MUTINY IN CALIFORNIA DURING WORLD WAR II

By John S. Caragozian

On July 17, 1944, a ship being loaded with bombs and ammunition near San Francisco Bay exploded, instantly killing 320 men and wounding hundreds more. People as far away as Boulder City, Nevada heard the blast. Its legal and racial consequences echoed even further.

During World War II, the U.S. Navy was responsible for supplying aerial bombs, ammunition, depth charges and mines to overseas theaters. Mare Island Naval Shipyard near Vallejo served as one of the bases from which these munitions were loaded on Pacific-bound ships. However, Mare Island soon lacked space to load the increasing volume, and the Navy looked for additional Bay Area sites.

The Navy chose the Contra Costa County town of Port Chicago on Suisun Bay. It could accommodate ocean-going ships and had connections to three major railroads that could bring the munitions. By November 1942, the Navy had constructed a pier, railroad sidings, barracks, mess halls and offices.

The Navy needed additional personnel to unload the railroad cars and load the ships. Mare Island used unionized civilian stevedores, but, at Port Chicago, the Navy decided on enlisted men to lower costs and enhance security.

At the time, the U.S. Navy was rigidly segregated by race. The Navy trained African-Americans in segregated facilities and then assigned them only to segregated units for mess or labor duties. The Navy barred African-Americans from combat roles. By 1943, the Navy had over 100,000 African-American enlisted men, but zero African-American officers. *E.g.*, Leonard Guttridge, “Mutiny: A History of Naval Insurrection,” 211 (2002).

All of the 1,431 Port Chicago laborers were African-American. White officers supervised them, and white U.S. Marines guarded them. The entire base was strictly Jim Crow, with segregated barracks, mess halls and recreation. Too, the town was hostile to African-Americans. *See* Robert Allen, “The Port Chicago Mutiny,” 30-38, 42-43, 46 (1993).

The base’s African-Americans resented being relegated to menial labor and denied promotions and combat roles. Further, they repeatedly warned officers of the dangers of their duties: The men received no training for munitions loading; they often loaded “hot cargo” (bombs with fuses attached); and, worst of all, the Navy sacrificed safety for around-the-clock speed. *Id*. at 50-52.

On July 13, 1944, the 440-foot-long cargo ship *E. A. Bryan* moored at the Port Chicago pier for munitions loading. This loading was particularly difficult: Fused bombs had been wedged so tightly in railroad cars that men had difficulty removing them; a steam winch lacked a brake; and bombs were accordingly subjected to rolling, dropping and other rough treatment.

Still, by July 17, the laborers stacked more than 4,600 tons of munitions in the *Bryan*'s five 40-foot-deep holds. An additional 430 tons of explosives were in railroad cars on the pier, and the *Bryan* had been fueled with 5,292 barrels of bunker oil. *See* id. at 56-57.

That night at 10:18, as loading continued, an explosion occurred, followed within a few seconds by a second, massive explosion of the entire *Bryan*, including the munitions. All 320 men on the ship or pier — two-thirds of them African-American enlisted men, plus guards, officers and civilian railroad and ship crews — were instantly killed, most of them vaporized. The wounded amounted to an additional 390 men, again, two-thirds of them African-American.

The explosions obliterated the *Bryan*, pier and railroad locomotives. The explosion also created a fireball, three miles in diameter, and flung chunks of molten metal 12,000 feet skyward. The explosion wrecked base barracks and other buildings and damaged almost all businesses and houses in the town of Port Chicago. Damage extended to San Francisco, 25 miles away.

Surviving enlisted men and officers rushed from their barracks in rescue efforts, but, with the ship and pier gone, little could be done.

The Port Chicago explosion was the deadliest stateside disaster of World War II, accounting for fully 15% of the entire war's African-American naval casualties. To that time, it was the largest single man-made explosion in world history.

On July 21, the U.S. Navy convened a court of inquiry. After 39 days of testimony from 125 witnesses, the court issued a 1,200-page report. It failed to pinpoint the explosion's cause, but exonerated all officers from any wrongdoing. Although the report acknowledged that the Navy had not trained African-American enlisted men, it blamed those men for lacking capacity to be trained. The report also criticized the men as "unreliable, emotional … and … inclined to … make an issue of discrimination." Report, 1203, 1254-55 (Oct. 30, 1944).

In Congress, U.S. Representative John Rankin, a white supremacist from Mississippi, opposed a proposal to pay $5,000 to the family of each person killed, because most of the beneficiaries were African-American. Consequently, Congress reduced the payments to $3,000.

Some of the African-American enlisted men requested survivors' 30-day leaves, which the Navy often gave after a major loss or other disaster. The Navy denied all of these requests, but granted such leaves for white officers.

Instead, the Navy moved the enlisted men to Mare Island and, on August 4, 1944, ordered them to resume loading munitions.

Initially, 258 African-Americans refused the order, citing the danger. The Navy confined them to a barge and replaced them with civilian stevedores. The Navy moved the 258 to Camp Shoemaker near Dublin in Alameda County, where the Navy interrogated them without counsel and in the presence of armed guards.

Eventually, 208 men agreed to return to loading, but 50 were steadfast. The Navy charged the 50 with mutiny, defined as a concerted revolt against military authority. Mutiny's maximum wartime penalty is death.

The court martial for the 50 began on September 14, 1944, at Treasure/Yerba Buena Island in San Francisco Bay. The panel of judges consisted of seven naval officers.

The defendants had counsel, and trial was open to the media. The defendants moved to substitute the less serious charge of insubordination for mutiny, but the judges denied the motion. The judges also allowed the prosecutor to introduce hearsay (such as an unidentified person urging the defendants to refuse the order to load) on the theory that such evidence proved a conspiracy. The prosecution primarily argued that the danger of loading munitions did not excuse disobedience.

The defense included testimony from various defendants that they (a) never received a direct order to load, (b) were unaware of any conspiracy and acted on their own, and (c) were coerced into signing incriminating affidavits by officers or armed guards at Camp Shoemaker.

After hearing from 80 witnesses over 32 trial days, the judges deliberated for 80 minutes and found all 50 defendants guilty of mutiny. The judges imposed prison sentences ranging from eight to 15 years.

NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund counsel and future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall represented the defendants on appeal. He highlighted the Navy's pervasive racism, but the appeal was denied. Civil rights groups and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt also raised questions, though to no avail. The secretary of the navy did ask the panel of judges to reconsider the matter without hearsay evidence, but the panel reaffirmed the verdicts and punishments.

While the defendants were imprisoned at Terminal Island in Los Angeles harbor, the Navy began to desegregate, though at least part of the motivation was to end all-African-American units that had given rise to organized opposition to racism. By 1946, the Navy ended formal segregation.

In January 1946, all but three of the Port Chicago 50 were released from prison. The men's continuing hardships included being denied G.I. Bill benefits, such as college tuition and low-interest home loans. *See* John Boudreau, "Breaking the Silence: Mutiny," L.A. Times (Jul. 16. 1991). The mutiny convictions also remained in their records.

More than 50 years after the court martial, President Bill Clinton's secretary of defense resisted a blanket pardon on the ground that "sailors are required to obey orders … even if … subject to life-threatening danger."

Today, the Port Chicago base and town have been absorbed into the U.S. Army's Military Ocean Terminal Concord. A memorial to the Port Chicago victims has been erected there, but visits require advance reservations.

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