

Alvin Harris Justis, Jr.

Born: August 23, 1924
Hometown: Lynchburg, VA
Class: 1944
Service: Merchant Marine
Position / Rank: Deck Cadet
Date / Place of death: December 2, 1943 / Bari, Italy
Date / Place of burial: December 2, 1943 / Lost at Sea – Bari, Italy
Age: 19



Alvin H. Justis signed on aboard the SS John Harvey as Engine Cadet on October 5, 1943 at Baltimore, MD. Three other Cadet-Midshipmen also signed on aboard the John Harvey; Marvin W. Brodie (Engine), James L. Cahill (Deck), and Richard B. Glauche (Deck). According to a report filed by Cadet-Midshipman Cahill, the ship sailed to Norfolk, VA to finish loading and joined a convoy that sailed for Oran, North Africa on October 15. Unbeknownst to most of the crew, part of the ship's cargo was 2,000 M47A1 mustard gas bombs. The bombs were being sent to the Mediterranean so that American forces could retaliate if the Germans resorted to chemical warfare.

The John Harvey arrived in Oran on November 2, discharged its cargo other than the mustard gas bombs and then loaded a cargo of ammunition. A convoy of about forty ships, including the John Harvey, sailed from Oran for Augusta, Sicily on November 19, arriving there on November 25. The John Harvey sailed the next day in a convoy of thirty ships bound for the ports of Taranto and Bari on the Italian mainland with the Bari bound ships arriving there on November 28. The port facilities at Bari were unable to keep up with the number of ships in the port, resulting in days-long delays in discharging ships anchored in the port. Because of the high level of secrecy surrounding its cargo, the John Harvey was held in port for several days awaiting discharge, moored alongside other ships loaded with ammunition and gasoline, including the SS John L. Motley, SS John Bascom, and SS Samuel J. Tilden.

Because of its distance from German airfields an air attack on Bari was not considered likely so the port was not protected by the normal air defenses. As a result, a German attack force of more than 100 Ju88 was able to completely surprise the few defenders of Bari on the evening of December 2, 1943. Due to the lights being left on the bombers were able to accurately bomb the ships in the port and port facilities with only

the loss of a single aircraft. They left behind 28 ships sunk, twelve more damaged, over 1,000 merchant mariners and military personnel killed, and a port so badly damaged that it took three weeks to resume discharging ships.



**Explosion of either SS John Harvey
or SS John L. Motley at Bari, Italy**

According to the few surviving eye witnesses, the John L. Motley and the Samuel J. Tilden were among the first ships to be hit by the bombers. However, after the second wave of aircraft finished their attack the John Harvey was in flames from stem to stern. With the fires threatening the John Harvey's cargo of ammunition its crew fought desperately to save the ship, and their lives. However, the damaged John L. Motley had broken free from its mooring lines and, completely engulfed in

flames, was drifting towards the John Harvey. Suddenly, the John L. Motley exploded, destroying the ship and detonating the John Harvey's cargo. The John Harvey disintegrated, sending the contents of its cargo of mustard gas bombs into the air and water throughout the port.

Everyone aboard the John Harvey, including Cadet-Midshipmen Alvin H. Justis , Marvin H. Brodie and Richard B. Glauche, perished instantly. The only survivors from the John Harvey were Cadet-Midshipman James L. Cahill and one of the ship's Able Bodied Seaman who were ashore when the attack began. One of the major factors in the high number of casualties from the attack is that doctors and other medical personnel attending to the wounded did not diagnose their signs and symptoms as those of mustard gas poisoning since no mustard gas was believed to be in the area.

Cadet-Midshipman Alvin H. Justis, Jr. was posthumously awarded the Mariners Medal, Combat Bar, Atlantic War Zone Bar, the Mediterranean-Middle East War Zone Bar, the Victory Medal, and the Presidential Testimonial Letter.

Alvin H. Justis was the only son and oldest child of Alvin Harris Justis and Lavie Clyde Grissett Justis. Alvin's sister, Marie, was two years younger. According to the 1940 U.S. Census, the Justis family was hard working, with only Marie identified as not having some type of employment. Alvin Sr. worked as a clerk for the Norfolk & Western Railroad in Lynchburg, Lavie worked part time as a "fancy stitcher" in a shoe factory and at age fifteen Alvin worked about nine hours per week driving a truck for a local grocery store. A graduate of E.C. Glass High School in Lynchburg, Alvin Justis was a member of the football and baseball teams. Nicknamed "Shorty" because of his short stature, Alvin stood tall when it counted.