

Right: Robert Edwards. Right below: The site under construction. Below: Destroyed pier; workroom.



# CHALLENGE TO CHANGE

the legacy of the port chicago disaster

BY TRACEY PANEK



The sleepy town of Port Chicago, surrounded by rolling hills dotted with oaks, hugged the shores of the Suisun Bay east of San Francisco. It was an unlikely place to test the nation's mettle. Yet that is exactly what happened on July 17, 1944, when a munitions explosion at the town's naval facility instantly took the lives of 320 people—most of them African American enlistees. The site of the worst home front disaster of World War II and the center of the largest mass mutiny trial in U.S. naval history, Port Chicago not only demonstrated the cost of war to those at home, it ignited a conflict that challenged the military's racial policy. In the explosion's aftermath, the Navy and the entire military were forced to take notice.

ALL PHOTOS PORT CHICAGO NAVAL MAGAZINE NATIONAL MEMORIAL







### A NEW PACIFIC SUPPLY CENTER

As the nation mobilized in the wake of Pearl Harbor, military development on the West Coast accelerated at a frenzied pace. By 1942, the Navy's ammunition depot at Mare Island, 35 miles east of San Francisco, was overburdened. Nearby Port Chicago, site of a former shipbuilding factory, proved an ideal replacement, offering deep channels for docking, rail lines to ease munitions transport, and the safety of an isolated location.

In rainy December 1942, sailors began arriving. Most were young black men from the South. They were greeted by mud—sidewalks on the base had yet to be laid.

Claude Ellington had been working as a fireman for the Georgia Railroad Company when he met a recruiter in Augusta. "[Things were] changing in the Navy setup and they [were] going to let black[s] come in as . . . seamen," the recruiter promised, enlisting Ellington as a fireman first class. That promise was ignored at Camp Robert Smalls, an all-black base at the Great Lakes Training Center in Illinois. Sammy Boykin, who trained with Ellington, remarked, "We were reminded that we were made cooks, chefs . . . waiters and shoe shiners . . . We couldn't be sailors." The Navy refused to accept Ellington as a fireman first class, offering him third class status instead.

When Ellington heard that he would be shipping out of Camp Smalls, he asked where. "Port Chicago, California,"

was the reply. "We left Chicago one cold, rainy night. I'll never forget it. All the way we were asking the porters [about Port Chicago]. Nobody seemed to know."

### WORK ON THE BASE

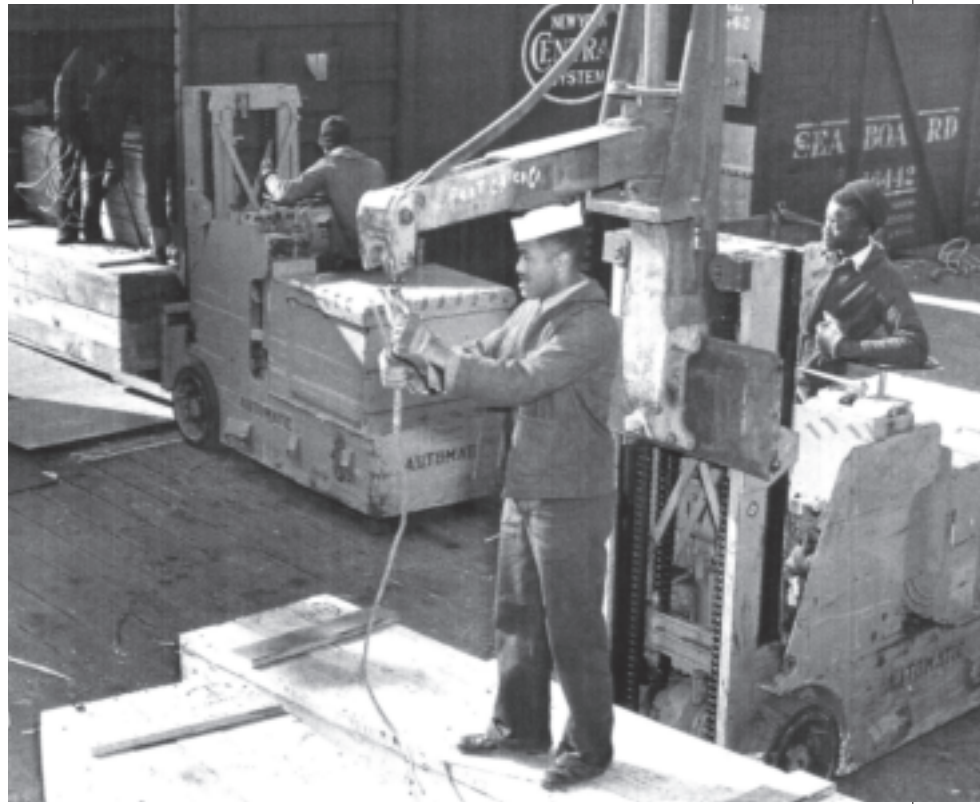
When Ellington arrived, he immediately was set to work loading one of the first ships to dock, a captured German vessel recommissioned for the American war effort. He found work divided along racial lines. Under the supervision of white officers, Ellington's all-black crew was instructed to half-load the ship, leaving room for additional supplies to be taken on in San Francisco. The inexperienced loaders stacked ammunition to the top of the hold, leaving the adjacent side empty. Within minutes of departing Port Chicago, supplies began shifting. Luck was on their side. The ship arrived safely in San Francisco where crews off-loaded the entire contents then reloaded them before sending the vessel to sea.

Once work fell into a regular rhythm, ordnance workers at Port Chicago formed divisions corresponding to the holds of the ships. Trains ran the length of the dock, bringing supplies to within feet of the waiting vessels. "One hundred men could be on the dock at one time," explained Boykin. The base operated three eight-hour shifts per day working around the clock. With sailors loading 35,000 tons of ammunition per shift, ships could be loaded within a week.



Below: Loading and unloading.

"BOYKIN REGULARLY FOUND MENACING RACIAL SLURS ON THE WALLS OF BOXCARS. 'THEY WOULD HAVE BOMBS DRAWN,' HE SAID. 'UNDERNEATH IT WOULD SAY, 'THIS IS THE NIGGERS.'" OTHER TIMES THE BOXCARS WERE BOOBY TRAPPED WITH MESSAGES LIKE, 'THIS IS WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU . . . I HAD SOME NIGHTMARES THINKING ABOUT IT. IT WAS A FEAR . . . EVERY TIME THE DOORS WOULD OPEN.'"



Robert Routh and Dewhitt Jamison arrived at Port Chicago in 1944. Routh had just finished eighth grade and had begged his father to let him join the Navy. He hoped to make a contribution to the country and learn a trade. Jamison had similar hopes, enthused by the promise "Join the Navy. See the World." Jamison was assigned to police duty. He patrolled nearby Richmond and Pittsburg, where he had to contact white officers before making an arrest. One day he broke up a riot, arresting white sailors because no officer was present. Not long afterward, he was reassigned to check damaged ammunition in a unit known as the "Suicide Division."

#### **GREAT RISK, LITTLE TRAINING**

"All of us that loaded was people that hadn't seen a ship before," remembered Ellington, "and had no training or nothing about handling ammunition." Such experiences proved the standard for black loaders at Port Chicago. The Navy offered limited training. Boykin took courses in boating and operating machinery like the forklift. Ellington volunteered to operate the winch. He learned as he loaded, practicing when no ships were docked. "I got so good at it that I could fill a bucket of water right up to the brim and pick it up and take it and set it down in that hold without wasting a drop," he recalls.

Despite the lack of training, loaders handled bombs, torpedoes, shells, and bags of gunpowder every day. Boykin recalls a particularly dangerous practice: using nets to hoist shells aboard. "We had to stop using nets . . . because if the shells tipped in a certain way [they] would fall through. So we started using boxes to take the shells up."

Crews found a variety of loading methods. Some filled wheelbarrows with ammunition. Division leader Morris Soublet improvised a way to load 1,000-pound projectiles that were over 5 feet high and 16 inches in diameter. To prevent them from knocking against each other, he put a grass mat between each one.



### **SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL**

Born in Camden, Alabama, Boykin joined the Navy to get away from the racism he experienced as a child. He grew up in a mining town where a fight broke out one Sunday afternoon among black and white youths. The police questioned the neighborhood, and afterward all the black families were moved into the mountains. The image of white residents dragging a black man behind a truck still haunted him.

When he arrived at Port Chicago in December 1942, he encountered the familiar strains of segregation. Exhausted, he and his buddies fell into bunks on the ground floor of a two-story barracks. The next day they discovered white sailors upstairs. Racial epithets soon followed and then a fight. The commander ultimately moved the white sailors into separate barracks.

Segregation began on nearby Mare Island. Barracks were reserved for white sailors while African Americans stayed on an old ferryboat dubbed the “U. S.S. Neversail.” On ships, signs prohibited blacks from using the bathrooms. “We were not allowed in the head even if there was no one in there,” Spencer Sikes explained. Instead, loaders had to walk half a

mile to the rest room. One night after a tiring dayshift, a group of black loaders stopped work, demanding admittance to the head. The confused white officers instructed the entire crew to off-board. Eventually officers roped off a section of the head for the crew to use.

When it came time for promotions, black sailors at Port Chicago had limited opportunities. Boykin recalled a lecture the day after his arrival. Summoned to the parade grounds, enlistees were told there were “no promotions to be had . . . the ranks were closing.” He was also discouraged to learn that although he could become certified in machinery and boating, he would receive no additional pay.

For black enlistees, exchanges with officers sometimes included racial slights. Outspoken Morris Soublet confronted an officer about the problem, asking if they could speak “man to man” rather than officer to enlisted. “If you ever call me ‘boy,’ or ‘you people’—that was his name [for African Americans], ‘you people’—if you ever call me that again . . .” Soublet ended with a threat.





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**Below: The patrol boat *Mia Helo*. Above: Loading. Right: Harold Tegner.**

Boykin regularly found menacing racial slurs on the walls of boxcars. “They would have bombs drawn,” he said. “Underneath it would say, ‘This is the niggers.’ Other times the boxcars were booby trapped with messages like, ‘This is what’s going to happen to you’ . . . I had some nightmares thinking about it. It was a fear . . . every time the doors would open.”

Despite the environment of resentment and fear, work sped up in response to wartime demands. The Navy hired contractors to help, like Port Chicago resident Calvin Wiley, who used his carpentry skills bracing loaded boxcars. In early 1944, the Navy expanded the pier so two ships could load simultaneously. Workers completed the expansion in June. By July, ships were docking in pairs.

#### **THE EXPLOSION**

July 17, 1944, was a hot muggy day at Port Chicago. Ellington walked to the dock and boarded the *E. A. Bryan*. He noticed that the ammunition had been loaded to the top of the hold. He lingered for a time and returned to the barracks to finish his wash. Just after 10 p.m., he stepped outside to take his drying white cap off the clothesline.

When a ship was being loaded, Soublet usually checked in by 10 p.m. to determine the number of men needed for the upcoming shift. On this particular night he was delayed. He had purchased some underwear and had stopped to put his serial number on them.

Boykin lay dressed on his bunk awaiting the midnight-to-8 shift. The barracks were noisy. His crew was slow getting to the mess hall. They were due on the dock by 11:30 p.m. and then they would march down the pier to the ship to begin their shift.







The newly christened *Quinault Victory* had just arrived at Port Chicago that evening. Crewmember Morris Rich was eager to go ashore. He had been on deck twice, but had been turned away. Around 9:20 p.m., the gangplank was lowered. Rich and a few buddies passed the Marine on guard and walked to town, heading into the restaurant next door to the Port Chicago Theater. They sat down and ordered sandwiches. Only five minutes had passed when they heard two blasts. “We found ourselves across the room,” said Rich. “The first thing we thought is, ‘The Japanese are bombing.’”

Out on the bay, aboard the Coast Guard patrol boat *Mia Helo*, Harold Tegner finished a turn at the wheel and went below deck to rest. The boat had just passed the two ships docked at the Port Chicago pier. In the distance, the Roe Island lighthouse glimmered. At 10:18 p.m., Tegner heard two explosions—then black oil rained down. “It covered every one of us from head to foot with oil,” he remembers. “We were black. Nobody could even call anybody by name—they couldn’t recognize us.”

The blast knocked out all light in the area. The *Mia Helo* crew dropped anchor and waited in the blackness. Port Chicago pier was gone. Scraps of metal and an upturned piece of bow rising out of the water were all that remained of the two ships. In all, 320 people were dead, 202 of them African American enlistees. Another 390 military personnel and civilians were injured.

Inside the barracks, Robert Routh blinked against the shattered glass that had lodged in his eyes. “It was a night that none of us would ever forget,” he recalled. “It was the beginning and end of our lives as they were up to that point.”

Ammunition inspector Ignatius Vouri arrived on base around midnight. Wailing sirens, thick smoke, and the smell of gunpowder met him as he searched through the rubble for ordnance that had not exploded. Unable to find anything but a piece of twisted metal from one of the ships, he pocketed the souvenir, signing the Navy’s nondisclosure agreement before heading home.

Two days later, Morris Rich, who had left the *Quinault Victory* less than an hour before it exploded, called Oklahoma. “My mom and dad never heard about the explosion,” he said. “I was kind of afraid that they had heard and they thought I was . . . they hadn’t heard.”

The next day recovery crews located contractor Calvin Wiley underneath a band saw and rushed him to the hospital. At Mare Island Hospital, Yeoman Robert Edwards was treated for head wounds.

The Navy reacted forcefully to the 258 men who would not return to the dock. It court-martialed 208, forcing them to forfeit three months’ pay. Across from San Francisco at Treasure Island, the Navy convened the largest mutiny trial in its history. Thurgood Marshall, NAACP attorney and later Supreme Court justice, handled the appeal in the mutiny case. When it ended, the Navy imprisoned 50 seamen as mutineers.

In the months that followed, tensions at Port Chicago mounted. Sixteen-year-old Joseph Simon of Louisiana and others arrived in November to fill the void. On the van ride to work one day, a black sailor yelled hello to a white girl from the base whom he knew. Later that day the lieutenant gathered Simon’s crew, asking who had “molested the girl.” As punishment, Marines woke the crew early the next day, instructing them to dress and report in front of the barracks. “They marched us from 4:00 in the morning until 6:00 [p.m.],” said Simon. “They rode in the jeeps with guns pointed at us . . . yelling at us and telling us what kind of niggers we were . . .”

“INSIDE THE BARRACKS, ROBERT ROUTH BLINKED AGAINST THE SHATTERED GLASS THAT HAD LODGED IN HIS EYES. ‘IT WAS A NIGHT THAT NONE OF US WOULD EVER FORGET,’ HE RECALLED. ‘IT WAS THE BEGINNING AND END OF OUR LIVES AS THEY WERE UP TO THAT POINT.’”

Undeterred by the horror of the blast, the Navy sailed on, removing debris, rebuilding the pier, and repairing buildings. Within weeks, Port Chicago reopened, but morale could not be restored.

#### THE CHALLENGE

When Edwards returned to work in the office, he was told that he had been reassigned. He would now be loading ammunition. But even after the tragedy, no changes had been made to the process of loading ships with high explosives, and Edwards refused. Other terrified enlistees refused to load as well, bringing work to a standstill.

Left: Damaged barracks (above) and pier (below).

Simon held out hope when the NAACP’s executive director wrote that he would be inspecting the base. The Navy temporarily moved blacks into white barracks and held a parade, “the only time the blacks and the whites . . . marched together.” The NAACP later reported that “conditions [were] satisfactory at Port Chicago.”



On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb shipped out through Port Chicago was dropped on Hiroshima, hastening an end to the war. In early 1946, the Navy issued a desegregation order. By 1948, President Truman called for the integration of all of the nation's armed forces.

**RECOGNITION**

In 1994, African American Navy veterans who served at Port Chicago gathered for its dedication as a national

Port Chicago, attended the memorial dedication. "The world has changed," he reflected. "The United States more than anyone has changed."

Tracey Panek conducted oral history interviews with the Port Chicago survivors for her master's thesis at California State University, Sacramento. She is now an archivist with the American Automobile Association. Contact her at [tracey\\_panek@yahoo.com](mailto:tracey_panek@yahoo.com). For more information, go to the National Park Service website for the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial at [www.nps.gov/poch](http://www.nps.gov/poch).

"SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD JOSEPH SIMON OF LOUISIANA AND OTHERS ARRIVED IN NOVEMBER TO FILL THE VOID [LEFT BY THE MUTINEERS]. ON THE VAN RIDE TO WORK ONE DAY, A BLACK SAILOR YELLED HELLO TO A WHITE GIRL FROM THE BASE WHOM HE KNEW. LATER THAT DAY THE LIEUTENANT GATHERED SIMON'S CREW, ASKING WHO HAD 'MOLESTED THE GIRL.' AS PUNISHMENT, MARINES WOKE THE CREW EARLY THE NEXT DAY, INSTRUCTING THEM TO DRESS AND REPORT IN FRONT OF THE BARRACKS. 'THEY MARCHED US FROM 4:00 IN THE MORNING UNTIL 6:00 [P.M.],' SAID SIMON. 'THEY RODE IN THE JEEPS WITH GUNS POINTED AT US . . . YELLING AT US AND TELLING US WHAT KIND OF NIGGERS WE WERE . . .'"



**Above: Morris Soubley; Joseph Simon. Right: Aftermath.**

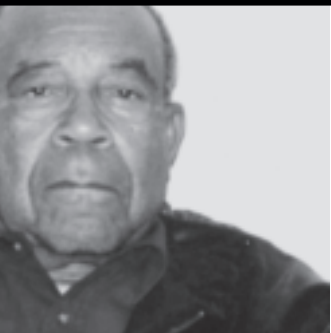
memorial on the 50th anniversary of the explosion. The Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial honors those lost and recognizes the site's role in creating a climate for change.

In the end, events at Port Chicago highlighted prejudicial practices common in the military and in society at large. The episode ultimately forced military leaders to reevaluate discriminatory policies, which helped create a political atmosphere that enabled integration.

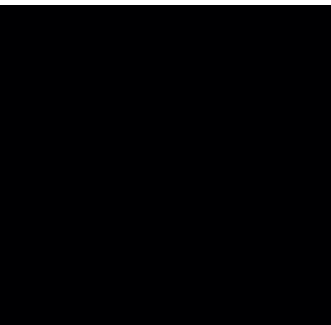
The Port Chicago explosion also demonstrated a need to prevent a similar tragedy. In the years following the explosion, formalized training for loaders became standard practice, as did certification of anyone who was going to work on a dock where explosives were handled.

Robert Edwards, who had vowed never to return to





**Left: Claude Ellington. Above: On trial.**  
**Below: Spencer Sikes; Ignatius Vouri.**



### **Roots of Segregation**

Since the Revolutionary War, African Americans were principally limited to menial labor in the military. The Union Army, an exception during the Civil War, deployed black regiments in the South and West until the 1880s. Only by World War II had prejudicial policies relaxed enough for blacks to enter the Navy as stewards or yeoman. Segregation remained the policy during the war at training camps, bases, and in work assignments.

### **Port Chicago Killed or Missing**

**Navy Officer and Enlisted: 211**  
**Marine Corps Enlisted: 1**  
**Navy Armed Guardsmen: 30**  
**Coast Guard Enlisted: 5**  
**Merchant Marine Crewmen: 67**  
**Navy Civil Service: 3**  
**Civilian: 3**

**Memorial ceremonies** for the lost and injured are held every July at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial. The memorial is on an active military base, with escorted tours available Wednesdays through Fridays most of the year. For more information, visit [www.nps.gov/poch](http://www.nps.gov/poch) or contact the National Park Service, P. O. Box 280, Danville, CA 94526, (925) 838-0249.