

# The Legacy of Port Chicago

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: At the beginning of the school year, Professor Downs and Professor Olmsted introduced me to the history of the Port Chicago Mutiny. Once I began researching the events, I was surprised that I had never heard of it before, despite the fact that it occurred only 36 miles away from Davis. I've always known that I wanted to study World War II history and the narratives and stories that came with it. When I entered Professor Azevedo's writing class and she assigned us our final research project, I knew I wanted to focus on the history of Port Chicago. The history of Port Chicago illustrates a contradiction to the narrative that the Second World War was the "good" war. Through my research, I've become more interested in how diverse groups of Americans experienced and felt about the events of the war. I hope that this essay sheds some light on how oppressed groups were treated throughout WWII and how these events shape our perspective on American history.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Maxwell produced what proved to be one of my favorite research essays from my UWP 102C: Writing in History winter 2022 course. The topic he chose to write on captured my attention from the moment he explained it in his research proposal. Similarly to what Maxwell outlined in his writer's comment, I too was surprised that I had little more than a cursory understanding of the Port Chicago disaster, especially considering its proximity to UC Davis. Not only is his essay therefore elucidating, but it's also a great example of how an event like the one at Port Chicago can be used to highlight a bigger issue— here the pervasive racism that plagued*

*the U.S. military, and American society at large, during World War II. Well written and well researched, Maxwell skillfully weaves larger contextual information about the contemporary treatment of African American servicemen together with the events of the actual disaster and later the Port Chicago Mutiny thus providing an enlightening and engaging essay for his readers.*

—Jillian Azevedo, University Writing Program

**O**n the night of July 17, 1944, an explosion rocked the Port Chicago munition facility, instantly killing 320 American sailors and injuring 400 more. The harbor had been entirely destroyed, covered in debris and the dismembered remains of the working men who had been preparing to go to bed in the neighboring barracks when they were hurled through the air with an ear rattling boom. It was a genuinely terrifying scene, one that would not vanish from the minds of the black seamen that were there. Prior to this, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox emphasized that segregation and racism were “deeply rooted facts of life in American society,” before the war and desegregation “would hurt the war effort,” because white sailors would not work well with black sailors<sup>1</sup>. Black military personnel had to fight a two-front war, one at home and one abroad. Fascist regimes posed a threat to the freedom that Western democracies represented throughout the world. At home, the oppressed populations regarded the war as a method of achieving their own liberation. The Port Chicago explosion and mutiny trial exposed the racial inequalities of not only the era, but of American society as a whole. The incident also calls into question conditional narratives centered on the cultural concept of World War II as the “good” war. For African Americans

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Sheinkin, “The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights,” (New York, New York; Roaring Brook Press, 2014), 11.

“the inconsistency of fighting Nazism with racially segregated military units was not lost in black Americans.”<sup>2</sup>

Before the disaster, Port Chicago workers recognized that their working conditions were inadequate, indicating the military’s racially motivated disregard for the safety of the black stevedores. When an African American man enlisted or was drafted into the navy during World War II, he was transported to start training at the Great Lakes Training Center, the only training facility for black sailors. The young men would stay for two to three months before being sent to their regular duties. When they arrived, the majority of the men “expected to be trained to go to sea, to become sailors.”<sup>3</sup> However, the majority of these men would be shipped to various ammunition bases, with no idea what their duty would be or where they were heading. African Americans found themselves in the same situation as they did in civilian life, as a “source of cheap, subordinated labor in both domains.”<sup>4</sup>

The men had no prior training on how to load munitions before arriving at Port Chicago since they were originally trained to go overseas. The labor the black stevedores had to undertake had “special hazards requiring special training, and they were not trained for it.”<sup>5</sup> Loading munitions onto the ships became a hands-on learning experience. African American sailors did all of the hard labor while the white officers stood off to the side and instructed the men. The officers at the munitions base prioritized speed as a technique of completing work, having two divisions compete for a prize. Multiple parties expressed concerns about the combination of inadequate training and an unreasonably fast-paced work environment. Weeks prior to the explosion, the longshoremen’s

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Wollenberg, “Blacks vs. Navy Blue: The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial,” *History* Vol. 58, no. 1 (Spring, 1979), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny* (Berkeley, California; Heyday Books, 2006), 32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. NAACP LDF Office, New York. 1945.

union reached out to warn the base that a disaster was imminent if they did not properly train the seamen to load munitions. The union volunteered to send experienced members to help train the black stevedores, but “this offer was apparently ignored by the Navy.”<sup>6</sup> Some African American laborers at Port Chicago voiced their concerns with their work loading munitions, but were turned away to return to work. The higher-ranking military personnel at Port Chicago were disorganized and arrogant, ignoring grievances while putting black laborers in a hazardous work environment.

Historically, African Americans’ participation in the United States’ wars were limited to menial and manual labor, demands that primarily met those of white soldiers. During the American Civil War, for example, African Americans were only permitted to participate in the war effort following “a strident campaign by black and white abolitionists.”<sup>7</sup> Three hundred thousand African Americans worked as laborers or servants. In comparison to their white counterparts, African American men received inferior equipment, inadequate medical care, and did not receive equal pay until 1864. In the Great War, of the 400,000 African Americans who served, “only 10% were assigned to combat units,” while the rest worked in labor battalions.<sup>8</sup> These forms of discrimination against African Americans continued into World War II. Only 2,807 of the 116,000 enlisted naval men were of color when the war broke out in 1939.<sup>9</sup> Discrimination against African Americans in the military ranks was not of any surprise, but rather an intrinsic feature of how the military industrial complex functioned in America.

The explosion at Port Chicago revealed the black seamen’s concern for their safety and the genuine racial inequalities that existed within the ranks of the United States Navy. Two ships, the

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<sup>6</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> L.D. Reddick, “The Negro in the United States Navy During World War II,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2 (April 1947), 203.

S.S. Quinault and the S.S. Bryan, were docked in Port Chicago's harbor on the day of the explosion with thousands of barrels of explosives. At 10:18 p.m. that night, two powerful sequences of explosions lit up the pier, destroying everything in its path. The explosion shook the town of Port Chicago, collapsing the ceilings of a local movie theater onto the auditorium; however, no one was injured. The explosion was "equivalent to an earthquake measuring 3.4 on the Richter scale," according to seismic graphs in Berkeley, California.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the explosion's human toll was catastrophic, particularly the number of African Americans who were affected. The deaths of African American at Port Chicago accounted for "15% of total African American military losses during World War II."<sup>11</sup> Those who survived the explosion were left in shock and afraid of another explosion. These men assumed that they would be granted leave because such a catastrophic tragedy had occurred. However, "African American sailors were refused leave and were assigned the gruesome task of clearing the area of wreckage and searching for remains."<sup>12</sup> Their white counterparts, on the other hand, were granted a 30-day leave. To top it all off, the black stevedores were sent back to loading armaments at the Mare Island Navy Yard in Vallejo with no further guidance on how to prevent such an occurrence from happening again.

The Naval Court of Inquiry was tasked with investigating the incident, exposing the high-ranking navy commanders' negligence and discrimination against the black enlisted men who perished. One hundred and twenty-five witnesses testified in court, including Port Chicago survivors, personnel, ordnance specialists, ship inspectors, and eyewitnesses to the event. Despite the fact that almost all of the people who handled the munitions and worked on the winches were African American, "only five black witnesses

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<sup>10</sup> Erika Doss, "Commemorating the Port Chicago Naval Magazine Disaster of 1944: Remembering the Racial Injustices of the 'Good War' in Contemporary America," *American Studies Journal*, 59 (2015): 2, DOI 10.18422/59-06.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

were called to testify.”<sup>13</sup> The key point of contention in the court was whether the working conditions were safe enough for the men to be working in the first place. The issue of trained contract stevedores coming to Port Chicago to train the enlisted men came up again during the working conditions debate. The port director had suggested “contract stevedores be brought in to do the loading at Port Chicago.”<sup>14</sup> Safety regulations could not be avoided during the investigation, but that did not stop the officers from pointing out who was to blame. They also heard testimony about whether there was sabotage, bomb defects, equipment problems, or organizational problems. The competition that the officers put the black enlisted men through was also discussed throughout the investigation, although it was not identified as a cause of the explosion. Captain Kinne, the man in charge of Port Chicago, merely stated that the junior officers, who said the competition in loading munitions was dangerous, didn’t know what they were talking about. The white officers were given a slap on the wrist for the competition aboard the ships, while the black men who died in the explosion were blamed for the disaster.

When the surviving men were ordered to return to work on Mare Island in Vallejo, 250 of them refused out of fear and shock. This demonstrated the workers’ determination to affect change and expose the racial injustices perpetrated against them. Joseph Small, a black seaman at Port Chicago, was one of the unelected leaders of the workforce at the munitions base. Small developed a strong reputation among the workers as a man who would stand up to the officers and voice their concerns. On August 9th, Small and the other men did exactly that. They all headed toward their allocated pier to load explosives when the officers directed them to. The division abruptly came to a halt, though, as the men were fearful that another explosion might occur since there had been no adjustments to the facility’s conditions or a plan to adequately

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<sup>13</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

train the men. Simultaneously, the men were frustrated that there were no white seamen who assisted in loading the ammunition. White navy men were treated more equitably, especially following the explosion. Small saw that the “work stoppage was inevitable. It would have happened. But something had to happen to give it a shove. The explosion was the instrument by which all of this injustice was brought to light.”<sup>15</sup> When the men refused to return to work, they were taken onto the barge and interrogated by higher-ranking officers. Some of the men were threatened with being shot in an attempt to scare them back to work. By the end of the interrogation, just 50 of the men had refused to break their commitment; they were all charged with mutiny against the United States government during a time of war.

The men at Port Chicago had no intention of staging a mutiny against the U.S. government; they desired a better working environment and sufficient training before returning to work. The decisions were made by the men independently, on an individual psychological level. Each individual had their own emotional connection to the event, uninfluenced by other group members. Martin Bordenave, an 18-year-old who had been thrown out of the military for being too young two years prior, expressed his dissatisfaction with the conditions at Port Chicago. He stated “every day was a miserable day there and when the explosion come up, that just made me make up my mind I wasn't going to do it no more.”<sup>16</sup> Bordenave was not persuaded to commit to the work stoppage by any leader; instead, he recognized his opportunity when the explosion occurred. His personal experience echoed many of the other men’s concerns about not loading explosives. Another Port Chicago worker, Percy Robinson, saw the stoppage as

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Small, “Survivor Interview Transcript: Joseph Small,” interview by Robert L. Allen, June 10, 1978, transcript, 7, <https://calisphere.org/item/419c2b18-4062-4349-ad3c-58370526bde0/>

<sup>16</sup> Martin Bordenave , “Survivor Interview Transcript: Martin Bordenave,” interview by Robert L. Allen, August 23, 1980, transcript, 2-3, <http://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/ucldc-nuxeo-ref-media/917a7e84-fa36-42dc-93d9-a39b199ede87>

an opportunity— “well, if you don’t let us go home, we ain’t gonna work. It was one of those kind of deals.”<sup>17</sup> He watched how the white officers were allowed leave, but black workers who directly worked on the ships were not. Finally, Cyril Sheppard, a laborer who had previously worked aboard ships prior to Port Chicago, despised the navy’s segregated organization. He had been trained as a gunner and wished to serve in the Pacific. He stated “put me on a ship and let me fight out there; take my chances out there. Don’t want to lose my life due to somebody else’s negligence.”<sup>18</sup> Sheppard was not seeking to drag the other people he worked with down; rather, he was pointing out that their training was designed to prepare them for combat, not to load explosives. Even though he knew how to load ammunition, he was aware that another event would occur if all the men were not properly trained. Each of the men at Port Chicago described why they were on strike, revealing the development of individuals into a spontaneous self-conscious collective.

The men who refused to go to work, known formally as the Port Chicago Fifty, were tried for mutiny and refused to give in due to their strong commitment to exposing the wrongdoings at Port Chicago. The prosecution in the trial was very focused on the idea that the work stoppage was started by a ringleader. Small was perceived as the ringleader, although there was no formal leader who commanded everyone to decline work. He stated “nobody made me nothing. I said we don’t need a leader if you know what’s going on on that base.”<sup>19</sup> The men had no problem returning to work; their only issue was that they were “scared of ammunition.”<sup>20</sup> They never used force to fight the US military or planned to take over

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<sup>17</sup> Percy Robinson, “Survivor Interview Transcript: Percy Robinson,” interview by Robert L. Allen, May-June, 1978, transcript, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Cyril Sheppard, “Survivor Interview Transcript: Cyril Sheppard,” interview by Robert L. Allen, October 20-27, 1977, transcript, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Trial Transcript, General Court-Martial, “Case of Julius J. Allen, Seaman Second Class, U.S. Naval Reserve, et al.,” Sept. 14–Oct. 24, 1944 (typescript). Navy Judge Advocate General Office, Washington D.C. 267.

an entire ship; they simply saw the situation as a work stoppage, in which they needed to be properly trained to perform their duties. Small remarked that the work stoppage “was just brought on by circumstances, working conditions – it was inevitable.”<sup>21</sup> The defense emphasized there was no mutinous conspiracy and that the men were still in shock following the explosion. They claimed fear was to account for the stoppage, describing it as “an uncontrollable fear, a fear actually that controls your actions and influences your normal reasoning beyond your ability to handle it.”<sup>22</sup> The defense went on to clarify that the men had the right to petition not to handle the ammunition, and questioned whether they could blame the men for being terrified to continue. All the men wanted was to be treated fairly, just like the rest of the white military personnel. However, the court decided not to consider the men’s individual circumstances. All of them were charged and sent to the Terminal Island Disciplinary Barracks in San Pedro.

The events at Port Chicago highlighted the racist undertones that hampered the black community during the Second World War. During times of war “civilians from a democratic-society, even an imperfectly democratic society, willingly submit themselves to such authoritarian direction only when they believe in the purpose and fairness of the system.”<sup>23</sup> The vast majority of African American men found this to be inaccurate. The men at Port Chicago believed that joining the war effort could help them overcome racial discrimination. In truth, the military was structured in such a way that it demanded complete obedience from its African American soldiers. The US military had zero tolerance for African Americans who stood up for their civil rights. Racial discrimination committed by the US government against the African American population during World War II needs more examination in the context of

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21 Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, 139.

22 Trial Transcript, General Court-Martial, “Case of Julius J. Allen, Seaman Second Class, U.S. Naval Reserve, et al.,” Sept. 14–Oct. 24, 1944 (typescript). Navy Judge Advocate General Office, Washington D.C. Vol VI, 159.

23 Reddick, “The Negro in the United States Navy During World War II,” 209.

WWII narratives. Port Chicago should be viewed as a common subconscious of the American psyche during this age, rather than an anomaly. African Americans understood that the U.S military was no different from any other facet of American society. Racism followed African Americans wherever they went, even while they were fighting the same battle to preserve democracy. War does not conceal any of the bigotry that afflicts a society; rather, it makes it more visible.

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