

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Great Secret

**Author: Jennet Conaut, Grove Press UK.**

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By 1943 the Allied Forces had largely secured the Mediterranean war area and were advancing through Italy. The allied forces needed a suitable deep-water port to unload military supplies, tanks, vehicles, munitions etc, and Bari in southeastern Italy was an ideal location. The allies were so confident that the Germans posed no threat that they operated a 24 hour unloading of supply ships with no black-out for a fast turn-around. This was to be the strategic push for Rome. On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1943 the Luftwaffe bombed Bari sinking seventeen ships and killing over one thousand service men and civilians. Amongst the ships destroyed was the John Harvey containing a secret cargo. Soon after the bombings sailors began dying from conditions unrecognizable by the medical teams and a chemical weapons expert Lt Colonel Stewart Alexandra was sent to investigate the deaths. He quickly identified that the fatalities and disabilities were caused by mustard gas, which was denied by the military as well as the politicians, and all information immediately became classified. This also raised the issue of whether the Germans had used chemical weapons in the air raid. Alexandra subsequently determined the John Harvey was carrying mustard gas shells in case the retreating Germans resorted to chemical warfare during their retreat. His "Bari Report" was classified however, another clinician Colonel Cornelius Rhodes who was also a

research scientist had access to classified material and identified that the toxic effects of mustard gas significantly depressed white blood cells. Although mustard gas had been identified in the 1930s as a potential agent for 'curing cancer' its toxicity proved to be an ongoing issue and some small scale use with cancer patients at Yale University on a trial and error basis were hit and miss.

Rhodes connected the Bari reports and the Yale reports and proposed a centre for cancer research. Two industrialists, Alfred Sloan and Charles Kettering under-wrote the new cancer research institute – Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer research where the research continued using nitrogen mustards for cancer treatment. The increasing understanding of how nitrogen mustards inhibited cancer and in particular leukemia led to the new development of chemotherapeutic agents such as the folic acid antagonists.

The author writes clearly on the early history of cancer treatments initiated in an ad-hoc manner. The politics of war and secrecy are intermingled with the politics of medicine and research, two hotly contested battlefields. The remarkable well-referenced story of how a wartime disaster evolved into cancer chemotherapy makes this book an excellent read.

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