

When war broke out in 1939 my dad, John Cumming Sclater, gave up his ambition to train for the Customs and Excise at Skerries College in Edinburgh and instead went to Wireless College in Aberdeen. After passing his exams there, he joined the Merchant Navy as a Wireless Officer. My sister Eileen and I knew this, and that he'd been to India and South Africa while at sea for he had brought back souvenirs which were displayed in our family home. What we didn't know was that one of the ships he had served on - HMT Rohna - had been bombed with a huge loss of life in 1943 and that the subsequent sinking had been immediately classified until 1965. Dad didn't speak of the horror he had gone through when his ship sank, so we only discovered about the sinking when clearing out the family home after our mother died in 1998. All dad's letters which he wrote as a young officer to his parents and sisters in Kirkwall, Orkney, plus certificates and documents from his years in the Merchant Navy, were neatly placed on a shelf in his wardrobe. It was a revelation. I opened his Continuous Certificate of Discharge which listed all the ships he had sailed on. 'Discharged at sea on 26 November 1943' was written beside the Rhona entry. Did this mean what I thought it did? So, I googled HMT Rhona and discovered that the day after she left Oran for the Far East, she was attacked by the Luftwaffe. Of the 1981 American soldiers who were on board, 1015 soldiers died. 117 crew members were killed, leaving just 78 who escaped. Five ship's officers were killed. Dad was one of the lucky ones. He survived.

It was a shock. So, I decided to research what happened. This is what I found out.

On 2 August 1942, HMT Rohna docked in Bombay harbour after leaving Karachi. Originally a British passenger and cargo ship, she had been requisitioned as a troop ship in 1940 when war engulfed the world. Four days after her arrival in Bombay, dad began his engagement on the ship as a second radio officer. He was twenty years old.

Basra was the first port of call after Rohna sailed out of Bombay on 20 August, just eight days before dad's twenty-first birthday. Khorramshahr in Iran, Karachi, Bandar Abbas, Hormuz, and Tripoli were to follow.

Dad was a prolific letter writer but, mindful of the censor, he focussed on the minutiae of life, describing his cabin which was 'bigger and better' than his last as he now had a desk with more drawer space. He mentioned the new Third Officer who was seventeen years old 'and a bit scatterbrained.' On one occasion he passed the time when not on watch by sewing new buttons on his shirt, for they came back from the laundry with 'next to no buttons.' You could say that life on board was a bit dull, were it not for the fact that Rohna supported the North African Campaign and the Sicily Landings which dad was not allowed to describe. The last letter he wrote home from Rohna was dated 6 November 1943.

'Lately I have been doing lots of odd jobs to prevent myself from getting bored, as that is rather inevitable when you lie about for a long time and no watches to keep. My amplifier for the gramophone is finished but I have not got a speaker for it yet. The other day I went off hot foot to another ship when I was told someone was disposing of an old set but unfortunately it proved a false alarm.'

If dad managed to get a speaker later that letter did not reach home. His gramophone was lost as well, for twenty days later Rohna sank.

At 12.30 on 25 November 1943, Rohna and five other troopships sailed from Oran in French Algeria to join a convoy which had left Gourock on the Clyde ten days before. Troops were needed for the Far East, and as the Americans and British were now working closely together, British ships which were already in the Middle East were used to transport American soldiers to the Indian Ocean, with convoys from Britain to protect them.

The day they left was Thanksgiving which should have been a day for celebration, but the young GIs were far from home and missing their families. There were other concerns too, for that morning a German reconnaissance plane had been spotted over Oran. Just five days before, the Empire Dunstan, a cargo ship, had been sunk after being torpedoed by a German submarine. Rohna was sailing into danger.

The following afternoon on November 26 at about 16.30 hours, the Luftwaffe appeared as the convoy was sailing past Bougie on the Algerian coast. They carried not only conventional bombs, but also radio-guided, rocket-boosted glide bombs, a new weapon. At first, the Germans dropped only vertical bombs aimed mostly at the transport ships. When these missed, they began to fire glide bombs at the escorts, but a combination of electronic jamming, a thick black smoke screen and constant zigzagging meant the convoy avoided being hit. Four French Spitfires were flying overhead on routine patrol and as the fighting continued, RAF fighters joined the action. With such protective measures, the Germans had no successful hits on the convoy and troopships – although the Allies did report two planes missing. Everyone watched with relief as the last of the German planes disappeared. Then one plane returned, flown by Major Hans Dochtermann. Rohna, the only ship without barrage balloons for protection, was hit by a glider bomb close to the engine room. The explosion was so powerful that the debris from the blast killed several of the gun crew on the top deck.

I read a brief report of the bombing from the British Ministry of Defence Naval History in the National Archives. 'Attacked by aircraft 26/11/43. Sank in ½ hr.'

Half an hour of chaos and terror. Men were trapped below deck and could not find their way out due to smoke and flames. A report from the nearby Arundel Castle noted that the base of the resulting smoke cloud occupied at least one-third of the ship. About twenty minutes later a 'sheet of flame leapt to a steady height of about 100 feet, testifying to the large size ...and power of the bomb.'*

After the attack dad, like the other British officers on board, had to write a report on his actions when Rohna was hit.

'When the attack took place,' dad wrote, 'I was on watch in the wireless office. Immediately the ship was hit, all power ceased, and someone yelled to me to get out. I went aft to see about my own boat, No.10, which was at the after end of the boat deck, but it was impossible to lower it as the plate had been blown out at right angles to the hull. I went back to the wireless office and collected the logs, but while helping to lower No.1 boat, I lost them. While lowering this boat, the forward fall got out of control and tore the fall drum out of the socket on the bridge. The same thing happened to No.3 boat a few minutes previously. We eventually got the

boat into the water although it went in by the stern, shipping quite a lot of water. I then went to the port side of the boat deck to try and assist in lowering the other boats. This was useless

as No.2 was hanging by the after falls. The boats which did get into the water were almost immediately swamped by the number of men who boarded them. The midships safety net had not been loosened so I let it go and then climbed down it into the water. The ship was then ablaze from No.4 hatch aft.

Suggestions: Improved method of lowering lifeboats should be introduced. On ships with Indian crews, parties from amongst the troops should be instructed in lowering the boats. U.S. navy type inflatable life belts should be issued in place of kapok jackets.'

Is there an implicit criticism here of the lack of training of the Indian crew and the inadequacy of the life jackets? I do wonder.

The following year on 10 August 1944, the Orcadian, Orkney's local newspaper, did a piece on 'Local Lads at Sea' and dad was one of the 'lads' featured. There was no mention of the sinking. Instead, it was reported that dad 'had a memorable baptism of fire when his ship was repeatedly bombed in the Mediterranean. Though shaken by near misses, the ship was not hit.' How can you cover up over one thousand deaths, I wondered after reading this article.

I began to think that I didn't know my dad as well as I thought; my dad with his big broad grin who adored his family, gave hugs freely, and who loved gardening, photography, and music; he said nothing of what he had gone through – even to my mother. Faced with his own mortality at the age of twenty-two, having seen other men die in horrendous circumstances, he stayed silent - like so many men in World War Two who had witnessed terrible things.

I had come across a note among dad's papers titled 'Learning to live' which he had written after the bombing. That made me wonder if dad had made a conscious decision to put the shock of the bombing behind him. Had he chosen to forget being in the water surrounded by men who were struggling to survive for the lifeboats were overloaded? What had it been like to see his ship on fire above him and then to watch it sink below the waves, knowing that there were men trapped below decks; to smell burning oil, to hear the crackling of flames and see men who could not swim drown before him?

Yet somehow dad found the courage to go back to sea and join another ship two months later. That took guts. If he had inner scars, he hid them well.

There is a postscript to this story, for in November 2023, 80 years after Rohna sank, Eileen and I went to New Brunswick NJ for the screening of a new documentary about the bombing, organised by the Rohna Survivors Memorial Association. I had heard about the Association when searching for information on the internet, so I contacted them, explaining that my dad was a British Officer on the ship when it sank. When we were invited to attend the screening, we both accepted, for we wanted to honour our dad. What struck us both at this weekend reunion was that Shawn Dochtermann, the grandson of the pilot who had bombed the Rohna, was there as well. He has been coming to these reunions for some time now at the invitation of the Association. Shawn said that after the bombing was declassified, his grandfather had felt very guilty when he discovered how many men had died; but he had taken the oath of service and had to follow orders. In an interview in Frankfurt on 2 October 1995 he said of the Rohna survivors, "I give them my sincere greetings, every one of them," and wrote in a letter that "the memory of all the fallen soldiers, from whichever nation, makes me deeply sad." A poignant remark indeed.

It was very special to meet families of men who had been on the Rohna but we quickly realised that not all survivors could forget the horror of the sinking as dad seemed to have done – though I'm sure that he must have had moments when unwelcome thoughts came into his head. We met families whose fathers came home traumatised, turned to alcohol, or suffered repeated bouts of depression. Somehow, we both marvelled, our dad learned to cope with what he had seen, put the bombing behind him and surround us with love. I imagine him struggling to stay afloat in an oily sea, his ship in flames above him, waiting for the rescue ship to pick him up along with other men fighting for survival. 'Learning to live' he wrote on a piece of paper from his next ship. He was only twenty-two. He had faced his own mortality but knew that life was precious, and he was determined to live that life well. And he did.

This story is to honour his memory: John Cumming Sclater 1921 -1976.

*Allied Secret: The Sinking of HMT Rohna by Carlton Jackson