

IN 1944, 50 BLACK SAILORS
DEFIED THEIR ORDERS IN THE
FACE OF A DEADLY DISASTER
AND DISCRIMINATION.

BEFORE THE CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT, BEFORE BLACK
LIVES MATTER—THERE WERE
THE PORT CHICAGO 50.

MUTINY in Port Chicago

BY CASEY GANTRELL

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JULY 17, 1944. WORLD WAR II CONTINUED TO RAGE. In the Bay Area, Navy ships streamed in and out of the Port Chicago Naval Magazine on their way west to fight the Japanese fleet. Just like any other day, enlisted Black sailors at the munitions depot toiled around the clock to transfer tons of ordnance—small arms ammunition, depth charges, artillery shells, and massive 2,000-pound bombs—from train cars to waiting ships, their tireless work supporting a war effort that had already seen some of the biggest and most brutal naval battles in history.

But that night, along the tranquil shores of the Carquinez Strait, a different battle was about to take place—one that would result in the deadliest stateside disaster of World War II and force a nation to reckon with its racist disregard of Black lives.



THE FUSE

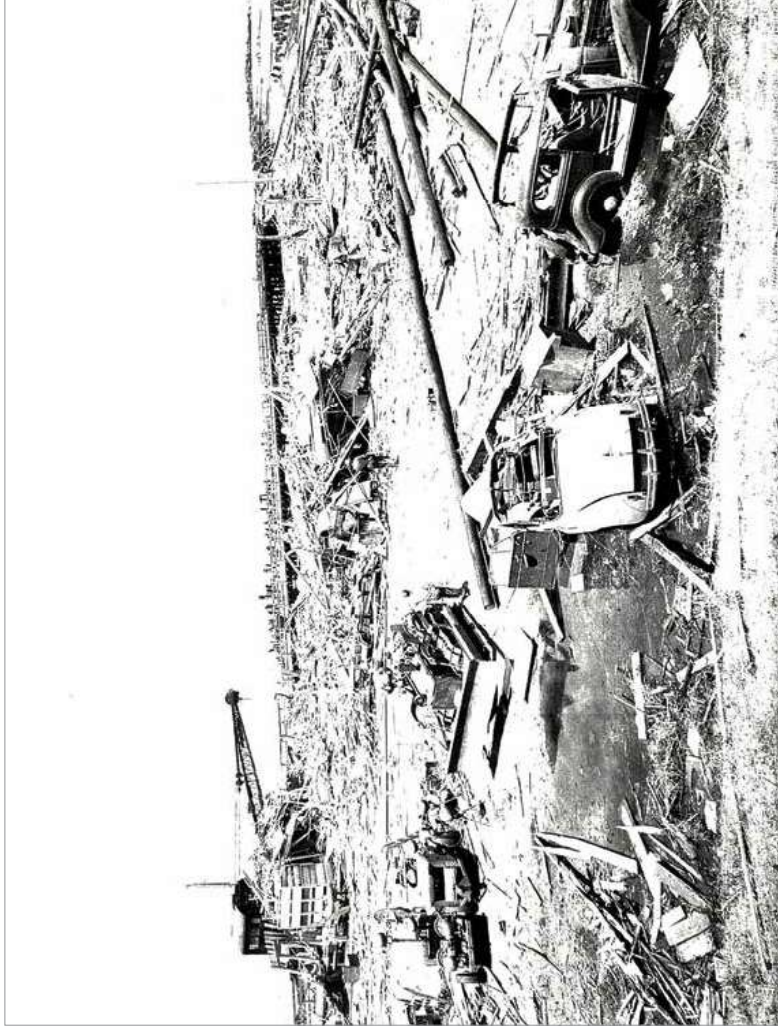
Constructed shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine joined the existing Mare Island Navy Yard to quickly transform the region into a major munitions hub. Every day, the port conveyed hundreds of tons of material onto ships destined for the Pacific front.

But behind the prestige, the munitions depot also revealed the country at its worst.

During World War II, all branches of the U.S. military were segregated, with bases adopting Jim Crow laws in an effort to appease white Southerners. Port Chicago was no different—the 1,400 enlisted Black men assigned to the base used separate barracks and mess halls. Although they received specialized training at Naval Station Great Lakes—one of the only Navy facilities that instructed Black recruits—the men were put to work as laborers, loading and unloading ordnance under demanding and dangerous conditions. Only Black men handled munitions, and they were paid less than their white counterparts.

Problems emerged almost immediately. White officers called the enlisted men unreliable and inept; in turn, the Black men were distrustful of leadership. Captain Merrill T. Kinne, who commanded the munitions depot, failed to provide adequate training on proper procedures and safety regulations, believing the Black sailors were too incompetent to internalize instruction. (Ironically, Kinne and the officers serving under him had little to no experience handling munitions.)

At the same time, the officers in charge made impossible demands. Captain Nelson Goss, who commanded the Mare Island Navy Yard and whose jurisdiction included Port Chicago, set a goal of loading 10 tons per ship hatch per hour. Such a task



Every person working within 1,000 feet of the pier—320 men, including 202 Black sailors—died instantly. Another 390 people—233 of them Black—were maimed or injured. In a matter of seconds, the Port Chicago disaster became one of the deadliest wartime events in U.S. history.

present were the crews of both ships and a Coast Guard fire barge.

The *E.A. Bryan* was already packed with more than 4,600 tons of explosives and ammunitions, including depth charges, cluster bombs, 1,000-pound bombs, and 650-pound incendiary bombs, while another 400 tons of ordnance sat in boxcars or on the dock.

It is unclear what occurred next. At around 10:18 p.m., witnesses described a metallic crash followed by a deafening boom and a blast of fire—the first explosion. A few seconds later, the ordnance aboard the *E.A. Bryan* was ignited.

The violence of the explosion defied belief. A massive fireball measuring three miles in diameter could be seen for miles. White-hot metal shot into the air, scattering shrapnel across the area. The blast crumpled buildings in the town of Port Chicago and shattered windows as far away as San Francisco; the shock wave registered on seismographs at UC Berkeley, measuring 3.4 on the Richter scale. The 500-foot-long *Quinnault Victory* was flung into the air like a toy, breaking apart and falling 500 feet away. The *E.A. Bryan* was essentially obliterated. The explosion's force was the equivalent of five kilotons of TNT—a third of the magnitude of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

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became one of the deadliest wartime events in U.S. history, accounting for 15 percent of all Black Americans killed during World War II.

But for the Black survivors, the tragedy only underscored their unequal status. About 200 of the enlisted men were assigned to cleanup detail, clearing rubble and collecting the bodies of their fellow sailors, while the white officers received a month of leave to recover.

While many of the Black sailors asked for 30-day survivor's leave—given to those who experienced a traumatic event where shipmates had died—the Navy denied their requests.

Less than a month later, more than 300 of the survivors were moved to the Mare Island Navy Yard and told to go back to work loading munitions.

Coast Guard in charge of supervising the dock, warned the Navy that worsening conditions could lead to catastrophe for the base and the men stationed there.

But the Navy ignored him. The sailors continued loading munitions, inching closer to deadly disaster.

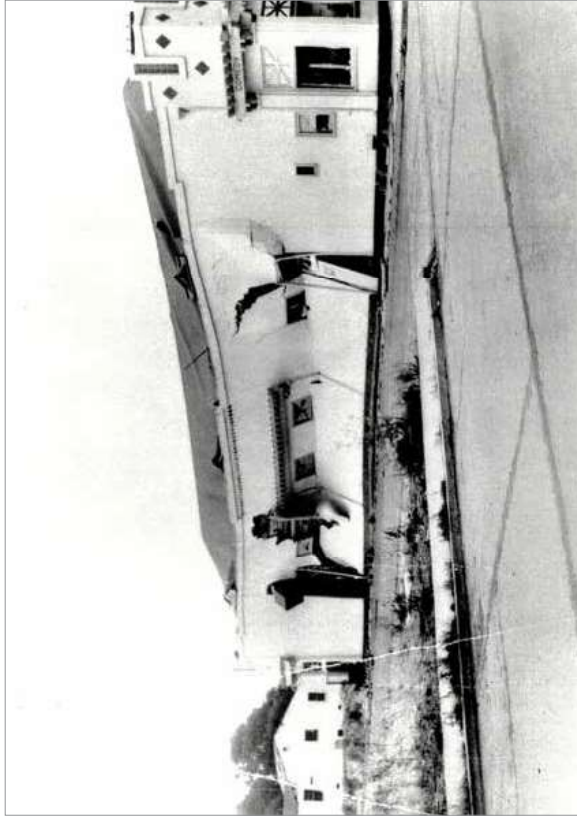
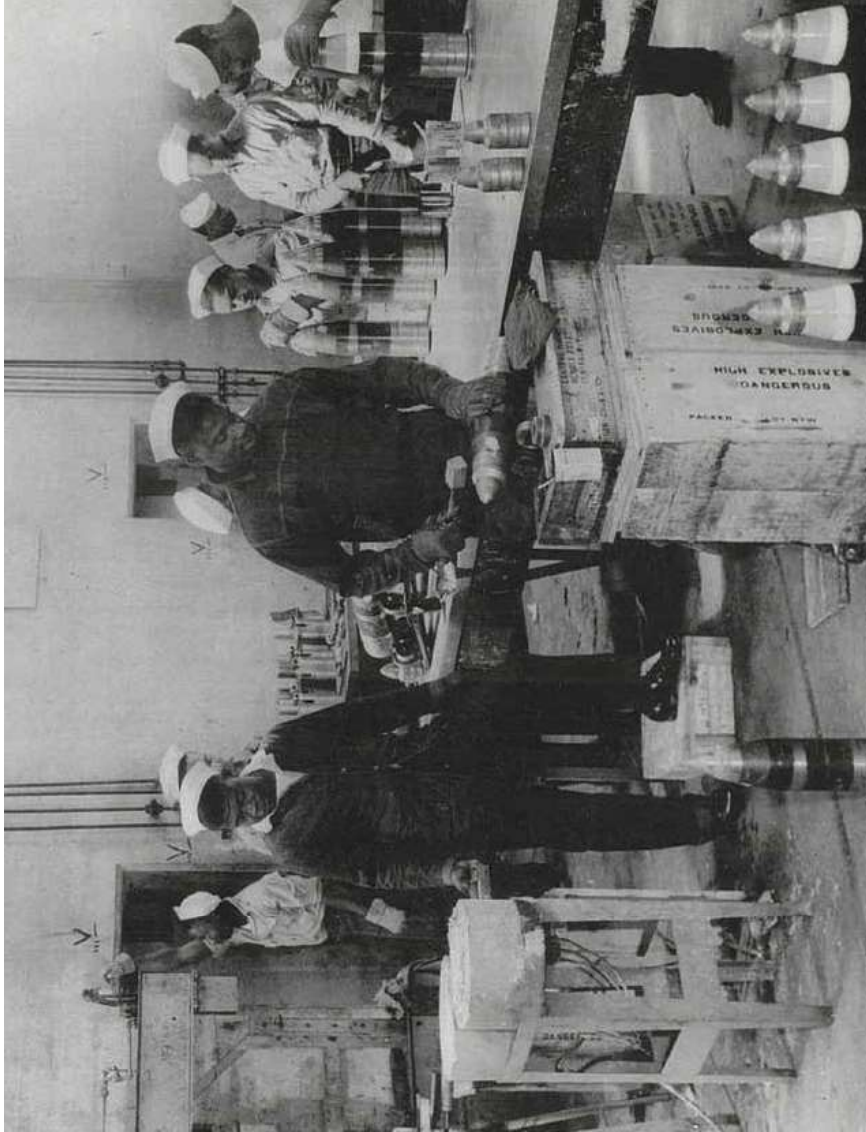
THE EXPLOSION

The night of July 17, 1944, was like any other night at the port. On the main pier, two divisions of Black sailors toiled under harsh floodlights, transferring munitions from tightly packed boxcars onto the newly arrived *USS Quinault Victory* for loading. Supervising the men were nine white officers and 29 white Marines, also



CASCADE EFFECT
A loading mishap decimated the Port Chicago naval base, killing hundreds in seconds.

moving to the Mare Island Navy Yard and preparing to load munitions. Supervising the men were nine white officers and 29 white Marines, also



HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

Black Navy sailors received inadequate training to handle dangerous munitions. The resulting explosion buckled buildings across the base.

pushed forward with its plans. On Aug. 9, 1944, officers ordered the Black sailors to the dock to start loading ordnance. But on their way from the barracks to the dock, all 328 men suddenly stopped marching.

Under questioning from the officers, 70 sailors changed their mind and continued to the dock, but the rest stayed put. They were taken to a temporary brig—a barge built to accommodate only 75 men. Even though conditions in the barge were abysmal, the men were more terrified of the possibility of another explosion.

“I wasn’t trying to shirk work,” explained Small, who, at the age of 23, was one of the oldest members of the group. “I don’t think these other men were trying to shirk work. But to go back to work under the same conditions, with no improvements, no changes, the same group of officers that we had... we thought there was a better alternative.”

Again, the men’s concerns were dismissed. The Navy threatened to charge the 258 men with mutiny and place them in front of a firing squad. Most of the sailors capitulated. (Despite agreeing to return to work, these men were still punished; President Franklin D. Roosevelt recommended sentences of bad-conduct discharges—effectively eliminating almost all veterans’ benefits for the sailors—and the loss of three months’ pay.)

majority of the deceased were Black. He insisted that compensation be reduced to \$2,000. Congress settled on \$3,000.

Of course, the war was still happening, and U.S. soldiers fighting overseas needed munitions. While most of the sailors stationed at Port Chicago were sent to Oakland, three divisions were reassigned to load munitions at the naval yard on Mare Island. Incredibly, the Navy provided the men no new training, implemented no new safeguards, and placed the same white officers who oversaw the Port Chicago disaster in charge.

The survivors were rattled and stressed. “Everybody was scared,” recalled Percy Robinson, one of the survivors of the Port Chicago disaster. “If somebody dropped a box or slammed a door, people [began] jumping around like crazy.”

Despite the compromised condition of the men, the Navy

THE MUTINY

In the aftermath of the disaster, the Navy convened a Board of Inquiry to investigate the events, leading up to the explosion. Junior officers argued the competition put in place by Kinne contributed to unsafe conditions, but the Navy captain denied the accusation. Ultimately, he and the other officers were cleared of any wrongdoing.

Instead, the court blamed the Black sailors, concluding that “the colored enlisted personnel [were] neither temperamentally or intellectually capable of handling high explosives.”

Meanwhile, a plan by Congress to compensate the families of victims with a one-time payment of \$5,000 was obstructed after Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi discovered the

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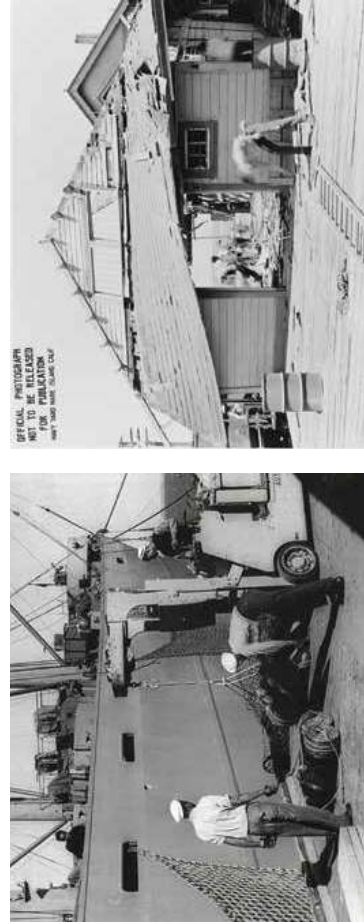
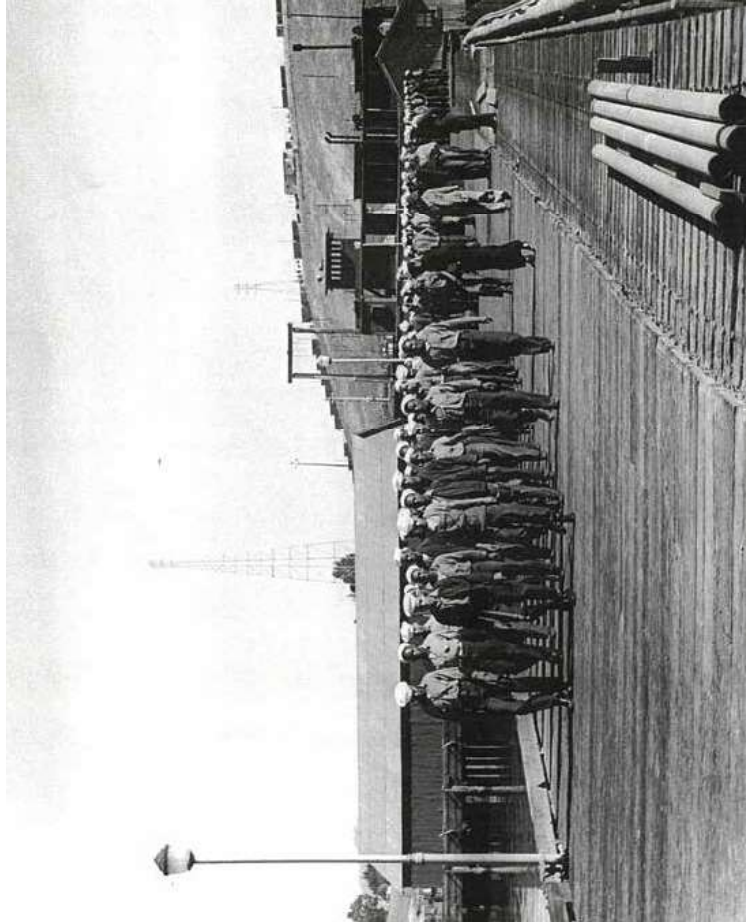
—Percy Robinson

But some of the men continued to stand their ground. Led by Small, 44 sailors refused to follow orders. Three days later, they were joined by six more men who had changed their minds. Together, they were dubbed the Port Chicago 50.

THE TRIAL

The 50 men were arrested and taken to Camp Shoemaker in Dublin, where they were interrogated by officers and asked to sign a summary of their testimony. The men complained the statements were often inaccurate or misrepresentative; nevertheless, many of the men were coerced into signing.

The trial that followed was a formality. Prosecutors hurled racial invectives against the defendants, using the manipulated statements as evidence of their dishonesty. (In one infamous exchange, a defendant argued that he couldn’t handle munitions because of a broken wrist, to which lead prosecutor Lieutenant Commander James F. Oakley quipped that “there were plenty of things a one-armed man could do on the ammunition dock.”)



FROM LABORERS TO MUTINEERS
Less than a month after the Port Chicago disaster, survivors were moved to the Mare Island Navy Yard to continue loading munitions. Of the 328 Black men reassigned to Mare Island, 50 of them refused to work.

“The Port Chicago 50 men who, despite the hardships they faced, honorably served their country, and their true story deserves to be told.”

—Congressman Mark DeSaulnier

Thurgood Marshall, to observe the proceedings. Marshall immediately denounced the entire process as a sham. “This is not 50 men on trial for mutiny,” he said. “This is the Navy on trial for its whole vicious policy toward Negroes.”

In April 1945, Marshall filed an appeal on behalf of the convicted men. The motion was denied, but the future Supreme Court justice’s efforts to shine a light on the case made an impact. Rather than quell discord, the trial only succeeded in highlighting the Navy’s systemic racism. Concerned citizens—including former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt—flooded the Navy with letters and petitions demanding justice for the Port Chicago 50.

In response to this and other events, the Navy began changing its policies, slowly integrating its forces. On Jan. 6, 1946—16 months after they were convicted—47 of the 50 men were granted clemency and released. (Two stayed in a hospital recuperating from injuries; the third remained incarcerated due to a bad conduct record.)

One month later, the Navy became the first military branch to desegregate its ranks. Two years later, President Harry Truman would sign an executive order desegregating all U.S. forces.

THEIR LEGACY

After their release, the enlisted men served overseas for a year, then were discharged “under honorable conditions.” The discharge would cost them their veterans’ benefits.

Although hailed by civil rights activists as the early vanguard of the civil rights movement, none of the 50 have been officially exonerated of their guilty verdicts. In 1999, President Bill Clinton issued

a pardon to Freddie Meeks, the last surviving member of the Port Chicago 50 and the only one to receive a pardon. (Meeks passed away in 2003.)

That, in part, was by design. Some of the men actively refused to receive a pardon, seeing it as an admission of guilt. “That means, ‘You’re guilty, but we forgive you,’” explained Small before his death in 1996. “We want the decisions set aside.”

In fact, Meeks sought a pardon to raise awareness of the unjust treatment he and others had received. “I hope that all of America knows about it,” he said at the time. “It’s something that’s been in the closet for so long.”

Efforts have been made to exonerate the men. In 1994, Congressman George Miller called on Navy leaders to overturn the verdict. The Navy refused, arguing that while bigotry informed the assignments given to the men, the convictions themselves were not “tainted by racial prejudice.” Last year, Congressman Mark DeSaulnier passed a bill directing the Navy to exonerate the Port Chicago 50, but the measure found no traction in the Senate.

“The Port Chicago 50 were brave men who, despite the hardships they faced, honorably served their country, and their true story deserves to be told,” says DeSaulnier. “Their families and our nation cannot heal until this racial injustice is corrected, and we will continue our efforts in Congress until that happens.”

Despite the stalled legislation, the sailors’ legacy of bravery remains just as powerful 76 years later.

Today, the former munitions depot sits quiet except for the sounds of chirping birds and lapping water. Dedicated in 1994, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial commemorates those who lost their lives as well as those who courageously stood their ground. It speaks to the power of individuals who protest inequality and injustice—and what they can accomplish when they take a stand together.

“Everything we’ve gotten, we’ve fought for and suffered for,” Martin Bordenave, one of the Port Chicago 50, later said. “You got to holler loud.”



VISIT THE PORT CHICAGO MEMORIAL
Make a reservation at nps.gov/poch.

THE PORT CHICAGO 50

ALMOST A CENTURY OF
50 BLACK SAILORS
HIGHLIGHTED THE
DISCRIMINATORY
PRACTICES OF THE
U.S. NAVY, ULTIMATELY
RESULTING IN THE
DESEGREGATION OF
ALL U.S. MILITARY
BRANCHES. THESE
ARE THEIR NAMES:

- Julius J. Allen, Mack Anderson, Douglas G. Anthony, William E. Banks, Arnett Baugh, Morris Berry, Martin A. Bordenave, Ernest D. Brown, Robert L. Burnage, Mentor G. Burns, Zack Credle, Jack P. Crittenden, Hayden R. Curd, Charles L. David Jr., Herbert Davis, Bennon Dees, George W. Diamond, Kenneth C. Dixon, Julius Dixon, John H. Dunn, Melvin W. Ellis, William Fleece, James Floyd, Ernest J. Gaines, John L. Gipson, Charles C. Gray, Ollie L. Green, Harry E. Grimes, Charles N. Hazzard, Frank L. Henry, Richard W. Hill, Theodore King, Perry L. Knox, William H. Lock, Edward L. Longmire, Miller Matthews, Augustus P. Mayor, Howard McGee, Lloyd McKinney, Alphonso McPherson, Freddie Meeks, Cecil Miller, Fleetwood H. Postell, Edward Saunders, Cyril O. Sheppard, Joseph R. Small, William C. Suber, Edward L. Waldrop, Charles S. Wideomon, Albert Williams Jr.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM; NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND; VALLEJO NAVAL AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE