

# "TOP SECRET"



## BARI, 2<sup>ND</sup> DECEMBER '43

Hundreds  
of mysterious  
deaths of soldiers  
and civilians in Bari  
after a devastating  
aerial attack by the  
Germans against  
the Allied ships.



A merchant ship  
carrying  
a mysterious cargo and  
the top secret  
military  
investigations,  
to uncover  
one of the most  
terrible  
secrets of WWII:

**THE CHEMICAL WAR.**

from  
an idea  
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a  
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# THE STORY OF THE MOST SERIOUS **CHEMICAL DISASTER** OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR



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### 1. The German aerial attack

"Voll besetzt", "completely full": it is the morning of 2 December 1943 when Werner Hahn, the pilot of a German reconnaissance plane, sends a message to his base saying that the port of Bari is full of ships. That is exactly what the Luftwaffe General Staff in Italy have been waiting to hear. Since mid-November, the port of Bari the most important port in Italy supplying the Allies in the Adriatic has been kept under close observation by German reconnaissance planes, because German intelligence had noted the weakness of its defences. In the afternoon, 105 German JU 88 bombers take off with the aim of bombing the port of Bari; at 19:30 they take the Allied defences completely by surprise. It is a massacre: one after another the ships in the shipyards are hit and many explode. By the end of the operation, 17 ships have been destroyed and the port of Bari has been made inoperable for many weeks.

### 2. The tragedy never ends: mysterious deaths, mustard gas and the military

secret But it is not over: hundreds of sailors and ordinary citizens fill the hospitals. They have not been burnt and they are not wounded, but they are beginning to have rashes, burning eyes and respiratory problems. Many are even dying without explanation.

Why? What is going on? "The medical officers tried to get through to the War office in London for information but none was forthcoming. We were all furious. And yet, if the War Office couldn't release the information, it must be a military secret we couldn't save most of the injured their eyes asked questions that we couldn't answer" memories of a British nurse. What military secret lay behind those strange deaths? Eisenhower sent his own medical officer to shed light on the events: in the end he made a terrible discovery, an American merchant ship, the John Harvey, was transporting a top secret cargo, mustard gas, a highly toxic gas banned by the 1925 Geneva Protocol. The ship had exploded in the port, dispersing its 550 tons of lethal gas in the air.

### 3. The cover-up

"Mustard gas? What mustard gas?" Winston Churchill would always deny furiously. The strictest military censorship is imposed on events in Bari. All the papers are classified Top Secret. It is Churchill himself who gives the order that all British files remove any reference to mustard gas, in sharp contrast to the Americans.

### 4. The tragedy of the Italians.

Many Italian sailors and citizens pay the consequences: hundreds of sailors and Bari citizens die without ever knowing why. Just a month later, an internal secret Italian enquiry, which we have found, reveals the terrible secret of the Italian deaths due to mustard gas.

Bari, 2 December 1945:

it was the Pearl Harbour of the Mediterranean, the most serious chemical disaster of the Second World War and one of its best kept military secrets.

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