

NAVAL MAGAZINE
PORT CHICAGO, CALIFORNIA

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~
~~DECLASSIFIED~~

ATTACHMENT TO WAR DIARY - JULY 1944

DECLASSIFIED

DISASTER, 17 July 1944

1. At 2222 17 July 1944, there was an explosion at the Ships' Pier, cause of which is unknown. The consensus of opinion of witnesses is that two explosions took place within five seconds of each other, and that the first explosion was the lesser of the two. Two merchant vessels were berthed here at the time. The SS QUINAULT VICTORY (Type VC-2) was outboard, starboard side to. The SS A. E. BRYAN (EC-2) was inboard, starboard side to. The QUINAULT VICTORY had berthed at 1800, 17 July, and was being prepared for the receipt of cargo. No ammunition was aboard the QUINAULT VICTORY at the time of the explosion. The A. E. BRYAN had been loading since 13 July 1944. The foregoing vessels were the 79th and 80th ships to have berthed and loaded ammunition at the Magazine since start of operations 30 Nov 1942, during which period in excess of 280,000 tons of ammunition and high explosives had been loaded for overseas shipment.
2. Involved in the explosion was a total of approximately 5080 tons of ammunition and high explosives, of which approximately 4485 tons were aboard the A. E. BRYAN and approximately 595 tons were in thirteen box cars on the Ships' Pier partially unloaded or awaiting loading in the two vessels. In addition, three cars of inert material and one empty Magazine box car were on the pier and were lost in the explosion.

DECLASSIFIED

3. At the time of the explosion, cargo being loaded consisted of:

MK7 Incendiary Bombs in #1 Hold, MK47 Depth Bombs (Torpex loaded) in #2 Hold, Tail Vanes in #3 Hold, MK4 Fragmentation Bombs in #4 Hold, and 40mm in #5 Hold. Practically all the tonnage that had been loaded aboard the A. E. BRYAN was lower hold stowage.

4. Results of the explosion may be summarized as follows:

- (a) Both vessels, the SS QUINAULT VICTORY and the A. E. BRYAN, together with the Ships' Pier, one 45 ton Diesel locomotive, the Joiner Shop, Bldg. A-7, and the adjacent marginal wharf under construction, were completely demolished.

A Coast Guard fire barge moored at the East end of the Ships' Pier was also destroyed and all hands aboard lost. A nearby Coast Guard patrol boat suffered no injury to vessel or crew other than blast damage to its superstructure. A MK33 1000-lb AP bomb landed on a passing oil barge. While same did not detonate, it caused considerable damage to the barge, which nevertheless was able to proceed under its own power to destination.

- (b) A total of 319 people were killed and 255 injured.

The dead consisted of:

- 9 Naval officers engaged in supervision of ship loading at the pier;
- 202 Naval Enlisted Personnel (mostly colored), comprising two working divisions at the pier;
- 1 Marine enlisted man on sentry duty at the pier;
- 5 Coast Guard Enlisted Personnel--the crew of the Fire Barge;
- 3 Magazine Civil Service employees--the train crew;
- *30 Armed Guard Personnel attached to the QUINAULT VICTORY and the A. E. BRYAN;
- **66 Merchant Marine Personnel--crews of the two vessels;
- 3 employees of the Macco-Case Construction Co.--Contractors for the marginal wharf under construction.

* Based on latest advice from the Armed Guard Center.

** Based on latest advice from the War Shipping Administration.

CONFIDENTIAL DECLASSIFIED

The injured consisted of:

245 Naval and Marine Corps personnel transferred to hospitals, the greater majority of which suffered slight injuries, principally from glass fragments;

10 Magazine civilian employees suffered lost time injuries;

Numerous other personnel were treated for minor injuries, the exact number of which we have no record.

- (c) Every building on the Magazine suffered damage from the blast except the kennels for the sentry dogs. However, all damage to buildings may be classified as Class "C" damage except the Recreation Building, which was Class "B", and the Joiner Shop, which was Class "A".
- (d) At the time of the explosion, there were a total of 218 box cars of ammunition and components in the Magazine yards. None of this ammunition detonated as a result of the explosion at the Ships' Pier, including two cars of bombs, spotted in the open on Spur 10, a distance of only some 1100 feet from the scene of the explosion. Two cars of MK4 Smoke Pots caught fire in Barricade B-206, but the fire was extinguished without further loss or damage. Of the 218 cars, representatives of the Bureau of Ordnance inspected and approved all but three cars for shipment as serviceable ammunition. While various railroad cars themselves suffered damage from the blast, only 54 cars were in such bad order that contents had to be transferred to other cars for shipment. Further inspection of each round in each car is being made by qualified Bomb Disposal officers, prior to releasing material for shipment. Of the 218 cars on hand at the time of the explosion, at this writing 145 cars have already been shipped to other loading points or naval activities, and it is anticipated that the remaining 73 cars will be shipped by 5 August 1944.
- (e) Barricades and inset magazines were practically undamaged by the explosion except BM 138 and the doors of all inset magazines, which were blasted inwards. There was ammunition in 30 of the 50 inset magazines, primarily consisting of warheads, which was undamaged.
- (f) Except for the fire in the two cars previously mentioned, no fire resulted from the explosion.

DECLASSIFIED
CONFIDENTIAL

- (g) General Class "C" damage from the blast was suffered in the town of Port Chicago and adjacent communities, including Pittsburg, Concord, Walnut Creek, and Martinez. The lighthouse on Roe Island was similarly damaged by the blast.

We are informed that the explosion was felt in a radius of some 40 miles.

5. It is not possible to name all personnel and agencies from the many communities and activities which came to the assistance of the Magazine at the news of the disaster. Generally speaking, the response of everyone who could get here was magnificent, and too much praise can not be given for their efforts. Among those who responded were:

The Martinez Fire Department
The Mt. Diablo Fire District, of Concord
The Rio Vista Fire Department
The Crockett Fire Department
The Berkeley Fire Department
The Associated Oil Co. Fire Dept., of Avon
The Red Cross
The USO
The Salvation Army
The U. S. Army, including units from Camp Stoneman,
the 217th AAA group, and the 324th AAA Searchlight Battalion
The U. S. Coast Guard
Navy Yard, Mare Island
Naval Ammunition Depot, Mare Island

The Army, in particular, were of inestimable assistance in the immediate feeding and evacuation of Magazine personnel.

The devotion to duty during the emergency of all personnel attached to the station was also of the highest order, including officers, enlisted personnel, and Civil Service employees.

6. Rehabilitation and re-establishment of facilities commenced almost immediately. Employees of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company were

~~DECLASSIFIED~~ ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ ~~DECLASSIFIED~~

on the Base to restore telephone communications within three hours after the explosion. The following day, invaluable assistance was further given by employees of the Navy Yard at Mare Island and the Naval Ammunition Depot at Mare Island, particularly in the restoration of utilities.

Numerous services were restored the first day after the explosion, most remaining were restored the second, and all essential utility services were restored the third day. The assistance of T. L. Rosenberg, Electrical Contractors of Oakland, Calif., was particularly helpful in the restoration of light and power circuits.

7. By the end of the week, transfer of ammunition from damaged box cars to certified cars had begun under the direction of Bomb Disposal and Magazine officers, the physical handling of ammunition being performed by station enlisted personnel, who volunteered their services. The first shipments of cars of ammunition were made 25 July and similar shipments have gone forward each day since then.

Loading of ammunition aboard lighters at the Barge Pier (which was undamaged) was resumed 24 July, and the first lighter of warheads was shipped from the Magazine on 25 July. To date, a total of three lighters have been loaded and shipped since the explosion.

8. Following conferences of various public works officers and representatives of the Bureau of Yards and Docks and Bureau of Ordnance, on 18th and 19th of July, plans for the immediate rehabilitation of Magazine facilities were formulated and contracts let for the repair of existing

DECLASSIFIED
CONFIDENTIAL

Magazine facilities and completion of the construction of other facilities that had been in progress, including the reconstruction of the partially completed marginal wharf destroyed in the explosion. At this writing, it is estimated that the first berth will be completed by 1 Sept 1944.

The contracting firm of Barrett and Hilp was assigned the rehabilitation of the Magazine Administration Building and Marine Barracks, Buildings A-1 and A-2, together with certain other designated structures, and moved their men and equipment on the station 19 July. The 42nd Construction Battalion were assigned the rehabilitation of the remaining Magazine facilities, including in particular the structures in the Barracks area. The Seabees moved men and equipment on the station 20 July. To date, the work of all parties involved in the reconstruction of Magazine facilities is proceeding expeditiously.

9. Among the officers and technicians not assigned to duty in the Twelfth Naval District who visited Port Chicago immediately after the disaster were:

Capt. J. C. Byrnes, Jr., of the Bureau of Ordnance
Capt. Radford Moses, of the Bureau of Ordnance
Comdr. M. G. Johnson, Bureau of Ordnance
Comdr. J. H. Sides, Bureau of Ordnance
Lt. Comdr. Dexter Bullard, Bureau of Ordnance
Capt. W. S. Parsons, from the Office of Chief of Naval Operations
Col. Crosby Field, of the Joint Army-Navy Ammunition Storage Board
Lt. Col. Ruel Stratton, of the Joint Army-Navy Ammunition Storage Board
Professor John F. Burchard, Chairman Doloc Committee, Office of Scientific Research and Development
D. Max Beard, of the Naval Ordnance Laboratory, Navy Yard, Washington, D. C.
E. Moss Brown, Naval Ordnance Laboratory, Navy Yard, Washington, D. C.

DECLASSIFIED

10. A Court of Inquiry has been appointed by the Commandant of the Twelfth Naval District to investigate all facts surrounding the explosion.

The Court consists of:

Capt. Albert G. Cook, Senior Member
Capt. John S. Crenshaw
Capt. William B. Holden
Lt. Comdr. Keith Ferguson, Judge Advocate

The Court convened at the U. S. Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, at 1000

21 July 1944 for its first session.