

Remembering Port Chicago

Almost three-quarters of a century ago, at the mouth of the Sacramento River, where the current flows into San Pablo Bay and then out to sea, a cataclysmic explosion on July 17th obliterated two Navy ships, leveled a town, and killed 320 men. It was a disaster that was to forever change the United States Navy.

The site is now part of the Concord Naval Weapons Center, CA, but in 1944 it was the Port Chicago Naval Depot, a Naval munitions area where bombs, shells, and depth charges were loaded onto awaiting vessels. At 10:18 PM on a warm summer night, Port Chicago was decimated by a blast that was the equivalent of five kilotons of TNT. Chunks of metal were later found 12 miles away. Only 51 of the bodies could be identified. It was an unprecedented Naval catastrophe. The cause has never been determined.

But an even worse disaster, both for the Navy and the survivors, was yet to come. Of the 320 men killed, 202 had been Blacks. Indeed, it was the Black sailors at Port Chicago who did all the loading and handling of munitions. “The only whites at Port Chicago were officers and marines with dogs,” commented Otis Butler, one of the survivors. “We enlisted as sailors but they worked us as stevedores.”

Incredibly, within 24 days of the disaster, 258 traumatized Black survivors were ordered to resume loading munitions. There was no explanation given for the explosion, no acknowledgment of their grief, no leaves were granted and, as before, no white sailors were ordered to load ammunition (white sailors, incidentally, *were* granted leaves).

When the Black sailors resisted those orders, a Navy admiral first threatened to have them shot, then had all 258 of them arrested and placed in the cargo hold of a barge on San Pablo Bay—a space meant to hold 75 people. All but 50 eventually agreed to go back to work. What followed for the remaining 50 was the largest court-martial trial in Naval history.

The case was tried and resolved in one month, with an all-white Navy panel finding all 50 Black sailors guilty of mutiny. The 50 received prison sentences and Dishonorable Discharges, losing all chances for possible Naval careers, pensions, etc. They were released from prison in 1946, largely through the help of the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

The Port Chicago incident underscored the segregationist policies employed by the Navy, and although it was this incident that directly led to the ultimate desegregation of the Navy, the Navy covered up the incident as much as possible. Court documents and other evidence of the Port Chicago story were sealed and classified by the Navy until 1972, including testimony about brutal treatment and brutal officers.

Many of the 50 have since died, but those who survive today are still waiting for the stain to be removed from their records and the implication of cowardice to be cleared away once and for all. Three years ago, 24 members of Congress mounted a campaign to pardon the 50. The Navy refused the request, acknowledging the racism present in 1944, but denying that racism affected the trail. A new push to reopen the case was initiated in August, and the White House currently has the matter under review.

