

# 'The Real Closure Was That it Answered Questions'

## A VFW member from Michigan helps honor his wife's late uncle, whose 'killed at sea' citation during World War II left many questions unanswered for decades

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Tillie Bobby and her family spent 80 years piecing together the vague details around her uncle's death during World War II, clinging to a citation that simply stated he was killed at sea. But in 2022, while browsing the Find a Grave database online, Bobby and her husband, Roger, of Port Sanilac, Michigan, discovered a link between Tillie's uncle's death and the British troopship HMT Rohna.

"We got married 53 years ago, and I had just thought her uncle, Ralph, died at sea by having his plane shot down or something," said Roger, a VFW Post 8872 commander in their hometown of Port Sanilac. "Finding out that he was on the HMT Rohna led us to finding The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association and learning about the cause of his death."

Pvt. Ralph Sitter was born on July 7, 1909, in Strasburg, North Dakota, and later moved to Washington state for work before joining the Army Air Force. He was among the 793 Air Corps 853rd Engineer Aviation Battalion servicemen aboard the Rohna on Nov. 26, 1943, when a German aircraft sank the vessel off the coast of Algeria in the Mediterranean Sea.

At the time, the U.S. War Department had withheld details from the public due to the then-new radio-guided bombs used in the attack, according to details the Bobbys found on the Rohna Survivors Memorial Association website. Believed to be the largest loss of Army servicemen at sea in a single attack, it killed 1,015 of the 2,000 Army Air Corps servicemen aboard that day.

When Congress publicly recognized the sinking of the Rohna in October 2000, the families of the deceased had been kept in the dark for decades and even the survivors, who had been

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held to secrecy, struggled to prove the event had taken place.

“Little is known about the Rohna in the public consciousness as a result, and it is something that does not get talked about or taught in schools,” Roger said. “It was such a huge loss of American lives, and the fact is that the families did not know what happened for more than 50 years. Some family members went to the grave not knowing what happened to their loved ones.”

To do right by her uncle after discovering the details of his death, the Bobbys requested an official VA-issued marker in June 2022. But since Sitter had had a stone on a family plot in a Strasburg cemetery, the VA denied the request that August.

“The regulations are that if the deceased died before 1990 and there is a marker of some sort, the VA would deny it,” Roger said. “So we just went ahead and had our own marker made to look like the VA-issued marker, with the same dimensions, and added ‘HMT Rohna casualty.’”

The Bobbys then orchestrated a VFW-style funeral ceremony to honor Sitter and others who perished aboard the Rohna on Nov. 26, 1943. They traveled from Port Sanilac to Strasburg and held the ceremony on July 1 at the Saints Peter and Paul Cemetery in Strasburg, where Tillie’s parents and grandparents also are buried.

The ceremony was conducted by an honor guard from the North Dakota National Guard, and more than 70 guests attended the event, which included VFW Posts in North Dakota whose members sat among Tillie’s family to honor Sitter and others who lost their lives on the Rohna.

“My wife is the youngest of 16 children, and her mother was Ralph’s sister,” Roger said. “Aside from the nice ceremony we were able to give him, the real closure was that it answered a lot of questions about Uncle Ralph for my wife and her siblings. They got to uncover what the citation really meant when it said, ‘killed at sea.’”

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