Port Chicago Naval Magazine

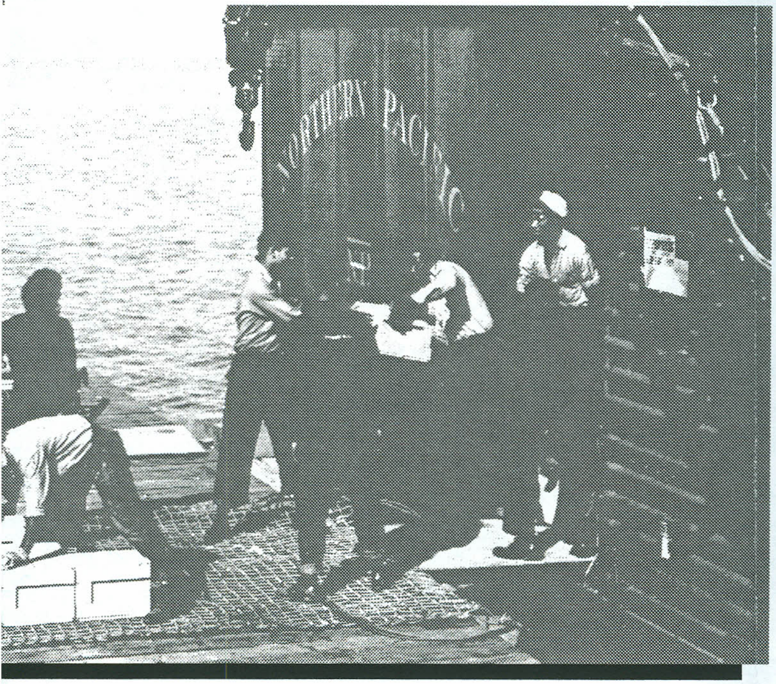
The Explosion's Aftermath

The Armed Forces, American Society

The Armed Forces were a mirror of American society at the time, reflecting the cooperation and dedication of a country. For many people, the explosion on July 17, 1944, became a symbol of what was wrong with American Society.

The consequences of the explosion would begin to reshape the way the Navy and society thought about our social standards. More importantly, the explosion illustrated a need to prevent another tragedy like this one.

A Dangerous Job, Little Training



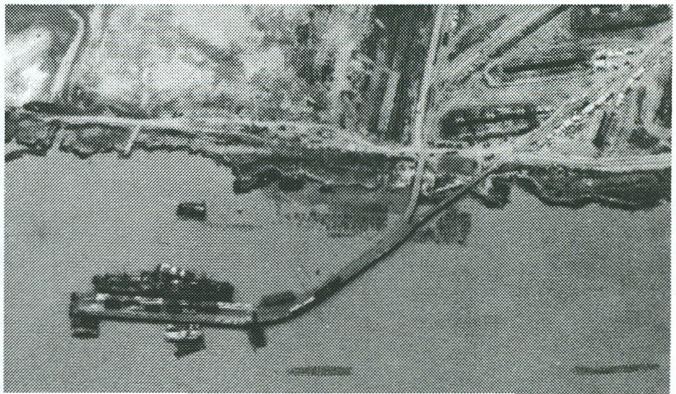
The tremendous danger and importance of the work, while not always recognized by the public, was always present in the minds of the men at Port Chicago. The Marines, Coast Guard and civilian employees knew of the danger, but none as vividly as the Merchant Marine crew and the Naval Armed Guard of the ships and the men serving on the loading docks.

In 1944, the Navy did not have a clear definition of how munitions should best be loaded. The dangerous work on the piers at Port Chicago and other Navy facilities was done by the men of the ordnance battalions. These men, like their officers, had received very little training in cargo handling, let alone in working with high explosives.

Coast Guard instructions, published in 1943, were often violated as it was felt that they were not safe or fast enough for Port Chicago's specific circumstances. The men on the pier were experimenting with and developing procedures which they felt were safer and faster.

Left-Damaged pier and debris smolder after the explosion

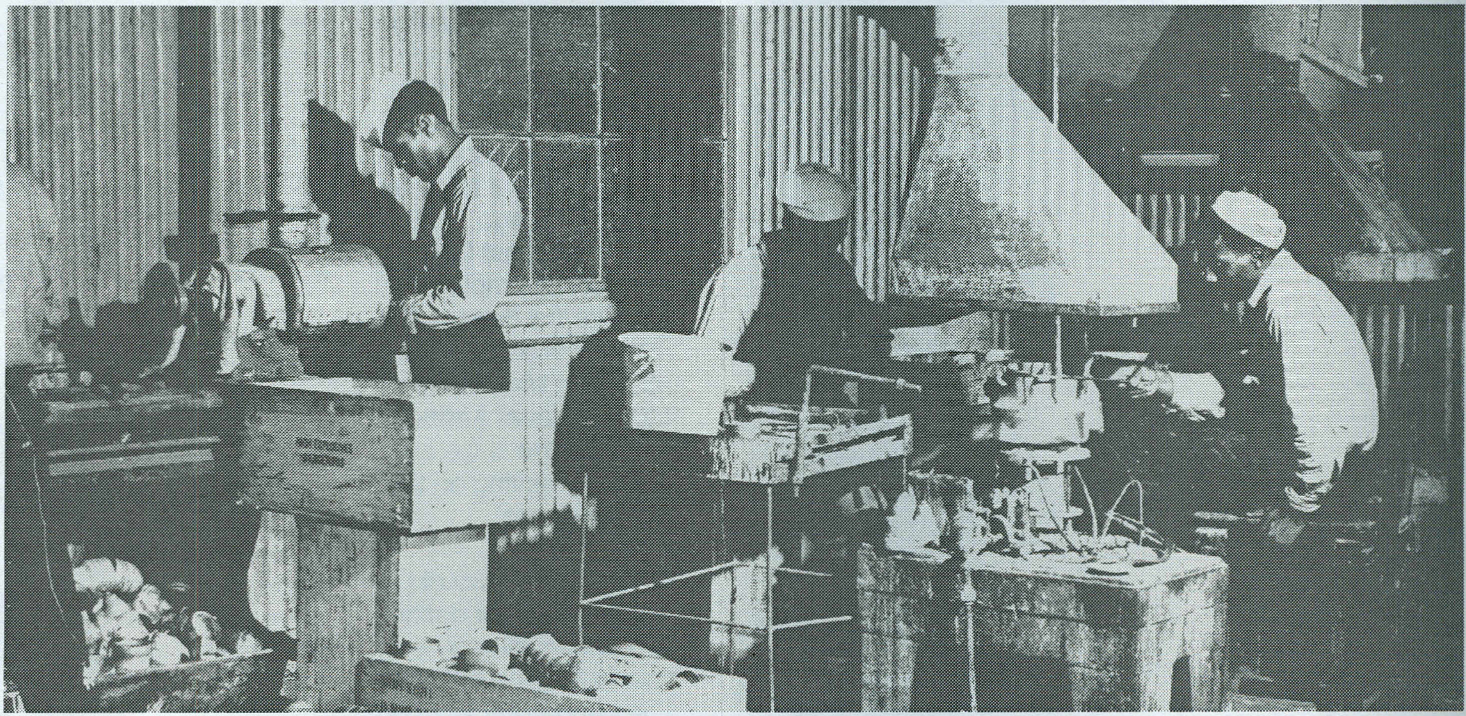
Top-Segregated African-American loading crews on the pier transfer munitions under officer's supervision



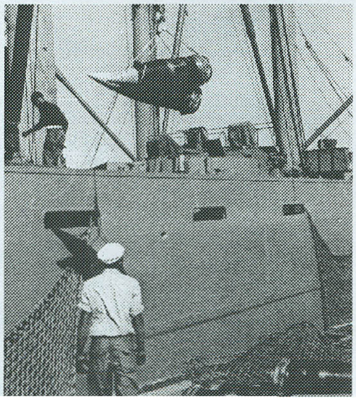
Aerial view of ships loading munitions shot about three months before the explosion

Raising the Safety Standards

After the explosion, the Navy would institute a number of changes in munitions handling procedure. Formalized training would be an important element, and certification would be required before a loader was allowed on the docks. The munitions themselves would be redesigned for safety while loading.



Racial Segregation



Bombs being loaded into a ship's large cargo hold

Port Chicago would also lead people to examine their society. There was growing resentment toward the policies of racial segregation throughout the nation. The Navy opened its ranks to African-Americans in 1942, but men served in segregated units supervised by white officers, and opportunities for advancement were extremely limited. The men assigned to the ordnance battalion at Port Chicago were African-American.

Wary Survivors Ordered Back to Duty

The explosion had shaken all of the men, but especially those surviving men who worked on the pier.

Of the 320 men killed, almost 2/3 were African-American sailors from division of the ordnance battalion. What had been minor grievances and problems before the explosion began to boil as apprehension of returning to the piers grew. On August 9, less than one month after the explosion, the surviving men, who had experienced the horror, were to begin again loading munitions, this time at Mare Island. They told the officers that they would obey any other order, but not that one.

Munitions crews move five inch antiaircraft shells onto railroad cars

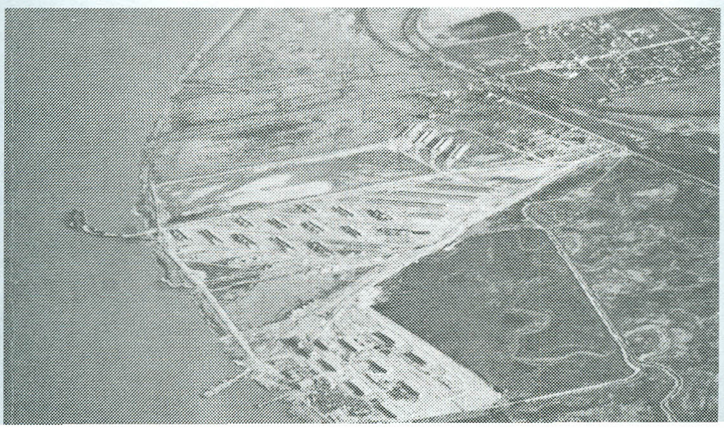
Courts Martial and Sentences

Of the 328 men of the ordnance divisions, 258 African-American sailors refused to load ammunition. In the end, 208 faced summary courts-martial and were sentenced to bad conduct discharges and the forfeit of three months' pay for disobeying orders. The remaining 50 were singled out for general courts-martial on the grounds of mutiny. The sentence could have been death, but they received between eight and fifteen years at hard labor after a trial which a 1994 review concluded had strong racial overtones. Soon after the war, in January 1946, all of the men were given clemency and an opportunity for an honorable discharge.

Change in the Navy

The explosion and later mutiny proceedings would help illustrate the costs of racial discrimination and fuel public criticism. By 1945, as the Navy worked toward desegregation, some mixed units appeared. When President Harry Truman called for the Armed Forces to be desegregated by 1948, the Navy could honestly state that Port Chicago had been a very important step in that process.

Port Chicago sailors assembling ordnance



Aerial view of Port Chicago and surrounding area before the explosion

National Memorial
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior