



The 1944 Port Chicago Mutiny and the Legacy of Racism in the U.S. Military

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 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.¹

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.*

than 100,000 African-American enlisted men, but zero African-American officers.¹

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.² Too, the town was hostile to African-Americans.³

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

1. Leonard Guttridge, *Mutiny: A History of Naval Insurrection*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2002, 211.

2. Joseph Bruton, "Port Chicago — The most solemn memorial you'll never visit," Apr. 19, 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/219936/port_chicago_the_most_solemn_memorial_youll_never_visit [as of July 12, 2022].

3. Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, Berkeley: Heyday, 1993, 30–38, 42–43, 46.

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

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 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.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 state-side 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



A boxcar-load of live bombs: Loading the deadly cargo from railway to pier was not only “hard, back-breaking work,” but fraught with an obvious potential for catastrophe. Photo: U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

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

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 & Elluman, *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century*, 201.

5. Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 56–57.

6. John Boudreau, “Blown Away,” *Washington Post*, Jul. 17, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1994/07/17/blown-away/le64797d9-ae0a-4c33-b6ef-50e6cf7a60a1/> [as of July 12, 2022]; Erika Doss, “Commemorating the Port Chicago Naval Magazine Disaster of 1944: Remembering the Racial Injustices of the ‘Good War’ in Contemporary America,” 59 *American Studies Journal*, 2015, at <http://www.asjournal.org/59-2015/commemorating-port-chicago-naval-magazine-disaster-1944/#> [as of July 12, 2022].

7. See, e.g., Thurgood Marshall, Jr. and John Lawrence, “The Port Chicago 50 at 76: Time for Exoneration,” National World War II Museum, Jul. 17, 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/port-chicago-exoneration-thurgood-marshall-jr-john-lawrence> [as of July 12, 2022].

8. *Court of Inquiry Appointed by the Commandant of the Twelfth Naval District To Investigate the Facts Surrounding The Explosion of 17 July 1944*, Oct. 30, 1944, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/p/port-chicago-ca-explosion/online-documents/court-of-inquiry.html> [as of July 12, 2022]. This Court of Inquiry report included “Findings of Facts,” and a photocopy of the Findings, with the original pagination, is at <https://www.jag.navy.mil/library/investigations/PORT%20CHICAGO%20EXPLOSION.pdf> [as of July 12, 2022].

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.

10. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 67; Boudreau, “Blown Away.”

11. *Ibid.*

12. Joseph Bruton, “Port Chicago,” Reese Erlich, “Navy Reopens WWII Black Mutiny Case,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 10, 1992, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1992/0410/10121.html> [as of July 12, 2022].



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.



Thurgood Marshall in 1957. Photo: Library of Congress.

Marshall (*left*) represented the defendants on appeal to the Judge Advocate General's office. Marshall 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 relying on hearsay evidence; the panel did so but reaffirmed the verdicts and punishments.¹⁷

During the defendants' imprisonment 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.¹⁸ By 1946, the Navy ended formal segregation.

In January 1946, all but three of the Port Chicago 50 were released from prison. Still, the men's continuing hardships included being denied G.I. Bill benefits, such as college tuition and low-interest home loans.¹⁹ The mutiny convictions also remained on their records.

Half a century 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."²⁰ Any future pardons will have to be posthumous, as all 50 convicted men are now dead.²¹

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. Visits require advance reservations. ★

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barge and replaced them with civilian stevedores. The Navy then 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 in refusing. The Navy charged the 50 with mutiny, defined as a concerted revolt against military authority. The maximum wartime penalty for mutiny was death.¹³

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 public and media. The defendants moved to substitute the less serious charge of individual 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 to revolt against military authority. The prosecution primarily argued that the danger of loading munitions did not excuse disobedience.¹⁴

The defense included testimony from various defendants that they (a) never received a direct order to resume loading munitions, (b) were unaware of any conspiracy to revolt against military authority and acted on their own, and (c) were coerced by officers or armed guards at Camp Shoemaker to sign incriminating affidavits.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund counsel and future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood

13. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 92. See also 10 U.S.C. § 894(b).

14. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 94–98, 121–23.

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.

19. See, e.g., John Boudreau, "Breaking the Silence: Military: Were 50 Black men wrongfully convicted of mutiny after a 1944 explosion that killed 320 men? Some of them say yes — and they want their names cleared," *L.A. Times*, Jul. 16, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-07-16-vw-2465-story.html> [as of July 12, 2022]; Reese Erlich, "Navy Reopens WWII Black Mutiny Case."

20. William Glaberson, "Sailor From Mutiny in '44 Wins a Presidential Pardon," *N. Y. Times*, Dec. 24, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/24/us/sailor-from-mutiny-in-44-wins-a-presidential-pardon.html?searchResultPosition=1> [as of July 12, 2022].

21. See, e.g., Jill Cowan, "How a Bay Area Explosion Pushed the Military to Desegregate," *N.Y. Times*, Jul. 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/us/port-chicago-navy-desegregation.html> [as of July 12, 2022].