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## THE GREAT PORT CHICAGO DISASTER and MUTINY

By *Therese Lanigan-Schmidt*

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More Than Justified

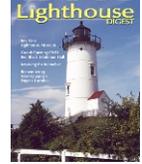
Former President Bill Clinton was roundly criticized for many of the 450 pardons he granted in his waning days in office. But some of the pardons were more than justified. In fact, in one such case, there should not have been an issue of a pardon to begin with for there should never have been a trial for mutiny. That case was that of Freddie Meeks and the Port Chicago Mutiny.

Meeks, who waited 55 years for his pardon, was a survivor of the 1944 Port Chicago, California naval magazine explosion. In the worst military accident in the United States during World War II, more than 300 sailors were killed and close to 400 wounded, almost all black ammunition loaders.

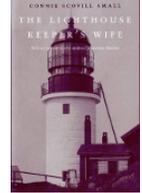
Hazardous Conditions

Port Chicago was a naval ammunition base situated on the Sacramento River near its entrance into San Francisco Bay and located about 30 miles northwest of San Francisco. Every commissioned officer was white, typical in the segregated Navy

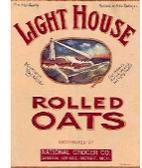
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of that time. All the men handling ammunition were black. They were informed that the bombs could not detonate because they had been defused. Protests about the hazardous conditions were made periodically to the Naval upper echelon whose sole reply was a call for greater tonnage to be loaded in record time.

On July 17, 1944, the E.A. Bryan and the Quinalt Victory, tied up at the loading pier, were being loaded by floodlight. The cargo including 650-pound ignitable bombs, the detonator already in place, were deemed especially perilous "hot cargo." Shortly after 10 PM, a blast blew Joseph Small, later said to be the "ringleader" of the mutiny, out of bed. His barracks collapsed around him. The blast destroyed both ships as well as the base and damaged the small town of Port Chicago, over a mile away. Of 320 men killed, 202 were black ammunition loaders.

The Bryan was blasted to pieces - very little of its remains were ever located that could be positively identified as belonging to the Bryan. The Quinalt Victory was shot out of the water by the explosion, turned around, and smashed into pieces. Its stern slammed back into the water upside down 500 feet from where it was originally moored.

The Coast Guard fire barge was blown 200 yards up river and sunk while nearby locomotive and boxcars vaporized into sizzling remnants soaring through the air. The 1200-foot long wooden pier simply vanished from the impact of the blast.

#### Tidal Wave At The Lighthouse

At the Roe Island Lighthouse, keeper Erven Scott, his wife, Bernice, and the assistant keeper were just finishing a late cup of coffee. The explosion shook the house violently and broke all the windows. Mrs. Scott grabbed the two children and sent her husband upstairs for the baby. As he ran up the stairs, Scott saw a plume of smoke and flame rising above Port Chicago and a 20-30 foot high wave rolling toward the lighthouse from the direction of the explosion. He dashed back downstairs with the baby. By the time the tidal wave reached Roe Island, it had expended most of its energy. Still, it hit with such force to push the lighthouse about 40 feet up on the beach.

#### A Startling Tragedy

All on the pier and aboard the Bryan and Quinalt Victory, 320 men including 202 black enlisted men were killed and 233 injured. Only 51 bodies were found intact enough to be positively identified. The lone, startling tragedy accounted for more than 15% of all black naval fatalities in the war. Property damage, military and civilian, was said to be in excess of 12 million dollars.

In spite of the enormity of the disaster and the fact that the naval base was rendered a shambles, there was no panic. Survivors organized rescue efforts and aided the injured and doused small fires caused by flaming debris. One group of black seamen and officers fearlessly battled and doused a fire that had begun in a boxcar filled with explosives. If the boxcar had detonated, it could have set off a series of blasts in nearby boxcars and perhaps killed more men.

The explosive power of the blast was equal to five kilotons of TNT, the same magnitude as the atomic bomb that would be dropped on Hiroshima over one year later. Rear Admiral Carleton H. Wright, the commandant of the Twelfth Naval District, applauded the men:

"I am gratified to learn that, as was to be expected, Negro personnel attached to the Naval Magazine Port Chicago performed bravely and efficiently in the emergency as real Navy men, they simply carried on in the crisis attendant on the explosion in accordance with our Service's highest traditions."

#### A Court of Inquiry

A court of inquiry was convened to look into the disaster. Its final outcome was to clear the officers involved of any responsibility and to lay the blame for the explosion on the black enlisted men who had died. Three weeks later, after denying the surviving black seamen 30-day leaves granted to the white survivors, the Navy ordered 328 of the surviving ammunition loaders to work on another ship under the same unsafe conditions found at Port Chicago.

The men refused, citing the recent disaster and that the unsafe conditions that caused the first explosion might well be repeated. Two hundred and fifty eight men were marched off to a barge and held under guard for several days. They were ordered by their division officers to fall into two groups - those willing to return to the dangerous work and those who refused. Fifty men refused, and were taken to the brig at Camp Shoemaker. Joe Small, considered the ringleader, was placed in solitary confinement. The fifty were charged with mutiny.

The Port Chicago Mutiny became the largest mass mutiny trial in U.S. Naval History. The prosecution, headed by naval officer James Frank Coakley, later the Alameda County District Attorney who prosecuted the Black Panthers and antiwar activists in the 1960's, asserted that the sailors were "depraved" men who declined to do their duty.

#### Thurgood Marshall

Thurgood Marshall, who would argue 32 cases before the Supreme Court, including the renowned *Brown v. Board of Education* case that led to the desegregation of public schools, and was to later sit on the Supreme Court, filed a brief on behalf of the 50 men. Then chief counsel for the NAACP, Marshall stated that the young men were already disheartened by the Navy's policy of racial discrimination and had been traumatized by the terrible explosion in which so many of their counterparts perished. "Negroes in the Navy don't mind loading ammunition," Thurgood Marshall stated in their defense, "They just want to know why they are the only ones doing the loading!"

Marshall had flown in from New York with special travel priority arranged by Secretary of the Navy Forrestal. He zeroed in on the practice of the 12th Naval District, which, with only scant exceptions, narrowed the services of black seamen, notwithstanding their background and abilities, to shore duty in the position of laborers and in segregated outfits. Marshall also pointed out the inefficient and hazardous way in which ammunition was loaded at Port Chicago before the blast and that those men working on it were offered no guidelines or instruction in the appropriate handling of ammunition.

#### Cautions Ignored

Marshall wrote that the Navy ignored official cautions by the San Francisco waterfront union before the Port Chicago catastrophe and that an explosion was inescapable if they continued in the use of untrained seamen in the loading of ammunition.

The Navy dismissed an offer by this same union to dispatch skilled men to instruct Navy personnel in the proper handling of explosives. In addition, it came out that division officers of Port Chicago actually placed bets from \$5 and up as to whose crew could load more ammunition.

After 32 days of hearings with only 80 minutes of deliberation, (said to include lunchtime), all 50 were found guilty of mutiny. The men were court-martialed, convicted, and handed sentences ranging from 8 to 15 years imprisonment. After serving their sentences, they would "Be dishonorably discharged from the United States Naval Reserve and to suffer all the accessories of said service," according to the findings of the trial board.

#### Discontinuing Segregation

In June 1945 the Navy, formerly the most exclusionist and segregated branch of the armed forces, announced that it was discontinuing segregation in training camps. In 1948, President Harry S. Truman ordered the complete integration of all Armed Forces.

The Port Chicago men were finally discharged from the Navy "under honorable conditions: but the mutiny convictions stood. Most, including Meeks, served less than two years thanks to Marshall's eloquence and the Navy's relative embarrassment as to the singling out of these men to begin with to such a dangerous duty.

Lobbied by black World War II veterans, on December 24, 1999, President Clinton

conferred a presidential pardon on 80-year old Meeks, the only one of two surviving sailors to petition for a pardon.

Editor's Footnote:

As is with all events of this magnitude, there are a number of theories and scenarios associated with the Port Chicago disaster. Many historians believe the explosion at Port Chicago was in all probability a low level atomic explosion. This theory states that a nuclear bomb was on one of the ships, possibly the Quinault Victory, on its way to a secret destination in the South Pacific where it would later be dropped on Japan. Part of that belief is that a separate explosion caused the nuclear device to explode. In fact, the court of inquiry did consider the "Presence of a supersensitive element, which was detonated in the course of rough handling."

Perhaps the Japanese were not the first casualties in nuclear warfare, and instead it was the African-American sailors.

Explosion

and

Blast Timeline

Monday, July 17, 1944

10:00 PM

14,600 tons of ammunition and other unknown explosives loaded on board the vessel E. A. Bryan. 430 tons still on dock to be loaded.

The ship Quinlan Victory scheduled to be loaded.

10:15 PM

Officer orders slowly turning propeller on Quinault Victory to be stopped before crews begin loading.

Depth charges, 40 mm shells, and cluster bombs start to be loaded.

650-pound bombs are loaded and fuses installed.

10:18 PM

Vessel E. A. Bryan is blown to smithereens.

Ship Quinault Victory lifts out of the water and lands in pieces 500 yards away.

Coast Guard barge thrown 200 yards and sinks

Locomotives and boxcars disintegrate.

The 1,200 foot pier is flattened.

Tidal wave caused by explosion hits Roe Island Lighthouse causing severe damage.

320 people immediately killed of which 202 were black.

The small town of Port Chicago, a mile and half from the explosion was totally destroyed.

Force of explosion is felt as far away as Nevada.

Only 51 of the 320 killed could be identified.

This story appeared in the June 2004 edition of Lighthouse Digest Magazine. The print edition contains more stories than our internet edition, and each story generally contains more photographs - often many more - in the print edition. For subscription information about the print edition, [click here](#).

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