

THE PORT CHICAGO DISASTER AND ITS AFTERMATH

by Robert L. Allen

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On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago (California) naval base on the Sacramento River were suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion. The incredible blast wrecked the naval base and heavily damaged the small town of Port Chicago, located 1½ miles away. Some 320 American sailors were killed instantly. The two ships and the large loading pier were totally annihilated. Several hundred military personnel and civilians were injured, and millions of dollars in property damage was caused by the huge blast. Windows were shattered in towns 20 miles away, and the glare of the explosion could be seen in San Francisco, some 35 miles away. It was the worst home-front disaster of World War II. In fact, it was the most powerful man-made explosion prior to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima a year later.

Of the Navy personnel who died in the blast, most—some 200 ammunition loaders—were black. Indeed, every man handling ammunition at Port Chicago was black, and every commissioned officer white. This was the standard operating procedure in the segregated Navy at that time.

Three weeks after the disaster, 328 of the surviving ammunition loaders were ordered to work loading ammunition; but 258 of these men refused, saying they feared another explosion. All of the refusers were immediately incarcerated and during the next few days naval officers cajoled and threatened the

resisters. Finally, 50 men were singled out, charged with mutiny, court-martialed, convicted, and handed sentences ranging from 8 to 15 years imprisonment.

A mass campaign to gain the release of the men was organized by Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. After more than a year of struggle, and the ending of the war, the Navy finally agreed to set aside the remainder of the sentences and the men were released from prison and sent overseas for a year of "rehabilitation." In effect, they were sent into exile before being allowed to return to their families.

A few years ago, while doing research for another article, I came across a small pamphlet entitled "Mutiny? The Real Story of How the Navy Branded 50 Fear-shocked Sailors as Mutineers." The pamphlet was published in 1945 by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and it recounted the disaster at Port Chicago and the alleged mutiny by the black seamen. I had never heard of this incident, and I was fascinated. Turning to standard historical reference works I was surprised to discover very little information beyond an occasional mention. Curious that such an obviously major event had attracted so little attention from scholars, I began going to libraries and reading old news clippings. The more I read the more intrigued I became.

Eventually I learned that many of the records pertaining to the disaster and the "mutiny" were now declassified and were

available in various archives, mostly on the East Coast. Subsequently I received a Guggenheim Fellowship which made it possible for me to visit archives and track down survivors to interview. The following account is based on these primary documents and oral histories collected from survivors.

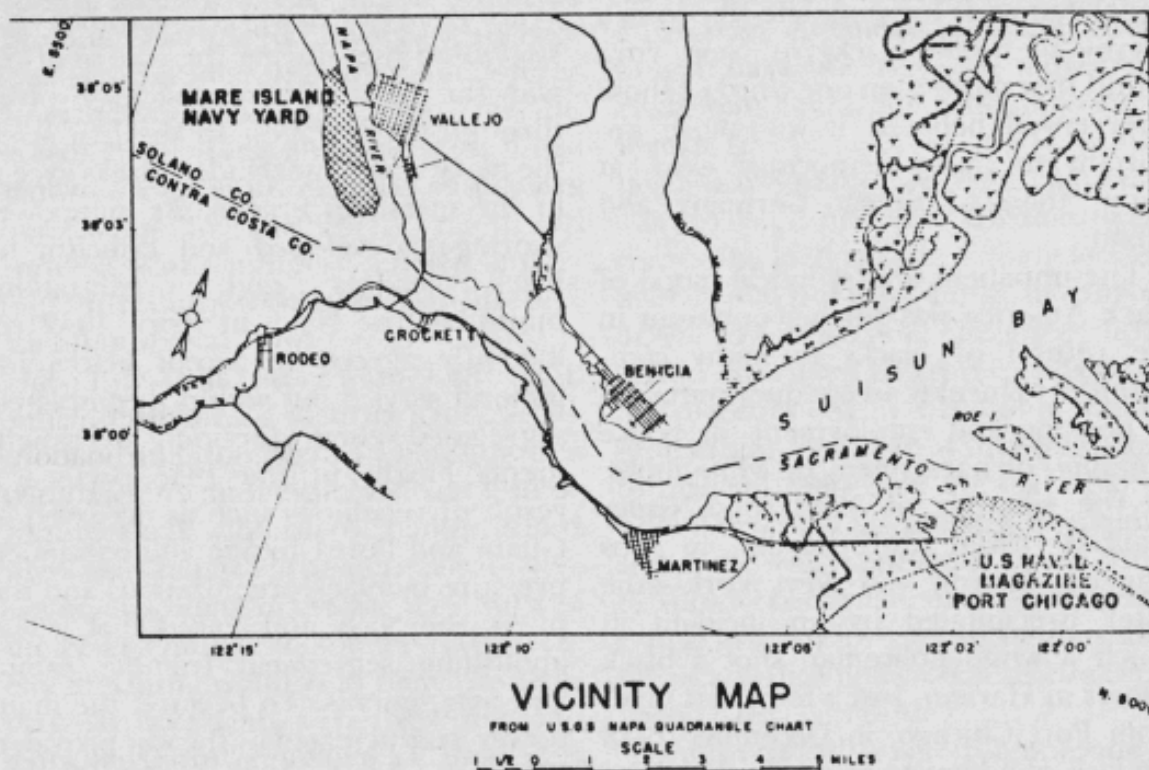
Black men have found themselves in every American war since the war for independence, although black spokesmen have not always been enthusiastic supporters of America's foreign adventures, especially during the Philippines campaign at the turn of the century and the Vietnam conflict. Black men were never welcomed into the military with open arms; their participation was often allowed only after a fierce struggle with a racist military and political bureaucracy, and the tasks black soldiers were given were sharply restricted. Black recruits were employed chiefly as laborers and menials serving the needs of white troops and officers. For example, during the Civil War it was only after a series of military reversals and a strident campaign by black and white abolitionists that the North agreed to use black troops. Some 500,000 blacks contributed their services to the Union cause; 300,000 of these were employed as servants and laborers. Or again: of some 380,000 black troops who served in World War I, 340,000 were assigned to labor battalions, stevedore battalions, supply regiments and other service units.

Black soldiers were essentially the day laborers of the American military machine. Indeed, black soldiers have found that their position in the military parallels their position in civilian life: blacks are a source of cheap, subordinated labor in both domains. Indeed, if we think of the military as an employer, then the black struggle within the military has been in part a struggle for the democrati-

zation of labor usage. Segregated units, discrimination in pay, discrimination in promotions and ratings, the lack of black officers—these and other grievances of black soldiers correspond closely to the grievances of black workers in civilian life.

But whereas civilian workers may resort to various forms of protest, including strikes, to improve their conditions; the forms of protest allowed in the military are virtually non-existent. Protest is instead treated as insubordination, refusal to obey orders, or even mutiny, and punished accordingly. Thus, protest and resistance in the military has been much more risky and difficult to organize.

Many examples of black men being victimized by racist forces—such as the Brownsville case of 1906 and the mob attacks on black soldiers during and after World War I—are relatively well known, but much less familiar are the instances of active resistance on the part of black servicemen in wars prior to Vietnam. These acts of resistance are a hidden part of the heritage of popular struggle against racial oppression. The Port Chicago rebellion is perhaps the most spectacular example during World War II, but Port Chicago was not an isolated incident. Within the Navy alone there were several other examples of mass protest and resistance: A two-day hunger strike by 1,000 Black Seabees in March 1945 to protest Jim Crow practices and the lack of promotions; the so-called Guam riot of December 1944 in which black sailors armed themselves to resist harassment by white shore patrolmen and marines; and the case of 15 Seabees who in October 1943 were dishonorably discharged because they dared to speak out against discriminatory treatment in the Navy. The Army, too, was wracked by frequent racial disorders during the war.



Port Chicago is located on the Sacramento River approximately 35 miles north of San Francisco-Oakland.

These instances of protest and resistance cannot be separated from the state of the black struggle in U.S. society. On the eve of World War II black America was in a watchful, skeptical mood. The Garvey movement had reawakened a sense of racial pride in many Afro-Americans, and the labor and radical movements of the Thirties—in which many blacks participated—had demonstrated the importance of collective action. Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the rise of Hitler's racist regime had attracted black attention to the developing international conflict. Popular confrontations, such as the Joe Louis–Max Schmelling fight, and the Jesse Owens Olympic victory in 1936 (and Hitler's public snub of Owens) also sharpened black consciousness.

But economic depression and rampant racial discrimination at home continued to pre-occupy black leaders, the

black press, and the black community generally, and shaped the black response to the war. Unlike World War I, in which a leader such as W.E.B. Du Bois could urge the black community to “forget our special grievances and close ranks shoulder to shoulder with our fellow white citizens . . . fighting for democracy,” World War II was from the very beginning regarded by most black spokesmen as a struggle on two fronts. A. Phillip Randolph took the lead in January 1941 when he began organizing the March on Washington movement to protest discrimination in the war industries and segregation in the armed forces. Early in 1942 the *Pittsburgh Courier* inaugurated its immensely popular “Double V” campaign, calling for victory over the fascists abroad and victory over racism at home. Later that year the *Courier* published the results of an opinion poll which found that almost 90 percent of those ques-

tioned felt that blacks should not soft-pedal demands for complete freedom; a survey of 1,000 blacks in New York found that more than one-third of those interviewed believed it was more important to make democracy work at home than to defeat Germany and Japan.

The impatient and skeptical mood of black America was further apparent in the refusal of blacks in many communities to meekly accept discrimination in housing and employment, or police brutality, or harassment by white mobs. In the summer of 1943 these issues sparked racial disturbances in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York—the latter precipitated by an incident in which a white policeman shot a black soldier in Harlem. Just a few short miles from Port Chicago, in December 1943 the lack of adequate recreation facilities for black servicemen in the town of Vallejo, California, led to a clash between black and white sailors in which several men were injured. In sum, as America entered World War II black people were in no mood to put aside their grievances, and instead were actively opposing every manifestation of racism.

BLACKS IN THE NAVY

A brief look at the situation of blacks in the Navy offers further insights. Black men have served in the U.S. Navy since the American Revolution, but following World War I the Navy attempted to exclude blacks altogether, replacing them with Filipino stewards. The Navy's growing need for stewards and messmen led to a reversal of this policy in 1932, but black recruits were still limited in numbers and relegated to the most menial tasks. There were no black officers and the number of black sailors above messman level was negligible. Black organizations protested this situation but changes

did not occur until the advent of World War II. Historian L.D. Reddick has suggested that during the course of the war the Navy's racial policies evolved through three stages: In the first stage the Navy virtually excluded blacks except in the messman branch. As manpower shortages developed and criticism by black leaders and organizations mounted, the Navy in April 1942 reluctantly agreed to accept blacks for general service but within a completely segregated system of training and assignments. Finally, in June 1945, partly as a result of rebellions such as occurred at Guam and Port Chicago and continued pressure by black organizations and the press, the Navy announced that it was abolishing segregated training camps and assignments. To be sure, the manpower needs created by the war provided the motive force behind this progression from exclusion to segregation to integration, but Reddick concluded that it was the struggles undertaken by black sailors themselves, supported by the press and black people's organizations, which set the pace and direction of change.

With so much said by way of describing the general social and military context, let me now turn to an examination of the Port Chicago rebellion itself, a case which has received scant attention from historians and social scientists, and one in which many of the racial issues came to a head.

PORT CHICAGO

Following the outbreak of the war in the Pacific the need for additional ammunition handling facilities on the West Coast became urgent. A site for a new facility was selected near the small town of Port Chicago. Construction was authorized in June 1942 and the first ammunition ship was loaded at the new magazine on December 8, 1942, a year

and a day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Over the next several years Port Chicago became the most important ammunition handling facility on the West Coast, loading hundreds of thousands of tons of ammunition of all types onto ships for the Pacific campaign. Indeed, Port Chicago remained important through both the Korean and Vietnam wars.

By July 1944, there were 1,431 black enlisted personnel at Port Chicago, 71 officers, and 106 Marines who guarded the base. In addition there were some 231 civilians who were mainly skilled workers such as carpenters, locomotive engineers, crane operators, etc. Most of the black enlisted personnel—who were chiefly young draftees in their late teens or early twenties—were organized into work divisions consisting of about 125 men each. Each division was headed by white lieutenants, with black petty officers acting as foremen of the working gangs. The divisions were housed in two-story wooden barracks located over a mile from the loading pier.

Loading went on around the clock in three shifts. Typically, a division would load ships for three consecutive days, seven hours per day. This would be followed by a "duty day" when the division would be assigned other work such as cleaning up the grounds or unloading dunnage (timber used in stowing bombs in boxcars and ships' holds). In the afternoon of the duty day there might be a lecture, an educational film or a drill, followed by some free time for the men to handle personal chores such as laundry, letter writing, etc. The men were required to stay at the base during duty day in case of emergency. The following day the division would resume loading for three more consecutive days, at the conclusion of which they would have a day's liberty during which

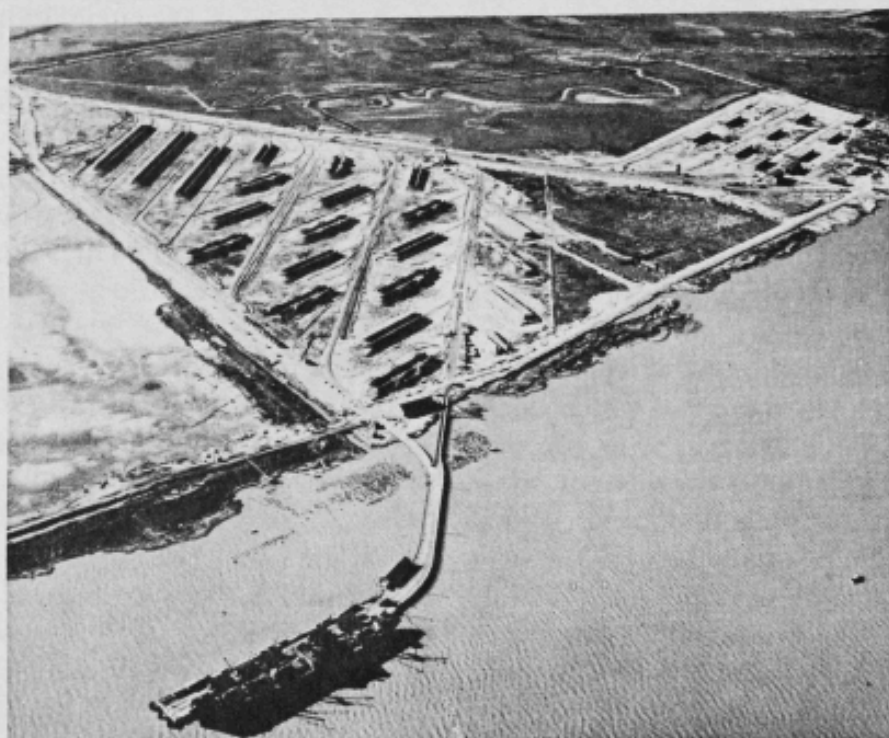
they might leave the base. Consequently, during an eight-day period a division would have six days of ammunition loading, a duty day, and one day of liberty.

On the loading pier the usual practice was to assign one work division to each ship being loaded. The division would be broken into five work gangs, one for each of the ship's hatches. The gangs in turn would be broken into two squads, one on the pier and one in the hold of the ship. In addition one man would be assigned to operate the winch for that hold and one man would act as hatch attendant to signal the winch operator.

Men not actually employed in ammunition loading for various reasons might be assigned as compartment cleaners or mess cooks.

Ammunition was brought onto the pier in railroad boxcars. One or two men would be assigned to "break out" the car, using a sledge hammer and pinch bar to remove dunnage that shored up the bombs.* The rest of the squad would then manhandle the bombs onto the pier—large bombs would be rolled down an incline or removed by electric "mules," and small bombs and boxes of ammunition might be passed hand to hand or transported by handtrucks. The ammunition would be placed in nets or on pallets on the pier so it could be hoisted by the ship's booms through the hatch and lowered into the hold where another squad stowed it away. The bombs would be stowed layer by layer, slowing rising from the bottom of the hold to the hatch. During these operations the pier would be jammed with boxcars, locomotives, tons of bombs and high explosives, and men scrambling about everywhere.

* The men who broke open the boxcars had one extra reward for their efforts: they got the names and addresses of women workers at ammunition plants who sometimes wrote them on the dunnage. More than once a lively correspondence followed.



Aerial view of Port Chicago Naval Magazine and loading pier before the explosion in July, 1944. U.S. Navy photo.

The types of ammunition handled included everything from small arms ammunition to artillery projectiles, depth charges, incendiary bombs, fragmentation bombs, and huge block-busters weighing as much as 2,000 pounds each.

Unloading boxcars and stowing bombs and explosives into ships' holds was back-breaking, heavy labor. Port Chicago was a "workhorse base," as one informant put it. "This was solid work," he continued. "You'd go down in that ship and you build yourself all the way up—just packing until you find yourself way up on top." "We were a mule team," another man said. Still another man described Port Chicago as a "slave outfit," adding that "We were considered a cheap labor force from the beginning."

OUTPUT VS. SAFETY

From the beginning the new base was under pressure to continually expand

and increase its output in response to wartime needs—and the operation was beset by difficulties. In the first place, the loading platform on the pier was too narrow for safe work. This led to overcrowded working conditions and slowed the pace of loading. In May 1944 the loading platform was widened, but the workload on the pier was immediately doubled; now for the first time *two* ships were being loaded simultaneously on either side of the pier instead of one, as had been the previous practice. This meant twice as many men and twice as much ammunition were on the pier at a given time, and correspondingly increased the hazards of the work.

Second, there were grave questions about the competency of the officers at the base. In testimony before the naval court of inquiry that investigated the explosion, it was revealed that many of the officers at Port Chicago had no previous training in handling ammunition and no training or experience in

commanding enlisted men. Many of them were reservists called to active duty from civilian life and given only scanty training of any type.

Third, the constant war-time pressure to increase efficiency and output was translated into speeding up the pace of work. Captain Nelson Goss, the commanding officer of Mare Island naval station of which Port Chicago was a subcommand, required that loading crews achieve a goal of ten tons per hatch per hour of loading. In practice this goal was seldom achieved, and at the court of inquiry which investigated the explosion there would be considerable debate as to whether such an objective was unreasonably high and might have encouraged unsafe practices and rough handling in an effort to attain it.

The pressure to increase tonnage became more intense when Captain Merrill T. Kinne came on board as officer in charge of Port Chicago in April 1944. Kinne initiated the practice of posting daily rates of loading for each work division on a blackboard in the dock office. Kinne explained that he got the idea for the blackboard from the Navy practice of competition in target practice where scores are kept on the number of shots fired and hits made. "I have never felt," he stated at the court of inquiry, "that it would be possible to maintain a satisfactory loading rate with the type of enlisted personnel assigned to Port Chicago unless every officer in a supervisory capacity keeps continually in mind the necessity for getting this ammunition out."

It also came out during the court of inquiry that junior officers, according to one of them, "had received some rather sharp letters [from superiors] concerning our lack of efficiency from the standpoint of lack of tonnage." Such criticism combined with Kinne's black-

board encouraged the junior officers to promote competition in loading ammunition between the various work divisions.

When asked if the posting of tonnage figures encouraged competition and undue haste the officer above replied: "I would say there was a tendency to be a little rough in order to be a little quicker in stowing." The officer added that at one time the divisions with highest efficiency in loading were rewarded with free movies. Several other junior officers agreed that competition between divisions existed and some admitted that the practice led to rough and unsafe handling of ammunition.

The incredible fact that forced competition existed was corroborated in my interviews with Port Chicago survivors. "We were pushed," one informant said. "The officers used to pit one division against the other, and the officers themselves used to bet on their division putting on more tonnage than the other divisions. I often heard them argue over what division was beating the others. So we were pushed by the petty officers to get the tonnage in. They were in turn pushed by the officers."

Although no other informant mentioned betting among the officers, most agreed that the pace of work was fast and competition between the work divisions was fostered by the officers. "There was always a tonnage thing," one man said. "You always knew what the division did in front of you. If they put on x number of tons that meant you had to do more." Another man described the officers as "tonnage minded," and he reported that the officers pushed the men to work faster. Still another informant recalled that tonnage figures were posted on a blackboard.

The men were goaded into competition by threats of punishment or loss of privileges. Two informants recalled that the division with the best loading record

each week would be given a pennant to fly over the barracks. Another informant said the outstanding division might be rewarded with special recreational privileges.

Thus, the black enlisted men, already engaged in extremely dangerous work, were pushed to race against each other in handling ammunition. Not surprisingly, the competition led to rough and sometimes careless handling of ammunition and increased the danger of an explosion. Some of the men voiced objections to this dubious practice, but to no avail. At least one of the division officers also complained about this gross violation of safety precautions, but also to no avail.

RACISM

In addition to unsafe working conditions, blacks at Port Chicago were also targets of the racism of the officers, and many of the enlisted men were distressed by the discriminatory treatment that was common in the Navy. The top brass and many of the division officers at Port Chicago and Mare Island regarded the black enlisted men as themselves a major problem. Captain Goss routinely characterized the black men under his command as "troublemakers" and "agitators," which he later explained meant that they "evinced a desire to question orders." There was an unusually high number of disciplinary actions against the men at Mare Island and Port Chicago, which undoubtedly alienated the men even more. Goss also complained that the black personnel were poor workers, capable, in his opinion, of accomplishing only about 60 percent as much work as white personnel.

Yet it was Goss's refusal to make use of contract stevedores at Port Chicago that led to the assignment of black enlisted personnel at the base. In a series of communications with the Navy's Bureau

of Ordnance, Goss had expressed his objections to the use of contract stevedores. In his opinion civilian stevedores were too expensive, were subject to union regulations regarding working conditions, were under the influence of labor leaders, and, worst of all, the civilian laborers available were mainly Filipinos, blacks, and whites of "enemy alien" descent (Italians). Goss recommended that white enlisted personnel be employed at Port Chicago on grounds that they would be less expensive and more manageable than civilian stevedores.

But by 1942, as noted already, the Navy was modifying its racial policies under fire from civil rights groups and others. Blacks were still to be segregated but they were to be employed more widely in naval installations, particularly as laborers and industrial workers in shore facilities. Consequently, black enlisted personnel were assigned to Port Chicago to load ammunition. Goss was not enthusiastic about this development, but no doubt he concluded that it was better to deal with black enlisted men who were under complete Navy control than to deal with a motley group of Filipinos, blacks and enemy alien whites who would be under the influence of radical union leaders.

For their part the black enlisted men had an equally low opinion of the situation at Port Chicago. According to my informants, the men were angered by the racial discrimination apparent in the organization of the base. They resented that only black men were assigned to what were essentially labor battalions charged with doing dangerous and heavy work, and in a situation where they were compelled to race against each other. Moreover, although all of the men had been trained at Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois, apparently



Black enlisted men unload boxes of ammunition at Port Chicago under supervision of white officer.
U.S. Navy photo.

none had been instructed in safe methods for handling ammunition; they were simply expected to learn by doing and to ignore the attendant risks.

In this regard it is also worth noting that before the disaster the longshoremen's union had warned the Navy there would be an explosion if the Navy continued to use untrained seamen to load ammunition. The waterfront union would not allow a winch driver to work on ammunition unless he had had years of experience with other loads; it was the Navy's practice to permit a man to operate a winch after only a few days' training or sometimes no training at all. The union offered to send experienced longshoremen to train the Navy recruits in safe handling of ammunition but this offer was ignored by the Navy.

Men were also disturbed that they could not get the promotions and ratings they thought they deserved. There was little room for mobility on a segregated

base where it was not possible for a black man to become an officer, and where there could be little lateral movement into specialized ratings because basically there was only one job to do—loading ammunition. Pay was another grievance. The men knew that their labor was exploited, that stevedores in civilian life earned several times what they were being paid. Some men sought transfers, preferring combat duty to escape from the exploitation, oppression and danger of Port Chicago, but these apparently were not often granted—adding another grievance to the list. Finally, men complained about the lack of recreational facilities. There was little on the base (a recreation building was not constructed until June 1944, one month before the explosion), the town of Port Chicago was not friendly to blacks, and there was no military transportation from the base to Oakland or San Francisco, only a commercial bus. These

grievances were not unique to Port Chicago; they paralleled the grievances of black sailors at other naval stations.

The grievances agitated the men's minds. Some individuals complained to the petty officers and the division officers, only to be ignored. Other men vented their anger in acts of individual defiance. But such acts only further confirmed the officers' habit of ignoring the men's grievances, treating them as simply disciplinary problems.

At least one group of Port Chicago men appealed for outside help: they drafted a letter in 1943 setting forth their grievances and pointing out that morale among the enlisted men had dropped to "an alarming depth." The men asked for a change in Navy policy so that they would have a fair chance to prove their capabilities. The letter ended prophetically: "We, the Negro sailors of the Naval Enlisted Barracks of Port Chicago, California, are waiting for a new deal. Will we wait in vain?" The letter was sent to a Berkeley lawyer who forwarded it to the NAACP where it joined a file of similar letters from other black men in the military.

On occasion, the enlisted men took action to dramatize a particular complaint. Several work slowdowns had occurred in the past. As one of the men put it in an interview: "You couldn't strike, you couldn't quit, so you just slowed down." Other men rationalized that their grievances were offset by the perceived benefits of Navy life. For instance, two men I interviewed listed several grievances concerning practices at the base and then commented that the grievances were "balanced out a little" by the fact that black men were now being admitted to the seaman's branch of the Navy for the first time. One of these men, who had been raised in an impoverished urban ghetto, added: "Being in the Navy and being able to sleep between clean

sheets and have three square meals a day, hot meals; this was a privilege that some of us hadn't had so we didn't put up much of a squawk about grievances." The men often griped among themselves but that was generally where it ended.

Some enlisted men, seeing the danger in the work process, confronted the officers about the risks. For example, one respondent said that he confronted superior officers "numerous times" about the danger of an explosion: "I had told everybody in authority that I could get to that we were working dangerously, and one day that place would blow up. The lieutenant gave me a manual that contained a diagram of a 500-pound bomb that was supposed to be totally harmless without the detonator in it. We had a discussion about it. I said won't concussion blow this thing up? He said it's impossible—it cannot blow up without this charge in the head of it. I didn't believe it. Every time we got in an argument over it, it would end up with him telling me that if it does blow up I wouldn't know anything about it."

Most of the enlisted men, upon first arriving at Port Chicago, were quite fearful of the explosives they were expected to handle. But over time, many of the men simply accommodated themselves to the work situation by discounting the risk of an explosion. Contrary to the example above, some men readily accepted the officers' assurances that the bombs could not explode because they had no detonators. Others were influenced by the attitude of veteran workers at the base who apparently discounted the danger. Still others witnessed or were told about minor accidents which did not result in an explosion, and consequently lowered their estimation of the risks.

Some of the enlisted men even got to

the point of being able to joke about the danger, and sometimes kidded each other about who would be the first or last out of the ship's hold if something went wrong.

THE EXPLOSION

The fateful, moonless night of July 17, 1944, was clear and cool. Two cargo ships were tied up at the Port Chicago pier and under floodlights work was proceeding at full speed.

One of the ships, the *E.A. Bryan*, a Liberty vessel owned by the War Shipping Administration, had been moored at Port Chicago for four days, taking on ammunition and explosives night and day. Some 98 men of Division Three were hard at work loading the *Bryan*, and by 10 p.m. that night the ship was loaded with some 4,600 tons of munitions including 1,780 tons of high explosives.

The loading of the *Bryan* had been proceeding routinely but not without some problems. There had been trouble with the steam winches on the *Bryan*. The crank bearing on the No. 2 winch had failed and was replaced. The afternoon of July 17th a valve on the No. 4 winch had gone out and had to be repaired. There was also trouble with the No. 1 winch. The brake on the winch was reported stuck in the "off" position. The chief engineer was informed of the problem by the third mate, but it was not certain that the brake was repaired. Failure of one of the winches could be disastrous since it might result in the dropping of a load on the pier or into the hold of a ship.

The second ship, the *Quinault Victory*, was brand new; it was preparing for its maiden voyage. The *Quinault Victory* had moored at Port Chicago at about 6 p.m. on the evening of July 17th. Some 102 men of the Sixth Division, many of them only recently arrived at Port Chicago,

were busy rigging the ship in preparation for loading. Loading of ammunition was due to begin by midnight.

In addition to the enlisted men there were present nine Navy officers, 67 members of the crews of the two ships along with an Armed Guard detail of 29 men, five crew members of a Coast Guard fire barge, a Marine sentry, and a number of civilian employees. The pier was congested with men, equipment, a locomotive and 16 railroad boxcars, and about 430 tons of bombs and projectiles waiting to be loaded.

Just before 10:20 p.m. a massive explosion occurred at the pier. To some observers it appeared that two explosions, only a few seconds apart, occurred: a first and smaller blast was felt; this was followed quickly by a cataclysmic explosion as the *E.A. Bryan* went off like one gigantic bomb, sending a column of fire and smoke more than 12,000 feet into the night sky.

Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships was killed instantly—some 320 men, 200 of whom were black enlisted men. Very few intact bodies were recovered. Another 390 military and civilian personnel were injured, including 226 black enlisted men. This single, stunning disaster accounted for almost one-fifth of all black naval casualties during World War II. Property damage, military and civilian, was estimated at more than \$12 million.

The *E.A. Bryan* was literally blown to bits—very little of its wreckage was ever found. The *Quinault Victory* was lifted clear out of the water by the blast, turned around and broken into pieces. The next morning the stern of the *Quinault Victory* could be seen protruding upside down out of the water.

In an interview, one of the men described his experience of the disaster: "I was reading a letter from home. Suddenly there were two explosions.



Wreckage on shore following blast at Port Chicago. *U.S. Navy photo.*

The first one knocked me clean off . . . I found myself flying toward the wall. I just threw my hands up like this, then I hit the wall. Then the next one came right behind that, Phoom! Knocked me back on the other side. Men were screaming, the lights went out and glass was flying all over the place. I got out to the door. Everybody was . . . that thing had . . . the whole building was turned around, caving in. We were a mile and a half away from the ships. And so the first thing that came to my mind, I said, 'Jesus Christ, the Japs have hit!' I could have sworn they were out there pounding us with warships or bombing us or something. But one of the officers was shouting, 'It's the ships! It's the ships!' So we jumped in one of the trucks and we said let's go down there, see if we can help. We got halfway down there on the truck and stopped. Guys were shouting at the driver from the back of the truck,

'Go on down. What the hell are you staying up here for?' The driver says, 'Can't go no further.' See, there wasn't no more docks. Wasn't no railroad. Wasn't no ships. And the water just came right up to . . . all the way back. The driver couldn't go no farther. Just as calm and peaceful. I didn't even see any smoke."

Another man, who was scheduled to do guard duty that night, had just walked into the administration building: "I'm over there with the petty officer, sitting there in the window, telling him my name and all that. Then this damned thing happened. They talk about light traveling faster than sound. . . . Well, the first thing was this great big flash, and then something must have hit me. I found myself outside of that building and I don't remember going out of no window or climbing out of it. But I was

outside and with only one little scar on my arm. Everybody felt at that point that it was another Pearl Harbor—not that the ships had blown up, because you didn't think about that at that point, because of the building that you had been in and the barracks and all that—caved in, windows busted out, blown out and all that kind of thing. People running and hollering. You know a bunch of guys were sleeping in the barracks. The barracks had a lot of windows, lower and upper deck, whole side was windows. And they were blown to pieces. Some guys lost their sight; others were badly cut. Finally they got the emergency lights together. Then some guys came by in a truck and we went down to the dock, but when we got there we didn't see no dock, no ship, no nothing."

One man who was blinded by the explosion described what happened: "When taps was sounding that evening I put my writing gear away and went to wash up and put on my Noxzema—being a teenager I had some of those blemishes on my face. I came back and I was lying on my bunk. It would usually take about 20 minutes to quiet the men down after lights out. And shortly after, probably 10:20 p.m., there was this tremendous explosive sound. I was looking to my right, I had my head pillowed on my arm looking away from the explosion. I quickly jumped up to look and see what was going on and there was a second explosion—all these tremendous beautiful flashes in the sky. That's when the flying glass hit my face and entered my eyes. It did it in such a strange way, inasmuch as I never felt any pain from it. It lacerated the left eye so badly that it was removed that night. The right eye had a laceration, just one laceration in the eye itself that travelled across part of the pupil and cornea allowing the vitriolic fluid to drain, which

left me with split vision in that eye. They were able to put a suture there. Of course, sutures leave permanent scar tissue, and this scar tissue eventually caused the sight to leave me completely."

RESCUE EFFORTS

Rescue assistance was rushed from nearby towns and other military bases. The town of Port Chicago was heavily damaged by the explosion but fortunately none of its citizens were killed although many suffered injuries. The naval base itself was a shambles but there was no panic. The survivors assisted in rescue efforts and in putting out small fires started by flaming debris. One group of black enlisted men and officers bravely fought and extinguished a fire that had started in a box car loaded with explosives. If the box car had exploded it might well have set off a chain reaction of explosions in nearby box cars and possibly killed more men.

During the night and early morning the injured were removed to hospitals and many of the black enlisted men were evacuated to nearby stations, mainly to Camp Shoemaker in Oakland. Others remained at Port Chicago to clear away debris and search for what could be found of bodies.

The search for bodies was grim work. One survivor recalled the experience: "I was there the next morning. We went back to the dock. Man, it was awful; that was a sight. You'd see a shoe with a foot in it, and then you would remember how you'd joked about who was gonna be the first one out of the hold. You'd see a head floating across the water—just the head, or an arm. Bodies . . . just awful."

Some 200 black enlisted men volunteered to remain at the base and help with the clean-up operation.

Three days after the disaster Captain Kinne issued a statement praising the



View of destroyed pier and semi-submerged wreckage of *Quinalt Victory*. U.S. Navy photo.

black enlisted men for their behavior during the disaster. Stating that the men acquitted themselves with "great credit," he added: "Under those emergency conditions regular members of our complement and volunteers from Mare Island displayed creditable coolness and bravery."

Rear Admiral Carleton H. Wright, Commandant of the Twelfth Naval District, also commended the men: "I am gratified to learn that, as was to be expected, Negro personnel attached to the Naval Magazine Port Chicago performed bravely and efficiently in the emergency at that station last Monday night. These men, in the months that they served at that command, did excellent work in an important segment of the District's overseas combat supply system. As real Navy men, they simply carried on in the crisis attendant on the explosion in

accordance with our Service's highest traditions."

Four Port Chicago men and one black enlisted man from Mare Island were awarded medals for their heroic conduct in fighting the ammunition boxcar fire that broke out after the explosion. These men were James A. Camper, Jr., William E. Anderson, Richard L. McTere, Effus S. Allen, and John A. Haskins, Jr. Kinne himself was awarded a bronze star.

Meanwhile it was announced that memorial services for the dead would be held on July 30th, and in Washington, steps were being taken to compensate the families of the victims. A proposal was presented in Congress to grant the families up to \$5,000 in compensation. However, when Mississippi Representative John Rankin objected to the plan because most of the beneficiaries would be black, Congress in its wisdom reduced the maximum allowable grant to \$3,000.

COURT OF INQUIRY

Four days after the Port Chicago disaster, on July 21, 1944, a Naval Court of Inquiry was convened to "inquire into the circumstances attending the explosion." The inquiry was to establish the facts of the situation and the court was to arrive at an opinion concerning the cause or causes of the disaster. The court was comprised of three senior naval officers and a judge advocate who assembled evidence and witnesses for interrogation. Both Captain Goss and Captain Kinne were present throughout the proceedings as "interested parties," which meant that they would be allowed to present evidence and examine witnesses "in the same manner as a defendant."

The inquiry lasted 39 days and some 125 witnesses were called to testify. However, only five black witnesses were called to testify—none from the group that would later resist returning to work because of unsafe practices. The court heard testimony from survivors and eye-witnesses of the explosion, other Port Chicago personnel, ordnance experts, inspectors who checked the ships before loading, and others.

The question of Captain Kinne's tonnage figures blackboard and the competition it encouraged came up during the proceedings. Kinne attempted to justify this practice as simply an extension of the Navy's practice of competition in target practice. He contended that it did not negatively impact on safety, and implied that junior officers who said it did, did not know what they were talking about.

The court also heard testimony concerning the fueling of the vessels, possible sabotage, defects in the bombs, problems with the winches and other equipment, rough handling by the enlisted men, and organizational problems at Port Chicago. But the specific cause of

the explosion was never officially established by the court of inquiry—anyone in a position to have actually seen what caused the explosion did not live to tell about it. (Recent evidence has come to light which indicates that the explosion may have been nuclear. See article by Peter Vogel in this issue.)

Nevertheless, the court was charged with offering an opinion on the cause of the explosion, and something or someone must be held responsible for the awful tragedy. In his summation of the testimony the Judge Advocate dismissed sabotage as a possible cause on the grounds that an investigation by the District Intelligence Office had failed to turn up any evidence of sabotage. Inherent defects in the bombs might have been a "contributory cause," he said, "but there must have been some overt act to cause the bomb to actually explode." As for equipment problems and procedures employed, the Judge Advocate said the testimony was inconclusive: some witnesses testified that the equipment and methods used at Port Chicago were as safe as those employed at other naval magazines; other witnesses disagreed.

This brought the Judge Advocate to the question of the role of the black enlisted personnel: "The consensus of opinion of the witnesses—and practically admitted by the interested parties—is that the colored enlisted personnel are neither temperamentally or intellectually capable of handling high explosives. As one witness has stated, sixty percent of the lowest intellectual strata of the men sent out of Great Lakes were sent to Port Chicago. These men, it is testified, could not understand the orders which were given to them and the only way they could be made to understand what they should do was by actual demonstration. . . . It is an admitted fact, supported by the testimony of the witnesses, that there was rough and

careless handling of the explosives being loaded aboard ships at Port Chicago."

Although there was testimony before the court about competition in loading, this was not listed by the court (or the Judge Advocate) as in any way a cause of the explosion (although the court saw fit to recommend that in future "the loading of explosives should never be a matter of competition"—a small slap on the hands of the officers). Thus, the court of inquiry in effect cleared the officers of responsibility for the disaster, and in so far as any human cause was invoked the burden of blame was laid on the shoulders of the black enlisted men who died in the explosion.

MEN IN SHOCK

After the explosion many of the surviving black sailors were transferred to nearby Camp Shoemaker where they remained until July 31st; then the Fourth and Eighth Divisions were transferred to naval barracks in Vallejo near Mare Island. During this period the men were assigned barracks duties, but no ship loading was assigned. Another group, the Second Division, which was also at Camp Shoemaker until the 31st, returned to Port Chicago to help with the cleaning up and rebuilding of the base.

Many of the men were in a state of shock, troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion in which so many of their friends had died. All were extremely nervous and jumpy. "Everybody was scared," one survivor recalled. "If somebody dropped a box or slammed a door, people be jumping around like crazy. Everybody was still nervous." Another man who arrived at Port Chicago the day of the explosion wrote home to his family: "It was something I'll never forget. I am in a pretty nervous condition now. Every loud noise I hear

makes me jump and my heart flutters." There was no psychiatric counselling or medical screening of the men, except for those who were obviously physically injured.

The men's anxiety was probably made worse by the fact that they did not know what caused the explosion. Rumor and speculation were rife. Some thought it was caused by an accident, some suspected sabotage, others did not know what to think. Apparently the men were not informed that the Navy was conducting an investigation—certainly none of those who would later be involved in the work stoppage were called to testify at the court of inquiry. Thus the men attempted to evaluate their situation in the absence of any definite information, and gradually their conversations focused more on the work process and the ammunition itself. It was no longer possible to blithely discount the risks of ammunition handling. "They assured me that it couldn't happen," one man reflected. "Without that detonator and the cap in it, it was supposed to be innocent. It couldn't explode. I don't know what caused the initial explosion but that so-called innocent ammunition is what did most of the damage."

The men talked among themselves. They had not yet been ordered back to their regular duty and no one knew what would happen next, but many of them hoped they would be transferred to other stations or to ships.

Many of the survivors expected to be granted survivors' leaves to visit their families before being re-assigned to regular duty. But such leaves were not granted, creating a major grievance. Another man who worked on the clean-up crew said: "This is what made the guys mad after they done that work around there getting things straightened out and then they turned them down. They said, 'No, you cannot have that 30-day leave.'"

Even men who had been hospitalized with injuries were not granted leaves.

WORK STOPPAGE

The complex and agonizing process by which a large group of men decided not to go back to work is not fully clear. From interviews and documents, I have pieced together a rough reconstruction of events as follows:

By the time the Fourth and Eighth Divisions were transferred to the Naval Barracks at Vallejo on July 31st the men were talking among themselves about whether they would go back to work. Some suspected that they would soon be sent back to work loading ammunition, and probably under the same or similar work conditions as before. Several men approached one of their number, Joseph Small, who was highly respected by the others. They asked what he intended to do. Small made it plain that he did not intend to go back to work. Other men expressed the same view. Someone came up with the idea of drawing up a petition, a list of all the men who were willing to sign a statement saying they were afraid of handling ammunition and wanted a transfer of duty. Some 50 or 60 men signed the list; others refused to sign; and still others thought the petition was useless. In any case the petition was never presented to the officers and was probably destroyed.

Some men, such as Joe Small, linked the cause of the explosion to the working conditions on the pier. For them the thought of returning to the same working conditions—competition, rushing, etc.—under the same officers was intolerable. "I was a winch operator on the ship," recounted Joe Small, "and I missed killing a man on the average of once a day—killing or permanently injuring a man. And it was all because of rushing, speed. I didn't want to go back

into this. This was my reason for refusing to go back to work—to get the working conditions changed. I realized that I had to work. I wasn't trying to shirk work. I don't think these other men were trying to shirk work. But to go back to work under the same conditions, with no improvements, no changes, the same group of officers that we had, was just—we thought there was a better alternative, that's all."

More men expressed their opposition to returning to loading ammunition, citing the possibility of another explosion. Two of my informants probably voiced the opinion of many of the men when they told me they would rather have been sent off to fight the Japanese. "I got a chance over there with the enemy," one man said, "but I ain't got no chance in that hold." No one used the word, but gradually the notion of a collective work stoppage—a strike if you will—began to take shape. Indeed, some in the group came to believe that if all or the overwhelming majority of the enlisted men refused to handle ammunition then the Navy would be compelled to improve the working conditions or transfer the whole group to other stations. It was a desperate gamble, and not without problems.

The first confrontation occurred on August 9th. A ship had come into Mare Island to be loaded with ammunition. The Second, Fourth and Eighth Divisions—328 men—were ordered out to the loading pier—and the great majority of the men balked. Immediately there was confusion as the officers hastily conferred with their superiors. Again the men were ordered to work (although there is conflicting testimony as to whether *direct* orders to load ammunition were issued to the men); again most refused, but an additional few agreed to work. Those who still refused—258

men—were arrested and confined for three days on a barge tied to the pier. Meanwhile, the Navy hurriedly recruited civilian stevedores to load the ship.

Tension was high on the prison barge. Officers told the men they faced serious charges, possibly mutiny charges for which they could be executed. They were also threatened by guards with being summarily shot. Some men wanted to forget about resistance and go back to work. Others countered that the Navy could not execute 250 men. Some wanted to arm themselves for self defense. Everyone was on edge.

The next day, August 10th, a fight broke out in the chow hall during the noon meal. The men were not allowed to smoke on the barge or in the chow hall, but apparently someone started to smoke and this led to a fight with one of the guards. Maintaining the unity and discipline of the group was proving more and more difficult.

That evening Joe Small talked with three other enlisted men who had been assigned by their division officers to keep order on the barge. It was agreed to call a meeting of all the men. Small spoke at the meeting. He told the men to knock off the horseplay and to obey the guards. He also urged the men to stick together, saying they had the officers where they wanted them—that the officers couldn't do anything to them if they didn't do anything to the officers. In an interview, Small told me he was trying to maintain order and to quiet the men's fears of being shot.

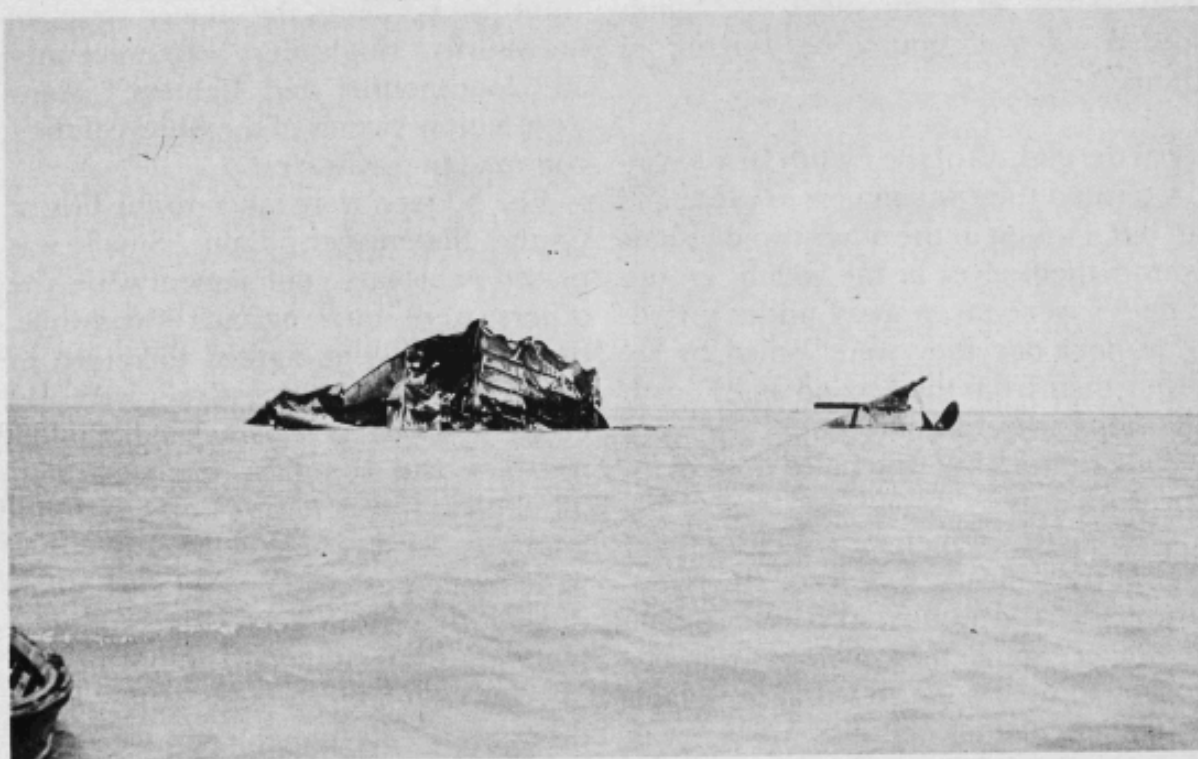
Whatever may have been Small's motives, the fact that a meeting took place on the barge later became known to the officers, and during the mutiny trial this fact was presented by the prosecution as evidence of a mutinous conspiracy among the men.

SELECTING THE 50 'MUTINEERS'

The following day, August 11th, the men from the barge were marched to the baseball diamond and assembled in a "U" formation under heavy armed guard. Shortly, Admiral C.H. Wright arrived in a jeep and addressed the men. One of them recalled the admiral's words: "Just in case you don't know who I am, my name is Admiral Wright and I am the commandant of the Twelfth Naval District. They tell me that some of you men want to go to sea. I believe that's a goddam lie. I don't believe any of you have enough guts to go to sea. I handled ammunition for approximately thirty years and I'm still here. I have a healthy respect for ammunition; anybody who doesn't is crazy. But I want to remind you men that mutinous conduct in time of war carries the death sentence, and the hazards of facing a firing squad are far greater than the hazards of handling ammunition."

The death threat made by the admiral came as a shock to the men. Most were stunned, but some couldn't believe it. One man muttered: "Man, this guy can't have nobody shot. We ain't fighting no war here. They can't do this. They'd have to have an act of congress to shoot somebody in the United States."

After the admiral left the men were ordered by their division officers to fall into two groups—those willing to obey all orders and those not willing. It was an incredibly difficult moment: Several men wept openly as they chose one side or the other; two brothers separated and took opposite positions; many men vacillated, going first to one group then to the other. Some men protested that they were still afraid of ammunition and they were assigned to the unwilling group. One man vacillated too long and was assigned to the unwilling group. Another



Above: Wreckage of *Quinalt Victory*. Below: Aerial view of wreckage and shore damage. *U.S. Navy photo.*



man essayed some gallows humor and teased his partner: "What you gonna do? You gonna let them shoot you blindfolded or you gonna be looking at them?"

In the end, all of the Eighth Division indicated their willingness to work, and all but 44 men in the other two divisions found themselves in the willing group. The 44 were taken away under guard. The next day they were joined by six other men from the Second and Fourth Divisions who had indicated they were willing to work but who failed to show up for work duty.

Among the 50 men were some of those whom the officers considered the "ring-leaders" of the mutiny, such as Joe Small. However, some men who actively encouraged others not to work, for example by circulating petitions, were not in the group of 50—at the last moment they agreed to go back to work, creating much ill will among those they had recruited to resist. Joe Small described the 50 resisters as "loudmouths and fighters," the "most nervy men" who stood up for themselves. But this description also did not accurately characterize the group. Some of the 50 were certainly men who refused to be cowed by the officers. Others simply may have had the misfortune to be disliked by their division officers for other reasons and therefore found themselves among the "mutineers."

For example, two men were permanently assigned as mess cooks—one because he had a nervous condition that made him a hazard to others on the pier, the other because he was underweight. Yet these two were now ordered to load ammunition and when they hesitated they were thrown in with the mutineers. Another man had fractured his wrist in an accident on August 8th, and even though his arm was in a cast, he too was

ordered to work. When he protested he found himself placed with the "mutineers." Thus, the 50 men were not necessarily "ringleaders" nor were they all "loudmouths and fighters." Many were simply victims of the whims of their commanding officers.

The 50 men were taken to the brig at Camp Shoemaker, Calif. Small was placed in solitary confinement while the others were interrogated. Meanwhile, the 208 men who agreed to return to work did not do so; instead they were also brought to Camp Shoemaker for interrogation and summary court-martials. Thus all of the men were now faced with another hard choice: whether they would give evidence against each other during the ensuing investigation. The men were interrogated without benefit of counsel; indeed several of them thought that the interrogators were their defense lawyers. The investigation continued through the month of August, and statements were obtained from almost all of the 258 men. Armed guards were present when at least some of the statements were taken, and it became a point of contention at the mutiny trial as to whether the statements were obtained voluntarily or under duress.

THE MUTINY TRIAL

In early September, 1944, Admiral Wright formally charged the 50 men with mutiny. A seven-member military court was appointed to hear evidence and render a verdict in the case. The court, composed of white senior naval officers, was headed by Rear Admiral Hugo W. Osterhaus, a forty-year career officer brought out of retirement for the occasion. The judge advocate, or prosecutor in the case, was Lt. Commander James F. Coakley, formerly an assistant district attorney in Alameda County. In the 1960s and 1970s he would achieve

notoriety as the DA who prosecuted the Black Panthers and anti-war activists. The defense team was headed by Lt. (j.g.) Gerald F. Veltmann.

The case was given much fanfare by the Navy. Photos of the accused men were distributed to the press along with sensationalistic statements about the alleged mutiny. The court-martial was described as the first mutiny trial of World War II and the largest mass mutiny trial in the history of the U.S. Navy. The Navy was anxious to have the trial publicized, perhaps to intimidate other dissident sailors.

The trial opened at the Treasure Island Naval Station in San Francisco Bay on September 14, 1944. The judge advocate called the officers to recount the events of the work stoppage. Several black enlisted men, most from the Eighth Division, were called to testify that a so-called "don't work" list was circulated and that the men were told by Small to stick together at the Barge meeting. Most of these witnesses were themselves prisoners, having just been convicted by summary court-martials.

For its part the defense objected to the mutiny charge, pointing out that the legal definition of mutiny was a concerted effort to usurp, subvert or override military authority. The defense contended there had been no such attempt in this case—that the men were orderly and obeyed all orders, except the order to load ammunition. On this latter point, the defense also argued that no direct orders to load ammunition were ever issued, at least not to all the accused men. Even if such orders were issued, the defense argued, refusal to obey an order does not constitute mutiny.

The defense, which was handled by young Navy lieutenants, made no mention of the working conditions at Port Chicago nor the men's grievances. One of the defendants startled the trial when

he stated that the men had been made to race against each other, but this hot potato was not picked up by the defense. The defense lawyers successfully challenged the statements obtained from the men during the August investigation, arguing that the statements were inaccurate and possibly obtained under duress, and thus preventing them from being introduced as evidence. But the prosecution got around this obstacle by the stratagem of reading each of the statements and asking each of the defendants whether they did or did not make them. Some of the statements contained remarks suggesting collusion in the work stoppage. Most of the defendants denied having made such remarks, but the prosecution had accomplished its purpose of getting the statements before the court.

On October 24, 1944, after only 80 minutes of deliberation by the court, all 50 men were found guilty of mutiny. The next month they were sentenced: 10—including the "ring leaders,"—were sentenced to 15 years in prison; 24 sentenced to 12 years; 11 sentenced to 10 years; and 5 sentenced to 8 years. All were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy.

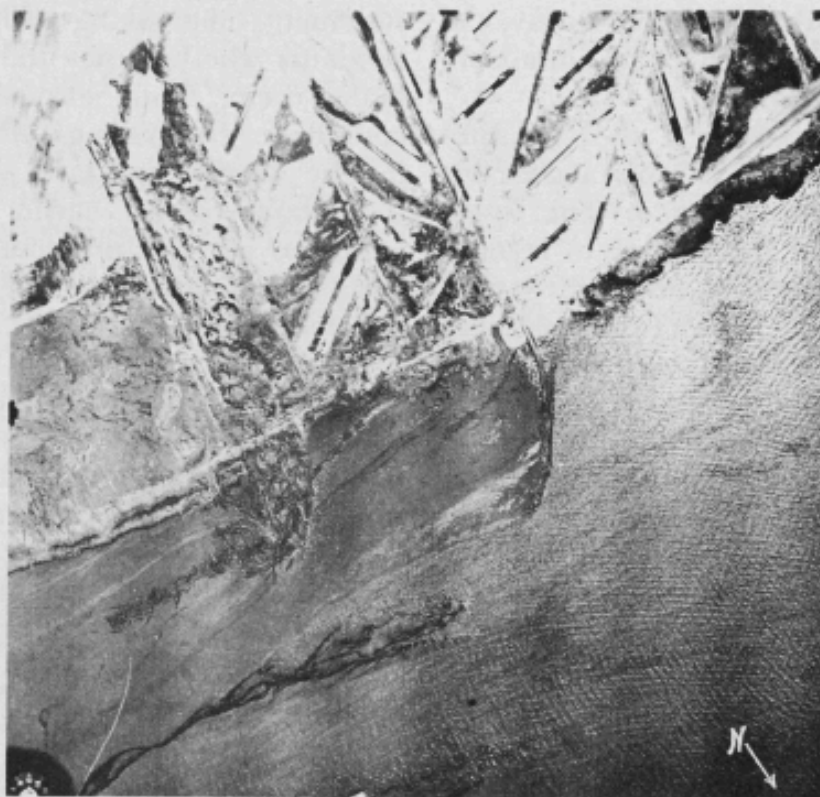
With perverse but unrelenting logic those who were responsible for the conditions at Port Chicago were never charged with any wrongdoing, while those who were the chief victims of these conditions were charged, tried, convicted and jailed. By the end of November 1944 the 50 men were serving their sentences at the Terminal Island prison at San Pedro, California.

MARSHALL CONFRONTS FORRESTAL

The mutiny trial was widely covered by the local Bay Area press, and by nation-

ally circulated black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Early in the trial an official of the Vallejo branch of the NAACP sent a letter and clippings on the trial to the national office of the NAACP in New York. A short time later Thurgood Marshall, who was then special counsel for the NAACP and who had handled many military cases, arrived on the West Coast to observe the trial for 12 days.

James Forrestal. He commended the naval defense team for good work in defending the men "within the limitations of Navy rules." But Marshall knew very well that the men's grievances had not been presented at the trial, and he proceeded to outline some of these in his letter to Forrestal in the form of questions. Marshall asked why only blacks were loading ammunition at Port Chicago, why the men did not receive the



Aerial view of destroyed Navy base and pier, and oil slick from *Quinault Victory*. U.S. Navy photo.

Marshall met with the accused men and learned of the conditions at Port Chicago. He voiced outrage over what he saw at the trial and heard from the men. He told reporters that "these men are being tried for mutiny solely because of their race and color." Later he described the case as "one of the worst 'frame-ups' we have come across in a long time. It was deliberately planned and staged by certain officers to discredit Negro seamen."

Upon his return to New York Marshall fired off a letter to Secretary of the Navy

ratings they expected, why the men were not given proper training for the work, why competition in loading was allowed, why the men were not given survivors leaves after the explosion, among other questions.

Forrestal refused to answer the questions on training and competition on the grounds that they were based on "conjecture." As to discrimination in ammunition handling, Forrestal replied blandly that since Port Chicago was manned predominantly by black enlisted

personnel then "Naturally, therefore, the only Naval personnel loading ammunition regularly were Negroes." He also said there were other ammunition depots manned by white personnel. If there is discrimination, it must be against whites as well as blacks, he wrote. As for the lack of ratings Forrestal described the men's tenure at Port Chicago as a "trial period . . . during which the men considered most capable of assuming added responsibilities can be selected." Finally, Forrestal asserted that previous experience had shown that "requiring men to immediately return to handling ammunition, after an explosion, is the preferred method of preventing them from building up mental and emotional barriers which, if allowed to accumulate, become increasingly difficult to overcome."

Forrestal sought to semantically liquidate the question of racial discrimination in handling ammunition. But the explosion and the ensuing publicity about the work force at Port Chicago had made the Navy sensitive to the discrimination issue. Moreover, 1944 was a presidential election year and the Roosevelt administration was cultivating the black vote. Letters and memos going back and forth in the Navy department expressed concern about possible adverse reaction to the discrimination question, and as early as August 1944 orders went out requiring the formation of two white loading divisions to work at Port Chicago. Thus while Forrestal and his staff were trying to evade the discrimination issue, they were taking steps to head off criticism. But they acted too late.

MASS CAMPAIGN

The explosion and the highly publicized trial focussed public attention on racial discrimination in the Navy and provoked an angry reaction from the

black community and liberal white groups throughout the country. The protest began spontaneously as a few people, learning of the trial, wrote letters objecting to the treatment of the men and the sentences. Sensing the importance of the case, the NAACP by December 1944 had begun preparing a publicity pamphlet on the case and was planning to represent the men in the appeal process. A two-pronged strategy was worked out by the NAACP: First a mass campaign would be organized to publicize the case and build popular pressure for the release of the men; second, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund would intercede on behalf of the men and file an appeal brief.

Beginning in January 1945 editorials on the case appeared in the *Crisis* and other black publications. Prominent individuals such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Lester Granger, head of the National Urban League, also took an interest in the case. Over the next several months thousands of names were collected on petitions, numerous black, labor and civil liberties organization issues statements, mass protest meetings were held in several cities. The mass campaign continued throughout most of 1945 and was felt in many regions of the country. It was one of the largest popular campaigns up until that time on behalf of black men who had run afoul of military justice.

Thurgood Marshall drafted an appeal brief and in April 1945 he made a personal appearance at the Navy's Judge Advocate General's office in Washington to present his arguments. Marshall contended that no direct order to load ammunition was given to the 50 defendants; that there was no mutiny even if an order was given ("I can't understand why, whenever more than one Negro disobeys an order, it is mutiny," he said); and finally he charged



View of destroyed main pier and marginal pier (foreground), which was under construction at time of explosion. *U.S. Navy photo.*

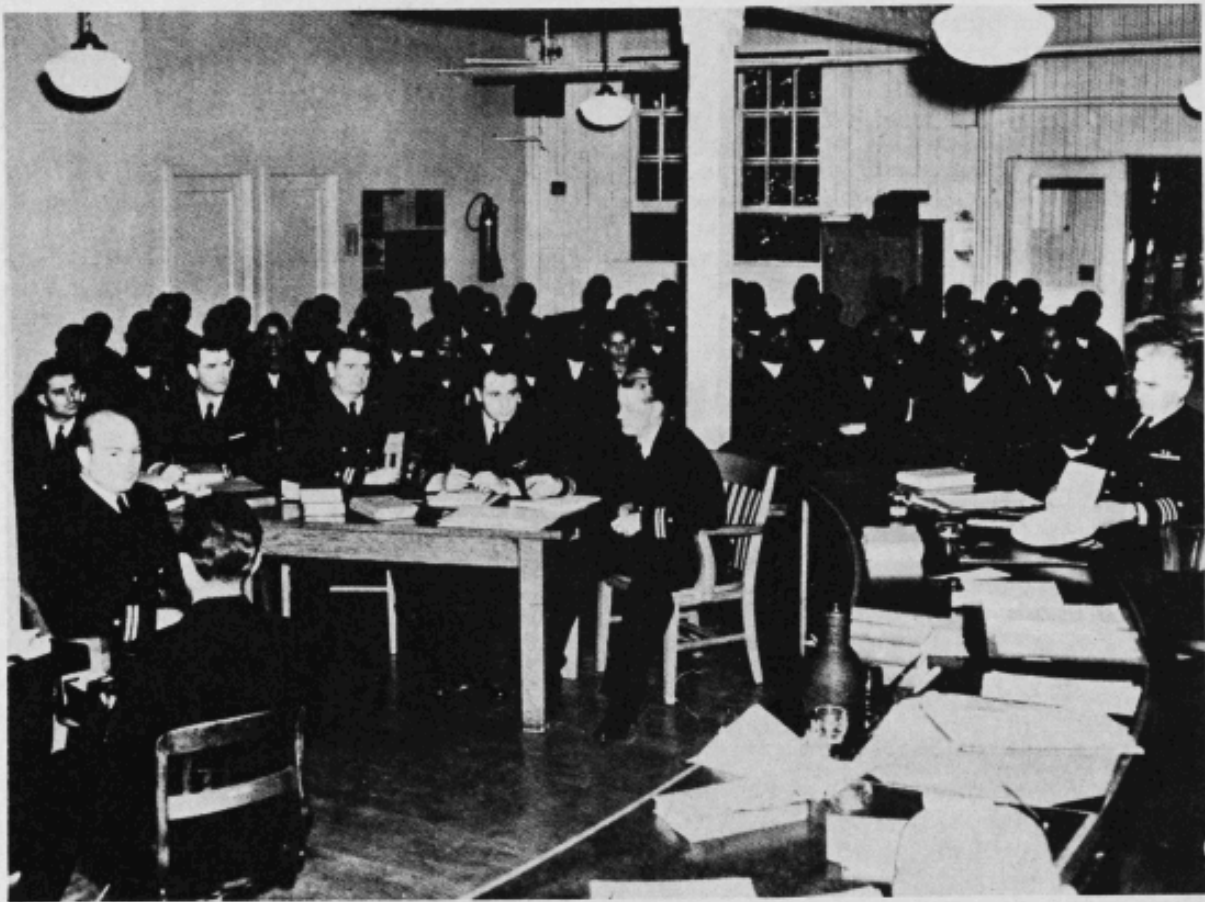
that trial judge advocate Coakley deliberately misled the court on the law of mutiny and introduced inadmissible evidence. "The accused were made scapegoats in a situation brought about by a combination of circumstances," Marshall wrote in the brief. "Justice can only be done in this case by a complete reversal of findings."

But the findings were not reversed; the convictions were upheld. Sentences for some of the men were reduced, but no one was released from prison. During the summer of 1945 the NAACP urged all its branches and other supporters to send another wave of protest letters to the Navy.

Meanwhile, instances of mass resistance such as occurred at Port Chicago, Guam and the Seabees case had persuaded some of the Navy bureaucracy that Jim Crow was an unwise policy, not necessarily because of its unjustness and economic inefficiency, but also because it

concentrated blacks together in groups and made collective action by black servicemen possible. Better to disperse black sailors in the Navy by mixing them in with whites. Navy officials who in the past had opposed racial integration now found themselves advocates of this "enlightened" new policy.

In June 1945 the Navy announced it was discontinuing segregation in training camps and other programs. To herald its new policy, the Navy borrowed Lester Granger of the Urban League to become special advisor to the Secretary of the Navy. In this capacity Granger made three tours of Navy bases in the U.S. and overseas, including Port Chicago. In November 1945 Granger made his report and recommendations. He noted instances of continuing discrimination but he praised the Navy, declaring that "the Navy means business about revising its racial policy and making it possible for every member of the service



Scene from court martial at Treasure Island. The 50 accused seamen are in background; in foreground seated around table are Navy defense attorneys. *U.S. Navy photo.*

to give his best efforts in his nation's cause without hindrance and without discrimination." In special reports on the Port Chicago and Guam situations, Granger urged the Navy to relax the severe sentences imposed in both cases.

In January 1946 Forrestal's office announced that 47 of the Port Chicago men were being released from prison. (Two remained for a time in the hospital and a third was not released because of a bad conduct record.) With the war over, some 1,700 imprisoned servicemen were given clemency, including the Guam and Port Chicago groups. The Port Chicago men were released from prison but not from the Navy. They were divided into small groups of three or four and then sent overseas for a period of "rehabilitation." Finally, over the course of the next year the men made their way back from

exile and returned to their families and their private lives in the United States.

CONCLUSION: NUCLEAR DANGER

Today the remaining survivors of the Port Chicago disaster are living quiet lives—some still working, some unemployed, some retired. Many are dead. Those still living are in their 50s and 60s. I interviewed several of the "mutineers" as part of the research for this article. The men still don't know what caused the explosion, and their feelings about the work stoppage are mixed. Several men expressed pride at their act of resistance and the fact that the 50 accused men stuck together throughout their trial and imprisonment. Others were more circumspect, expressing concern about possible negative repercussions to them-



The pier at Port Chicago as it appeared in November, 1944, after being rebuilt. *U.S. Navy photo.*

selves or their families even at this late date. At least one of the men, Martin Bordenave, has been working with an NAACP attorney, Marion Hill, in trying to get the case re-opened and the men's names cleared.

The town of Port Chicago no longer exists. Although damaged, the town survived the explosion, but in the late 1960s the town was razed to the ground by the Navy in order to facilitate expansion of the base. By then the base was busily involved in shipping ammunition and explosives to American forces in Vietnam, and it was also the target of several anti-war demonstrations.

Most recently the base has come into the news again. Now renamed the Concord Naval Weapons Station, it has become even more dangerous. Investigative reporter Stephen Talbot, in his

prize-winning documentary *Broken Arrow* (shown on public television station KQED-TV in San Francisco), asserted that the base is now a nuclear weapons storage and trans-shipment facility, and there are reports of unsafe handling procedures being employed. Moreover, Talbot found that aqueducts carrying drinking water for several East Bay communities pass near nuclear storage bunkers at the base, creating the possibility of radiation contamination in case of leakage.

Today the Concord Naval Weapons Station poses a life-endangering threat to the entire San Francisco Bay Area. A disaster there now would make the Port Chicago explosion—whatever its cause—seem like a firecracker.

A NOTE ON PORT CHICAGO SOURCES

Some military documents pertaining to Port Chicago were declassified in 1972. The most important primary sources are the Record of the General Court Martial ("Case of Julius J. Allen, et al.") of the 50 men and the Record of the Court of Inquiry that investigated the explosion. Both of these may be found in the archives of the Navy's Judge Advocate General's office in Washington, D.C. The history of the Port Chicago Naval Ammunition Depot may be studied in the Administrative Histories of the 12th Naval District (copies of which are located in the Navy History Library at the Washington Navy Yard), and in the records of the Historical Office of the Naval Construction Battalion at Port Hueneme, California. The Port Chicago War Diary is located in the Operational Archives of the U.S. Naval History Division at the Washington Navy Yard.

The NAACP's involvement in the defense campaign is documented in reports and correspondence contained in the archives of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York City and in the NAACP's General Office File, 1940-55, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. There is also a useful file of Lester Granger's papers in the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. The General Correspondence Files of Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal are extremely helpful and are located in the Old Army and Navy Branch of the National Archives in Washington. Copies of memoranda sent to President Franklin D. Roosevelt may be found in the Roosevelt Presidential Library at Hyde Park, N.Y.

Another critical primary source is found in the oral histories which were collected recently by the author from surviving participants and witnesses of the Port Chicago events.

There is one published book-length account of the Port Chicago rebellion. Entitled *No Share of*

Glory (Pacific Palisades, California: 1964) authored by Robert E. Pearson, this book was published before the primary documents were declassified. The author apparently relied almost exclusively on newspaper accounts; consequently the book is riddled with errors and lacks any treatment of how the black enlisted men viewed the situation at Port Chicago.

A good brief description of the Port Chicago events may be found in Florence Murray, *The Negro Handbook, 1946-47* (New York, 1947). Most recently, Charles Wollenberg presented a paper on "The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial" to the Pacific Coast Branch meeting of the American Historical Association, University of San Francisco, August 19, 1978. An article based on his paper was published in *California History*, Spring, 1979.

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