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The Port Chicago Disaster

Disasters Can Produce Lasting Social Impact

The Port Chicago disaster, like so many focusing events, is largely forgotten except by those who gathered this month for a brief commemoration at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial. And yet, the incident had a profound impact on the US Navy and produced ripple effects that continue to this day.

The Mission

In 1941, Suisun Bay, an estuary of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers was selected as a site for a naval munitions supply depot because of its remoteness from major population centers and its connection to the Pacific via San Francisco Bay. By 1944, Port Chicago had been expanded to allow for two ships to be loaded simultaneously around the clock.

Loading was done primarily by segregated black units supervised by white officers. These enlisted men had been trained in various naval ratings before being assigned as stevedores and received no training in munitions handling. The white officers supervising the men also had received no training on munitions handling and were unfamiliar with safety regulations. Added to this was

pressure from the commanding officer to meet unrealistic goals for the loading of cargo vessels that led to an emphasis on speed over safety.

The loaders were understandably concerned about the safety of their work. They had been assured that the bombs could not be detonated as they would not be fused until they reach their destination. This assurance and the nature of the packing of the explosives often resulted in rough handling of the munitions, prompting warnings from an officer in charge of a Coast Guard detail that conditions were unsafe. The Navy ignored his warnings and the officer withdrew his detail.

The Disaster

On the evening of July 17, 1944, two Liberty ships were being loaded in the port: the *SS E. A. Bryan* and the *SS Quinault Victory*. The ships' holds held 4,600 tons of explosives, including bombs, ammunition, and depth charges. Among the cargo were 650 lb. incendiary bombs with their fuses installed. Another 400 tons of explosives were stored in railway cars near the docks.

At approximately 10:18 PM, an explosion occurred on or near the *SS E.*

A. Bryan generating a fireball reportedly three miles in diameter and a shockwave equivalent to a 3.4 Richter earthquake that was said to be felt as far away as Nevada. The 320 servicemen loading the ship and working on the nearby *SS Quinault Victory* were killed instantly and 390 other workers and civilians were injured. Two hundred and twenty of the dead were black sailors.

Mutiny and Court Martial

A Naval Board of Inquiry held later that month decided that the cause of the explosion could not be determined and exonerated the officers involved of any blame. The Board implied that the most likely cause was probably mistakes made by the enlisted men in handling the cargo. No mention was made of their lack of training and the pressure to load ships quickly.

At the request of the Navy, Congress award \$5,000 to the families of those killed in the explosion. However, this amount was reduced to \$3,000 for the families of the black sailors. A memorial was held on July 31 and the men were returned to work.

On August 8, 328 black sailors were asked to resume loading munitions at Mare Island. The men refused, citing their unwillingness to work under the same officers and conditions that led to the explosion at Port Chicago. Seventy men were persuaded by their officers to return to duty but the others refused.

On August 11, the men were told that refusing to obey orders to load munitions would be considered mutiny, a crime punishable by death by firing squad. Most returned to work; 48 men did not and were arrested for mutiny. Two other sailors did not report for work the following day and were also arrested.

These fifty men were charged with disobeying orders and mutiny, a crime that potentially carried the death sentence. After a court martial of several weeks, all fifty men were convicted and given sentences of 15 years at hard labor, reduction in rank, and a dishonorable discharge. Upon review by the cognizant admiral, punishments were reduced to 8 to 12 years for all but ten of the mutineers.

Thurgood Marshall, then an attorney for the NAACP, handled the appeal. Public pressure began to mount, including concerns raised by Eleanor Roosevelt. In addition, the end of the war meant that the Navy could no longer justify harsh sentences as a deterrent to other sailors. The sentences were gradually reduced and by early 1946 most of the "Port Chicago 50" were released to return to duty and granted a general discharge under honorable conditions

The Aftermath

The shock of the disaster and the subsequent case of the "Port Chicago 50" captured the public's imagination. The actions of the "mutineers" served as an inspiration for other black sailors to protest racial discrimination, most notably in Guam and Port Hueneme, California. By 1945, the Navy was working on a plan for the elimination of segregated units. Although it would be years before this occurred.

Sadly, the 50 sailors whose refusal to work under safe conditions led to a fully integrated navy have never been exonerated. Except for one sailor pardoned by President Clinton in 1999, their convictions stand despite regular calls for them to be set aside. In 1990, the Navy acknowledged that discrimination led to the assignment of the black sailors as munitions handlers but stated that there was no evidence of discrimination in the courts martial. 