As a child growing up on Maui, Ramona Ho heard her father, Joseph Cabral, tell stories about the day he and his classmates helped rescue 33 survivors from the Royal T. Frank, a U.S. Army transport ship sunk by a Japanese torpedo off Maui’s beautiful Hana Coast in January 1942.

The sinking of the U.S. transport ship Royal T. Frank off the coast of Maui’s Hana coast on January 28, 1942, remained a mystery for decades.
Surprisingly, it was a story no one else seemed to remem-
ber. And even today, the sinking of the Royal T. Frank re-
 mains one of the mysteries from World War II.

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, the Royal T.
Frank had been used to transport military personnel to the
island of Hawaii (the Big Island) and Maui, many of whom
went on excursions to visit Hawaii Volcanoes National
Park. In the months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor,
however, its mission changed to transporting new recruits
and ammunition, according to Tricia Marciel, granddaugh-
ter of Walter C. Wiechert, the ship’s last captain.

The Royal T. Frank’s final voyage occurred in a particu-
larly tense time period in Hawaii. Japanese submarines were
active in Hawaiian waters and had already sunk three ships.
A submarine had also surfaced to shell Maui’s Kahului
Harbor, and others had fired at Hilo on the Big Island and
Nawiliwili Harbor on Kauai. As a precaution, on its final
voyage, the Royal T. Frank was part of a three-ship convoy
that included a Navy destroyer.

Aboard were 26 soldiers from the Big Island who had
just completed boot camp at Schofield Barracks on Oahu.

According to now-declassified government documents, a
Japanese submarine fired on the transport just after seven
o’clock on the morning of January 28, 1942, an estima-
ted 30 miles north of the Big Island’s Upolu Point in the
Alenuihāhā Channel. Two earlier torpedoes had missed.

**THE OFFICIAL ACCOUNT:**

**SHIP SANK IN A MINUTE**

An official account given by one of the ship’s officers and
published in mainland newspapers (which were not subject
to Hawaii’s martial law), states that the third torpedo had
moved deceptively slowly prior to impact.

“I saw a torpedo coming straight at us. It veered as it ap-
proached. It appeared to be moving very slowly and seemed
to be running down. It struck opposite the starboard boiler.
There was a terrific explosion. As soon as I had seen the
wake [of the torpedo], I ran forward shouting ‘torpedo!’”
said the unnamed officer in an official account released by
U.S. Army authorities and reported by the New York Times
on February 11, 1942.

Those below deck were killed by the initial explosion.
Above deck, flying shrapnel killed Captain Wiechert and
others, and the ship sank in less than a minute. Of the
60 people aboard the Frank, only 36 survived. Survivors
of the explosion included nine of the Big Island soldiers
who had been above deck and 27 crew members. Some
were thrown into the water, and others jumped in soon
afterwards. Covered in oil, the survivors spent hours in the
ocean, many clinging to whatever debris they could, before
they were picked up by the ammunition barge that had
been the actual target of the Japanese submarine.

“My father had told us the story since we were very little,”
says Ho. “The survivors had come ashore while Dad was at
school. . . . [Most were] covered with oil and were naked.”
Drilled for just such an incident by their principal, William
P. Haia, the students hurried the men to the school, helped
them clean up, and assembled cots for them. The Navy
flew in a medic to treat them until an ambulance could tra-
verse the winding Hana road to bring the men out. A day
later, the survivors were gone—and soon, so was the story.

For decades after the war, the story of what had hap-
pened to the Royal T. Frank remained unknown to most.
Marciel and her family believe the secrecy may have been
because there is a chance the ship had been on a top-secret
mission. Her grandfather, even before the attack on Pearl
Harbor, had expressed concerns about the inter-island trips
to his wife.

On November 28, 1941, Adm. Husband E. Kimmel,
the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, had issued
orders to “bomb on contact” any foreign submarines and had relayed the information to Adm. Harold Rainsford Stark, the Navy’s chief of naval operations.

“You will note that I have issued orders to the Pacific Fleet to depth bomb all submarine contacts in the Oahu operating area,” wrote Kimmel to Stark.

In the years before America’s entry into the Second World War, said Marciel, the Royal T. Frank had been primarily used to transport soldiers to the islands of Hawaii and Maui for recreational purposes. In the months leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, its mission had suddenly changed.

“It was being used to transport new recruits and ammunition. Apparently, my grandfather had a very ominous feeling about this last voyage—he felt something was going to happen. He had seemed to know about Japanese submarines in the water, even before Pearl Harbor. My mother mentioned he even had written a letter to President Roosevelt addressing his concerns about being followed and also about the dangers of what they were transporting,” said Marciel.

The low profile of the Royal T. Frank would have made it difficult to be seen by Japanese submarines, and Stark had urged Kimmel to employ small surface vessels as lookouts.

Portentously, prior to his last voyage, Marciel’s grandfather had left his personal possessions, including his wedding ring, at home. While the families of the new recruits lost in the explosion were not told about the cause of death, Wiechert’s widow was informed of the sinking.

“My mother’s assumption is the top-secret nature of the trip is probably why the families of those soldiers that perished were not told about it until after the war. My grandmother, however, who at the time was seven months pregnant with my mother, learned my grandfather was missing approximately six weeks after his ship had gone down,” said Marciel.

To learn more about

- The attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, go to www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/winter/.
- Selected research topics in Navy records, go to www.archives.gov/research/arc/topics/navy.html.
In the 1980s, while a student at the University of Hawaii-Manoa on Oahu, Ramona Ho started to research the story her father had told her. Initially, she could not find out anything about what had happened. “The only way I could find out anything about the incident was through the name of the vessel, the Royal T. Frank,” says Ho.

Survivor Haruo Yamashita, who died in early 2012, told the mainland-based Go for Broke Foundation in an interview recorded in 2010 that the vessel had been on its way to the Big Island’s Kawaihae Harbor to pick up more troops when it was hit. Along with Yamashita, eight other Big Island soldiers survived and became known as the Torpedo Gang.

After the sinking, Yamashita and his comrades served throughout the duration of the war, and all survived. A close-knit group, they looked after one another afterwards. Each year, they would gather together to remember those who died that fateful day in 1942.

But for others, the Royal T. Frank sank from memory.
was always that if the Japanese had landed in Hana, there would have been no defense.”

Kazuko Ushijima of Hilo says her late husband, Torpedo Gang member Shigeru “Rueben” Ushijima, was also told not to mention the incident. “They just didn’t talk about it to [others outside their group] until after the war,” says Ushijima.

Shigeru had taken a group photograph of the other 25 Big Island soldiers at Schofield Barracks just two days prior to the sinking. Though his camera didn’t survive the sinking, the image miraculously did; a soldier who was not aboard the vessel had taken the film to be developed.

Seven decades later, a mystery remains: despite advances in technology, the wreck of the Royal T. Frank has never been found. “It is believed to be in water too deep,” says Oahu-based shipwreck researcher and author Richard Rogers, “and there is not a very detailed idea of where she was torpedoed.” Rogers says that if a report from the Japanese submarine exists and is ever located, there might yet “be enough data to begin a survey with pretty pricey gadgets.”

“The Japanese submarine that had sunk the Royal T. Frank was itself sunk with all hands off the island of Bougainville in New Guinea by American depth charges on February 1, 1944, as the U.S. military and its allies were pushing their way to the Japanese mainland, island by island. 🎥

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