor picked out of the water. He spent 17 days in the hospital before being recalled to the 853rd Aviation Battalion, an engineer unit which was to build airfields and anything else needed in India. But Beard's troubles were still not over.

"I was wearing a British uniform they had given me at the hospital and was picked up by the military police for being out of uniform," he said. His commander secured his release.

For security reasons, the War Department immediately suppressed all news of the Rohna catastrophe. As company commander, Beard was assigned the duty of writing letters to the families of his fallen buddies.

"Everything was so secret that I couldn't tell them what had happened to their loved ones." The only thing Beard could write, the only thing any notification letter ever said, was that the victim was "killed in action" or "missing at sea and presumed dead."

After the war and the successful completion of their mission in India, Beard returned to Vidalia where he had worked for the Corps before the war. He came home with a Purple Heart and a raging case of malaria.

"I had it so bad I had to go to the hospital in Natchez," Beard said. Lucky for him. With a fever of 106, Beard asked his attending nurse to marry him. She accepted and became his wife.

Beard quickly returned to work with Vicksburg District, staying until his retirement in 1976. Then he continued to work with contractors until about 1990.

The U.S. government maintained the secrecy around the sinking of the Rohna. The story didn't surface until the mid-1960s. In the early 1990s, the survivors and the victim's families began to obtain the details under the Freedom of Information Act. On May 30, 1996, a memorial to the Rohna was dedicated at the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery in Seale, Ala.

So, Beard is now something of a celebrity in the community and has been featured in the newspaper several times recently. His loyalty to the Vidalia Area Office runs deep. "I still have coffee down there every morning."

And daily he remembers his buddies from the Rohna, keeping alive the memory of those who never made it to India and never made it home.