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 handle 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 reduce 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 more than 100,000 African-American enlisted men, but zero African-American officers.

All 1,431 of Port Chicago’s 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. For example, African-Americans were allowed to eat only after whites had finished.

Too, the town was hostile to African-Americans.

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.

4. Id. at 32, 41, 45, 50–52. Originally, the U.S. Coast Guard helped to supervise loading at Port Chicago, but reported it found unsafe procedures and recommended improvements. See Christopher Bell & Bruce Elleman, Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century: An International Perspective, London: Routledge, 2003, 201. When the Navy rejected the Coast

Damage resulting from the July 17, 1944 ammunition explosion. This view looks south from the Ship Pier, showing the wreckage of Building A-7 (Joiner Shop) at the right. There is a piece of twisted steel plating just to left of the long pole in left center. Photo: U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.
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 had stored 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.\(^5\)

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 explosion obliterated the Bryan, pier and railroad locomotives. It also created a fireball three miles in diameter and flung chunks of molten metal 12,000 feet skyward. It 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 percent of the entire war’s African-American naval casualties.\(^6\) To that time, it was the largest single man-made explosion in world history.\(^7\)

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.\(^8\) It failed to pinpoint the explosion’s cause but exonerated all (white) 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.”\(^9\)

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.\(^10\) Consequently, Congress reduced the payments to $3,000.\(^11\)

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.\(^12\) 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 loading order, citing the danger. The Navy confined them to a

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Guard’s recommendations, the Coast Guard withdrew from the Port Chicago base. See Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 45–46. Similarly, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union offered to assist training of the Port Chicago men in loading, but the Navy also rejected this offer. See Bell & Elleman, *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century*, 201.


9. “Findings of Fact,” 1203, 1254–55. The Court of Inquiry acknowledged that the U.S. Coast Guard’s safety recommendations had been rejected, supra note 4, but claimed that such recommendations would have unacceptably slowed loading. See “Findings of Fact,” 1256.


11. Ibid.

A photo of the largest mass-mutiny courts-martial in U.S. Navy history shows the 50 accused Port Chicago sailors seated behind their defense team. Photo: Courtesy Robert L. Allen.


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15. Id. 103–16, 124.
16. The other 208 African-American men who had initially refused to resume loading but resumed were summarily court martialed for insubordination. All were found guilty, and their punishment included forfeiture of three months’ pay. Id. 127.
17. Id. 133.
18. Id. 134.