

Black sailors who survived the WWII Port Chicago explosion deserve justice



An explosion at Port Chicago in Concord on July 17, 1944, killed 320 and injured 400; 202 of the dead and half the injured were Black sailors.

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After [Dorie Miller](#) was awarded the Navy Cross for his valor in pulling shipmates to safety and manning an anti-aircraft gun at Pearl Harbor, he was heralded as a hero, then assigned to promote war bond sales.

When Miller returned to active duty after a six-month war bond tour in 1943, it wasn't as an anti-aircraft gunner, but as a galley messman, his former rating. Hero or no, like almost every Black sailor throughout most of World War II, Miller was assigned menial duties as an officer's steward, working in the galley or laboring loading cargo.

The racial status quo at the Naval Ammunition Depot at Port Chicago in Concord was no different. The Bay Area base served as a transfer point for many of the munitions used in the Pacific during World War II. There, only Black sailors performed the dangerous and labor-intensive drudgery of transferring munitions from railcars onto Liberty-class cargo ships.

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The Navy never bothered to train these workers or their white commanding officers on handling hazardous cargo.

On July 17, 1944, two Liberty ships exploded at Port Chicago, killing 320 and injuring 400; 202 of the dead and half the injured were Black sailors.

A Naval Court of Inquiry couldn't determine the explosion's cause but uncovered disturbing practices. The base commander had rebuffed Coast Guard supervision, which could have ensured safer practices for munitions handling. An offer by the longshoremen's union to give sailors safety training had also been rejected. Work crews were pitted against one another to see which could load more tonnage in an eight-hour shift; officers sometimes bet on the outcome.

A few weeks after the explosion, 328 Black survivors, who still hadn't received any safety training, were called upon to load munitions onto another ship at Mare Naval Shipyard near Vallejo; 258 balked. Those who refused were confined on a barge, and after a few days, 208 agreed to load the ship. The Navy ignored their change of heart, and instead convicted them of disobeying orders, fined them three months' pay and issued them bad-conduct discharges.

The other 50 were tried for mutiny. Some testified that they were injured or had always been assigned to kitchen duties and had never been cargo loaders. Others stated that a direct order hadn't been given. Still others said that they were willing to load munitions but first wanted safety training.

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All 50 were convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall filed their appeals and argued that the prosecution failed to prove a joint conspiracy, a necessary element for a mutiny conviction, and that they should've been charged with causing a work stoppage, a minor infraction.

Marshall's second appeal was successful, and the men were freed after about two years in prison. Their convictions remain on their records, though they were discharged "under honorable conditions," entitling them to G.I. Bill benefits. However, many never fully felt the pride of being members of "the Greatest Generation." They buried the pain of being convicted; some never truthfully answered when their children asked, "What did you do in the war, Daddy?"

African American poet Langston Hughes was prescient when in 1943 he penned: "When Dorie Miller took gun in hand — Jim Crow started his last stand ... "

After the 1944 Port Chicago "mutiny," [the Navy realized its institutional racism](#) was hurting its efficiency and the morale of sailors. Over the next year, it instituted multiple changes. The Navy limited Black personnel to 30% of ammunition depot companies, experimented with limited integration on some naval auxiliary vessels, published a "Guide to Command of Negro Naval Personnel" that warned officers on what words and expressions were now verboten, and brought on Lester Granger, the head of the Urban League, as a special adviser to Navy Secretary James V. Forrestal.

Freddie Meeks, one of the "mutineers," petitioned for a pardon in 1999, which President Bill Clinton granted. The other 49 mutineers and the 208

with bad-conduct discharges deserve a review of their records by the Board for Corrections of Naval Records, which could lead to the overturning of their convictions.

Giving them pardons would imply they had done something wrong, which they hadn't. Exoneration won't change anything for these now-deceased sailors, but their descendants will know that their work stoppage was one of several reasons that the Navy started integrating even before President Harry Truman's 1948 desegregation order.

The Navy has made enormous strides in overcoming discrimination and segregation. It's now time for President Biden to finally correct this racial injustice and order an official inquiry into the alleged mutiny and misconduct, which should result in justice for these sailors.

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