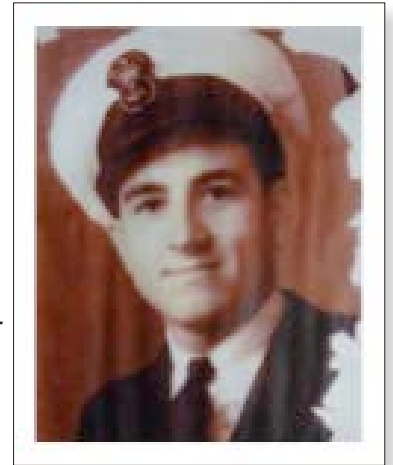


George Southern, *Poisonous Inferno: World War II Tragedy at Bari Harbour* (excerpt)

George Southern served in the British Royal Navy from 1942-1946 aboard ships escorting convoys in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. At the time of the Bari tragedy, he was a gunlayer on the destroyer HMS *Zetland*, one of the convoy's ill-fated escort vessels. It was not until a reunion in 1976 that he learned of the mustard gas and that seventeen ships had been lost on that dreadful night. This is the only book to have been published by a survivor...



Bari - Arrival and Attack

Shepherding the newly arrived convoy into Bari's outer harbour on that sunny morning of 2 December 1943 were the convoy escorts consisting of *Zetland* and *Bicester* and three minesweepers. Closed up at the actions stations I noticed, as everyone on the upper deck did, a lone German reconnaissance plane high in the sky. It passed over the port in a north-westerly direction, evidently returning to a base in northern Italy....

Between *John Motley* and *Testbank* lay the ship that was destined to create a horrifying situation never before encountered in the history of warfare - the USS *John Harvey* carrying a cargo of 5,037 tons of what were described as "war supplies"....According to official accounts, Allied Headquarters Algiers gave instructions for 24,430 Bombs Chemical, HS (HS was the code description for mustard) to be loaded onto the USS *John Harvey* at Oran...

We heard the sound of aircraft overhead. It was instantly followed by a single flare which illuminated the harbor and then several more. Both of us knew what that meant...as the flares slowly descended, the first bombs dropped. It signalled an outburst of activity. The scream of falling bombs rent the air and the crash and crump as they landed sent shock waves along the breakwater...in a mad scramble, lorries, half-tracks, jeeps, vans and motor bikes made a concerted dash along the mole....anyone walking, as we were....took their life in their hands.... For some time bombs fell all over the harbour...the result was catastrophic. As the fires gained hold, preparations were underway on several vessels to abandon ship. Other ships at anchor in the harbour had received direct hits and the crews were already taking to lifeboats and rafts.

At the end of the raid, the *Lyman Abbott* suffered a near miss... Donald Meissner stuffed cotton wool in his ears, put on his helmet and ran to his gun platform...'three bombs hit the water off our bow and the fourth hit just off the stern. It was so close the mud from the bottom of the harbor struck me in the face. I know the ship rose out of the water because I felt it slap the surface as it came down again. Suddenly there was a blinding flash as if night had turned to day, then a thunderous explosion sent all of us sprawling onto the deck, whose steel was vibrating

as if to tear itself apart. It then began to rain shrapnel...when all the fury of the explosion subsided, there was a deathly silence except for the moans and cries of the wounded and dying.'

We all discovered that we were not soaked with rain but with a thick, greasy liquid which was as black as pitch and gave off a foul stench...the explosion dumped me underneath the star-board side bridge some 20 feet from where I had been standing...when I moved along the deck and went below, survivors from other ships, covered head to foot in what at the time we thought was fuel oil, were being hosed down...

98th British General Base Hospital

Meanwhile in the hospital...it was not long before the influx of patients began. Nurse Gwladys Rees recalled 'The aftermath of the explosion was almost too pathetic and grim to describe. Only a few hours before dawn following the raid we began to realise that most of our patients had been contaminated by something beyond all imagination. I first noticed it when one or two of my patients went to the sink looking for a drink of water...they were complaining of intense heat and began stripping off their clothes...what little knowledge we had, our first thought was that these boys were suffering from mustard gas burns for their were blisters as big as balloons and heavy with fluid on these young bodies. We were not sure whether the staff was at risk...we tried to get tests done, we were never informed of the results...it was horrible to see these boys so young and in such obvious pain...The medical officers tried to get through to the War Office in London for information, advice and an anti-dote, but none was forthcoming..we were at a loss to battle this poison and we couldn't save the majority of the wounded. Almost one thousand men died in one night and just as many in the aftermath...

In her diary, Nurse Gay Trevithic wrote: What a night followed, ambulances screamed into the hospital all night long with casualties from the raid...The majority of them were either burned or covered in oil or had limbs blown off...It was so bad that when the boys came in we did not know whether they were Italians, Indians, or British...I only hope I never live to experience another night like this...

Aftermath: Legacy of Secrets

Some time later, he [Lt. Cdr. Morgan Giles, Staff Officer Special Operations at Bari] learned that USS *John Harvey* carried amongst its cargo white phosphorus bombs, and even worse, mustard gas bombs which were not fused...their contents thrown into the air and scattered on the water and neighboring ships...

It was obvious that not just one or two people had prior knowledge of the mustard gas aboard the *John Harvey* but a number of service personnel, probably as many as ten, were fully aware of its existence. One person who was not aware and who certainly should have

been was NOIC Bari, Captain Campbell, RN...it would appear that not one of the several people who knew of the mustard gas were capable of releasing the true facts to the hospital...

In the 1970s, the British official accounts were released and for the first time John [Adams, who had served in Royal Corps of Signals at Bari] learned about the existence of mustard gas at Bari. His doctor, an ex-RAF surgeon who had studied the effects of mustard gas...looked up his records and remarked that he was 99 percent certain that the lesion [in his lung] was the result of exposure to mustard gas...

On 24 February 1995, Bert Stevens gave up the struggle...he was the first survivor to be officially recognised as having been contaminated by the mustard gas at Bari, and the first to be awarded a pension...

Medical records are not due to be released until 2018, by which time no one who was in Bari in 1943 will be around to refute it. To the best of my knowledge, there has never been a comment or letter published concerning mustard gas by any doctor who was serving in Bari at the time...how many more people suffered like Bert Stevens and his family, totally unaware of the real reason, we will never know...

Perhaps it was a case of 'head in the sand' or the fact that the words 'mustard gas' were too controversial to be mentioned, so compounding the secrecy. The Official Account admits that many men died because of the lack of information, or more to the point, bungling secrecy...

Differences Between WWI and Bari

On 22 April 1915, at Ypres, Belgium, mustard gas was used for the first time when the German forces deployed 150 tons of chlorine against unprotected French troops...there was no censorship of the information...it was good propaganda. In the years following the armistice in 1918, many ex-soldiers who had been exposed to mustard gas suffered illness and sickness... [but] these ex-servicemen had one advantage that the survivors of Bari were denied. A great number of general practitioners had returned from war service and had experienced life in the trenches of Flanders and the effects of mustard gas...they helped them and procured war pensions for many of them. There was no such help for the contaminated at Bari, though that was not the fault of general practitioners. There were no medical records showing exposure to mustard gas, which could have assisted in diagnosing various ailments brought on in later years...

Continued Impact in Italy

The port of Molfetta, some 50 miles (80km) north of Bari had been singled out as a disposal point for a certain quantity of mustard gas still in Bari...in order to save on fuel oil, and not

knowing the nature of the materials they were dumping, the barge and boat-owners cut corners by jettisoning the highly toxic cargoes in an area of the sea 40 miles (64km) north-east of Molfetta. This area, though not as far, was of course much shallower than the designated one. When fishing resumed after 1945, incidents began to occur. Nobody knew what the metal bomb and shell casings dragged up in the fishing nets contained...Dr Angelo Neve is the enthusiastic co-ordinator and director of a group studying the long-term effects of the contamination of the seas around Bari...[he] sent me a video tape filmed aboard a diving support vessel...the diver turned round to show viewers his leg, on which ugly red blisters covered a large area from his knee to his thigh. It showed contamination still occurring more than fifty years after the disaster...

To learn more about Bari, see

Southern, George. *Poisonous Inferno: World War II Tragedy at Bari Harbour*. Shrewsbury: Airlife, 2002.