

Pelham, A Soldier and the Rohna

by Jackie Layne Partin

In 1943, Pelham, Tennessee edged closer to giving up one of its own as an unknowing participant in a World War II military maneuver, in a German secret weapon event, then in a lengthy, major “cover-up,” a tragedy beyond measure for all involved, except Hitler. Raymond Patrick Partin was the only soldier from Grundy County on the *Rohna* that frightful afternoon.

Orville Patrick and Allie Blair (Goodman) Partin reared a large family in the valley that lay in northern Grundy County. Paul Carden was the oldest child; then came Alice Belle, Mildred Louise, Raymond Patrick, Virginia/Jean, Clara Mai, Reba Jewel, James Ray, Kenneth and Helen Joyce. Allie had not one child to spare; she carried them inside her body for nine months, then in her arms until too large to carry. She counted them like Jesus does every hair on His children’s heads (Matthew 10:30).



Orville Patrick Partin (father)

**Allie Blair (Goodman) Partin
(mother)**

Paul Carden Partin (brother)

Alice Belle Partin (sister)

**(Some members of Raymond
Patrick Partin’s family)**

The Partins could smell war in the air. Sparsely owned radios never missed the opportunity to speak of Germany's selfish desire to continue invading the small countries around them, then the whole of Europe, then possibly the world, Grundy County included. Newspapers, always searching the horizon for anything newsworthy, kept locals' eyes glued to the print for fear that the effects of WWII would reach here, our county, Pelham Valley. An advertisement in *The Tennessean* in **1943** offered a *Puzzle War Map* for sale for \$1.00. Listed in the countries to be learned geographically was North Africa. Orville and Allie never gave much thought to Africa; it was too far away to enter their minds – until that tragic day.

Raymond managed to complete the seventh grade in his education. His father worked for the county road system, but there was still a need for more income. Pelham Valley was known for its good farm lands, so it wasn't hard for Raymond to find work to help his parents in providing for the other children.



Raymond at Providence School



Raymond with friend Dorothy Smith

The U. S. draft board found Raymond rather quickly, for on **January 15, 1943**, he went to Dyersburg, Tennessee, not too far from home, and was assigned to the 853rd Engineer Battalion, Aviation that worked as cranesmen, derrickmen, hoistmen, and shovelmen. He was a single man with dependents that one would assume were the

several siblings still home and going to school. His parents were still alive and working, but he helped out as long as he lived.



Raymond at Dyersburg in June 1943



**Trained with 853rd Engineer, Battalion,
Aviation**

Raymond Patrick Partin of Pelham, Tennessee was shipped off to war on the HMT Rohna. I will now place a story written by *Jesse Greenspan* about the “calamity at sea” of the Rohna. The reader can follow the Partins’ son on his journey from the U. S. A. to North Africa.

<https://www.history.com/news/a-calamity-at-sea-70-years-ago>

The HMT Rohna, an 8,602-ton, coal-burning vessel, was not built for the military. Lacking alternatives, the British nonetheless pressed it and many other ships like it into service during World War II as troop transports. In the early-to-middle stages of the conflict, the Rohna carried men and supplies between Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Bombay, India, evacuated women and children from Singapore, and participated in the invasion of Sicily. It then headed to Oran, Algeria, where about 2,000 U.S. troops boarded it. On Thanksgiving 1943, the Rohna and five other troop transports left port to join convoy KMF-26 in the middle of its journey from Britain

to India. Survivors of the Rohna disaster later recalled that their Thanksgiving meal consisted principally of watery canned chicken and weevil-filled bread.

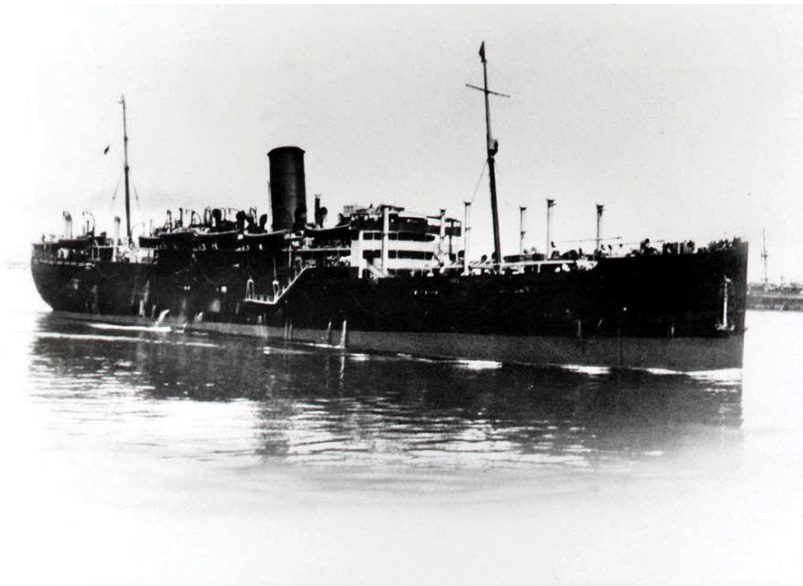
The following late afternoon, as the convoy sailed roughly a dozen miles off the North African coast, about 30 German aircraft swooped in. The ships responded by opening fire, putting up a thick smoke screen and attempting to electronically jam the Nazis' bomb frequencies. With the assistance of Allied fighter planes, they destroyed several German bombers while initially suffering very little damage of their own. During the second wave of the attack, however, a German bombardier guided a remote-controlled glider bomb – a precursor to today's "smart" missiles – into the Rohna about 15 feet above the waterline. The subsequent explosion started an engine room fire, sent debris flying and knocked out the ship's lights, communications systems and water pressure. It also punctured holes in the sides so large that, as one survivor put it, "you could drive a truck through."

An estimated 300 men died in the blast, and the casualty toll only grew from there, arguably due in part to the Rohna's deficiencies. Of the 22 lifeboats onboard, most were either destroyed by the bomb, defective or mishandled. And the remainder were "old, beaten up things," one survivor asserted. At least some of the ship's 101 rubber life rafts were likewise unusable, and the men apparently never received proper instructions on how to inflate their life belts. Moreover, the crew "had no thoughts in the emergency for anyone but themselves," according to a report from the U.S. Adjutant General's office. (Other sources say the crew acted honorably and that the life-saving equipment was adequate.) Within an hour or so, the Rohna disappeared below the surface, and all those who hadn't yet jumped into the water were forced to do so. Many were sucked under the ship never to reappear; others found themselves covered in leaking oil. The cold, darkness, big swells and strong currents also took their toll, as did German strafing fire.

In the aftermath of the attack, the commander of the convoy designated a handful of rescue ships and ordered the remainder to continue on course. The USS Pioneer, a minesweeper, proved to be the most adept at finding survivors, picking up 606. The tugboat Mindful saved over 200 additional men, and the freighter Clan Campbell pulled 83 from the water despite high decks that made rescue operations difficult. At the same time, the destroyer Atherstone, the corvette Holcombe and a French tugboat that came from shore retrieved a few dozen men between them. The rescuers worked throughout the night, coming across their last survivor nearly 12 hours after the Rohna sank. Nevertheless, 1,015 American GIs, 120 British and Indian crewmembers, 11 gunners and three Red Cross workers didn't make it out alive. No other U.S. military disaster at sea has ever been deadlier.

After a few weeks of rest, the Rohna survivors followed the rest of the convoy to India, from where some then dispersed to Burma and China. Meanwhile, since most of the dead bodies remained unrecovered, the U.S. government classified them as “missing in action.” The notified families originally held out hope. “From my experiences in the Navy I’ve heard of hundreds of men who were reported missing, and showed up a few months later,” Harold Glickman, the cousin of Pvt. Abraham Gunn, wrote to Gunn’s parents on January 5, 1944. “We just must be patient and calm, but above all we must never, never lose our faith.” Later on, however, the status of Gunn and his fellow Rohna victims was changed to “killed in action.”

In order to prevent the Germans from learning about the success of their cutting-edge remote-controlled bomb, the U.S. government disclosed only vague details about the incident, such as that around 1,000 men had been lost at sea. By and large, this secrecy stayed in place following the war. Finally, after a survivor secured the release of relevant documents under the Freedom of Information Act, the Birmingham News published a piece on the Rohna in 1993 that was picked up by the Associated Press. The first reunion of Rohna survivors took place later that year, a monument was dedicated at Alabama’s Fort Mitchell National Cemetery in 1996 and a few books on the subject came out in 1997 and 1998. Congress then got involved, honoring both the dead and the survivors in a 2000 resolution. “The men who gave their lives for their country on board this ship were heroes who deserve to be recognized and not forgotten,” congressman Jack Metcalf, the resolution’s sponsor, said on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives that September. “All Americans need to learn of their bravery and sacrifice.”



Rohna

Somewhere in Mr. Greenspan's story, Raymond Patrick Partin lived or died, was KIA or MIA. The following newspaper clipping has faded with time, but it is what the family and people of Grundy County were told, and that was all. After all, the whole affair was top secret, classified, similar to all the Congressional doings of today (2020), except the Rohna was truly top secret.



MISSING

**Mr. and Mrs. O. P. Partin of Monteagle,
Tenn. were recently notified their son,
Cpl. Raymond P. Partin 21, has been
missing in action since Nov. 26. Cpl.
Partin was last heard from with an army
unit in North Africa.**

For many years the Partins wept over, wondered about, and prayed for answers concerning their second born son. Survivors kept quiet for fear of military court martials. Orville and Allie must have had one child to spare because that is just what happened in their son's case. A memorial military marker was placed at the center of their graves in the Plainview Cemetery in Tracy City, TN. Raymond's name is etched on a memorial stone in the North Africa American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunesi, Tunisia with several thousand deaths that occurred in North Africa from several different battles throughout the years.



IN MEMORY OF
RAYMOND P. PARTIN

CPL US ARMY

WORLD WAR II

MAR 18, 1922 – NOV 27, 1943

PARKER WILLARD M	1 LT	20 BOMB SQ	2 BOMB GP(H)	NEW YORK
PARR CLIFTON L JR	1 LT	1 REGT	1 ARMD DIV	OHIO
PARRISH FORREST R	PVT	853 ENGR BN(AVN)		VIRGINIA
PARRISH RALPH F	2 LT	71 FTR SQ	1 FTR GP	SOUTH CAROLINA
PARRY JOHN C	PFC		INFANTRY	MICHIGAN
PARSONS DENVER	PVT	853 ENGR BN(AVN)		WEST VIRGINIA
PARTIN RAYMOND P	TEC 5	853 ENGR BN(AVN)		TENNESSEE
PARTIN ROBERT E	PVT	6 INF	1 ARMD DIV	GEORGIA
PASAGOLI LOUIS A	CPL	31 SIG	CONS BN	NEW YORK
PASCHAL JAMES M	1 LT	1 SQ	8012 COMPOSITE FORCE	TENNESSEE
PASCHAL JOHN F JR	1 LT	330 BOMB SQ	93 BOMB GP(H)	OHIO
PASKETT STANLEY C	PFC	32 PHOTO SQ	5 RCN GP	TEXAS
PASLAWSKI ANDREW	PFC		AIR CORPS	NEW YORK
PASTOVICH PAUL D	2 LT	787 BOMB SQ	466 BOMB GP(H)	IOWA
PATTERSON MC CLOTHAN L	TEC 5	853 ENGR BN(AVN)		ARKANSAS
PATTERSON RICHARD B	CPL	853 ENGR BN(AVN)		OHIO
PATTERSON ROBERT C	PVT	6 INF	1 ARMD DIV	MISSOURI

Other notes I have found about Tec 5 Raymond P. Partin follow:

- Missing in Action or Buried at Sea; Tablets of the Missing at North Africa American Cemetery, Carthage, Tunisia
- Award: Purple Heart
- In line of duty (Battle Casualty)
- Diagnosis: Causative Agent: Boat, sinking, by enemy action

A Must Watch

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJs0lco9N10>



THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, GREETING:

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT
THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
PURSUANT TO AUTHORITY VESTED IN HIM BY CONGRESS
HAS AWARDED THE

PURPLE HEART

ESTABLISHED BY GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON
AT NEWBURGH, NEW YORK, AUGUST 7, 1782

TO

Technician Fifth Grade Raymond V. Partin, A.S.No. 34505802,

FOR MILITARY MERIT AND FOR WOUNDS RECEIVED
IN ACTION

resulting in his death November 27, 1943.

OFFICIAL

GIVEN UNDER MY HAND IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON

THIS 16th DAY OF June 1944

Henry L. Emerson
SECRETARY OF

Years ago, one of Raymond's brothers, James Ray Partin, used to sit in my kitchen with me and talk about family history. (My husband Grady Ward Partin is a cousin to all of Orville and Allie's children. I suppose they would be like double cousins since Orville was related to my husband's grandfather Willie Partin, and Allie was a sister to his grandmother Octavia Belle "Tavy" (Goodman) Partin.) James Ray Partin has been dead for some years, but I remember our talks, and looking back, he really didn't know much to say when I asked about Raymond and the Rohna. I truly believe his parents died without knowing what really happened to their son; thus, the children just didn't discuss it, not much at all. How frightening! How sad!