

Mustard Disaster at Bari

Bari lies along the Adriatic Sea at the top of the heel of the boot of Italy (See Figure 1). During World War II, the port of Bari was under the jurisdiction of the British and was the main supply base for General Montgomery's Eighth Army as well as the headquarters for the American Fifteenth Air Force which was activated in November 1943. Foggia, about 35 miles further north along the coast was the main operating base of the Fifteenth Air Force.



In addition to the usual war material, ships moored at Bari harbor carried aviation fuel for the Fifteenth Air Force. Totally absorbed in getting the Fifteenth Air Force off the ground, the Allies gave little thought to the possibility of a German Air Raid on Bari.

The Germans needed to stop the northward advance of the Allied Army and suppress the Fifteenth Air Force. The port of Bari was critical to the supply line supporting the Allied Armies. By bombing and destroying the port of Bari, the Germans hoped to stall the Allied advance and suppress the Fifteenth Air Force.

During every campaign there was always the threat of the Germans using poison gas. By the end of 1943, the strategic initiative in the war had passed to the allies. The allies feared that Hitler could use poison gas to redress the strategic balance. While the United States condemned the use of poison gas, President Roosevelt pledged that the US would reply in kind if the Germans used poison gas first. In support of this pledge, the Liberty ship, *John Harvey* was selected to convey a shipment of mustard gas to Italy to be held in reserve.

The *John Harvey* was loaded with two thousand M41-A1 100 lb mustard bombs at the Baltimore cargo port. The *John Harvey* sailed for Norfolk on October 15, 1943 and then onto Oran, Algeria by convoy arriving on November 2, 1943. From Oran, it proceeded in convoy to Augusta, Sicily and then to Bari arriving at Bari on November 28, 1943.

In late November 1943, the harbor at Bari was extremely crowded and busy. All the berths in the inner harbor were full or not ready for unloading. The *John Harvey* was ordered to berth at Pier 29 on the East jetty (outer mole) until there was a berth free in the inner harbor where she could unload her cargo. The East jetty was extremely crowded. The Liberty ship *John Motley* was moored on her starboard side while the British ships *Testbank* and *Fort Athabaska* as well as the Liberty ship *Joseph Wheeler* were on her port side.

The *John Harvey* was still waiting to unload on December 2, 1943. Since secrecy was paramount and few people knew of the mustard gas on board, the *John Harvey* was not given priority to unload its cargo of mustard bombs.

The German attack on Bari began at 7:20 in the evening on December 2, 1943. The planes flew in from the east. The docks were brilliantly lit and the East jetty was packed with ships. There was no time for the ships in the harbor to get underway.



The *Joseph Wheeler* took a direct hit and exploded. Several other ships were hit and exploded. The *John Harvey* remained intact sustaining no direct bomb damage but caught fire when showered by flaming debris from a nearby damaged ship. The situation was extremely serious because of the mustard bombs on board. Without warning, the *John Harvey* blew up. Everyone on board was killed instantly and pieces of the ship and her cargo were hurled into the air. Mustard released from the broken bombs mixed with the oil on the waters surface and with billowing clouds of smoke.

The Americans sustained the highest losses from the German raid losing the *John Bascom*, *John L. Motley*, *Joseph Wheeler*, *Samuel J. Tilden* and the *John Harvey*. The British lost four ships, the Italians three, the Norwegians three and the Poles two. There were more than 1,000 military and merchant marine casualties with 800 admitted to local hospital. A conservative estimate places civilian casualties at around 1,000.

Casualties from the raid began pouring into the hospitals. Swamped with casualties and not realizing they were dealing with poison gas, hospital staffers let the injured remain in their oil and gas soaked clothes. Victims suffered from burns and blisters, temporary blindness, swollen genitals and irritated respiratory systems. As victims began to die, the doctors started to suspect that a chemical agent was involved. Lieutenant Colonel Stewart F. Alexander was finally able to confirm that the casualties were caused by mustard exposure.

There were 628 mustard casualties among military and merchant marine personnel with 69 dying in the first two weeks. Most victims fully recovered. There was no accounting for the civilians who must have been exposed to the chemicals. Additionally, there was a mass exodus of civilians out of the city and some were probably gas victims that died for lack of care.

Secrecy shrouded the affair at Bari. The public was eventually told of the devastating raid at Bari but the presence of mustard gas was not divulged. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was particularly adamant that the role mustard gas played in the tragedy remain a secret. He believed that publicizing the fiasco would hand the Germans a propaganda victory. This secrecy may have caused additional deaths because if the word of the presence of mustard agent had been disseminated, more victims, especially civilians, may have sought proper treatment.