

Rohna Survivor Reunited with Knife After 62 years

By Addrien Marx, for the *Pathfinder*

Sixty two years, a lifetime, but for Louis R. Phelps for 24 years he and other survivors suppressed memories of an incident that the US government refused to acknowledge or verify until 1967,

The sinking of the HMT Rohna resulted in over 1100 men lost at sea, ushering in the “Missile Age” unknown until this tragic day to the unsuspecting world.

Now, Memorial Day Festivities in Seeley Lake, MT will attempt to give a special token of appreciation to one of the survivors of that tragic episode by reuniting him with a knife lost those many years ago.

Don Weidinger of Seeley Lake, acquired the knife, with the tell tale inscriptions, in China while serving in the US Navy and has found the original owner, Louis R. Phelps, one of only 60 men still alive of the nearly 2000 that set sail from Oran, Algeria on Thanksgiving 1943.

Only 900 men would survive the fatal sinking of the HMT Rohna—Louis Phelps was one.

Memorial Day 2005 the Seeley Lake Historical Society, the Seeley Lake Fire Department and the Seeley lake Veterans Association will present Louis Phelps with the knife he lost over 62 years ago in China, after the sinking of the Rohna.

Although having ownership of the knife longer than the original owner, Don Weidinger of Seeley Lake has found another tie to Louis Phelps, now living in Las Vegas, NV. Both men were born in Enid, OK over 20 years apart—and until just months ago, never had any knowledge of each other.

A German guided missile hit the Rohna, a British ship recently retrofitted to serve in the war. The ship was equipped to provide accommodations for only 100 “well-heeled” passengers but wartime needs offered travel to over 2000 soldiers headed to the Chinese theatre, 20 times its intended capacity. More lives were lost on this ship than on the USS Arizona at Pearl Harbor, yet survivors and families lived as though the event never happened—a tragic, government-induced amnesia that was unbroken for almost 25 years.

Thirty-five German bombers attacked from the rear the floating allied armada headed toward the Chinese theatre. The previous day was Thanksgiving and now the crew could see land on both sides—Europe and Africa. The event to unfold was to be historical, as the first German remote-controlled, rocket boosted bomb hit the ship, causing the greatest loss of troops at sea in US history.

Louis Phelps, now 83 years young, can still vividly picture what unfolded before him. “At four PM, I was assigned Corporal of Guard duty and was leaning against part of the ship talking to another GI when the raid started. The bomb that hit us looked just like a fighter plane except where the cockpit should have been, there was a big ball of flame. As it neared the ships, the few guns that were available were shooting at the missile. To me it seemed like it entered above the waterline and took several decks of men who were sitting down to chow. The entire side of the ship just seemed like someone had peeled it outward.”

Survival was the only order on the ship as men frantically searched for escape from the sinking ship and now, also hesitating to jump into the fire-blanketed water below. Louis continues, “I went to the low side and could see the tide was going into the hole, I went to the high side, and my God, it looked like a mile to the water. I found a rope hanging from the high side and I started down. The rope was bloody and soaked with salt water. I put both feet against the hull and jumped out as far as I could go. I had somehow shed my shoes and helmet but having jumped so far the momentum took me deep and I did not think I would make it back to the surface.”

“When I did reach air, I pressed the lever for my life belt, but only one side snapped open. I let the air out so I could blow it up right. I started swimming fast—fast enough to avoid the suction of the sinking ship. I thought I was fast—until some guy with a Tommy gun strapped to him passed by me like a dirty shirt! Somehow I had gotten rid of my coveralls. I had on my shorts and money belt. To this day I do not know how I got out of the coveralls! I was in the water for only seven to eight hours, some guys much longer. I was rescued by heroes aboard the Clay Campbell.”

This air to surface attack was so devastating that the US government placed a veil of secrecy upon it which was not lifted until 1967. The underlying reason at the time was not to let the enemy be aware of the success and prompt further similar war tactics. The reasoning behind the continued silence remains baffling—and now an awareness of the treatment of the survivors and families of the fatalities adds a new dimension to the sacrifices our troops made.

So as the festivities honoring Louis R Phelps unfold on Memorial Day in Seeley Lake, the images—both those recalled and those forgotten—will drift across the memories and imaginations of those in attendance and those present now in spirit only.

A small token of a past due thank you, words written and spoken from grateful hearts, a remembrance that measurably seems so insignificant—the event in Seeley lake will touch the heart of America.



In the reality of passing generations, honor discovers that only the hearts and souls of American citizens can remain in constant song—by enjoying this style of life and freedom that was so dearly purchased through the sacrifices of such humble men.

Louis R. Phelps—reunited with a knife that commemorates a turning point in history, a turning point in civilization—during a small ceremony amongst others who remember in Seeley Lake, MT.