

Poison Gas in WWII: The Disaster at Bari

By,
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Within a few days of joining Reporting Co. A, of the 562 Signal Aircraft Warning unit at Ruv di Puglia, Italy in early June of 1944, I learned of a kind of group guilt feeling experienced by the men of the unit. Some six months before I replaced a soldier who was sent home due to psychological problems, (Discharged under Section Eight in Army terms:---*Went nuts* ,according to enlisted men in Company A, probably in an effort to make me feel welcome!) Co. A was *Sweeping* the skies north of Bari with long range RADAR,thus protecting that great port where Allied ships were unloading supplies by providing early warning for the major Allied Air Base at Foggia, and to the batteries of British a Anti-Aircraft batteries ringing the port. The great harbor at Bari was teeming with supply ships including tankers laden with aviation fuel for the planes at Foggia. On December 1, 1943, Co A's RADAR with a top range of 120 miles or so was shut down, briefly, for routine maintenance. The RADAR *mechanics* had shut down operations to make routine maintenance checks and when an attempt was made to restart the unit they could not do so. It so happened that the commander, a Lieutenant, was on the other side of Italy at Battalion Headquarters in Naples. Of course, it was soon known to the Plotting Center where the information on enemy aircraft was received, filtered and acted upon in order to take proper defensive action, that Co. A was out of commission. That must have caused some great concern to the Allied Air Command since Co. A had the capability for long range detection and was the only such unit in the area and now there as no early warning RADAR coverage available. The events were explained to me by Robert C. Scott, another member of Sgt. Jones' squad. Bob , or *Scotty*", as he called, was an Ohioan who had been drafted early on and had been with the 562 since it was formed. Keep in mind that the events he described were not generally discussed and it was a sort of *Hush hush* around the unit. I suspect he was reluctant to tell me about what took place on Dec.2, 1943, because details of *what occurred at Bari were not generally known and were considered to be Top Secret* for some time. On the day of *The Incident*. I was at Camp Crowder and I do not recall hearing or seeing any news about what turned out to be the biggest Allied shipping disaster of WWII since Pearl Harbor. Scotty, an old timer on Sgt Jones' crew told me the story late one night u when air traffic was slow due to foul weather conditions and when others on duty with us could not hear our conversation...

As I recall, he said that the Lieutenant Company Commander had been summoned to Battalion Headquarters in Naples, on the west coast of Italy.. The unit was now lead by a Warrant Officer. The RADAR mechanics, Technicians, 4th Grade,in Army parlance, were performing a routine maintenance on the equipment while the unit was off the air and inoperative. Of course, the whole command knew that this was to be done and a time was selected when there was little or no activity by the Luftwaffe. The job was completed and when it was time to start up, the unit

would not turn on. Of course, the WO and the T/5's frantically began to search for the *Gremlins* or *Bugs* in the equipment but could not locate the problem. Scotty said they took everything apart and reassembled it and still no luck. This went on for a long period and of course, the long range RADAR was out of service on Dec. 2, 1943 and that was when disaster struck the port city of Bari.

The great port was teeming with Allied supply vessels either unloading ,or waiting to unload, valuable cargos of military supplies including fuel for the Allied Armies pressing north on the boot of Italy and aviation gas for the big air Base at Foggia,, some 125 miles to the northeast of Bari. Among the ships at anchor was the American Merchantman, *John Harvey* and it carried a secret cargo of mustard gas contained in two thousand., one hundred pound bombs.!

The harbor was so crowded that the *John Harvey*, on arriving 28 Nov, 1943 could not be unloaded at once and had to anchor at the east jetty and await orders to proceed to the unloading area On Dec.1,high above the harbor, a reconnaissance plane of the Luftwaffe ,undetected, probably because long range RADAR of the 562 SAW was not functioning, counted the ships in the harbor and when he noted there were 30 vessels present., turned north and headed for his base in northern Italy to report his findings and I suspect, to share the photos he had taken.

On Dec. 2, at 1930 hours, the attack began. The German bombers had flown at low altitude over the Adriatic undetected and unleashed their lethal load. The attack was over by 1950 hours. In a mere 20 minutes the Luftwaffe's JU 88s turned the harbor into a blazing inferno seasoned with mustard gas from the *John Harvey* which had exploded, unleashing 100 tons of American made mustard gas.: It was the worst Allied shipping disaster of WWII, except for Pearl Harbor. .Seventeen ships were totally destroyed, eight others badly damaged. More than 1,000 military personnel lost heir lives and an even larger number of civilians were killed. Those who were injured and pulled to safety, were not given proper medical treatment because the Medics did not know about the poison and did not know how to treat the wounded properly subsequently many of the injured succumbed . The water supply of the City of Bari was poisoned as well.

Back in Camp Crowder on Dec. 2, 1943, like the rest of the world, I was totally unaware of what had transpired at Bari that day and only was made aware of the situation some six months later while perhaps on duty some fifty miles north the city. In the dark of the night, when air traffic was slow and by the light of the range scope, Robert Scott told me the story. But the saddest part of his account came when he told me that when the Lieutenant .in charge returned from Naples, he waked into the RADAR unit and flipped a circuit breaker switch and the whole unit began to function normally; Reporting Company A's RADAR was back in business! Like the men of Company A, I have often wondered what might have transpired had the Bombers been spotted some 120 miles north of Ruvo by the 562. Early warning could have been given when the incoming enemy aircraft were about 170 miles or so north of the target. Could they have been intercepted by fighters based at Foggia? Could some of the ships in the harbor been moved out to sea?

Could the anti-aircraft units which protected the harbor been prepared to defend the ships and the city? Could the U.S. Navy's Armed Guard gunners stationed on the merchant vessels been a big deterrent and could they or other Allied Naval vessels in the area throw up a defense and thwarted the raid?

Of course, such questions can never be answered and the men who served on the vessels stacked up in the harbor that day, for the most part, have gone on to their respective eternal rewards. The whole incident was kept *Hush hush* for decades since poison gas was involved. However, I had a chance meeting with a former US Navy man, Ralph Putterbaugh, of St. Joseph, MI, a few years ago and learned that he was a wheelman aboard a US Navy tanker which was waiting to unload the cargo of high test aviation fuel needed for the planes on the Air base at Foggia. The Skipper was not on board but rather at the Harbormaster's Office seeking permission to get the fuel unloaded when the attack began. The second officer took charge and ordered the ship out to sea and Ralph Putterbaugh was at the helm for that maneuver. The vessel and the cargo were saved. My regret is that I did not have Ralph record his story on video or audio tape before he succumbed to illness.

The events of that fateful day were never openly discussed among the men of Reporting Company A and I can understand why the reluctance to discuss the matter or to tell me, a "Green horn Rookie", about what transpired. My friend, Scotty, did tell me that the RADAR mechanics were so distraught that they wept on hearing about the disaster at Bari. The unit had been through much and had taken casualties while participating in the Invasion of North Africa in November 1942 and subsequent landings in Sicily and Italy. I'm sure that the failure to warn of the German attack on Bari weighed heavily, but silently, on their collective shoulders. Ironically, the majorities of the men had been drafted in October of 1940, and were to have served but one year! Perhaps one might describe it as, *The fortunes of war*.