



UNDERSTANDING
SACRIFICE

Activity: Race and Tragedy on the Homefront: The Forgotten Port Chicago Disaster



Guiding question:

How was World War II a war fought both on the battlefield and at home?

DEVELOPED BY DANIEL JOCZ

Grade Level(s): 9-12

Subject(s): Social Studies, Language Arts

Cemetery Connection: Golden Gate National Cemetery

Fallen Hero Connection: Seaman Second Class A. D. Hamilton

Overview

Through an inquiry-based media literacy activity, students will uncover what happened at Port Chicago on July 17, 1944. Using primary and secondary sources, students will compare the version of events from the official government report and other sources. Students will conclude the lesson by writing an op-ed or a letter to an elected official about the Port Chicago 50.

Historical Context

Many history classes focus on the numerous challenges and changes on the homefront during World War II. For African Americans, World War II was a war fought not only against fascism abroad, but also against racism at home. Port Chicago, California, was the site of the worst disaster on the homefront and it also played an extremely important role in the war in the Pacific. At Port Chicago, munitions were loaded onto ships, primarily by poorly trained African American soldiers in a segregated military. On July 17, 1944, an explosion occurred at Port Chicago that killed 320 sailors and civilians. The overwhelming majority of victims at Port Chicago were African Americans. The disaster on July 17, 1944, not only exposed injustices within American society, but also sparked resistance and reforms within the U.S. military.

“The story of various groups struggling not only against fascism abroad but also against discrimination at home during World War II resonates with my students. While I do cover various aspects of racial unrest on the homefront, my curriculum lacks personal stories and specific examples such as the Port Chicago Disaster.”
— Daniel Jocz

Jocz teaches at Downtown Magnets High School in Los Angeles, CA.

Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Analyze how bias, context, and other factors contribute to the way media reports on events;
- Describe the experiences of African Americans on the homefront and in the U.S. military; and
- Evaluate how various primary and secondary sources can provide contradictory information.

Documents Used ★ indicates an ABMC source

Primary Sources

"300 Killed In Bay Munition Ship Blast," July 18, 1944 *Oakland Tribune*

California Senator Steve Glazer, "An Appeal to President Obama for the Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50," January 18, 2017

Film, U.S. Navy, *Damage Caused By Explosion Of Ammunition Ships*, July 18, 1944

Internet Archive

archive.org/details/NPC-4814

Film, U.S. Navy, *Scenes of Damage Caused....*, July 18, 1944

Internet Archive

archive.org/details/NPC-5193

"NAACP Asks Navy Dept. Probe of Mutiny Charge," October 28, 1944

The Pittsburgh Courier

Opinion (excerpt, Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, Findings, October 30, 1944

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/p/port-chicago-ca-explosion/online-documents/court-of-inquiry/opinion.html

Oral History Interview with George Allen Prouty (audio file excerpt [19.36-21.29], 1990

Internet Archive

archive.org/details/cnchi_000076/cnchi_000076_a_access.mp3

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as muti-neers" (excerpt, 1945

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

Photograph Collection, *African American Stevedores*

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, National Park Service

[nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=F43C40BA-155D-4519-3E65DC-AA9DF3210](https://www.nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=F43C40BA-155D-4519-3E65DC-AA9DF3210)

The Port Chicago 50: An Oral History (audio file) [25:12]

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, National Park Service

[nps.gov/poch/learn/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm](https://www.nps.gov/poch/learn/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm)

Photograph Collection, *Port Chicago Disaster*

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, National Park Service

[nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=F40E9D90-155D-4519-3E886B704FAC971D](https://www.nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=F40E9D90-155D-4519-3E886B704FAC971D)

Secondary Source

Documentary, *Into Forgetfulness* [10:40]

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, National Park Service

[nps.gov/poch/learn/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm](https://www.nps.gov/poch/learn/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm)

Materials

- **Activity One**

- What Happened? Graphic Organizer
- Manila folders (two folders for each group of three or four students)

- **Activity Two**

- Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion? Graphic Organizer
- Computer with projector and speakers to listen to oral history interviews and watch the documentary

- **Assessment**

- Port Chicago Response Instruction and Rubric

Lesson Preparation

- Activity One

- Create photograph collections using folders. Create one folder for each group of three to four students for the each of the photograph collections:

- Photograph Collection, *Port Chicago Disaster*
- Photograph Collection, *African American Stevedores*
- Print one copy of What Happened? Graphic Organizer for each student.
- **Activity Two**
 - Print one copy of Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion? Graphic Organizer for each student.
 - Print (or make available online) one copy of the *Oakland Tribune* article and the excerpt from the U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry investigation into the Port Chicago Explosion for each student.
 - Set up five stations (three will need computers or tablets to access the sources).
 - Station One: Preset *The Port Chicago 50: An Oral History* (audio file). A transcript of this audio is provided if needed or preferred.
 - Station Two: Preset the oral history of George Allen Prouty, a survivor of Port Chicago oral history (audio file). Cue the interview to [19:36-21:29].
 - Station Three: Preset documentary, *Into Forgetfulness* [10:40].
 - Station Four: Print five copies of the article “NAACP Asks Navy Dept. Probe of Mutiny Charge” from the *Pittsburgh Courier*.
 - Station Five: Print five copies of the excerpt from the pamphlet “Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers” from the NAACP.
- **Activity Three**
 - Set up computer and projector for whole class discussion and debrief.
- **Assessment**
 - Print one copy of the Port Chicago Response Instructions and Rubric for each student.

Procedure

Activity One: Historical Inquiry (45 minutes)

- Divide students into groups of three to four students each.
- Give each group a folder containing the *Port Chicago Disaster* Photograph Collection.
 - **Teacher Tip:** The photographs are intentionally not labeled. Do not tell students any information about the event.
- Ask students to work as detectives to try to figure out what happened.
 - **Teacher Tip:** You may also choose to use any of the three short film clips from the Internet Archive to preview the Port Chicago Disaster.
- Distribute the What Happened? Graphic Organizer to each student and ask students to complete Part One. Ask students to identify what they believe happened in the images. Ask questions to help stimulate discussion.

- Do you think this image is from a battle in Europe?
- Could this be a image from a battle in the Pacific theater?
- Ask groups to share their theories about what happened before continuing.
- Provide each group with a second folder with images from the *African American Stevedores Photograph Collection*. Ask students to complete the Part Two of the What Happened? Graphic Organizer. Ask students to identify what they believe is happening in the images.
 - **Teacher Tip:** A careful examination of the images reveals that the work done at Port Chicago was predominantly done by African American sailors. Push students to discover this fact during their discussion.
 - Ask groups to share what they think is happening in the images.
- Use the images from the activity to provide context for the next lesson. Following Activity One students should have a basic understanding of the following facts:
 - Port Chicago was a naval base in Northern California, north of San Francisco.
 - A terrible explosion occurred. It was the worst homefront disaster of World War II.
 - African American sailors did the majority of the work at Port Chicago. All commissioned officers were white, and only a few non-commissioned officers were African Americans.
 - These men lived and worked in a segregated society and a segregated military.
 - African Americans were the overwhelming majority of the victims (202 of 320 killed) at Port Chicago. According to the Naval History and Heritage Command, 15% of all African American casualties in World War II were killed at Port Chicago (Source: Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts – A Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500–2000*. 2nd Ed. 2002).

Activity Two: What Caused the Port Chicago Explosion? (45 minutes)

- Distribute one copy of the Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion? Graphic Organizer to each student.
- Distribute (or make available electronically) the *Oakland Tribune* article and the excerpt from the U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry investigation into the Port Chicago Explosion.
- Ask students to complete Part One of the Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion? Graphic Organizer as they read.
 - Ask students, *Who do you think is responsible for the Port Chicago explosion?*
 - Ask students to share evidence from the primary sources to support their conclusions.
 - **Teacher Tip:** The report and newspaper accounts place the blame for the explosion almost entirely on the enlisted men and do little to address the lack of training and other factors that contributed to Port Chicago disaster.
- Set up the document stations and divide students into five groups.

- Rotate students to different stations to explore the video-, audio-, and text-based sources. Students may move through the stations as they finish. Ask the students to compare the findings from the government report and mainstream newspapers of the time with the other sources and complete Part Two of the Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion? Graphic Organizer as they analyze the following sources:
 - Station One: The Port Chicago 50: An Oral History (audio file or printed transcript, as preferred).
 - Station Two: Oral history of George Allen Prouty, a survivor of Port Chicago oral history (audio file). Cue the clip: [19:36-21:29].
 - Station Three: Documentary, *Into Forgetfulness* [10:40].
 - Station Four: "NAACP Asks Navy Dept. Probe of Mutiny Charge," *Pittsburgh Courier*.
 - Station Five: "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers," (excerpt) a pamphlet created by the NAACP.
 - **Teacher Tip:** By comparing how various news outlets covered (or did not cover) the Port Chicago disaster and the resulting "mutiny," students will be able to engage not only in a study of racism on the home front, but also the important topic of media literacy.

Activity Three: Debrief (15 minutes)

- Arrange student desks into a circle. Assign one student to record who contributes (each student gets points based upon their contributions during the Socratic Seminar) and one student to help facilitate the conversation. Students should share evidence from the sources and various activities to support their conclusions. Ask students,
 - *What do you think really happened at Port Chicago?*
 - *How do these findings compare with the conclusions reached after reading the government report and mainstream newspapers?*
 - *Why do you think the sources are inconsistent?*
 - *Who was at fault for the Port Chicago disaster?*
- Review that students have a basic understanding of the following facts:
 - Black sailors were poorly trained, safety procedures were minimal at Port Chicago, and the work was extremely dangerous.
 - Some black stevedores working at Port Chicago refused to return to work until safety concerns were addressed. These men were arrested for mutiny.

Assessment

- Show students the video clip from California Senator Steve Glazer requesting a presidential pardon of those imprisoned for the mutiny.
- Distribute copies of the Port Chicago Response Instructions and Rubric to each student.
- Direct students to write an op-ed or a letter to an elected official discussing whether they believe it would be appropriate for the current president to pardon those who refused to load a ship.
- The letter can be scored using the Port Chicago Responses Rubric.

Methods for Extension

- Teachers can adapt the lesson to younger learners by providing them fewer images to analyze in Activity One.
- Students interested in the Port Chicago disaster can read more about the events in these books:
 - Steve Sheinkin, *The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights*
 - James Campbell, *The Color of War: How One Battle Broke Japan and Another Changed America*
 - Christopher Moore, *Fighting for America: Black Soldiers, the Unsung Heroes of World War II*
- The American Battle Monuments Commission maintains U.S. military cemeteries overseas. These cemeteries are permanent memorials to the fallen, but it is important that students know the stories of those who rest here. To learn more about the stories of Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice, visit abmc.gov/education and NHDSilentHeroes.org.
- Teachers can enhance students' interest in World War II on the homefront by exploring these related lesson plans:
 - [Decisions in Postwar America: Remembrance of our Nation's Fallen Heroes](#)
 - [Industry's Role in the Strategic Bombing Campaign](#)
 - [A Japanese American Family's Experience During World War II: A Living DBQ](#)
 - [Sacrifice, Loss, and Honor: A Simulation of the Homefront in World War II](#)

Adaptations

- Teachers can adapt the lesson to younger learners by providing them fewer images to analyze in Activity One.
- Teachers can adapt the lesson to English Language Learners by providing academic vocabulary for the text and shortening the required reading. Teachers can also choose to use videos clips and audio oral history interviews in lieu of primary source text.
- Teachers can group students in mixed ability groups. Since the lesson requires different skills (reading, primary sources analysis, whole class discussion, photograph analysis) students would benefit from working in heterogeneous ability groups. Mixed ability grouping would allow students to assist one another on the various tasks.

Photograph Collection, *Port Chicago*



Photograph A



Photograph B



Photograph C



Photograph D

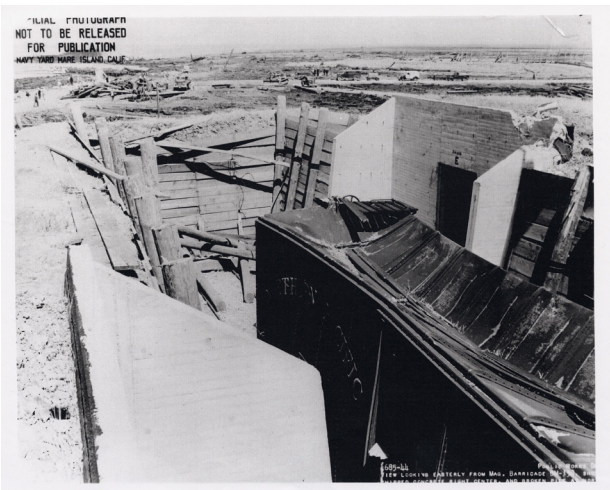
Photograph Collection, *Port Chicago* cont.



Photograph E



Photograph F

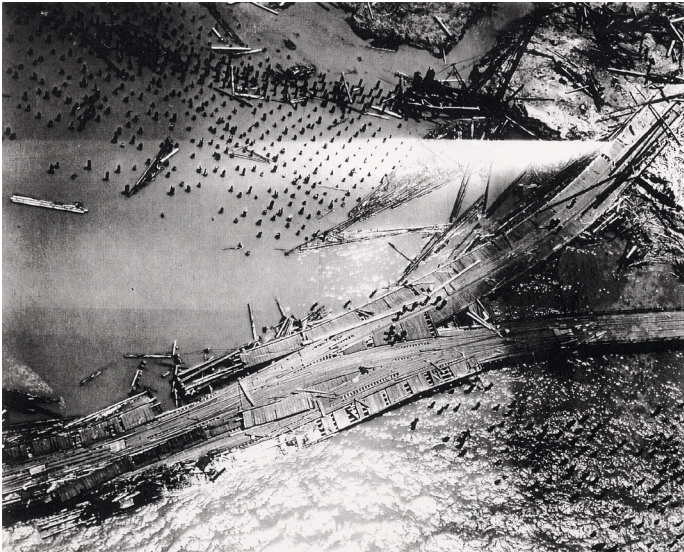


Photograph G



Photograph H

Photograph Collection, *Port Chicago* cont.



Photograph I



Photograph J



Photograph K



Photograph L

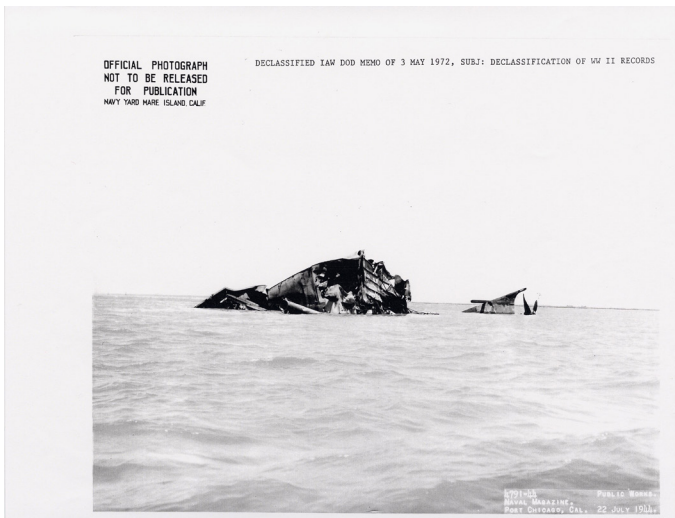
Photograph Collection, *Port Chicago* cont.



Photograph M



Photograph N



Photograph O



Photograph P

Photograph Collection, *Port Chicago* cont.

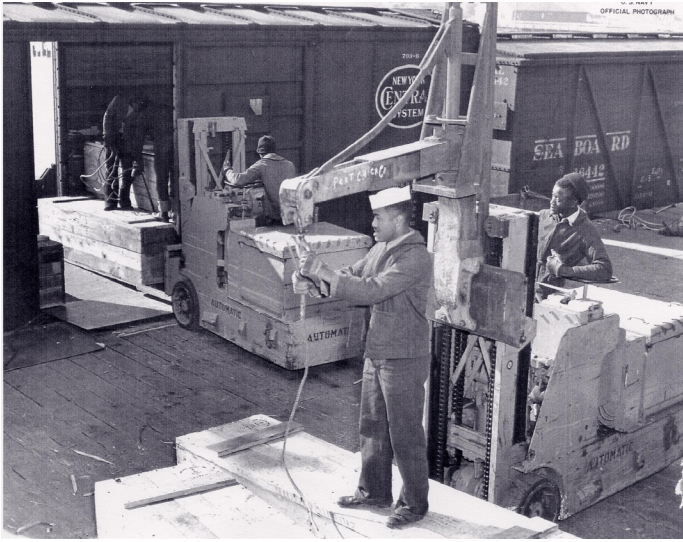


Photograph Q



Photograph R

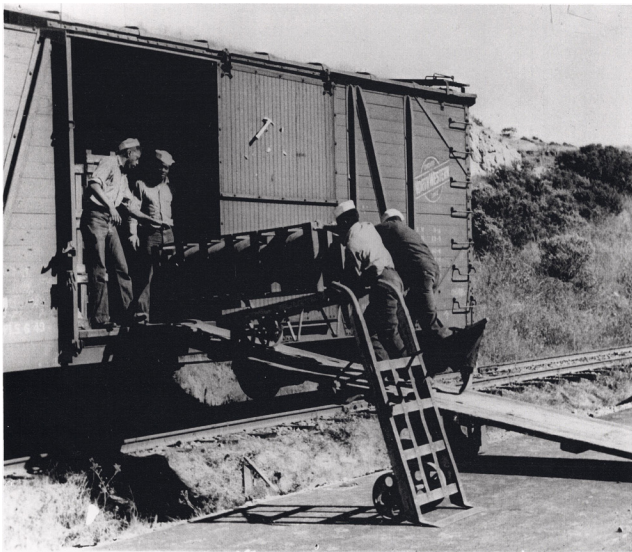
Photograph Collection, *African American Stevedores*



Photograph A



Photograph B



Photograph C



Photograph D

Photograph Collection, *African American Stevedores cont.*



Photograph E

What Happened? Graphic Organizer

Part One

What do you think happened in these photographs? Choose two photographs where you found clues.		
Image	Description of the photograph	What does the image lead you to believe happened? Why? Cite your evidence from the photograph.

Hypothesis One: What do you think happened?

What Happened? Graphic Organizer cont.

Part Two

What do you think happened in these photographs? Choose two photographs where you found clues.

Image	Description of the photograph	What does the image lead you to believe happened? Why? Cite your evidence from the photograph.

Hypothesis Two: What do you think happened? Make connections between the photographs from part one and part two.

Opinion (excerpt), Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, October 30, 1944

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

OPINION

1. That the Naval and Coast Guard personnel killed or injured in this explosion and listed in the Finding of Facts herein were killed or injured in line of duty and not as a result of their own misconduct.
2. That the civil personnel listed in e Finding of Facts herein as having been killed by the explosion were killed while performing their regularly assigned duties and in the service of their country.
3. That the loss of and damage to government property and privately-owned vessels caused by this explosion were incident to the prosecution of the war.
4. That the amount of damages caused to government-owned property is \$9,892,034.74.
5. That the amount of damage suffered by the M.S. REDLINE does not exceed the sum of \$136,840.00, the cost of repairs, and \$11,437.57, the expenses incident thereto, totaling \$149,277.57, which is greater than the sound value of the vessel, which did not exceed \$150,000.00, less the value of the vessel in her damaged condition.
6. No opinion is expressed as to the amount of damages suffered as the result of death. personal injuries or by small craft, as these claims have been delivered to the Board of Investigation for consideration.
7. That the establishment of a facility such as the U.S. Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, was necessary in this area and the location was well chosen.
8. That the development of the Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, to maximum efficiency and capacity as a loading facility was retarded by the following circumstances which were beyond the control of the Officer in Charge, Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, and the Commanding Officer, Naval Ammunition Depot, Mare Island, California:
 - a. A general failure to foresee and prepare for the tremendous increase in explosives shipments.
 - b. A failure to assemble and train the officers and crew for their specialized duties prior to the time they were required for actual loading.
 - c. A failure to provide initially the collateral equipment so necessary for morale.
 - d. A failure to provide an adequate number of competent petty officers or even personnel of petty officer caliber.

Opinion (excerpt), Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, October 30, 1944 cont.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

9. That the Commanding Officer, Naval Ammunition Depot, early realized the necessity for expansion, for trained officers and the importance of collateral equipment. He made every reasonable effort to obtain these.
10. That the operation of the Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, as an annex of the Naval Ammunition Depot, Mare Island, is sound and proper.
11. That the internal organization at Port Chicago is sound and proper.
12. That the training of the officers was the best possible under existing circumstances. That the dissemination of pertinent information required by the officers in the performance of their duties was adequate.
13. That the officers at Port Chicago have realized for a long time the necessity for great effort on their part because of the poor quality of the personnel with which they had to work. They worked loyally, conscientiously, intelligently, and effectively to make themselves competent officers and to solve the problem of loading ships safely with the men provided.
14. That the enlisted personnel comprising the ordnance battalions at Port Chicago were poor material for training in the handling and loading of munitions, and required an unusual amount of close supervision while actually engaged in this work.
15. That the training and supervision of these men was made even more difficult by the lack of petty officers or petty officer material.
16. That a very sustained and vigorous effort was made to train these men in the proper handling of munitions. Despite this, there was a considerable history of rough and careless handling by individuals. A marked and continuing improvement was discernible in recent months.
17. That the methods used in training these men were the most effective possible under the circumstances.
18. That in the months immediately preceding the explosion real progress had been made toward a better training program for officers and men. This work had been retarded by a lack of competent senior officers.
19. That the morale of the station was improving steadily as a result of the completion of the gymnasium and bachelor officers' quarters, and provision for additional transportation.
20. That the civil service personnel were about the average available for the ratings held and were in general of mediocre ability.

Opinion (excerpt), Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, October 30, 1944 cont.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

21. That the policies and doctrines followed were sound, well thought out, and aimed at generally getting essential war work done as safely as possible.
22. That the security measures in effect were adequate.
23. That the liaison between the officers, of the Port Director, Captain of the Port, Service Force Subordinate Command, and the Naval magazine, Port Chicago, was satisfactory.
24. That the pre-loading inspections made by representatives of the Captain of the Port and of the Port Director were not always thorough or well-timed in relation to fuelings. This lack of thoroughness was not a contributing cause to the explosion under investigation.
25. That the pier was well laid out for the work to be done. A pier which allows tandem berthing would be preferable, since it results in a lesser concentration of explosives and personnel.
26. That the loading procedures and the gear used at Port Chicago were safe and in accordance with standard naval practice and did not violate naval safety precautions.
27. That the few practices listed in the Finding of Facts which were contrary to the Coast Guard shiploading regulations were not dangerous and did not increase the hazards.
28. that there exists no publication or instruction for naval establishments which adequately specified the methods to be used in handling high explosives. Regulations as they exist are negative in nature and prohibitory.
29. That the Coast Guard instructions are not practicable in their entirety in that a literal compliance with all requirements would so restrict operations that loading could not be accomplished at a reasonable rate.
30. That where any regulation cannot be followed, it should be changed rather than ignored.
31. That it is possible to draw up a practicable set of loading instructions with no sacrifice to safety.
32. That the details of loading procedure at Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, were as safe, and in most cases safer, than those in use at many other points.
33. That the Coast Guard detail under the conditions it was originally assigned at Naval Magazine, port Chicago, did not contribute to the efficiency or safety of the loading operations.
34. That this Coast Guard detail could contribute to the efficiency of the operations provided: --
 - a. Their instructions were carefully revised and adapted to the special circumstances existing at a naval station, rather than arbitrarily using the same methods as when dealing with civilian stevedores at a commercial pier.

Opinion (excerpt), Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, October 30, 1944 cont.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

- b. The methods of handling each item were agreed upon by competent representatives before loading started.
 - c. That only competent men especially trained in ammunition handling were assigned to such duty.
35. That the loading divisions were well organized for the work to be accomplished, insofar as the availability of petty officers permitted.
 36. That the working hours and schedules were well planned and reasonable.
 37. That the officer supervision during loading operations was adequate.
 38. That the petty officer supervision was inadequate both in numbers and quality.
 39. That the posting of the amounts loaded by each division did not operate to increase the hazards of loading.
 40. That a loading rate of 10 tons per hatch per hour with the personnel available was high but a goal that could be attained with proper training and supervision.
 41. That the loading rate attained at Port Chicago was approximately that attained by commercial stevedores at Naval Ammunition Depot, Mare Island.
 42. That the S.S. E. A. BRYAN was seaworthy and in a satisfactory condition to receive explosive cargo on arrival at the Naval Magazine, Port Chicago.
 43. That the S.S. QUINAULT VICTORY was seaworthy and in a satisfactory condition to receive explosive cargo on arrival at the Naval Magazine, Port Chicago.
 44. That the loading of the S.S. E. A. BRYAN up to the time of the explosion was proceeding in a normal manner, using methods and gear that are considered safe and in accordance with good practice.
 45. That the quantities of explosive vapors probably present, the absence of any evidence of fire or other igniting agent, the speed with which the explosion was transmitted indicate to the court that the explosive qualities of the oil in the S.S. QUINAULT VICTORY did not cause or contribute to the explosion.
 46. That in an explosion of this magnitude where substantially all the possible initiating agents were destroyed and all eyewitnesses at the point of initiation were lost, it is impossible to determine positively the agent or act which caused the explosion.

Opinion (excerpt), Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, October 30, 1944 cont.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

47. That the following unusual circumstances existed just prior to the explosion, any one of which might have been a contributing cause:
- The S.S. QUINAULT VICTORY, a ship that had been in service only one week, was being rigged for the first time by enlisted personnel of the ordnance battalions and some difficulty was experienced, which might have led to the dropping of a boom on one of the cars of explosives spotted alongside.
 - The propeller of the QUINAULT VICTORY was turning over, which might have caused a failure in the pier structure.
 - A diesel switch engine was in motion on the pier, entailing the possibility of collision and damage to explosives being handled.
 - An unusual noise was heard which could have been caused by the falling of the boom or the failure of the structure of a boxcar or the pier. A similar noise could have been caused by the possibilities outlined in a, b, and c above.
48. That the weather conditions in no way contributed to the explosion.
49. That there was no unnecessary concentration of explosives or personnel on the pier at the time of the explosion.
50. That the possibility exists that a supersensitive ammunition component, such as is defined below, was present and that such a component was detonated either in the ordinary course of loading operations or as a result of rough or careless handling by an individual or individuals.

The term "supersensitive component" as herein used is defined as:

- One wherein a thin film of high explosives is present because of defects in the manufacture of the case or faulty filling of that particular component. (This condition could have occurred in the Mark 47 and the Mark 54 depth bombs.)
- One which has become prematurely armed by reason of damage to the safety features either in transit to the magazine or in the handling after arrival. (This condition could have occurred in the M-7 incendiary bomb clusters.)

The term "rough or careless handling" as herein used is defined as handling which would subject a component or its container to a severe blow or cause deformation of the case or container by the application of a concentrated stress. Examples of this would be a bomb which is allowed to roll against and strike another bomb, a hoist which is allowed to swing against the ship's side or a hatch conning, or a hoist which is dropped from a height or is allowed to strike

Opinion (excerpt), Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, October 30, 1944 cont.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

the deck a hard blow in lowering, or the arrangement of the load in the net or sling which is such as to impose concentrated stress on one or more of the components of the load.

51. That the probable causes of the initial explosion listed in the order of probability are:
 - a. Presence of a supersensitive element which was detonated in the course of handling.
 - b. Rough handling by an individual or individuals. This may have occurred at any stage of the loading process from the breaking out of the cars to final stowage in the holds.
 - c. Failure of handling gear, such as the falling of a boom, failure of a block or hook, parting of a whip, etc.
 - d. Collision of the switch engine with an explosive loaded car, possibly in the process of unloading.
 - e. An accident incident to the carrying away of the mooring lines of the QUINAULT VICTORY or the bollards to which the QUINAULT VICTORY was moored, resulting in damage to an explosive component.
 - f. The result of an act of sabotage. Although there is no evidence to support sabotage as a probable cause, it cannot be ignored as a possibility.
52. That the initial explosion occurred in the vicinity of the inboard end of the pier near the bow of the E. A. BRYAN, probably among components being handled on the pier or being loaded into No. 1 or 2 holds. The sharp distinct sound and the brilliant white flash lead to the belief that the initial detonation was that of an M-7 cluster or Mark 47 depth bomb which was, in turn immediately propagated to other explosives on the pier, producing the first explosion.
53. That the second and larger explosion consisted of the detonation -- substantially simultaneously -- of the ammunition in ten holds of the E. A. BRYAN. That this was initiated by the detonation of a component or group of components, or hot fragments from the first explosion which entered the holds either through the ship's side or through the open hatches.
54. That the pattern of fragment distribution would appear to indicate that the point of initiation of the second explosion was in one of the forward holds of the E. A. BRYAN and that the explosives in the after holds suffered sympathetic detonation almost immediately so that the ship in effect constituted a large bomb.
55. That there was an initial major explosion followed by minor explosions and burning for a period of from three to six seconds and culminating in a mass explosion of the entire cargo of the E. A. BRYAN and all remaining explosives. This final explosion was by far the greater; larger than any which preceded it.

Opinion (excerpt), Port Chicago Naval Magazine Explosion on 17 July 1944: Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, October 30, 1944 cont.

U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command

56. That from an examination of the damage to structures and facilities resulting from the explosion, certain specific requirements of standards of construction for such a facility are indicated as set forth under "Recommendations".
57. That the behavior of the officers and men after the explosion was exemplary and reflects credit on them and on their commanding officer.
58. That other U.S. Government agencies, the agencies of the State of California, the agencies of municipalities, civilian activities, and individual citizens in the area, were most prompt and helpful in their tenders of assistance.
59. That the explosions and the consequent destruction of property, death and personal injuries were not due to the fault, negligence or inefficiency of any person in the naval service or connected therewith or any other person.
60. That the explosions were not due to any fault, negligence or inefficiency of the interested party, Captain Nelson H. Goss, U.S. Navy (Retired).
61. That the explosions were not due to any fault, negligence or inefficiency of the interested party, Captain Merrill T. Kinne, U.S. Naval Reserve.

"300 Killed In Bay Munition Ship Blast," July 18, 1944

Oakland Tribune

Shells Rocket Far Afield

Continued From Page 1

Navy until their nearest of kin have been notified, but it was disclosed that nine officers known to have been stationed at the post are missing. They presumably have been killed.

In addition to the depot's personnel, two men were missing from Coast Guard picket boats, two were injured, and two were missing from the fireboat that answered the first alarm.

The Coast Guard issued immediate warnings to all mariners in the Bay to look out for ammunition that might be floating on the surface. They pointed out that it constituted a menace.

John Miller, former sheriff of Contra Costa County, now civilian defense co-ordinator for the area, estimated that at least 200 civilians were injured when the ships blew up. They were treated at hospitals throughout the county and by private physicians.

However, the Navy and civilian authorities agreed, there undoubtedly were hundreds of others hurt who didn't seek medical attention immediately.

Ammunition Magazine Shattered Shambles

The ammunition magazine, a comparatively new installation one mile out of Port Chicago, was a shambles when the first spectators reached it. Buildings were collapsed and hearses were carrying a procession of bodies out of the reservation.

Officers declined to tell what had happened in the stockade, but it was apparent that the explosion blasted buildings to the ground without spreading the detonations.

It was possible that block-buster bombs were mixed with the ammunition that exploded.

Force of the explosion was so great that it knocked the needle off the seismograph at the University of California and led people in Oakland to think they had been bombed by the Japanese.

Householders in the upper Bay area were wide awake with the first brilliant flash of light. Then they felt the two explosions, hardly a moment apart. They fled into the streets, few of them to sleep again during the night.

The Red Cross was alerted and prepared to take care of as many as 1500 persons from Port Chicago. The little town virtually was evacuated, and between 150 and 200 homes appeared to be uninhabitable. Not a single building

in the town escaped damage and most were described as "complete losses."

Thousands of dollars more damage was done in Martinez, but it apparently confined itself largely to broken windows.

Shells were hurled as far as Walnut Creek, and some observers said they heard a high-explosive shell go off over the town. Reports still were reaching the sheriff's office late today of explosives that scattered over the countryside.

The Navy said that the two ammunition ships did not blow to bits but it was obvious that everything above the waterline on both vessels had been torn to pieces.

Glass and debris littered streets in most of Contra Costa County, and at an early hour today men, women and children were walking the streets wearing bloody bandages. Military police and shore patrol helped them to dressing stations where nurses and doctors gave first aid.

Volunteer workers poured in from all parts of Alameda, Solano and Contra Costa counties, but the Army and Navy took over the situation and conducted operations after the first hour.

Every road into the area was jammed with traffic, and white-clad nurses mingled with Red Cross volunteers as hastily-summoned help came to the scene from all sides.

AMBULANCES JAM ROADS

A double line of vehicles, principally ambulances and hearses, was parked bumper to bumper for more than a mile west of the scene.

Highway patrolmen, auxiliary police and soldiers and sailors were pressed into traffic duty, but the cars of the curious continued to roll into the area.

Red-lighted emergency cars screamed in from the east and west.

Special convoys of station wagons, automobiles and ambulances were sent from towns all around the bay and as far north as Sacramento.

Hundreds of women gathered outside the Marine-guarded gates of the depot, anxiously waiting word of the men who had been caught on the ships.

“300 Killed In Bay Munition Ship Blast,” July 18, 1944, cont.

Oakland Tribune

RUMORS SPREAD

Rumors poured through the night. At one time, a Coast Guard lieutenant warned that there was a third ship that might blow up, but the crowd refused to fall back.

A Marine with a loaded Garand rifle forced the men and women to the side of the road so that the loaded ambulances could come out.

All of the emergency vehicles were directed east into the little town of Port Chicago, which was trying to pick itself out of the splintered glass at the time.

Spectators drove all the way from San Francisco and Oakland to see the damage, but found themselves turned back far from the gates to the Navy installation.

The town of Martinez refused to go to bed, officers said, and the street corners were crowded with chattering groups.

‘WORSE THAN ‘06 QUAKE’

Even before the ambulances had quit roaring through the streets, city employees and building owners were out, sweeping up the glass. Most of them said it was worse than the earthquake of 1906.

Hospital attendants in all the communities in the area lost count of the injured. They treated some for broken bones, others for cuts and bruises and still others for shock, but they gave up early in their attempt to list the names of the injured.

The entire region was in chaotic movement for three hours after the initial explosions.

Undertaking parlors as far away as Stockton received bodies before they could call in attendants. Identi-

fication at first was virtually impossible.

The Red Cross rushed in supplies of plasma and sent more than a hundred cots to the area.

Every type of vehicle, from taxicabs to trucks, was pressed into service to move the dead and injured. The cars formed a steady parade through the depot gates, which were flood-lighted to aid the sentries.

The armed guards moved into the crowd from time to time to enforce the “No Smoking” rule. Jittery to begin with, they refused to let anyone smoke near the installation.

Man after man came out of the depot to mingle with the crowd and all told different stories. It was impossible on the scene to get a clear picture of what had happened.

Some of the men had been near the ships. Others were working a short distance away. Still others were in their barracks. No two could agree as to what happened after the first blinding flash and explosion.

Floyd Lee Scott, 19, a painter who was in the Navy barracks, said he fell the two shocks and started running. He couldn't pick out one scene around him “because everything was falling all over,” but he did hear shouts for help from all sides.

Scott escaped uninjured, but his clothing was ripped from his body. He eventually staggered into the sheriff's office in Martinez and told his story.

The Army and Navy took over communications from Martinez and it was impossible to place a telephone call in the town for hours. Authorities kept in touch with each other by shortwave radio, but even that medium was jammed before the first casualties were brought out of the plant.

SEEK INFORMATION

Meanwhile, excited residents all around the north bay area were trying to reach telephone operators for information.

Many of them had seen shell fragments tear through their house walls. Some even had found unexploded shells in their yard. All had felt the terrific double concussion that broke windows and caved in walls in the immediate vicinity.

People as far away as the East Oakland residential area felt the blast and were roused from their beds.

Some said it felt like an earthquake, but most agreed at the moment that it was an explosion. They rolled out in their night clothes and shouted back and forth across the streets when they were unable to reach telephone operators.

The blast shook homes here and rattled doors and windows, but apparently did little actual damage.

Reporters heading into the damage area found the first physical signs of the blast near Martinez. There, storekeepers and home-owners were sweeping up the glass.

Neon signs were broken, wooden walls were leveled and power poles were knocked to the ground. It looked as if a cyclone had blasted its way through the countryside.

“300 Killed In Bay Munition Ship Blast” (transcription), July 18, 1944

Oakland Tribune

Shells Rocket Far Afield

Continued From Page 1

Navy until their nearest of kin have been notified, but it was disclosed that nine officers known to have been stationed at the post are missing. They presumably have been killed.

In addition to the depot's personnel, two men were missing from Coast Guard picket boats, two were injured, and two were missing from the fireboat that answered the first alarm.

The Coast Guard issued immediate warnings to all mariners in the Bay to look out for ammunition that might be floating on the surface. They pointed out that it constituted a menace.

John Miller, former sheriff of Contra Costa County, now civilian defense co-ordinator for the area, estimated that at least 200 civilians were injured when the ships blew up. They were treated at hospitals throughout the county and by private physicians.

However, the Navy and civilian authorities agreed, there undoubtedly were hundreds of others hurt who didn't seek medical attention immediately.

Ammunition Magazine Shattered Shambles

The ammunition magazine, a comparatively new installation one mile out of Port Chicago was in shambles when the first spectators reached it. Buildings were collapsed and hearses were carrying a procession of bodies out of the reservation.

Officers declined to tell what had happened in the stockade, but it was apparent that the explosion blasted buildings to the ground without spreading the detonations.

It was possible that block-buster bombs were mixed with the ammunition that exploded.

Force of the explosion was so great that it knocked the needle off the seismograph at the University of California and led people in Oakland to think they had been bombed by the Japanese.

Householders in the upper Bay area were wide awake with the first brilliant flash of light. Then they felt the two explosions, hardly a moment apart. They fled into the streets, few of them to sleep again during the night.

The Red Cross was alerted and prepared to take care of as many as 1,500 persons from Port Chicago. The little town virtually was evacuated and between 150 and 200 homes appeared to be uninhabitable. Not a single building in the town escaped damage and most were described as "complete losses."

Thousands of dollars more damage done in Martinez, but it apparently confined itself largely to broken windows.

Shells were hurled as far as Walnut Creek, and some observers said they heard a high-explosive shell go off over the town. Reports still were reaching the sheriff's office late today of explosives that scattered over the countryside.

The Navy said that the two ammunition ships did not blow to bits but it was obvious that everything above the waterline on both vessels had been torn to pieces.

Glass and debris littered streets in most of Contra Costa County, and at an early hour today men, women, and children were walking the streets wearing bloody bandages. Military police and shore patrol helped them to dressing stations where nurses and doctors gave first aid.

Volunteer workers poured in from all parts of Alameda, Solano, and Contra Costa counties, but the Army and Navy took over the situation and conducted operations after the first hour.

Every road into the area was jammed with traffic and white-clad nurses mingled with Red Cross volunteers as hastily-summoned help came to the scene from all sides.

AMBULANCES JAM ROADS

A double line of vehicles, principally ambulances and hearses, was parked bumper to bumper for more than a mile west of the scene.

Highway patrolmen, auxiliary police and soldiers and sailors were pressed into traffic duty, but the cars of the curious continued to roll into the area.

Red-lighted emergency cars screamed in from the east and west.

Special convoys of station wagons, automobiles and ambulances were sent from towns all around the bay and as far north as Sacramento.

Hundreds of women gathered outside the Marine-guarded gates of the depot, anxiously waiting word of the men who had been caught on the ships.

RUMORS SPREAD

Rumors poured through the night. At one time, a Coast Guard lieutenant warned that there was a third ship that might blow up, but the crowd refused to fall back.

A Marine with a loaded Garand rifle forced the men and women to the side of the road so that the loaded ambulance could come out.

All of the emergency vehicles were directed east into the little town of Port Chicago, which was trying to pick itself out of the splintered glass at the time.

Spectators drove all the way from San Francisco and Oakland to see the damage, but found themselves turned back far from the gates to the Navy installation.

The town of Martinez refused to go to bed, officers said, and the street corners were crowded with chattering groups.

"WORSE THAN '05 QUAKE"

Even before the ambulance had quit roaring through the streets, city employees and building owners were out sweeping up the glass. Most of them said it was worse than the earthquake of 1905.

Hospital attendants in all the communities in the area lost count of the injured. They treated some for broken bones, others for cuts and bruises and still others for shock, but they gave up early on their attempt to list the names of the injured. The entire region was in chaotic movement for three hours after the initial explosions.

Undertaking parlors as far away as Stockton received bodies before they could call in attendants. Identification at first was virtually impossible.

The Red Cross rushed in supplies of plasma and sent more than a hundred cots to the area.

Every type of vehicle from taxi-cabs to trucks was pressed into service to move the dead and injured. The cars formed a steady parade through the depot gates, which were flood-lighted to aid the sentries.

The armed guards moved into the crowd from time to time to enforce the “No Smoking” rule. Jittery to begin, with, they refused to let anyone smoke near the installation.

Man after man came out of the depot to mingle with the crowd and all told different stories. It was impossible on the scene to get a clear picture of what had happened.

Some of the men had been near the ships. Others were working a short distance away. Still others were in their barracks. No two could agree as to what happened after the first blinding flash and explosion.

Floyd Lee Scott, 19, a painter who was in the Navy barracks, said he felt the two shocks and started running. He couldn’t pick out one scene around him “because everything was falling all over,” but he did hear shouts for help from all sides.

Scott escaped uninjured, but his clothing was ripped from his body. He eventually staggered into the sheriff’s office in Martinez and told his story.

The Army and Navy took over communications for Martinez and it was impossible to place a telephone call in the town for hours. Authorities kept in touch with each other by shortwave radio, but even that medium was jammed before the first casualties were brought out of the plant.

SEEK INFORMATION

Meanwhile, excited residents all around the north bay area were trying to reach telephone operators for information.

Many of them had seen shell fragments tear through their hours walls. Some even had found unexploded shells in their yard. All had felt the terrific double concussion that broke windows and caved in walls in the immediate vicinity.

People as far away as the East Oakland residential area felt the blast and were roused from their beds.

Some said it felt like an earthquake, but most agreed at the moment that it was an explosion. They rolled out in their night clothes and shouted back and forth across the streets when they were unable to reach telephone operators.

The blast shook homes here and rattled doors and windows, but apparently did little actual damage.

Reporters heading into the damage area found the first physical signs of the blast near Martinez. There, storekeepers and home-owners were sweeping up the glass.

Neon signs were broken, wooden walls were leveled and power poles were knocked to the ground. It looked as if a cyclone had blasted its way through the countryside.

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

[catalogued]

Mutiny?

FOREWORD

The present status of the case described in this pamphlet is that the trial record and briefs are being reviewed by the Judge Advocate General of the United States Navy in Washington. His decision will be reviewed by Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal.

Ten of the men were sentenced to 15 years in prison; 11 to 10 years; 24 to 12 years; and 5 to 8 years.

Civilian counsel for the sailors on their appeal is Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for the NAACP. Mr. Marshall filed a brief in behalf of all fifty men at the written request of the sailors themselves.

Mr. Marshall, who attended the trial at Yuerba Buena Island in San Francisco bay for twelve days in October, 1944, stated at that time: "These men are being tried for mutiny solely because of their race and color."

Published March, 1945 by

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
69 Fifth Avenue New York 3, N. Y.

Cover is Official U. S. Navy photograph and shows sailors handling 1.1 shell cans on a conveyor.



REMEMBER Port Chicago?

You should.

Over 320 American sailors were blown to tiny fragments there in less time than it takes to say "Jim Crow."

It was an explosion — a nerve-shattering, unimaginably horrible explosion that rocked Northern California into a frightened uproar.

Over 300 young sailors died there. They died suddenly and they had no time to be afraid.

In some ways they were luckier than the eight or nine hundred who didn't die — who were left to watch as bits of charred flesh dropped from the sky and fell all about them — who were left to pick up the bits of charred flesh and put them into baskets and know that those baskets contained all that was left of their friends, their buddies.

The Port Chicago explosion happened months ago, on July 17, 1944 to be exact; but its reverberations haven't stopped yet.

The ground is still shuddering under the feet of 50 of the young men who lived through it.

Somewhere under the late autumn sun that shimmers down on San Francisco Bay, those 50 young men sit in a closely guarded jail and wait to learn how soon they will walk under that sun as free men.

While they wait, their minds are a confusion of hurt and bewildered resentment and fear — fear that has whispered along beside them for so many months that it is a part of the inexplicably twisted pattern their lives have become.

These 50 young men, over half of them under 21, were convicted last October 24 of a crime which can mean life imprisonment — or death.

They were convicted, after 45 minutes deliberation, by a court-

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

martial board of 7 high-ranking naval officers, of "making a mutiny" because they were afraid to go back to loading ammunition three weeks after they had seen those bits of charred flesh rain down on them from the sky.

They were prosecuted by a naval officer, Lt. Comdr. James Frank Coakley, formerly chief assistant district attorney of Alameda County, Calif., who was, unknown to the defense or the public, the brother-in-law of one of the two white officers involved in the case — who, in his final vitriolic plea for a conviction, shouted, "Any man who is so depraved as to be afraid to load ammunition deserves no leniency!"

They can still remember the flare of hope they felt when they entered the job that was to be for them, as it has been for millions of young Americans, a testing ground of their valor, their courage, their willingness to fight and die to rid the world of fascism.

They were tried at the largest mass trial in Navy history — with photographs and publicity issued by the Navy — the first naval mutiny court-martial of this war.

The trial lasted six weeks in an atmosphere of what the Navy piously calls "complete impartiality." But, behind and underlying this fair front are bias, bigotry and bungling. The record of the court-martial of these 50 young men contains not one word of the most important issues of the case. It contains not one hint that while these 50 bewildered youngsters sat for six weeks in a courtroom as the "accused," the real offender was the "accuser" — the Navy.

These 50 young men are Negro sailors.

Why is that so important, you ask.

The answer is simple. It's true there are two kinds of sailors in the United States Navy — sailors, and Negro sailors. It's that the policy of the United States Navy is to segregate Negroes, to keep them isolated, and with few exceptions, not to send them to sea except as messmen, and to give them, regardless of their training or capabilities, every kind of dirty, heart-breaking shore duty that can be found.

It's that any trials of any Negro for any offense in the Navy cannot make any pretension to justice if the Navy's policy of racial discrimination and its effect upon the Negro sailor are not made a part of the record of the case.

— 2 —

Who are these "depraved men" on trial as Lt. Comdr. Coakley called them?

Well, there's John H. Dunn, seaman second class.

That's a pretty impressive name for a 17-year old, 104-pound kid, isn't it?

"Guilty of mutiny" is a pretty impressive verdict to find against a 17-year-old, too.

Dunn is slender and small and he has an appealing kid's grin that reminds you of your little brother or the kid next door. You should have seen his face on October 24 when we was found guilty! It would have strengthened your faith in the United States Navy. No depraved mutineer like Dunn is going to get away with taking over the Navy. Not while Lt. Comdr. Coakley and the 12th Naval District are around!

Then there's Martin Bordenave who was injured in the explosion. He's even more depraved than Dunn. Bordenave is 18 and he's been in the Navy since he enlisted at the age of 16. He's a really tough character. He must weigh 125 pounds and he's at least 5 feet 5 inches tall.

Another of these dangerous degenerate men is C. N. Hazzard. He's 21 and on his arm he wears the insignia of a chaplain's assistant. His voice is soft as he tells of "picking up bodies" at Port Chicago. You can feel safer now that Hazzard is going to spend a long time in a federal penitentiary.

Charles S. Widemon is 19 years old. He enlisted when he was 17. He was at Port Chicago for two years and had asked for a transfer to sea duty at least six times. During the trial Prosecutor Coakley made a great point of the fact that Widemon is alleged to have called out to a commissioned officer, "Do you think this is what I enlisted for?" According to Coakley, that was the last word in arrogance. It proved that Widemon was a degenerate mutineer — insolent — demanding!

"Do you think this is what I enlisted for?"

Well, was it? Was two years of laborer's work what the 17-year-old boy had enlisted for? Maybe so. Maybe he should have known better than to expect to be treated like an American sailor. What did he think the Navy was — democracy? Off to federal penitentiary with him. He's a dangerous man.

— 3 —

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

Joseph R. Small, clean-cut, intelligent 23-year-old from New Jersey, was, according to Prosecutor Coakley, a ringleader of the "mutiny." The only reason Mr. Coakley could give for this opinion was that after having been made an acting petty officer by his division officer, Small proceeded to act like one in keeping discipline among the men who were quartered together after they had not gone to work.

He called a meeting of the men and warned them to "straighten up and fly right!" Because he had not been given specific orders to call a meeting, Mr. Coakley contended that Small had called a "mutinous assemblage," was a ringleader in a "mutiny." This in spite of the fact that the "mutiny" had taken place two days before.

There are a lot more of these depraved criminals. They come from all over the United States and they have varied backgrounds. Some are city kids; some come from the country. Some are high school graduates; some had only a year or two of southern grammar schools; one is an illiterate.

Over half of them are too young to vote.

Forty-four out of the 50 had perfect conduct ratings in the Navy.

Here's what one of their petty officers, not involved in the trial, said about them: "The cooperation of my men was always wonderful, their discipline excellent. We had the top division in the base"

THESE are the depraved mutineers who were convicted on October 24! How did they get that way? What "depraved" them? When did it start?

The day each of them entered the Navy is as good a place to start as any. They went to Great Lakes for boot training. So far, so good. They had pretty much the same boot training as any other sailor, and they came out with ratings as 2nd class seamen. Since they were told that they were seamen, they thought they'd be sent to sea. Maybe some of them had visions of coming home with service ribbons and a medal or two, and stories of battles and heroism to dazzle the girls. Maybe they did.

But the day they finished training and were assigned to "active" duty, they woke up to find that this brave new world was just the same old Jim-Crow world they had always known, only worse — because the other world was changing, and this one was not.

— 4 —

They were shipped to a little town on San Francisco Bay — Port Chicago — and the new Naval Ammunition Depot where Navy explosives were loaded for overseas.

They weren't going to sea. They were going to load ammunition.

That was all right. They were disappointed, but they were philosophical about it. Somebody had to load ammunition. They might as well do it. Of course this work had special hazards requiring special training, and they were not trained for it. That, too, was immaterial.

But on the first day they noticed something.

Every man loading ammunition at Port Chicago was a Negro.

Every commissioned officer at Port Chicago was white; so was every chief petty officer.

That was when the little ache inside that they hadn't had since they entered the Navy came back. And every day they spent at Port Chicago it got a little worse.

They were assigned to "divisions" and the next thing they knew they were on a ship loading ammunition.

Ammunition — high explosives — heavy work — dangerous work.

And all the instruction they received was the warning to be "careful."

Careful of what? They didn't know one kind of explosive from another. They didn't know what would make them go off. They didn't know which ones would explode if they were dropped or bumped.

But what they did know was that they were beginning to get scared. As the weeks passed they began to feel that they were shadow boxing with an enemy they couldn't see. In each fist he held a bottle of nitroglycerin which might go off at any moment if they made a wrong move.

The trouble was that they didn't know which move might be the wrong one.

And they noticed that a lot of the men they worked with were in the same condition — nervous, jittery. One night, one of the men went completely berserk in the hold of the ship.

They added to their own fears the knowledge that their buddies were

— 5 —

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

scared. And every so often somebody, nervous and unsure of himself, dropped something — a box of grenades — an anti-aircraft shell.

Running through the nervousness and the nagging awareness that they were not adequately trained for the work, was another thread. Why were only Negroes doing this work?

Morale got a little worse when they overheard white commissioned officers asking the section leaders to "pour it on tonight" because the white officers had five dollar bets on with each other as to whose division would load the most ammunition that night. Five dollar bets — on sudden death.

One of the boys went to the Buchanan street USO in San Francisco on his next liberty. He was still thinking about those five-dollar bets. When one of the white senior hostesses sat down beside him and tried to cheer him up, he found himself pouring the whole story out to her — sort of thinking out loud.

Why were only Negroes used to load ammunition? Why were the white seamen at Port Chicago given other jobs? Why was it almost impossible for a Negro to get a promotion? Why were most of the men at Port Chicago still second class seamen, even though a lot of them had been there for two years and had excellent conduct ratings? Why were there so few Negro petty officers?

He told her about something he had read that night in a Negro paper about Negroes on the Anzio and Normandy beachheads — about a Negro air corps captain in the 99th fighter squadron who had shot down his third Nazi plane over Italy — about a Negro artillery battalion in France that had hit the turret of a German tank with a 155 mm. shell at a distance of 9 miles.

Those guys were getting a chance to prove that they had as much guts and brains as anybody — but in the Navy —.

The woman listened carefully. That night she wrote a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt telling her the whole story — of the lack of training, the speed-up, the man who had gone berserk from nerves strained too far — the betting — the discrimination. The letter reached Mrs. Roosevelt just too late.

A week or so later another boy ran into another morale shaker. He met a longshoreman in San Francisco and heard bad news. He learned

— 6 —

for instance, that civilian longshoremen in the Bay Area had, on a number of occasions refused to work on the same ship where Navy personnel were loading. He learned that the Longshoremen's union wouldn't permit a winch driver to work on ammunition unless he had had years of experience on other loads.

He kept remembering that the winch driver on his gang had had exactly two months' experience — all of it on ammunition.

The boys in the barracks felt fine when he went back and told them. It was lucky they didn't know the whole story.

They would really have gotten shaky if they had known that the San Francisco waterfront unions had that very week warned the 12th Naval District that there would be an explosion if they persisted in using untrained seamen to load ammunition.

And they would have been really bewildered if they had known that the Navy had ignored an offer by these same unions to send experienced longshoremen to train them in the safe handling of explosives.

But they didn't know, so they were saved a little worry.

Morale in the barracks got another crack on the head a few days later when one of the boys asked his division officer for a transfer to sea duty.

The officer told him in all seriousness, "It's a policy of the 12th Naval District not to use you Negroes on ships because you can't settle any kind of argument without a knife!"

It's July 17. It's a few minutes before 11 p.m. and men are scattered around the barracks, some of them going to bed, others getting ready to go to work at midnight loading the two ships out in the harbor. Somebody is whistling "Can't See for Looking." He reaches for a high note and just as he hits it the long room shudders and then gathers itself together and the walls lurch forward in a noise too loud, too violent to register on anyone's ears. Then the men are flying through the air and the whole barracks is flying with them and their eardrums are screaming with sound that is too intense to have any meaning. Furniture catapults into walls and the air is full of flying bodies. Above their heads, the roof suddenly rips wide open and they see stars through a great yawning rent. That was the last a lot of them remember for a while.

— 7 —

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

For that was the Port Chicago explosion — the worst home front disaster of the war. The two ships in the harbor had blown up, killing the more than 320 men who were loading them.

The papers bloomed with headlines and pictures and feature stories that told how the people of the town of Port Chicago were so dazed that they couldn't speak coherently for a week after the blast. The razed buildings were described and the vacant staring eyes of the shopkeepers and the children who were too frightened to cry.

Case-hardened newspapermen in San Francisco still get a little sick when they remember the stench of charred flesh, the bits of burned and blackened and bloody flesh that littered the ammunition depot. They still speak of the hysteria that ruled officers and men alike all that night and far into the next day.

But what does Lt. Commdr. Coakley say — "Any man so depraved as to be afraid to load ammunition deserves no leniency!"

REMEMBER what you learned in your First Aid class about shock?

Here's what two California authorities on psychology had to say about this particular shock:

Dr. Cavendish Moxon, practicing psychologist in San Francisco: "There are sound psychological reasons why the 50 Negro sailors should not be accused of conspiracy to mutiny. When men are shocked by an explosion into a serious state of panic, they are not free to undertake new risks or even normal activities until they have been helped to overcome their nervous and mental upset. To accuse such persons of a crime is as meaningless and cruel as to punish a neurotic for being unable to overcome his panicky fears." *Any man so depraved as to be afraid to load ammunition deserves no leniency.*

This is what Prof. Harry C. Steinmetz, chairman of the psychology department at San Diego State College had to say: "Men who have not received unusual reassurances after an unusual catastrophe obviously have provocation for acting unusually. If adequate reassurances were not given following the tragic Port Chicago explosion, certainly the men involved deserve not public condemnation, but rather public sympathy."

Were "adequate reassurances" given?

The Navy brought in swing bands to play jive for the boys.

— 8 —

They brought in USO camp shows. The swing bands and the USO shows played in buildings that were roofless and twisted by the blast, and there were still a few fragments of bodies lying around, but maybe the idea was good.

And, oh yes, they kept telling the men that they shouldn't be afraid, that there was really nothing to be afraid of. Very few of them were convinced.

The survivors were split up. A large group, including those who had been injured, was sent to Camp Shoemaker; the rest were kept at Port Chicago, "cleaning up" after the explosion.

None of them was given leaves. They were just kept sitting around thinking — about ammunition and explosions and Jim Crow.

Less than two weeks after the explosion some of the men of the first division at Port Chicago were told to go back to loading ammunition. Most of them refused. It was tried again with other men. Still more refused. Some of them were put in the brig, and then let out again. And then suddenly over 100 men, most of whom had refused to load ammunition, were gathered up, transferred to Treasure Island and then shipped to the South Pacific.

In the meantime, the 2nd, 4th, and 8th divisions, the last three remaining of the loading divisions which were at Port Chicago at the time of the explosion, were scattered around at various camps.

On the 9th of August all three divisions assembled at Vallejo, scheduled to go to work loading ammunition.

The 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th of August are days which the 12th Naval District would probably very much like to forget. You would have to search long and far to find a more magnificent display of ineptness and bungling.

The men were supposed to go to work loading ammunition. Three white officers, Lts. Ernest Delucchi, J. E. Tobin, and C. G. Morehouse were responsible for getting the men to work. And not one of them was capable of giving a direct order.

"If you are willing to obey orders fall out — stand on this side — stand on that side — cowards over here — do this, do that." And never once a clean-cut direct order to march.

— 9 —

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

The result was that out of approximately 400 men, 257, admitting that they were afraid, were marched off to a barge and put under marine guard.

Tobin and Delucchi, completely confused by now, ran wild. They gathered up mess cooks, compartment cleaners and sick men, none of whom was supposed to load ammunition. When these men said honestly that they were afraid, they were shunted off to the barge.

Among these latter additions to the "mutineers" were: 104-pound, 17-year-old John Dunn, who had never loaded ammunition in his life. He had been made a mess cook because the doctor had said he was too light to work on the docks.

Another was a boy named Julius Dixon, who, on Lt. Delucchi's own testimony, had been made a permanent mess cook because of his inefficiency on the docks, lack of control, and because he was a hazard to others.

Another was a seaman named Ollie Green. On the day before, August 8, he had broken his wrist, which was still in a cast late in September.

The nerves of the officers seem to have been pretty thoroughly shattered too. And that is a charitable judgment.

On the 12th of August, the commandant of the 12th Naval District arrived at Vallejo and spoke to the men, telling them to go back to work.

After his speech Lt. Morehouse lined up his 8th division, said clearly, "We're going to work — March!" and every one of his men went to work.

Lts. Tobin and Delucchi, however, continued to shilly-shally, continued to give vague orders. As a result 44 men from the two divisions, still saying they were afraid, were taken under guard to Port Chicago. Subsequently six of the men from the 2nd and 4th divisions who had said they would go back to work, for various reasons didn't. They were taken to Port Chicago, making up the nice round even number of 50 men to be tried for conspiracy to mutiny.

That's the essence of the "mutiny."

THERE are a lot of interesting details, however. For instance, the so-called "don't work lists" which the prosecution repeatedly claimed were subversive pledges binding the signers to mutiny. The only trouble

— 10 —

was that not only couldn't the prosecution put its hands on a copy of these dread lists, but they couldn't produce any witnesses who could even come close to describing them. The defense, on the other hand, produced a very good description of at least one of the lists. It was a petition to Lt. Delucchi, stating that the men were afraid of ammunition and would like a change of duty!

Lt. Delucchi is an interesting link in the case. It was Delucchi who, according to half a dozen witnesses, appointed Joe Small as acting petty officer after the 9th of August.

On the stand Lt. Delucchi testified that he hadn't appointed Small. If he did not, Small's calling of a meeting on the barge might be construed as some sort of a mutinous assemblage — which is exactly what Prosecutor Coakley wanted it to be.

Lt. Delucchi's conduct on the 9th, 10th and 11th of August was not exactly the conduct of a naval officer who was competent to handle men. In fact, as the trial went on, Delucchi showed up in a worse and worse light, but in Coakley's final argument he made an appeal to the trial board which was in effect, "Are you going to take the word of *these men* or are you going to believe the word of a gentleman like Lt. Delucchi?"

Lt. Delucchi is Coakley's brother-in-law.

The fact wasn't discovered until two days after the trial was over when a San Francisco reporter dug it out by accident. The reporter also dug out the fact that the relationship between the prosecutor and his star witness was common gossip among naval men at Vallejo. Which leads to two questions: Why didn't the 12th Naval District know about it, and why was Coakley allowed to superintend the original investigation of the case — the investigation which was the basis for a charge of "conspiracy to mutiny," when his own brother-in-law's action were part and parcel of the case?

But there were other peculiar things about that investigation. Naval officers, working under Coakley's supervision, took statements from the men involved, in some cases, without telling them that they did not have to make statements or that they could have counsel — in others — according to testimony — by the use of threats. The statements, by which Mr. Coakley attempted to prove conspiracy, were, in almost no instance, complete statements made by the men themselves. They were "compiled"

— 11 —

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

by a question and answer method, and included only, as one of the officers testified, what facts he thought were relevant to the case. Insert the word "prosecution" before "case" and you will have a clearer idea of what he meant.

Prosecutor Coakley made the most of sectional prejudice during the trial. Mr. Coakley is a northerner, but he did as good a job of dragging race prejudice into that courtroom as anyone could have done. He used one of the oldest tricks in the old race hate bag. It goes like this:

The defense puts one of the accused on the stand — the first witness for the defense. His name is Longmire. He speaks with a decided Southern accent. Coakley doesn't ask him where he comes from. He doesn't have to, because in front of him he has 50 slender tan-covered books which contain the complete record of each of the 50 accused.

The next two witnesses speak with a Southern accent. Coakley doesn't ask them where they are from.

Then the fourth witness! It's Joe Small. He's a good witness and he's the man Coakley is trying to prove is a "ringleader."

"Where are you from, Small?" "New Jersey, sir."

"What did you do before you came into the Navy?" "I was a truck driver, sir."

Ah, a teamster. Coakley gloats, both eyes pinned to the Southern members of the court. You can see the thought waves going out. A smart Northern N—. Probably a union member, too.

The next eight witnesses have Southern accents, so there is no question. But the next one brings it out again.

Coakley looks down at the man's record, looks up, eyeing the southern officers. "Where are you from, Grimes?" "Detroit, sir."

"How much education did you have?" "High school, sir."

"What did you do before you came into the Navy?"

"I worked in a defense plant, sir."

And so it goes, day after day — where are you from? New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, New York, Chicago, Detroit. How much education did you have? High school graduate — three years of

— 12 —

high school — two years of high school. Never does he question the defendants who have obviously had not more than a couple of years of grade school. Never does he question defendants obviously from the South.

He was particularly obvious with a youngster named Freddie Meeks. The routine was changed a little. "Where are you from, Meeks?" "Memphis, Tennessee, sir."

A slight frown from Coakley, then. "Before you came into the Navy, weren't you in Los Angeles?" "Yes, sir." "How long?" "About two years, sir."

"What did you do?" "I was a welder, sir."

Didn't you go to Jefferson High School there?" "Yes, sir."

By the time 40 of the 50 accused had been on the stand Coakley had really warmed up and he had a new angle.

"Where are you from?" "Chicago, sir."

"What part of Chicago?" "The south side."

He tried this one only three times, once with the boy from Chicago, and twice with boys from New York. The New York boys crossed him up. When he asked "What part of New York?" they innocently answered, "Upper Manhattan, sir," knowing all the time that he wanted them to say "Harlem."

Here's a fairly accurate box score on Mr. Coakley's "north-south" poll. He asked 27 defendants where their homes were.

Twenty-one of them were from north of the Mason-Dixon line.

Two of the other six were asked, apparently because Coakley was under the misapprehension that Baltimore and St. Louis are Northern cities. The other four were asked because, after the newspapers started commenting on Mr. Coakley's peculiar little habit of questioning, he was instructed by the court to ask his question of each witness.

Mr. Coakley was made senior judge advocate for the 12th Naval District at the close of the trial.

NOW let's go back and pull a few threads together.

These 50 young seamen were tried because of an act which they

— 13 —

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

committed through fear and shock which was largely based on the fact that they knew that thanks to the Navy's lack of training, they were not competent to handle explosives safely — shock which is so well known and serious a phenomenon that the Army and Navy make elaborate provisions for most men to relax and recuperate from such shock before reassignment to hazardous duty.

They knew before the explosion that ammunition at Port Chicago was not properly handled. Most of them were afraid then — and not afraid because Negroes are cowards—but because they had sense enough to know that explosives are dangerous unless skillfully handled. They knew that they did not have that skill, and that the Navy was doing nothing to train them. Then the explosion proved that their fears were correct — proved it by wrecking an entire town and killing over 300 men who had also been afraid.

So, three weeks later, flouting everything that modern neuro-psychiatry has learned about shock, the Navy ordered them back to loading ammunition.

Is it any wonder that they didn't go back? Is it any wonder that 350 besides these 50 "examples" didn't go back?

The Navy has denied them every right of equality in the service. It has denied them their rights as Americans to serve in active sea duty. It has segregated them, insulted them, risked their lives by sheer unnecessary inefficiency and now it will send them to a Federal penitentiary for years in order to save its own face.

Somebody had to take the rap for the Port Chicago explosion. The 320 Negroes who died there couldn't do it, so the Navy found 50 others.

Fifty Negroes were singled out of over 400 men, all of whom for the same reasons, and with the same justification committed the same act.

What matters is that these 50 men were charged with "conspiracy to mutiny" a charge which evidence in the trial did very little to substantiate. They were convicted after a trial which, not once in its entire six weeks even approached the basic issues at stake.

Only once was any criticism of the Navy allowed to come out in open court and that was an accident. Early in the trial, one of the defendants when asked the routine question, "Have you anything to add

to your testimony?" almost gave apoplexy to every naval officer in the room by saying, "Yes, I have. I want to say that the reason I was afraid to load ammunition was because I knew it wasn't handled properly. The officers used to race each other and make us speed up."

The public relations officer assigned to the trial, after a word with the president of the courts-martial board, immediately cornered all reporters, trying desperately to get them to suppress that bit of information.

And after that, the defendants were instructed to consult with their attorneys before they said anything. The attorneys, being lieutenants in the Navy and perforce required to get along with the brass hats, their superior officers, saw to it that no more slips were made. There was no room for justice in this court-martial, because justice happened to conflict with the prestige and honor of the Navy.

The Navy is doing a great job of fighting fascists off foreign shores. It's doing a fighting job that every American can be proud of, but it's about time that it found out that it is a functioning part of a democracy, and that democracy means equality for all of the people in it. It can't treat men as these defendants were treated and then be piously shocked at a "breach of discipline."

Let's take a last look at one of these men whom the Navy is sending to a penitentiary, possibly for the rest of his life.

This one is older than the others, and because he's older, he has stored up a greater capacity for mental torture.

We'll call him "Arthur Hunt." He's 35 years old. Before he came into the Navy he lived in New York and worked at an electrical company in New Jersey.

He was a skilled worker — did light machine work and electrical parts assemblage.

You know what kind of work he's been doing in the Navy.

Hunt's face as he sat in that courtroom week after week was thin, sensitive, the face of a man who has been Jim-Crowed for 35 years and who, in the explosion and in this trial had reached the limit of mental endurance.

He sat in that courtroom for six solid weeks and stared straight

Pamphlet, "Mutiny?: The real story of how the Navy branded 50 fear-shocked sailors as mutineers" (excerpt), 1945 cont.

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

ahead. His expression never changed, never varied by the twitch of a muscle.

He sat and stared and you knew he heard nothing of what went on during those six weeks.

You knew that in his attempt to escape pain he had retreated so far back into himself that he would probably never be quite able to get back.

In his staring, carefully blank eyes, you could see many things — years of discrimination, segregation, humiliation. Then suddenly a chance to reach out and grasp at dignity — skilled work, vital work, work that he could do with pride. And then suddenly, the Navy — the kick-back, hurling him down, back to laboring, back to menial humiliating Jim Crow jobs.

The explosion, the trial, could only have been the final scratches that opened up the bigger wound that festered within Arthur Hunt.

You can't forget Arthur Hunt's face. It follows you around, still and quiet and tragic.

And when you think of John Dunn and Martin Bordenave and Hazard, the Chaplain's assistant, you know that their young, vital, hopeful faces must never become like Hunt's. For their sakes and the sakes of thousands of Negro youngsters like them, Jim Crow in the Navy must be cleaned up.

The Navy has a slogan — "Remember Pearl Harbor" — a reminder of foreign treachery against a democracy.

There is another slogan the Navy should adopt.

It is a reminder of what treachery to our own ideals within a democracy does to that democracy.

The pointless, meaningless deaths of over 320 Americans must be given a point, must be given a meaning — for the living.

Remember Port Chicago!

— 16 —

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
69 Fifth Avenue, New York 3, N. Y.

I enclose \$ _____ as a contribution toward your work.

Name _____

Address _____

City and State _____ Zone No. _____

Contributions are deductible for income tax purposes. Make checks payable exactly as above, or to MARY WHITE O'NINGTON, Treasurer.

“NAACP Asks Navy Dept. Probe of Mutiny Charge,” October 28, 1944

The Pittsburgh Courier

NAACP Asks Navy Dept. Probe Of Mutiny Charge

NEW YORK—As a result of the action of the Twelfth Naval District in singling out an even fifty Negro sailors to be charged with mutiny for refusal to load ammunition at the Mare Island depot, August 9, Special NAACP counsel, Thurgood Marshall, has requested thorough and impartial investigation by the Navy Department, in his letter to Secretary James V. Forrestal.

After spending twelve days investigating circumstances and reviewing testimony of the Seamen being tried at Yerba Buena Island, California, Mr. Marshall declared “These men are being tried for mutiny solely because of their race or color. In this instance the trial is really incidental. I am convinced that there are sufficient facts involved to warrant a thorough and complete investigation by your office as to the following conditions, which existed in the Twelfth Naval District:

“1. Why is it that the only naval personnel loading ammunition regularly was Negroes with the exception of their officers and petty officers?

2. Why is it that Negro seamen,

many of whom have had special training in such schools as gunnery schools, were nevertheless relegated to the duty of loading ammunition?

“3. Why is it that these men were not given any training whatsoever in the dangers to be found in loading ammunition or the proper methods to be used in loading ammunition?

“4. Why is it that men with no prior experience whatsoever were given the duty of handling winches in the loading of ammunition when civilian longshoremen were not permitted to handle winches on ammunition unless they had had several years’ experience in winch handling?

“5. Why is it that Negro seamen with no prior experience in ammunition were given the job of hatch tender in the loading of ammunition?

“6. Why is it that officers ‘raced’ their gangs in contests in the loading of ammunition?

“7. Why is it that one of the accused, Seaman Green, while suffering with a broken wrist, despite the fact that the Navy doctors ordered him on the sick list, was not placed on the sick list, but was ordered to load ammunition?

“7. Why is it that the Negro seamen who had been loading ammunition and who were at Port Chicago at the time of the explosion were not given any leave whatsoever as a result of this explosion, but were forced to return to the duty of loading ammunition?

A psychiatrist from the United States Navy testified at the court-martial proceedings that such an explosion as occurred at Port Chicago would have a lasting effect upon the minds of the men who were near the explosion.

GOOD AL
IOUS CREATOR
PANTS

(Name bearing similar name.)

ORDER NOW!

Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion?

Graphic Organizer

Part One

Who do you think is responsible for the Port Chicago explosion?		
Source	Evidence from the source	What does the source lead you to believe happened at Port Chicago? Why? Cite the evidence from the source to support your claim.
Court of Inquiry, Finding of Facts, Opinion and Recommendations, Findings, October 30, 1944		
<i>Oakland Tribune</i> , July 18, 1944		
Hypothesis One: Who do you think is responsible for the Port Chicago explosion?		

Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion? Graphic Organizer cont.

Part Two

Who do you think is responsible for the Port Chicago explosion?		
Source	Evidence from the source	What does the source lead you to believe happened at Port Chicago? Why? Cite the evidence from the source to support your claim.
NAACP "Mutiny" Pamphlet		
The Port Chicago 50: An Oral History		
George Allen Prouty Oral History excerpt		

Who Do You Think is Responsible for the Port Chicago Explosion? Graphic Organizer cont.

<p><i>The Pittsburgh Courier</i>, October 28, 1944</p>		
<p><i>Into Forgetfulness</i>, National Park Service</p>		
<p>Hypothesis Two: Who do you think is responsible for the Port Chicago explosion?</p>		

Port Chicago Response Instructions and Rubric

Over 70 years have passed since the Port Chicago disaster. Many Americans know very little about the events at Port Chicago. In addition, the African American sailors charged with mutiny have never been cleared of the charges. Your task is to write a letter to an elected officials stating whether or not you think the current president should pardon the sailors who refused to load ammunition following the Port Chicago explosion.

	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Emerging
Ideas and Organization	Ideas are expressed in a clear and organized fashion. Writer's position is evident throughout the letter.	Ideas are expressed in a somewhat clear manner, but the organization could be better.	Ideas are somewhat organized, but are not very clear. More than one reading required to understand the writer's position.	The letter is quite confusing. It is extremely difficult to understand the writer's position.
Content and Use of Evidence	The letter contains five or six accurate facts about the Port Chicago explosion.	The letter contains three or four accurate facts about the Port Chicago explosion.	The letter contains two or three accurate facts about the Port Chicago explosion.	The letter contains one or no accurate facts about the Port Chicago explosion.
Spelling and Grammar	Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling.	Writer makes one or two errors in grammar and/or spelling.	Writer makes three or four errors in grammar and/or spelling.	Writer makes more than four errors in grammar and/or spelling.