



Port Chicago - A Critical Link

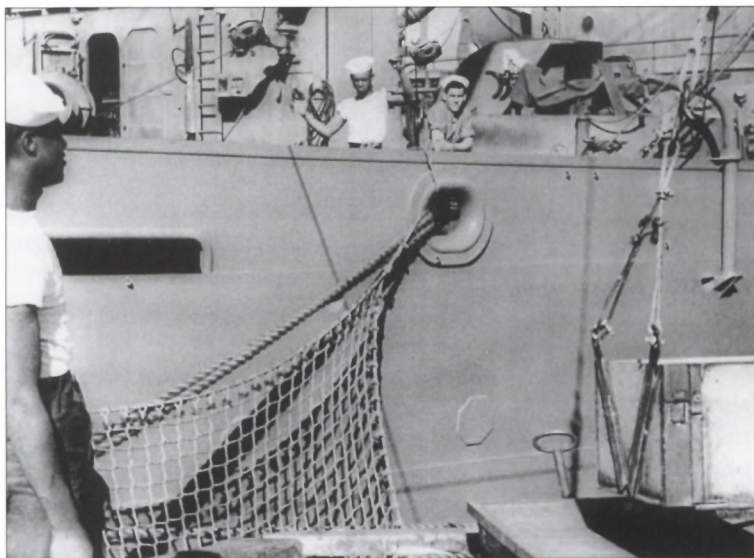
America at War

America clung to the hope that it could remain isolated from the wars that raged in Europe and Asia in the late 1930s and 1940s. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor shattered that dream on December 7, 1941. Americans responded to the nation's call to arms. Many felt the principles that this nation was founded upon were being attacked: freedom, equality, and the opportunity to build a better life. Port Chicago, California, a small, rural community set on the edge of the San Francisco Bay Delta, would play a role in ensuring and preserving those values at home and abroad.

Port Chicago Naval Magazine

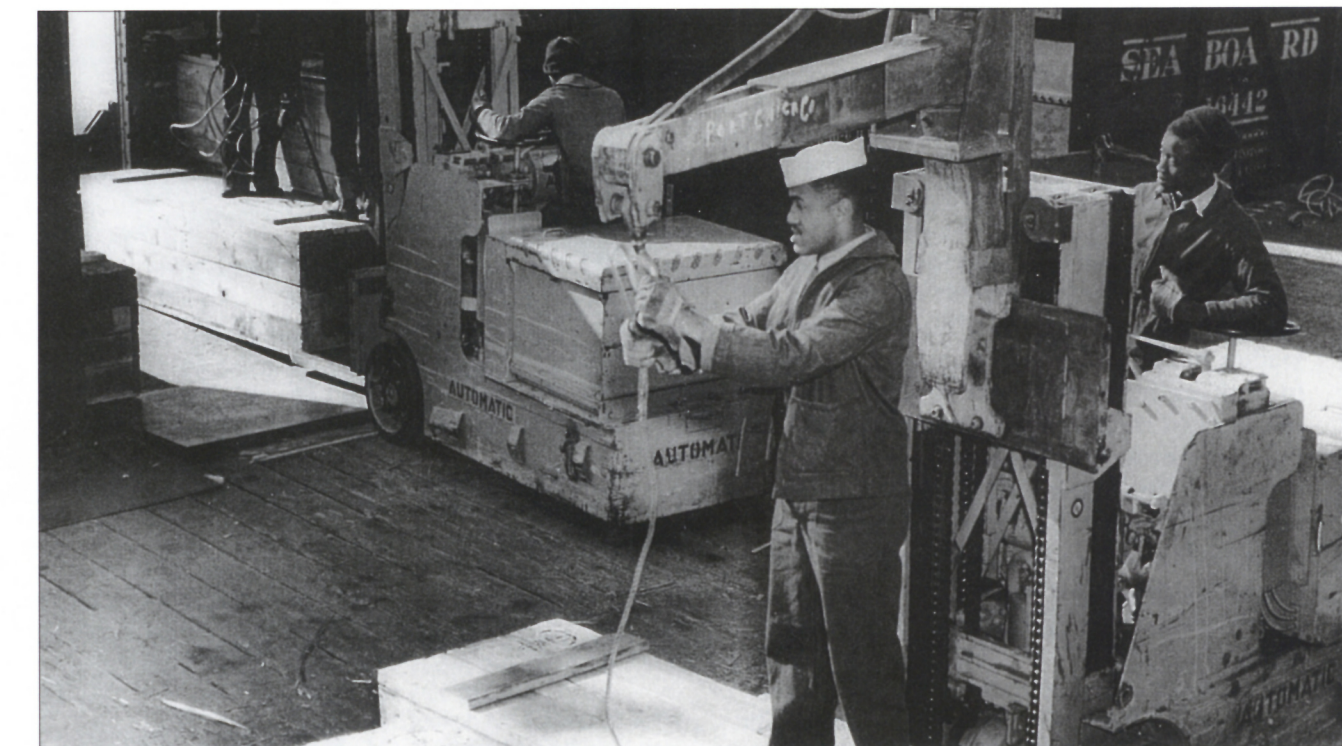
Port Chicago had long standing hopes for its future. Local ranches and farms produced wheat and cattle. The deepwater channels of the lower Delta provided access for large, ocean going ships, and nearby railroads connected Port Chicago to the rest of the nation. The potential of the area, however, never seemed to fully materialize. With only 1,500 people living in the area, Port Chicago maintained much of its rural character as World War II began. Port Chicago and its access to a deep water port was of great interest to the U. S. Navy.

The Navy needed additional facilities to ship supplies to the Pacific during World War II. Port Chicago was selected as a depot and cargo facility for loading munitions. Construction on the new shipping facility began in early 1942, loading its first ships in December 1942. A steady stream of the bombs, ammunition, mines, and depth charges vital to the war effort flowed from Port Chicago to the troops fighting in the Pacific.



Loading ships dockside.

Staffing the facilities proved problematic for the Navy which had difficulty finding trained cargo handlers or stevedores. Ultimately, Navy personnel loaded the munitions. The officers and men assigned to the task had little training or experience handling cargo, let alone munitions or explosives. They learned on the job while loading the ships. The Navy did not have prescribed rules or guidelines suitable for handling immense quantities of munitions.



Unloading railcars at the pier.

The Sailors

The enlisted men assigned to the work at Port Chicago were African-American sailors who volunteered to do their part in winning the war. They wanted to fight, like so many others, as well as gain skills and training for opportunities after the war. The military at that time was a mirror of civilian society in America: segregation was institutional and racism was common. White officers commanded segregated units and there was little opportunity for advancement for African-American Servicemen. Few African-American troops were allowed to serve in combat. A majority worked in labor and stevedore battalions or in service areas. The pay was low, and Port Chicago's remote location made it difficult to reach San Francisco or Oakland during off-duty hours. Compounding all of these simmering tensions was the work itself.

Loading the Ships

The pace of work at Port Chicago was frenetic. Munitions were shipped to Port Chicago by rail and stored in earthen revetments until the cargo ships were ready for loading. Two ships could dock at the loading pier

at once. The work proceeded 24 hours a day. Informal competition was encouraged, average loading rates for each division were posted, and incentives were awarded for high performance. Officers and men cut corners to save time. Many people inside and outside the Navy warned that, considering the fast pace of the work, the huge volume of munitions being moved, and lack of proper training, something terrible would happen.

The Explosion

Men were busy working on board two ships that were docked at the pier and on the pier itself on the evening of Monday, July 17, 1944. The Liberty Ship *S.S. E.A. Bryan* had been in port for four days. Her holds contained almost 4,600 tons of ammunition, including fragmentary cluster bombs, one thousand pound bombs, depth charges, and incendiary bombs. The Victory Ship *S.S. Quinault Victory* was docked across the pier after arriving on her maiden voyage from the Kaiser ship yards in Richmond, California. Men were busy all along the pier, unloading over 400 tons of munitions from the sixteen railroad cars that lined the tracks. Members of the stevedore battalion, the crews and armed guard of the ships, a Coast Guard fire boat crew, a Marine sentry, and the civilian employees busied themselves with their usual assignments and duties. Three hundred-twenty men were working on the ships and pier.

Two men, who left the pier minutes before 10:18 p.m., heard a hollow, metallic ringing followed by the sound of splintering wood. Witnesses from a distance reported seeing a column of smoke and flame rise up which flashed and glowed like fireworks as smaller explosions detonated within the blast. Six seconds later a much larger explosion occurred as the cargo of the *E.A. Bryan* detonated in one huge blast. The *E.A. Bryan*, the pier, and the nearby buildings disintegrated in the explosion. The shattered *Quinault Victory* spun into the air and her remains crashed back into the bay 500 feet away. All 320 men on duty around the pier were instantly killed. The shock wave from the blast smashed buildings, buckled walls, and shattered glass in the camp and in the town of Port Chicago, a mile away. Debris and unexploded munitions fell as far as two miles away. The explosion wounded 390 Navy personnel and civilians.

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The Explosion's Aftermath

The Explosion at Port Chicago destroyed and shattered many lives, but it helped fuel the movement that changed American society. The social impact of Port Chicago spread, even as the Navy began the grim job of cleaning up and returning to work.

The men of Port Chicago had hoped for thirty days survivor's leave before being reassigned to some other duty. But it became apparent that they were to return to the same dangerous duties and conditions as had existed at Port Chicago. On August 9, about three weeks after the explosion, the men were marched out to begin loading munitions at Mare Island. They refused to work and admitted they were afraid that nothing had changed. They declared they would follow any order but the one to handle munitions. The officers appealed to their sense of honor and pride. But in the end, those who expressed unwillingness to load munitions were ordered to step to the side and some 258 men were marched to confinement on an old barge.

The men hoped that they might be given other duties, or at worst, dishonorable discharges. The officers replied that the refusal to follow orders in a time of war was mutiny and could be punished with death. Faced with a terrible choice between the firing squad and loading munitions, most of the men reluctantly agreed to go back to work, but a few remained adamant. Those who agreed to return to work were given summary courts-martial and sentenced to bad conduct discharges and fined three months pay.

Ultimately, fifty men were singled out as "ringleaders" of the mutiny. Their courts-martial began on September 14, 1944. The prosecution claimed that the men had conspired to defy their officers and their orders. The Navy defense attorneys argued that the fear and shock resulting from the explosion and what they had been through had driven the men to a point where they could not load munitions, and as no specific order to return to work was given, charges of insubordination may be appropriate, but not mutiny.



The pier following the explosion (above and right).



Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) attended some of the proceedings. Marshall went to the press and accused the courts-martial and the Navy of being prejudiced and racist. He went on to ask the Navy why African-American sailors, despite their training or skills, were restricted to loading munitions at Port Chicago; why these sailors had not been given proper training, and how these fifty men could be unfairly singled out for their actions. Marshall drew national attention to the plight of these men.

The trial stretched over six weeks. In the end, it only took eighty minutes to determine the verdict. All fifty men were found guilty and sentenced to fifteen years in prison and dishonorable discharges, though for a few, the sentences were later reduced to as little as eight years in prison. To some Americans, these men were held up as examples to any who thought of defying military leadership. Marshall and the NAACP worked hard for these

men and represented them in an appeal to the Navy's Judge Advocate General in April 1945, but the original verdict was upheld. Despite this setback, Thurgood Marshall went on to defend all of the citizens of the United States in a long and illustrious career as the first African-American Supreme Court Justice.

The events of Port Chicago illustrated the prejudice and the inequities that most Americans had fought to defeat during World War II. The need for change was recognized and beginning to take hold. The Navy began to desegregate in June 1945. African-American sailors were provided more opportunity in placement and for advancement. In January 1946, the Navy granted clemency to the men from Port Chicago. Most were released from prison and put on board ships to finish out their enlistment.

In 1994, a review of the proceedings found that racism had played a role in the work at Port Chicago and in the subsequent mutiny proceedings. In 1999, President Bill Clinton officially pardoned Fredrick Meeks, one of three surviving men who were tried in 1944, of any charges of mutiny.



Barracks after explosion.

Unidentified dead and missing that as a result of said explosions, 3 officers and 197 enlisted personnel of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Naval Reserve, 3 enlisted personnel of the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Coast Guard Reserve, 2 civil service employees of the U.S. Navy, 64 personnel of the U.S. Maritime Service (members of the crews of the *S.S. QUINAULT VICTORY* and *S.S. E. A. BRYAN*) were on the pier or ships being worked at the time of the explosion according to the best information available, have not been seen since, and are missing. Of the above, 28 unidentifiable bodies were recovered and viewed by the court. Their names, rank or occupation being as follows:

U.S. Naval Magazine & Naval Barracks (121)

S2c James C. Akins
CM3c Clarence Allen, Jr.
Lt. (jg) Maxie L. Anderson *
S2c Leslie K. Asahe
S2c Isaiah Ash, Jr.
S1c David Bacon, Sr.
S2c Henry W. Bailey *
CM3c Leonard Baker
S2c David Barnes, Jr.
S2c Joseph Battle
S2c Raphel O. Beasom
S2c Silas Bell
Lt. Thomas L. Blackman
S2c David E. Blackwell
S2c Thimon Blaylock
S1c Johnnie C. Borders
CM1c James H. Born *
S2c L.T. Bowden *
S2c Charles L. Boyce
S2c Alvin Brewer, Jr.
S2c James Bridges
S1c Walter L. Brooks, Jr.
F1c Johnnie L. Broome
S1c Ernest L. Burnett
S1c Wilbert Calvin
S2c Lawrence L. Carlin
S2c Robert A. Carter
Lt.(jg) John B. Christenbury*
S2c Eddie L. Clark
S1c Eugene Coffee, Jr. *
F1c Bill Coleman
S2c Enos Coley *
S2c Arthur A. Connor
S2c Frank Cooley
S2c Norman H. Craig
S2c Eddie L. Cross
S2c Jessie V. Crimp
S1c Herman L. Curtis
S2c Horace Daniel, Sr.
S2c Huby Dansby
S2c Floyd M. Davis
S2c Henry J. Davis
S2c Willie Davis
S2c James L. Devaughn
S2c Nathaniel Dixson
S2c Rayfield D. Doyle
S2c Herman Dunbar
S2c Arthur L. Ebenezer
F2c Dunton I. Edwards
S1c Herbert L. Edwards
S2c Junice C. Ervin
S2c Luther Eusery
S2c Ananias Evans, Sr.
S2c Horace Evans
S2c John H. Evans
S2c William L. Evans
S2c John B. Feliseret
S2c Robert L. Ferguson
CM3c Clarence S. Fields
S2C Jessie Finney
S2c Matthew Forkner, Jr.
S1c Joseph R. Francis
S2c Ford S. Franklin, Jr.
S2c Artie J. Frazier
CM1c Elmer B. Froid
S1c Gerard Gabriel *
S2c Bennie L. Gaines
S2c Elgar Gant
S1c(CH) John S. Gibson
S2c Jethero Gilbert
S1c Samuel Glenn, Jr.
S1c Lewis D. Goudblock
S2c Harry L. Graham
S1c William H. Green
S2c Ross B. Grinage
S2c A.D. Hamilton

S2c Ernest E. Hamilton
S2c Emaral Hamm
S2c George R. Hammond
S2c John W. Hannan, Jr.
S2c Joe H. Hardaway
S2c John L. Harding
S2c B.C. Harris
S2c Roscoe A. Harris
S2c Phillip H. Harrison *
S2c Clifford Harvey, Jr.
S1c George W. Hayes
S2c D.C. Haywood
S1c Douglas L. Hector
S1c David L. Higginbotham
S1c Bobie R. Higgs
S1c Cluster Hill *
S2c Joseph Hills
S2c Charles W. Hite
S2c(SO) Rudolph V. Holden
S2c Stanford Holley
MoMM3c(T) Edred L. Holmes
S2c Ernest M. Howard
S2c Frank J. Howard
S2c Earl H. Hudson *
S2c Glen Hughes *
S2c Leroy Hughes *
S2c Theodore L. Hughes
S2c William Humphrey, Jr.
S2c Ross D. Hunt *
S2c Wave Hunt
S2c Rudolph W. Hunter
CM3c(T) Leroy Ingram
S1c D.C. Jackson
S2c James Jackson
CM2c James E.M. Jackson
S1c Levi R. Jackson *
S2c Paul E. Jackson
S2c Robert A. Jackson, Jr.
CM3c Samuel Jackson, Jr.
S1c Daniel L. Jamison
S1c Willie Jennings *
S2c Clarence Johnson *
S2c Earl T. Johnson
S1c Gabe Johnson *
S1c Harold Johnson
S2c Henry L. Johnson
Lt. (jg) James B. Johnson *
S1c Milton F. Johnson *
S1c Daniel L. Jones
S1c Ivery L. Jones
S1c Henry Joseph, Jr.
S1c Samuel Kearney
S1c(SC)(B) Calvin King
S2c Clifton King
S2c Verne Land
S1c Sidney J. LaPorte, Jr.
S1c Willie Law, Jr. *
S2c Cleo Lawson
S2c Caludius W. Leslie
S2c(SO) Aaron A. Lewis
S2c T.C. Lewis
S2c Lemuel M. Long *
S2c Robert Lyons
S2c Beattie J. Makins
S1c(CM) Rossell E. Martin
S2c(CM) Alonmo Martin
S1c Daniel Massie
S1c Lawrence Mathews, Jr.*
S2c Charles A. Mayfield *
S1c Mitchell McClam
CCM(T) Clarence K. McFarland *
S1c Calvin Milton
S2c Willis Mettles *
S1c Ernest C. Miller
MoMM3c Ira Miller, Jr.
S2c Otis K. Miller *
S2c Marshall Moore, Sr.
CM2c Thomas Moore

S2c William P. Moore
Ens. Gilbert Mordoh
S2c Eddie L. Neal
S1c James H. Nixon
S2c William H. Otky, Sr.
S2c Auguster Packer
S1c(SC) William F. Paschal
S2c Robert F. Peete
S2c Lester L. Perry
S2c Joe H. Person *
S2c Alfred Phillips
CM3c Charles Pickett
S2c Houston Porter
S2c McCoy Porter
S2c David W. Potts
SM3c(T) Samuel H. Powell
CM2c Joe C. Preuitt
S2c Arthur Reid, Jr.
CM3c James E. Rhodes
S2c Clyde F. Richardson
S2c James A. Roberts
S1c Mango Roberts
MoMM3c Alphonse Robinson
S2c Fred Robinson, Jr.
S1c Eugene J. Rogers
S2c Robert Sanders *
S2c Wesley Saunders
Lt. Roland Schindler *
CM3c Carl C. Scott
Lt. Vernon C. Shamer
S1c Joseph J. Sheckles
S2c Willie Sims *
S1c Isaac E. Smith *
S1c James P. Smith
S1c Ellis Taylor
S2c Joseph M. Tolson
MA2c Maxie D. Towles
S1c(CM) Mervin L. Van Dunk
S1c Issiah Wade
S2c Charles Walker, Jr.
S2c Walter L. Walker, Jr. *
S2c Woodrow L. Walker
CM2c(T) William C. Warren*
S2c James L. Washington *
S2c Woodrow Washington, Jr.
CM3c Daniel West
Lt. (jg) Raymond R. White *
S1c Joseph B. White
S2c Arthur Whitmore
S2c Mitchell A. Williams *
S2c Maryland E. Wilson
GM3c Oliver Wilson
S2c Samuel D. Wilson
Lt. Harold A. Wood *
S2c James E. Woods *
S2c Walter E. Wright
S2c Charles E. Wyatt

**SS E.A. Bryan
U.S. Navy Armed Guard (13)**

S1c Wayland E. Causey
S1c Rudy J. Cebella
S1c Robert E. Chase
S2c Claude L. Chastain
SM3c John J. Gee
Lt. (jg) Ralph B. Hartmann
S1c Clarence R. Hollandsworth
S1c Kenneth H. Muirhead
S1c Jesse W. Mulligan
S1c Lloyd J. Quick
S1c Martin J. Setzer
S1c George H. Singer
S1c Listern L. Small

Maritime Service (31)

Elmer A. Andraschko, Cook
Albert A. Arsenian, Seaman
William C. Benhart, Oiler
Martin M. Cacic, Seaman
Ray E. Davis, Wiper
Donald L. Dennon, Wiper
Thomas E. Dorsey, Seaman
George H. Falk, Bos’n
Marcus J. Franklin, Engr.
Alfred D. Gilbert, Engr.
James R. Gilstrap, Seaman
Joseph D. Grange, Jr, Engr.
Fred Hayes, Seaman
Delbert R. Hutchinson, Fireman
Peter C. Jepsen, Ch. Engr.
Charles A. Johnson, Utilityman
Clifford R. Johnson, Utilityman
Ralph A. Lantz, Seaman

John A. Louis, Engr.
Frank C. Malizia, Carpenter
Edward Maniago, Messman
Harry E. Nathan, Seaman
Jesse Porter, Sr., Ch. Cook
Richard D. Roberson, Seaman
Aaron C. Sangster, Jr., Seaman
Ellsworth M. Shaw, Oiler
Howard A. Smith, 1st Mate
Andrew Suchan, Fireman
Robert F. Townsend, 2nd Mate
Harding E. White, Messman
George H. Witt, Utilityman

**SS Quinault Victory
U.S. Navy Armed Guard (17)**

GM3c Jack L. Albin
GM2c Delbert P. Bergstrom
S1c(RM) Jack P. Bowman
GM3c John G. Hall
S1c George D. Hovland
S1c Andy Morrow
GM2c William H. Mulryan
S1c Henry J. Myers
S1c Woodrow A. Riiff
S1c Jacob D. Risenhoover
S1c William R. Robinson
S1c Charles H. Rondell
S1c Jay Rose, Jr.
S1c Otis K. Ross
S1c Woodrow W. Saint
S1c Arnold T. Sanders
S1c Harold S. Sano

Maritime Service (36)

Robert D. Bailey, Utilityman
Robert E. Bartlett, Messman
John D. Bell, Asst. Purser
Frederick E. Bentley, Seaman
Donald H. Cheney, Elect.
Hugh E. Crawford, Maint. Man
Floyd F. Crist, Seaman
Albert C. Dinde, Messman
Wallace M. Durland, Seaman
Kenneth J. Eulrick, Seaman
Burke E. Falor, Utilityman
Eugene W. Garrett, Fireman
Robert K. Henriksen, Seaman
Elis Henriksen, Engr. *
Johannes H. Justesen, Steward
Walter F. Kannberg, Engr.
Robert E. Keim, 2nd Mate
Joseph B. Koeninger, Seaman
Karl L. Mallery, Engr.
Lloyd K. McDaniel, Seaman
Kenneth M. Moen, 3rd Mate
Robert S. Morill, Oiler
Isadore E. Narinsky, Seaman
Roy L. Nelson, Carpenter
David R. Parsons, 3rd Mate
Mike Pearson, Oiler
Ellis B. Pinson, Engr.
Richard V. Potter, Fireman
Virgil R. Sandberg, Engr.
Albert R. Scott, Ch. Mate
Lester S. Skance, Seaman
Howard W. Sullivan, Seaman
Robert J. Sullivan, Master
Glen E. Thompson, Engr. *
Louis J. Widner, Messman *
John A. Williams, Ch. Engr.

Navy & Contractor Employees (6)

Lawrence C. Bustrack, Macco Co. Office Manager *
Gundar Halverson, Macco Co. Timekeeper *
Raymond V. Hunnicutt, Brakeman Navy Employee
Thomas D. Hunt, Macco Co. Project Engr. *
Harry A. Middleton, Engineman Navy Employee
Fred Zanarini, Chauffeur Navy Employee *

Other Military (6)

Pvt. Elwin A. Blanke, Marine Corps *
BM1c Peter G. Broda, Coast Guard
MM1c William G. Degryce, Coast Guard
McMM3c Edward J. Portz, Coast Guard *
S1c Charles H. Riley, Coast Guard
S2c James C. Sullivan, Coast Guard *

** Identified Dead*



Annual memorial event commemorating the tragedy of 1944.

"...no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible for the posting of African-American enlisted personnel to the loading divisions at Port Chicago."

Secretary of the Navy, John Dalton, 1994

Port Chicago Today

Today, the fallen soldiers and civilians are remembered at the memorial. Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial was established as a National Memorial to honor the courage and commitment of the Sailors, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, Merchant Marine, and civilians killed and injured in the largest homeland disaster during World War II. On July 17, 1944, 320 men, over 200 of which were African-Americans, were instantly killed when a loaded munition ship blew up during loading operations. The Memorial recognizes the critical role they and the survivors of the explosion played in winning the war in the Pacific. Port Chicago National Memorial was dedicated in 1994 by the survivors of that tragic event and their families, Naval personnel, and the National Park Service. The explosion and its aftermath was a catalyst, one of many, that helped persuade the U.S. Navy and the military establishment to begin the long journey on the road to racial justice and equality following World War II.

Port Chicago was established on July 17, 1992 as part of the National Park Service, which administers 391 units throughout the United States.

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Visiting the Site

Sacrifices

The work done at Port Chicago was vital to the success of the war, yet the story of the men who carried out that work is often overlooked. The explosion at Port Chicago was the worst home front disaster of World War II. U.S. Navy and Marine personnel, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine, and civilian staff all served at Port Chicago. Two hundred-two of the 320 men killed were African-American enlisted men who were assigned to the dangerous duty of loading the ships. Their deaths account for 15% of all of the African-American deaths during World War II.

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial commemorates the significant role of the facility during World War II, recognizes all of those who served at Port Chicago, and honors the memory and sacrifice of those who gave their lives in the explosion of July 17, 1944, while fighting to maintain America's freedom.

The Memorial is located on an active military base. The National Park Service has permission to escort visitors to the Memorial at certain times.

Advanced reservations are by request and required, available Wednesday-Friday starting between 10:30 and noon (allow 2 hours). Visit includes free transportation to the Memorial on the military base and a guided tour. Allow two weeks to process your request.

For more information or to make tour reservations, call (925) 228-8860. Visit us on the web at www.nps.gov/poch. For additional information visit the Port Chicago Committee website at www.portchicagomemorial.org.



Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial
by John A. Keibel

The National Park Service cares for the special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

