

Port Chicago Update

History of 10,000 Ton Gadget

By Harry V. Martin

Copyright FreeAmerica and Harry V. Martin, 1995

On January 9, 1990, the Napa Sentinel commenced to publish one of its most controversial series in five parts, the explosion at Port Chicago, now known as the Concord Naval Weapons Station, on July 17, 1944. Working closely with Peter Vogel, a man who has researched this story for over 12 years and also with military and civilian archives, the Sentinel presented the scenario that the wartime explosion in San Francisco Bay may have been the world's first atomic bomb.

Though the Sentinel received a lot of criticism at first, more and more government records have been uncovered to support the possibility of a nuclear explosion. Vogel has doggedly pursued documentation on the Port Chicago blast and his efforts have paid off. The Sentinel was in disagreement with Vogel over the nature of the explosion, he originally claimed it was a government test in which hundreds of black sailors were killed. The Sentinel research indicated that if it was a nuclear explosion, it was by accident and not design. Vogel is now in agreement with the Sentinel over the accident theory.

Over 1000 documents have now been obtained in the last two years on the Port Chicago blast. The first document which sparked Vogel's interest was a classified document he found in the bottom of a box of photography supplies he purchased at a garage sale in New Mexico. That document was entitled, History of 10,000 Ton Gadget, a Los Alamos document that outlines the process of nuclear detonation, and specifically refers to the explosion at Port Chicago. "11. Ball of fire mushroom out at 18,000 ft. in typical Port Chicago fashion," the document read.

The Sentinel article detailed the manifest of the Liberty Ship E.A. Bryan, diaries of port officials, full government inquiry records, computational evaluation for the energy released at Port Chicago, confidential and top secret memos from the U.S. Navy.

But now, two years later, some very specific documents have been declassified. One declassified document was originally hand-delivered only to Major General L.R. Groves, who headed the Los Alamos project, and Dr. J.R. Oppenheimer, the father of the nuclear bomb. The memo was dated 25 September 1944 and written by Captain W. S. Parsons. This document may prove, once and for all, that the Port Chicago blast was nuclear.

Parsons is the key. Dr. Norman Ramsay, who had direct ties to the first atomic bomb said of Parsons, "I think Parsons is probably exclusively responsible for the success of the first bomb." General Groves stated, "There was never any question on the part of anybody that Parsons was running the show (on

delivery of the Hiroshima bomb)." Dr. Oppenheimer stated, "It is impossible to overestimate the value which Captain Parsons has been to the project...He has been almost alone to appreciate the actual military and engineering problems which we should encounter. He has been almost alone in insisting on facing these problems at a date early enough so that we might arrive at the solution."

Vogel tenacity has established Parsons as the man who was the father of the first atomic bomb, in contrast to what history has told us. But what does Parsons and Port Chicago have in common. Recently released records show that Parsons, sole assigned to building the first atomic bomb, was at Port Chicago around the time of the blast. He made the report on the Port Chicago blast. All record depositories on the blast on not held by the U.S. Naval, but by the Los Alamos Lab.

The Port Chicago War Diary, which was also released, lists the officers who visited the destruction after the explosion. The diary named Captain William S. Parsons, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, as one of the visitors. "9. Among the officers and technicians not assigned to duty in the Twelfth Naval District who visited Port Chicago immediately after the disaster were....Capt. W. S. Parsons, from the Office of Chief of Naval Operations," the official record reads.

But more specifically, in the hand-delivered memo of September 25, 1994, Parsons relates specifically to Port Chicago in addressing nuclear tests. This document had one of the highest security clearance there was at the time. The communication indicates the possibility of holding a demonstration of the bomb for Japanese military and government officials, a test which might have convinced the Japanese to surrender a year earlier. "We may never have to use this weapon in battle," Parsons wrote. "This same exaggerated idea of the destructive possibilities of thousand-ton explosions has led to proposals in high and responsible quarters that if we are winning the war, anyway, perhaps the best use of the gadget is in a staged field test in an American desert; to which could be invited such foreign observers as the United States desires to impress with our victory over the atom and our potential power to win victories over our future enemies."

The key paragraph to history may be contained in this next paragraph. It may signify that black American sailors were the first casualties of the atomic bomb, not Japanese military and civilians. "The kind of reasoning in the above paragraphs (the test concept) is also attractive in that it disposes of the two really difficult and disagreeable problems; (a) final assembly design and manufacture, and (b) military delivery. To have our project culminate in a spectacularly expensive field test in the closing months of the war, or to have it held for such a demonstration after the war, is, in my opinion, one way to invite a political and military fizzle, regardless of the scientific achievement," he wrote. "The principal difficulty with such a demonstration is that it would not be held one thousand feet over Times Square, where the human and material destruction would be obvious, but in an uninhabited desert, where there would be no humans and only sample structures. From my observation of Port Chicago, I can give assurance that the reaction of observers to a desert shot would be one of intense disappointment. Even the crate would be disappointing." Because the explosion at Port Chicago was below the waterline and if it was an atomic bomb, it had far less power than the one at Hiroshima, its devastation would not have impressed military figures who had visited cities that were virtually fire-bombed.

Parsons sole responsibility was the development and delivery on the atomic bomb. Why was it his responsibility to do a major study of Port Chicago if it were a non-nuclear explosion? Why does Los Alamos keep the secret files on Port Chicago and not the Naval archives? Why did the Los Alamos Lab describe the detonation of an atomic weapon as "going up in Port Chicago style"? And why is Port Chicago discussed one-and-one-half month after the explosion in a secret memo to General Groves and Dr. Oppenheimer? History shows that the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was shipped from a rebuilt Port Chicago nearly a year later.

The Sentinel stuck its neck out two years ago to report this story, and now it appears vindicated again by history. Vogel is preparing a two-part series on his latest findings which will appear exclusively in

the Sentinel this month.

rom a bomb trailer being towed along a runway at an airfield near Norfolk, Virginia and exploded. In another i

