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**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... ..In rainy December 1942, sailors began arriving. Most were young black men from the South. ...

...When [firefighter-turned-sailor Claude] 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.

**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... ..Despite the lack of training, loaders handled bombs, torpedoes, shells, and bags of gunpowder every day. [Sammy] Boykin, [another newcomer to Port Chicago] 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 [unconventional] 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, [Sammy] 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. ...The commander ultimately moved the white sailors into separate barracks. ...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,” [fellow sailor] 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 offboard. Eventually officers roped off a section of the head for the crew to use. ...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.

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.”

## THE EXPLOSION

July 17, 1944, was a hot muggy day at Port Chicago. [Claude] 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. . . . The barracks were noisy. [The] 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.’” . . .

...The blast knocked out all light in the area. The Mia Helo crew dropped anchor [in the bay] 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.”...

...Two days later, Morris Rich, who had left the Quinault Victory less than an hour before it exploded, called [his parents in] 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.”...

...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 [Robert] Edwards returned to [his clerical] work in the office [after recovering from his blast injuries], he was told that he had been reassigned. He would now be loading ammunition. But even after the tragedy, no changes had been made [by the U.S. Navy] 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. 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.

Source: <https://www.nps.gov/commonground/Summer2004/fea1.pdf>