



2nd December 1943: Hell on Bari

Directed by: Fabio Toncelli - based on a project by Francesco Morra

Produced by: SD Cinematografica

Duration: 60 min.

Versions:  

Format: HD

“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. 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: by the end of the operation, 17 ships have been destroyed and the port of Bari has been made inoperable for many weeks. 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? 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. 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. Why was the aerial bombardment of the port of Bari one of the biggest secrets of World War II? Why did the Allies send a ship full of chemical weapons to Italy? What was it for? Why did Churchill insist on always denying that there was mustard gas at Bari despite all the evidence? Did the Germans really find out that a ship full of mustard gas exploded at Bari? Who knew about the cargo of mustard gas at Bari when the ship exploded? Was everything possible done to save the victims, or were they sacrificed for military secrecy? The documentary will be structured like a detective story. The excellent enquiry documents, found in a variety of archives scattered all over the world, will serve as the basis for the documentary, along with interviews with surviving eyewitnesses.



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