Port Chicago Sailors Finally Exonerated

by Steve Morse


US Navy Photo, POCH113

JULY 17, 2024, marked the 80th anniversary of the Port Chicago (California) explosion that killed 320 people—most of them black Navy enlisted men. On this day, the Navy exonerated 258 black sailors who had been court-martialed for being unwilling to work under the same conditions that led to the hundreds of deaths. Navy Secretary Carlos del Toro referred to the court-martials as "a tremendous wrong," language quite different from Navy commanders' at the time. Fifty sailors—the Port Chicago 50—were given sentences of between 8 and 15 years for mutiny; the other 208 were given summary court-martials. Advocates have worked for years to achieve this exoneration. Many, though not all, major media outlets covered this historic exoneration.

The Port Chicago explosion was the largest disaster, with the most deaths, that occurred within the continental U.S. during World War II. Armaments exploded were equivalent to 4,800 tons of TNT, about a third of the force of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The explosion was so powerful that it broke windows in Oakland, 25 miles away.

Understanding the flagrant racism practiced by the Navy at the time is key to understanding the Port Chicago disaster.

- Segregated Divisions of black sailors under the power of white officers were the sole loaders of armaments at Port Chicago.
- The sailors had no training in loading or unloading armaments. The militant, interracial Longshore union (ILWU) offered to train the sailors, but the Navy refused.
- The white officers competed, often with money bets, around whose unit could get the most work done in a shift. Black sailors realized that this led to dangerous work practices (which led to the disaster) but lacked the power to change the situation.
- Black Navy members were denied promotions to better or different positions, including being on ships, and barred from becoming officers.

IN THE AFTERMATH of the explosion, there was a toothless inquiry; no one in a command position was charged with anything. On the contrary, black enlisted men, including those who had been killed, were blamed for the explosion. And the black sailors who survived the explosion were not given survivors' leave, while white Navy personnel were.

After the pier was rebuilt, about three weeks after the disaster, the Navy tried to get surviving sailors to again load armaments, having neither increased safety protocols nor offered training. The men feared for their safety and lives; many would not resume loading armaments. They all cooperated with the command in every other way, and indicated they would obey any other kind of order. Though most had neither received nor refused direct orders to load the ordnance, the Navy somewhat arbitrarily picked out 50 to label as mutineers.

In a six-week mass trial, naval lawyers mounted a commendable defense "within the limitations of Navy rules" as Thurgood Marshall put it. Marshall, lead attorney for the NAACP and later Supreme Court justice, got involved in the latter part of the court-martial and its aftermath. Consistent with the long tradition of military "justice," the board took 80 minutes to convict all 50 of mutiny, and the convictions were upheld on appeal.


Photo Courtesy of Library of Congress

But the highly publicized trial did not reflect well on the Navy. As the war ended, the fight for racial justice at home took on more urgency for the black community and some white progressives. Civil organizations mounted a petition campaign for the Port Chicago 50; after a year and a half they were released. In addition, the Navy, while hardly eliminating racism, ended segregation in 1946. Thus, when Truman ordered the integration of the Armed Forces in 1948, the Navy had already complied.

THE MILITARY is an organization that facilitates external oppression while practicing internal repression. Those who resist within the ranks may focus on one or both aspects. The Port Chicago 50 fight was focused on the oppression directed at them; they were not opposed to the military mission. These Navy men were in a war to which there was little domestic opposition, with reasonable hope and expectation that creditable service to their country would result in a huge step forward toward social equality and against racism.

Interesting Port Chicago Connections

Despite the difference in focus, there are some interesting connections between the struggle of the Port Chicago 50 and later protests that were explicitly anti-war.

- The best-known GI Resistance of the Viet Nam war is the Presidio 27 action of 1968. Like the Port Chicago 50, they faced spurious mutiny charges, got 15-year sentences, and were released after a year and a half due to widespread support and publicity.
- James Frank Coakley, the hard-assed Navy prosecutor of the Port Chicago 50, became the hard-assed DA prosecuting Black Panthers and anti-war protestors in Oakland and Berkeley in the late 1960s.
- When the Port Chicago pier was rebuilt after the disaster, the Navy bought the adjacent small town Port Chicago that had been damaged by the explosion. They razed it, along with the pier, in 1968. Meanwhile, nearby Concord Naval Weapons Station (CNWS) developed into a major shipping point of arms for the Viet Nam war and the counter-insurgency wars in Central America that followed, and as such became the site of numerous protests. On September 1, 1987, former Air Force Security Captain S. Brian Willson lost his legs in a train-blocking action at CNWS. He and two other protesters commenced a fast on the tracks that day, fully expecting to be arrested (as promised by signs prominently posted in the public right-of-way where the protest was staged), but Navy commanders instead chose to play chicken and ordered the train not to stop. This author [Steve Morse] was one of about 7,000 protesters who showed up at the site the next Saturday in response to the tragedy. Protesters ripped up a section of track that day, and daily train-blocking actions continued at Concord for many months. Brian has been a long-time VFP member.
- Robert Allen, who rescued the Port Chicago mutiny story from obscurity, was a draft resister during the Viet Nam war. Allen spent years seeking out the survivors (including, notably, the leader Joe Small), listening, befriending, researching, and piecing together the history which he chronicled in *The Port Chicago Mutiny.* Allen was a black scholar/activist, dynamic teacher, sociologist, historian of black labor, and theoretician of internal colonialism. He died at age 82 on July 10, 2024, one week before the exoneration.

Steve Morse, a member of San Francisco VFP Chapter 69, is active with VFP's Climate Crisis & Militarism Project and Veterans and Labor for Sensible Priorities. Steve is a veteran of Viet Nam and GI Resistance.