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## Bright Nothing

If you go to The *Rohna* Survivors Memorial website at [www.rohna.org](http://www.rohna.org) and scroll down through the list of survivors, you'll see my grandfather's name: Neff, Robert H. 322nd Fighter Control Sqdn.

He is one of around nine hundred who lived through the sinking of the HMT *Rohna* during World War II, but he wasn't a survivor. My grandfather's memory, like the wreckage field of that ship, lies rusting away in darkness. I will try to raise him.

I can see him now as I most often saw him. He is sitting in the green chair beside the coal stove at my parent's house outside of Knoxville, Tennessee. His overalls are dingy and stained, his scuffed black boots unzipped. A cigarette burns in his right hand and his left hand, yellow-nailed and lifeless, is cupped around his crotch. Due to alcohol abuse and smoking, he had had a stroke and lost the use of his left arm and leg. He walked with an aluminum cane riddled with dents and dings and bits of paint. Leaning hard on the cane, he moved stooped and rigid, swinging his stiff left leg out before him like it was wooden, that hand petrified to his crotch.

I can hear his scratchy voice: "Mac, never spend your money on whiskey or women." It was the only advice he ever gave me. I was around the age of twelve at the time and had no idea what he meant. I was also unsure why, after uttering the statement, he cried. Although I had seen him cry before, it was baffling because he didn't seem to cry when he was sad. He cried when, at my mother's bidding, I gave him a hug, holding my breath so as not to smell his body odor or soured clothes. He

cried when my sister in her pajamas wandered into the living room rubbing her eyes and said, "Paps." He cried most often when he teased my mother.

"Sis, Mac's on the stairs," he would repeat from the green chair while my mother swept the kitchen or fixed us lunch. "Mac's on the stairs."

He would laugh for a moment, his big cheeks bright and red, and then his face would tremble and shift into a jumble of emotions before collapsing into wailing anguish. His deep sobs echoed through the house, leaving me silent with embarrassment. My mother played along with his teasing and seemed to ignore his sadness. "Alright now, you stinker," she would say in a patient, patronizing voice while raising a playful fist at him. I'm reminded of those times when she speaks to my two-year-old niece the same way she spoke to her father.

Since my name isn't Mac, it took me years to understand my grandfather was referring to me when he teased my mother, and I assume he was alluding to a time when I was crawling and my mother was careful to keep me away from the stairs. She blamed his uncontrollable emotions on the stroke in an attempt, I think, to shelter my sister and me. "Why does Papaw cry so much?" we must have asked a dozen times.

"It's just from the stroke," she would say as if trying to convince us that his tears didn't mean anything.

If my mother were writing this she might tell about the gap in their relationship, how it feels when a father deserts his family only to limp up to her doorstep years later as a crippled old man. She might lament his choices and their missed time, or she might condemn his selfishness and remind us how much one man can willingly give up and, in doing so, how much he can lose.

I've spent my life trying to learn about him from others even while sitting with him face to face. For most of my childhood, he lived just up the road, and we saw each other on a regular basis. He was a fixture at a little neighborhood store called Jay Jones, where he passed most every day at a corner booth, filling an ashtray with cigarette butts and waving with his good hand from a cloud of smoke at anyone who entered. In those days, the sound of the cowbell on the door chiming was synonymous with the phrase, "Hey, Bob." The customer would pay and leave, and my grandfather would light another cigarette and wait for the next person to enter the store and address him. I used to wonder why he wasted his days there, smoking and waving at those who stopped in from morning until close, but I guess at that point in his life all he could do was wave at the world flying by.

Summers, my mother sometimes invited him along when she took my sister and me to lunch, a movie or the park. “Why are we going this way?” I would ask when she turned left out of our driveway instead of right.

“I asked Papaw to come with us.”

I felt duped, wishing she had told me earlier so I could have feigned sickness, which is why she didn't; she knew I didn't want him to go. The way he struggled to chew food with his mouth opened was nauseating as was the way he made the waitresses uneasy by reaching for them grinning with the hook of his cane. In the movie theater, he coughed and hacked, spitting phlegm into a handkerchief. At the park, I ran ahead of him and my mother as he hobbled along holding his crotch, hoping none of my friends would see me with him. In my childhood mind my grandfather was like some old dog we had to drag along with us out of kindness. I might as well have spent time with an old dog because we never had a conversation, he never handed down a grandfatherly word of advice or skill, and he never told me a story. As a result, I never learned who the man really was. In writing this, I'm trying to understand him backwards.

I've been told by those who knew him then though never by my mother that I favor him when he was a young man. I saw a picture of him yesterday. He looks to be around my age, in his thirties, and he's standing on the porch of my great uncle's house, which is the house my grandfather's father built and the house I bought upon returning to Knoxville. It's strange to see him standing on my porch, the now dead maple tree in my yard young and full of leaves in the background. It's even stranger to see him holding a stringer heavy with fish in his stroke hand, the one I knew to be petrified to his crotch. You can see the drunkenness in his eyes, the hard lines of hard living on his face, and in my opinion we look nothing alike. But there's a black-and-white photo in a cabinet at my parents' house. He's sprawled out on a bench in his Air Force uniform shortly after he married my grandmother. He is young and slim, a bit of mischief in his smile, fearlessness in his eyes. The nose and curly hair, the jawline—I can see why people say I look like him, but I don't want people one of these days to say I was like him. I don't want my grandson writing this when I'm in the grave.

He died at age 79 from an abdominal aortic aneurysm. The doctors gave him hours from the time he was found unconscious on the floor of his room at Guy B. Love Towers, an assisted living facility near downtown Knoxville. He lay in a hospital bed for nearly a week, stomach distended, choking on fluid from his lungs, his frail body somehow fighting off death when it had no reason to. I was in graduate school at the time. My mother called with daily updates and then to

tell me he had died. I searched for sadness or distress in her voice, but all I detected was a calm relief. Her only worry that day seemed to be me making the seven-hour drive home from Mississippi for his funeral. She practically begged me not to come home, so I didn't. Perhaps she was thinking about me falling down the stairs.

My grandfather is now buried at a church less than ten miles from my house, one I pass each day on my way to and from work. A few years before he died, after I was recently hired to work for a small local newspaper called Halls News and told by the editor to go out and find a story, I called on him. At that point in my life I had a lot of animosity toward my grandfather. I saw him as a hindrance to my mother—she had to pick up and clean his laundry every week, pay for his stay at the nursing home, try to keep up his dilapidated house. In short, she was a child taking care of the father who had abandoned her, who never gave her or her mother a dime, who never consoled her or protected her or cheered her on, who was, in essence, never a father. But I had heard bits and pieces of a war story involving him and knew it was the type of story the editor would like. I made plans for a visit.

Though I hadn't seen him in months, I felt no desire to see him then. The story was the only reason I visited. I felt that he owed me something, so I planned to take from him the only thing he had left to give. The following is an excerpt from the story that ran in the little newspaper in March of 2002:

### **Hell at sea: a tragedy forgotten**

On November 26, 1943, Robert H. Neff, a young man from the Pedigo community, found himself a world away from the pastures he played in as a boy. He was in the Mediterranean Sea, somewhere off the coast of North Africa on his way to China aboard the HMT *Robna* along with almost 2,000 other U.S. and British service members as well as Red Cross workers.<sup>1</sup>

The ship was a British transporter, part of a convoy on its way Bombay, India, deploying its passengers to the China-Burma-India Theater of World War II. It had been at sea for a day when a German bomber patrolling above spotted the American/British convoy and dropped two of Hitler's latest bombs toward the largest ship in the convoy, the *Robna*. One of the remote-controlled bombs missed its mark and fell to the sea; the other, though, tore through the *Robna*, demolishing the engine room and any peace those aboard might have enjoyed up until that moment

For Neff, the moments after the explosion were vague. Other survivors reported seeing all the hellish gore of war: scorched bodies and body parts, men on fire, screaming and running along the burning main deck as German machine gun fire poured down from above, shredding those who had survived the initial blast. There was no escape but into the icy swells of the sea. Many men panicked and jumped into the water without removing their heavy gear only to drown. Neff remembered climbing down a cargo net thrown over one side of the ship. "Then I jumped," he said. "I went way under and finally came back up." He fought his way through high seas until he found a life raft. He saw the *Rohna* list and go under. Less than an hour after the bombing, the ship had sunk entirely. Hundreds died when the German bomb impacted the ship, but the majority succumbed to the sea's chilling temperatures. The rough seas and ensuing darkness hampered rescue efforts, and Neff and the other survivors clung to the raft all night, fighting hypothermia. Six hours after the bombs fell, the USS *Pioneer* pulled him, along with 600 others, from the water.<sup>2</sup>

A few days later, Neff was sent to Bombay, India, and from there to China. Once in China, he worked as a spotter for the Air Force, directing runway traffic. After the war, he returned to the Pedigo area where he married, had two children, and got a job driving buses for Knoxville Transit Lines.

"They said we'd get our Purple Hearts," he said. "I still haven't. I knew a man who told me he could get me out of joining the Air Force. I wish I had let him."

My grandfather, I found out after the interview, had been part of maritime war history. At the time I wrote the story little information about the sinking of the *Rohna* existed and few knew about it aside from World War II historians and family members of *Rohna* survivors and casualties. Though much information is still lacking, thanks to the ongoing efforts of The *Rohna* Survivors Memorial Association and others, including Carlton Jackson, author of *Forgotten Tragedy: The Sinking of the HMT Rohna* (1996) as well as Tom Brokaw, who reported on the tragedy on NBC Nightly News on December 27, 2000, the incident and theories as to why it was kept secret for decades have begun to come to light.

As these people have pointed out, the sinking of the *Rohna* is historic for two reasons: it was the second greatest loss of American life at sea in World War II,

its death toll of U.S. service members nearly equaling the USS Arizona's at Pearl Harbor. In all, 1,138 people including 1,015 U.S. service members lost their lives that day. It was also the first successful hit by a remote-controlled missile which is why, many familiar with the incident speculate, the United States government kept it a secret for more than 50 years. Whether it was to protect morale at home or withhold information from the Germans, inadequate and classified records were kept, and survivors of the *Robna* disaster and their families fought for years to prove that the ship even existed and that those on board deserved some type of recognition. In October 2000, 57 years after the fact, Congress officially recognized the survivors and casualties of the *Robna* with House Concurrent Resolution No. 408.

The Purple Heart is a beautiful medal. It now hangs on a wall in my office in a walnut case I built for it. Like the pistol my former writing teacher Barry Hannah gave me, it provides inspiration when I can't write. It reminds me of the stories that have to be told before anyone will hear them, the stories that can die along with their teller.

Though my mother had written the VA before my grandfather died, it wasn't until months after his funeral that she finally received his Purple Heart and other medals. I remember seeing it for the first time that Thanksgiving, and that shiny piece of metal did something he was never able to do; it helped me begin to view him as a man with more than a drunkard's past. The medal was another piece to the vague puzzle of his memory, a large piece that provided legitimacy to his near waste of an existence.

Though he chose to be such a poor husband and father, maybe it wasn't entirely his fault. Some men, I think, can handle seeing the face of humanity at its most desperate and rawest. Maybe they bury the memory away somewhere, so deep and heaped with thoughts of family, friends, love and light it rarely surfaces. For others, it scratches at the framework of their minds, beckoning, "Come, let me drag you down to hell." It's obvious that my grandfather suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He left for the war a good man who could have made a wonderful father (he had to be for my jewel of a grandmother to marry him) and returned with psychological and emotional problems which he expressed in violent fits of rage and tried to suppress with drink.

The job he got after his service lasted a short time as did his marriage. He would periodically stumble slurring back into his wife and children's lives, asking for money, taking furniture to pawn. He existed to them as he always has to me, a living ghost. The only tangible facts: he wrecked another marriage and had another son who hardly knew him. I'm limited as I piece back his memory because my

mother and her brother were too young at the time to remember anything concrete about the man aside from his drunken visits. I don't know my half uncle or his mother, and my grandmother, who has never abandoned my grandfather's last name, was focused solely on trying to raise her family as a single, working mother. In short, with the exception of the other addicts and deadbeats pulled to the grave by their own demons he must have associated with, nobody knows how he spent the decades after his service.

My grandmother knows the most and now that she is 86 those memories are fleeting. One story I remember her sharing a few years ago involved my grandfather climbing the oak tree that once stood in her front yard, taking a kitchen chair, bottle of liquor and shotgun up with him. He threatened firemen and police officers from his perch, while neighbors and my grandmother holding my tiny mother looked on. Maybe if he could have worn his medal on his stained and alcohol drenched shirt as an emblem it would have reminded people that this wild drunk was a hero. Maybe some good person would have balanced a chair beside him on a fat limb, took a swig from his bottle, and said, "I know how you feel. Let's talk about it, soldier. Let's sweep the darkness from your mind."

My grandmother also told me another story, just the other day when she found out I was writing about him. Shortly after he returned home from the service, a married couple who lived in Knoxville and had lost a son on the *Robna* called and requested that he visit. My grandfather had apparently befriended their loved one; he had written letters home that mentioned Bob Neff. They wanted, I assume, what most families who lose loved ones want: answers. He and my grandmother hadn't made it far in his Impala on their way across town to the family's home when he ran the car into a ditch. "I think he wrecked on purpose," said my grandmother, "because he didn't want to have to tell that story. He never talked about it to anyone."

I left him the day of the interview angry that he couldn't find the words with the exception of the few quotes I got from him, and those were heavily encouraged on my part. "Did you jump?" I asked him. "Was the water cold? Were the seas high? Did they say you'd get your Purple Heart? Have you got it? Did you want to join up in the first place?" Here was a man who couldn't even tell his own story, the story that turned out to be the climax of his life. He couldn't share advice or give warnings. Most of all I was angry, I believe, because I wanted to be proud of him.

I saw my grandfather one more time after that. It was around Christmas and my mother had asked me to pick up his laundry. I took an elevator to the eighth floor of Guy B. Love Towers and found him in his wheelchair at the window, looking out toward the parking lot and the surrounding buildings, their rooftops decorated

with lights. The nursing home staff had put a small Christmas tree on the counter and there was a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich on his table. His garbage bag of piss-smelling clothes leaned against the wall. He didn't hear me come in, and he didn't hear me leave, but he must have seen me carrying his clothes through the icy lot if he knew what he was looking at.

If I could go back to that time, I wouldn't be in such a hurry; I wouldn't view picking up his laundry as a chore. I was young and unable or unwilling to realize my mother had asked me to go in her place for a purpose. I would sit with him no matter how much he cried or mumbled, how badly his room smelled, how dismal it was inside those walls, looking out at life moving in the veins of the city and feeling trapped myself, like death, his only escape, lay in wait for me, too. I would also realize that even though I wanted more he gave me all he could that day. He sat and talked with me, or at least listened and tried to answer my questions, when he had never spoken to anyone else in the family about his hell.

I'd like to say I'm proud of him, but I'm not. What I can say is that somehow I love this man I hardly knew. Though the stroke had damaged his hardwiring, the anguish that fell across his face was real. He was handicapped by regret, and I think I love him because he loved me.

## Notes

1. U.S. Congress. House. Expressing Appreciation for U.S. Service Members aboard HMT *Rohna* When It Sank. H. Con. Res. 408. 106th Cong. (October 10, 2000).

2. *Ibid.*

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