STARK, PETE
OWEN, MAJOR
INTERNATIONAL LONGSHOREMEN'S AND WAREHOUSE UNION, LONGSHORE, CLERK AND BOSSES CAUCUS
Dear Pete:

Thank you for writing about the Port Chicago National Memorial.

I regret that I will be unable to attend the dedication ceremony on the 50th anniversary of this terrible tragedy. I join you in saluting these brave men and in acknowledging the tremendous sacrifice of African-American veterans in World War II and, indeed, in every war.

You also raised the issue of the Secretary of the Navy's January 6, 1994, report on the Port Chicago case. The Secretary of Defense is currently reviewing Secretary Dalton's report.

Sincerely,

Bill Clinton

The Honorable Pete Stark
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515
BLOWN AWAY

Fifty Years Ago Today, Segregation in the Military Ended With a Bang, and a Whimper

By John Boudreau

CONCORD, Calif.

In his best was counter-arranging. Bed sheets clung to bodies like wet shreds. Sleep was a twitching, thrashing dance.

Seaman 1st Class Robert Routh, stripped to his skivvies, face slathered in cool Nokzuana, rested his head on the crook of his arm. The faint moonlight lit his face.

And then the sky turned bright as day. Light m连云港ished. Sound traveled faster than devastating. Seaman 1st Class Robert Routh recalled, "What he believes was the greatest display of fireworks any man had ever seen, a churning kaleidoscope—reds, whites and blues of indescribable fury. It was the finest thing he ever saw. It was the last thing he ever saw. The glass shredded his eyes."

Fifty years ago today, toward the end of World War II, a catastrophic explosion at Fort Chicago, 30 miles south of San Francisco, an explosion of unexploded munitions killed 370 men and injured thousands more. Though sabotage was suspected, it was never proved or even effectively alleged. Almost certainly, the explosion was an accident: equipment failure or human error as the loading of torpedoes being loaded at night onto ships headed for the Pacific. Some say the blast packed nearly the explosive force of the Hiroshima bomb.

It was the worst war-related disaster in the continental United States. It was also a double tragedy. The shock of the blast was staggering, but the aftermath carried how much more.

In the segregated Navy, of 2,000 Port Chicago-bound men run by white officers but staffed almost exclusively by black line, some 320 men were killed or injured while working under conditions they deemed, with ample reason, treacherous. They were asking for better safety precautions and better training. Many actually asked to be sent into combat. But it was wartime, and their blatant act of insubordination was to the Navy an unforgivable offense. Fifty-two were charged with mutiny. After a trial rife with racial overtones, they were convicted and sentenced to varying terms at hard labor.

It was the largest mutiny trial in U.S. naval history, but its importance was eclipsed by the unfolding events of the day. Still, in the history of the military and the American civil rights movement, the Port Chicago trial stands as a milestone, eventually spurred the Navy to begin desegregation in 1945.

"This work stoppage created the conditions where the liberals and conservatives in the military thought: 'We are done with this,' says historian Allen F. Alper, editor of "The Port Chicago Mutiny." Sometimes, great moments pivot on acts of great courage or wisdom or will. But sometimes they result from nothing more than strategic retreat—and the stubborn defiance of misguided authority. Such was the case of the Port Chicago 50.

"In a sense," says historian Alper. "these men are heroes."

A deadly military accident, Port Chicago was unapologetically segregated in 1944. That meant blacks

Joe Small, top, and a photo of almost 60 years ago as a young, active sailor who never got tall. "We never just shown a flag, but we were taught to fight," said Small. Left, workers collect munitions.
The Labors' Left

Bob Rudd was 17 when he rode a train to the Tennessee Training Center in Iowa. He tells his father into letting him enroll, arguing that putting on a uniform would bring some stability to his parents' better place for work. Equally important, it was his way of getting away from the sort of much better things were under the Missouri Band. No, he said.

Ruth, who entered the Navy without an eight-grade education, left it a blank man. He went on to earn his master's in sociology from Pepperdine College in Los Angeles, and works as a Veterans Administration benefits counselor in Los Angeles.

In 1944, Rudd was assigned to an all-black unit. But they trained for war just like the white men; to test their endurance, to get them acclimated to the language, to get them into the swing of things.

The Japanese Americans were considered nonentities. They were not part of the nation's labor force. They were not part of the nation's economy. They were not part of the nation's culture. They were not part of the nation's history.

The majority volunteered to go to war just like young white men. But they trained for war just like young black men. And they fought for the nation's freedom just like young white men.

They were willing to die for it, says Robin Wood, who ran a medical clinic for the Army in the Philippines.

"We wanted to prove we were as tough as the white man, that we loved our country and church. You can't say that to the white man, that we loved our country and church. And you can't say that to the white man, that we loved our country and church. And you can't say that to the white man, that we loved our country and church.

Fifty years later, rubble from the Port Chicago blast is still visible. Port Chicago survivors have returned, etched on granite slabs, placed on the West Coast's largest munitions port.

Lives of Avoidance

The black community and liberal white groups denounced the convictions. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt appealed,牵头， to the Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal. The sailors were shocked, haunted and sent by train—under Marine guards with machine guns—to the Terminal Island Disciplinary Barracks in San Pedro, Calif., where they remained for 16 months. They were then returned to sea on various ships. A year later,
The Honorable William J. Clinton  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20500  

Dear Mr. President:  

On July 17, 1994, the National Park Service will dedicate the Port Chicago National Memorial in Concord, California. The Memorial will be dedicated on the 50th anniversary of the cataclysmic explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine that resulted in the deaths of over 300 sailors and officers, mostly African-Americans. The Port Chicago disaster was the deadliest single war-related disaster in the continental United States during World War II. This single event accounted for 15 percent of the total of black naval casualties during World War II.

In 1992, Congress approved legislation creating this National Memorial. Unlike the D-Day commemoration, the history of the Port Chicago explosion is little remembered by Americans outside California. Yet to many veterans, and particularly to members of minority organizations, the event was of tragic proportions, and the marking of its 50th anniversary, together with the dedication of the Memorial itself, will be an historic and solemn occasion.”

We would hope that you would strongly consider participating in the dedication of this National Memorial to the victims of the Port Chicago disaster. Your participation would bring a long-deferred recognition of national tribute to these hundreds of men whose sacrifice was less recognized, but just as heroic, as those more celebrated Americans who participated in D-Day. We have similarly sought the participation of Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Secretary Jesse Brown in the dedication ceremony.

At the same time, you could help close the books on a related aspect of the Port Chicago disaster that has remained unresolved over the past half century. Only black sailors were used to load the ammunition aboard ships at Port Chicago, under the supervision of white officers. When ammunition loading resumed two weeks after the explosion, 258 black
seamen refused to return to work, citing what they said were unsafe working conditions and inadequate training. Later, under orders, 208 who had received summary courts martial did return, but 50 others still refused and were charged with mutiny and convicted despite the involvement of major figures like Thurgood Marshall and Eleanor Roosevelt.

We have initiated efforts to secure a review of these convictions based on new evidence that demonstrated significant racial prejudice in the trial proceedings. On January 7, 1994, the Navy refused to overturn the convictions following a review mandated by legislation approved by Congress. Although the Navy found that racial discrimination had existed, it decided there was no basis for overturning the convictions.

As evidence of prejudice before and during the trial of the alleged mutineers has accumulated, the poisoned atmosphere that led to their convictions has been generally accepted and renounced. Indeed, even at the time, the blatant racism inherent in the case was recognized, which helped speed the desegregation of the military by President Truman several years later.

The men who were tried and convicted are now old men. Several testified before Congress at the time the Memorial was being debated. Many went on to additional military service during the War. Few have spoken openly about the humiliation of the court martial that was so infected with racial prejudice, as was the nature of their jobs in the military itself during World War II.

Now, on the 50th anniversary, would be an appropriate time both to dedicate the Memorial, and to purge the records of those who were convicted of mutiny following the disaster. We should put this sorry chapter in racial relations behind us, and allow these remaining men to complete their lives knowing that they have the esteem and regard of their countrymen for their service during World War II.

We therefore request that you immediately review the record assembled by the Secretary of the Navy John Dalton during his recent review of the Port Chicago case, and mark the 50th anniversary of the explosion by issuing a Presidential Order expunging the convictions from the records of the 258 men (208 who were court martialed, and 50 who were convicted of mutiny) whether living or dead. While a presidential pardon is also a possibility, we note than many of the men have indicated a disinclination to accept a pardon for a "crime" they do not believe they committed.
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Lastly, we renew our invitation to you and other representatives of the Administration to participate in the dedication of the Port Chicago National Memorial on July 17.

Please have your staff contact John Lawrence, staff director of the Committee on Natural Resources (225-2761) for additional information.

Thank you for your kind attention to our requests.

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[Signatures]

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United States Senator

DIANNE FEINSTEIN
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FORTNEY PETE STARK
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NANCY PELOSI
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June 13, 1994

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FORTNEY PETE STARK
Member of Congress

NANCY PELOSI
Member of Congress
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Thursday, January 6, 1994

LAWMAKERS DISAPPOINTED BY NAVY REVIEW
OF PT. CHICAGO COURTS MARTIAL

WASHINGTON — Four California lawmakers said Wednesday they are disappointed by the conclusions of a Navy review of the courts martial of 258 black sailors stemming from a World War II incident at Port Chicago Naval Weapons Station in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Congressman Ronald Dellums (D-Berkeley), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Congressmen George Miller (D-Martinez) and Pete Stark (D-Hayward), and Sen. Barbara Boxer (a House member at the time) passed legislation in 1991 requiring the Navy to review the cases of the sailors who were court-martialed after refusing to resume loading munitions following a huge explosion that killed over 320 sailors, most of whom were black, in the worst domestic loss of life accident during the war.

The lawmakers believed the review was merited because of evidence discovered in the intervening years indicating that racial bias may have contributed to the courts-martial. The lawmakers acknowledged that the Navy has complied with the law in reviewing the case but said they were disturbed by the conclusions reached and that they will pursue the case further.

"The Department of the Navy today reported to us that based on a careful review of the 258 courts martial of the black Pt. Chicago seamen, no evidence could be found to merit overturning the convictions, except for that of two sailors, one of which was overturned last year and one of which was overturned shortly after the initial conviction," the lawmakers said in a joint statement issued from Washington.

"We appreciate the careful review conducted by the Navy and the good faith in which it has dealt with our offices. But we find the conclusions of the review highly disturbing. The Navy acknowledges that the sailors were subjected to racist conditions in their employment and their living conditions. And yet the Navy cannot understand that under those conditions, the decision to refuse to resume loading ammunition after the shock of the accident was not an act of rebellion but an act of self-preservation in light of the danger they faced specifically because they were black.

(more)
"The Navy review concluded that, 'There can be no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible for the posting of African-American enlisted personnel to the loading divisions at Port Chicago.' But it also concluded that it 'was not persuaded ... that racial prejudice or other improper factors tainted' the trial and the courts-martial.

"We believe that the Navy did not apply a broad enough view to this extraordinary case. Since World War II, a number of significant steps have been taken to redress wrongful actions taken against innocent Americans during or shortly after the war by the U.S. Government. The government has acknowledged the illegal internment of Japanese-Americans during the war. And most recently, Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary has called on the government to redress the victims and their families of deadly secret radiation tests conducted on unwitting subjects.

"In the case of Port Chicago, it is readily admitted by the Navy that these black sailors were treated unfairly in their assignment because they were black. And yet, the Navy has concluded that it is unable to find any reason to remove the label of 'mutineer' from the records of men who made great sacrifices to the war effort.

"We will not rest here. We will continue to search for other means to address this issue in the belief that the surviving sailors and their families and the families of those now deceased deserve the chance to clear their names.

"It is a positive development that the Navy has acknowledged that racism was in fact a way of life in the Navy during World War II. We would like to think that racism is no longer tolerated in the military and we will devote our time to reviewing racial attitudes in the military. But we believe that the Navy applied a technical and narrow view in this case and that further steps should be taken."

For Additional Information, please Contact:

George Withers (Dellums) at 202/225-2191
Daniel Weiss (Miller) at 202/225-2095
John Garcia (Stark) at 202/225-5065
Linda Marson (Boxer) at 202/224-3553

###
Got call from SCOTT HENRY, assistant to Congressman Major Owens. Henry had heard WBAI program on Port Chicago. (I had taped WBAI interview while in NYC two weeks ago.) He had not heard of PC case, and was very interested in present status, and possible intervention by Major Owens. In particular he suggested that Owens, Dellums and Veterans Administration Brwon might intervene with President Clinton to secure some remedy. He also suggested that the Congressional Black Cuacus on its own might do something by way of recognizing the significance to history (prompting the initiation of desegregation process in Navy; prompting initiation process of safety training and procedures for ammunition handling) of the work stoppage by the Port Chicago sailors. I heartily agreed with these suggestions.

He contacted Amistad to get a copy of my book. I faxed him recent TBS update article and news clippings. I will also get copy of PCM video to send to him.

SCOTT HENRY
c/o Congressman Major Owens
289 Utica Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11213

Phone: 718 773-3100
Fax: 718 735-7143
6 April 1994

MR ROBERT ALLEN
PO BOX 2869
OAKLAND CA 94609

Dear Mr. Allen:

Thank you for your letter to President Clinton concerning the Port Chicago incident. I am answering on behalf of the President.

In 1992, at the request of then Secretary of the Navy, the Honorable Sean O'Keefe, the Navy Judge Advocate General (JAG) reviewed the 258 court-martial convictions arising from the Port Chicago explosion. With the exception of one case, the review concluded that no error was committed that was prejudicial to the substantial rights of the accused.

The review conducted by the JAG, while thorough, was limited to the legal aspect of the courts-martial convictions. In light of the conclusions of that review, Mr. O'Keefe ordered the Board for Correction of Naval Records to review the remaining convictions as necessary. Furthermore, the Board was ordered to review all aspects of the allegations of racial discrimination and prejudice.

The Department of the Navy will not tolerate any form of discrimination, and investigates all cases of alleged discrimination and prejudice that are filed through proper channels.

I hope you find this information useful. Again, thank you for writing to the President.

Sincerely,

GREGORY R. NOWAK
Director, White House Liaison Office
Office of the Secretary of the Navy
Mr. Robert L. Allen  
Post Office Box 2869  
Oakland, California 94609

Dear Mr. Allen:

Thank you so much for your letter. President Clinton greatly appreciates the trust and confidence you have expressed in him by writing.

To ensure that your concerns are addressed, I am forwarding your letter to the Department of Defense for any appropriate action. Please bear in mind that it may take some time to look thoroughly into the concerns you have raised.

Many thanks for your patience.

Sincerely,

Marsha Scott  
Deputy Assistant to the President  
Director of Correspondence and Presidential Messages
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Presidential Messages
TO: President Bill Clinton
The White House
Washington, DC 20500
(202) 456-2461

From: Robert L. Allen

DATE: February 1, 1994
No. of Pages (inc. this sheet): 11

RE: Appeal for intervention in Port Chicago mutiny Cases

MESSAGE:
President Bill Clinton
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Clinton:

I am writing to request your intervention in the case of 50 African American sailors who were unjustly convicted of mutiny during World War II, and 208 others who were convicted of lesser charges. This incident followed a disastrous explosion at the Port Chicago (California) Naval Ammunition Depot on July 17, 1944, in which 320 U.S. sailors were killed (most of them black) and hundreds of others were injured. It was the worst home-front disaster of the war.

There had been complaints from the black sailors about unsafe working conditions and racial discrimination before the explosion. Indeed, racial segregation was commonly practiced in the Navy, and my research revealed that the men were untrained for ammunition handling and that dangerous practices were encouraged by the officers. After the disaster there was a work stoppage among the survivors. Some 258 men (most of whom were in fact teenagers) were then tried and found guilty.

I contend that the mutiny charge was not justified, that these men were victims of the racist climate in the Navy, and that specific improprieties occurred in the mutiny court martial. As you can see from the enclosed materials, through the assistance of leading members of Congress efforts have been made to secure a review by the Navy Department. Recently such a review was completed and, although the review board admitted that racial prejudice existed in the Navy at the time, it concluded that this had no impact on the court martial proceedings.

This is a contradictory and unacceptable finding. Moreover, the board refused to deal with other improper factors that also tainted the trial.

It seems clear that the Navy is unable to objectively examine the consequences of racism in the Navy. This July will mark the 50th
anniversary of the terrible disaster at Port Chicago. It is time for justice to be done so that these men will no longer have to bear the stigma of "mutineer." I therefore ask you to intervene and to set aside the convictions.

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WASHINGTON — Four California lawmakers said Wednesday they are disappointed by the conclusions of a Navy review of the courts martial of 258 black sailors stemming from a World War II incident at Port Chicago Naval Weapons Station in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Congressman Ronald Dellums (D-Berkeley), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Congressmen George Miller (D-Martinez) and Pete Stark (D-Hayward), and Sen. Barbara Boxer (a House member at the time) passed legislation in 1991 requiring the Navy to review the cases of the sailors who were court-martialed after refusing to resume loading munitions following a huge explosion that killed over 320 sailors, most of whom were black, in the worst domestic loss of life accident during the war.

The lawmakers believed the review was merited because of evidence discovered in the intervening years indicating that racial bias may have contributed to the courts-martial. The lawmakers acknowledged that the Navy has complied with the law in reviewing the case but said they were disturbed by the conclusions reached and that they will pursue the case further.

"The Department of the Navy today reported to us that based on a careful review of the 258 courts martial of the black Pt. Chicago seamen, no evidence could be found to merit overturning the convictions, except for that of two sailors, one of which was overturned last year and one of which was overturned shortly after the initial conviction," the lawmakers said in a joint statement issued from Washington.

"We appreciate the careful review conducted by the Navy and the good faith in which it has dealt with our offices. But we find the conclusions of the review highly disturbing. The Navy acknowledges that the sailors were subjected to racist conditions in their employment and their living conditions. And yet the Navy cannot understand that under those conditions, the decision to refuse to resume loading ammunition after the shock of the accident was not an act of rebellion but an act of self-preservation in light of the danger they faced specifically because they were black.

(more)
Port Chicago - Page 2
January 6, 1994

"The Navy review concluded that,

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

But it also concluded that it 'was not persuaded ... that racial prejudice or other improper factors tainted' the trial and the courts-martial.

"We believe that the Navy did not apply a broad enough view to this extraordinary case. Since World War II, a number of significant steps have been taken to redress wrongful actions taken against innocent Americans during or shortly after the war by the U.S. Government. The government has acknowledged the illegal internment of Japanese-Americans during the war. And most recently, Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary has called on the government to redress the victims and their families of deadly secret radiation tests conducted on unwitting subjects.

"In the case of Port Chicago, it is readily admitted by the Navy that these black sailors were treated unfairly in their assignment because they were black. And yet, the Navy has concluded that it is unable to find any reason to remove the label of 'mutineer' from the records of men who made great sacrifices to the war effort.

"We will not rest here. We will continue to search for other means to address this issue in the belief that the surviving sailors and their families and the families of those now deceased deserve the chance to clear their names.

"It is a positive development that the Navy has acknowledged that racism was in fact a way of life in the Navy during World War II. We would like to think that racism is no longer tolerated in the military and we will devote our time to reviewing racial attitudes in the military. But we believe that the Navy applied a technical and narrow view in this case and that further steps should be taken."

For Additional Information, please Contact:

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Port Chicago — time to end the injustice

On July 17, 1944, a Richmond-built liberty ship, the S.S. Enoch A. Bryan, took on the last of its load of incendiaries at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine. Its cargo was unloaded by African-American sailors assigned to the most dangerous duty in the Navy — stevedoring explosives.

As the last of the Bryan’s riggings were secured, she exploded — pulverizing her hull, destroying a victory ship docked nearby and leveling the weapons depot. The blast killed 323 people and injured another 390. More than two-thirds of those suffering casualties were black people.

A month later, orders came down for the surviving members of the all-black unit to resume munitions loading at an auxiliary dock at the Mare Island Naval Ship Yard in Vallejo. A group of 258 refused orders, afraid for their lives and angry over hazardous working conditions. Under threat of summary execution, all but 50 of the refuseniks returned to work. Those who agreed to resume their duties were later issued bad conduct discharges. Those who stayed behind were charged with the high crime of mutiny and tried as a group before a military tribunal. The men were convicted despite the outrage of the civil rights community.

Discrimination charged

Those convictions, tainted by charges of racial discrimination, sparked a furor that has continued ever since. Determined to end their shame, the surviving mutineers fought valiantly for justice.

Finally, in 1991, Bay Area congress members were able to bring them hope. The congressional delegation, led by George P. Miller III, D-Martinez, sponsored legislation that forced the Navy to reopen the case. The bill directed the Secretary of the Navy to determine whether racial prejudice influenced the convictions and if so, whether the courts-martial were fair.

Last week, the Navy released its findings and met further outrage. Two Navy departments — the Board of Correction of Naval Records and the Judge Advocate General of the Navy — conducted independent investigations during the 1992-93 fiscal year.

‘Nothing unjust’

Both agencies concluded “there was nothing unfair or unjust in the final outcome of any of the Port Chicago courts-martial,” according to a statement issued by the Navy.

The BCNR panel further “concluded that racial discrimination did play a part in the assignment of African-American soldiers to load ammunition,” but not in the convictions.

Even at the time, the case seemed outrageous. Attorney Thurgood Marshall, later a Supreme Court Justice, flew out from Washington, D.C. during the trial to observe the proceedings. He rushed back East in disgust to demand a federal investigation, citing several aspects of the case that warranted scrutiny.

He cited “the inconsistent, haphazard manner in which the 50 seamen were singled out from more than 400 men whose actions were almost identical to those of the 50 accused.”

Then, as now, those courts-martial “scream out with injustice,” as Miller said when he beseeched his colleagues to right the wrongs committed by the naval tribunal.

These new findings simply compound the tragedy — adding insult to injury for 50 brave and innocent patriots who were victimized by the evil of racism.

Since the Navy refuses to see the errors of its ways, it’s up to the commander-in-chief — President Clinton — to set the record straight and exonerate the Mare Island mutineers.

The 50th anniversary (if not sooner) of the terrible explosion at Port Chicago would be a perfect opportunity for the president to issue his pardon and bring justice where justice was denied.
Port Chicago

THE NAVY'S exoneration of itself last week in the long-disputed courts-martial of 50 black sailors for mutiny following the disastrous Port Chicago explosion and fire of 1944 came as a bitter disappointment to all those who believe, with good reason, that the case represented one of the greatest American injustices of World War II.

The Navy's review of the case, ordered by Congress, acknowledged that the 50 sailors convicted of mutiny and 256 other black sailors convicted on lesser charges were victims of racial prejudice — a finding that could hardly be denied given the flagrant racism practiced by the Navy 50 years ago. But they concluded that the convictions themselves were not tainted by prejudice and thus must stand.

The so-called "mutiny" consisted of a work stoppage by black sailors assigned to load ammunition aboard ships after two ships exploded at the dock, killing 320 men, most of them black. The entire case was hushed up under a blanket of national security.

IF THE NAVY is unable to rectify the blatant injustice at the heart of this half-century-old tragedy, the only recourse is for President Clinton to take executive action. The Port Chicago convictions should be set aside without further ado.
STATEMENT

March 4, 1993

To: Board for Correction of Naval Records
Department of the Navy
Washington, DC 20370-5100

Attn: W. Dean Pfeiffer, Executive Director

From: Robert L. Allen
Author, The Port Chicago Mutiny

Subject: Review of Port Chicago mutiny cases, 1944

I am writing to urge the Board to overturn the convictions of 258 black sailors accused of mutinous conduct in 1944. The essence of my argument is that racially prejudicial attitudes and actions on the part of the Port Chicago command and the 12th Naval District fostered a pattern of racial discrimination in which African American sailors were mistreated and also scapegoated for the situation at the base, including the terrible explosion of July 17, 1944. The mutiny charges and convictions were a part of this racial scapegoating pattern.

My argument is as follows:

1. Racial discrimination existed at the Port Chicago Naval Ammunition Depot. From its inception in late 1942 until after the 1944 explosion only black men were assigned to the dangerous work of loading ammunition aboard ships at Port Chicago. These men lived in segregated barracks and worked in segregated work divisions under the command of white officers. The assignment of blacks to work at Port Chicago was resented by the white commanding officer, Nelson H. Goss, who regarded blacks as troublemakers and poor workers (see point #3 below). Moreover, the black enlisted men were given no training for the work they were expected to do. The white officers compelled competition or racing between different black
work divisions using threats of punishment or rewards, contrary to safe loading procedure. (42-45, 48, 72, 108-9)

2. After the July 17th explosion a Naval Court of Inquiry was convened on July 21st to investigate the circumstances surrounding the disaster. Port Chicago commanding officers, Nelson H. Goss and Merrill T. Kinne, were present at this inquiry as "interested parties" and allowed to present evidence and examine witnesses "in the same way as a defendant." (Note: Capt. Goss was commander of Mare Island N.A.D., of which Port Chicago was a subcommand, headed by Merrill Kinne.) Much of the proceeding was spent in disputes over who was responsible for unsafe loading practices at Port Chicago -- the base commanders or the captain of the port. Eventually attention was shifted to the black ammunition loaders (who were not present at the inquiry to defend themselves). The judge advocate concluded that it was the "consensus" of the witnesses, including the "interested parties" (who, I might add, could themselves have been charged with negligence or misconduct if they were found responsible for the explosion), that "the colored enlisted personnel are neither temperamentally or intellectually capable of handling high explosives." In its findings the Court of Inquiry effectively cleared the white officers of responsibility for the disaster, and insofar as any human agent was invoked, the blame was placed on the black ammunition loaders. (68-72)

3. The charge of mutiny against the sailors who engaged in the work stoppage was first suggested by Captain Nelson Goss, who had an active dislike for the black men under his command. (43, 89; for information on attitude of Nelson Goss toward black sailors see his testimony at Court of Inquiry, enclosed, especially pages 879 - 883, 885 - 887; also see copy of a memorandum dated13 August 1944 by Goss referring to the work stoppage as a "mutinous action", also enclosed.)

4. The charge of mutiny was not justified under the laws obtaining at the time. There was no attempt to usurp, subvert or override superior authority.
military authority. There was a passive work stoppage brought on by fear, not an active revolt with the intent of seizing command (94, 125; see also oral argument made by defense attorney Gerald Veltmann in trial transcript).

5. The prosecution in the mutiny trial did not establish that direct orders to load ammunition were given to all 50 of the accused. Even if they were, refusal to obey an order does not constitute mutiny. (94-103, 125)

6. The prosecutor in the mutiny trial, James F. Coakley, had a major conflict of interest that was not known to the Court or the defense. Coakley's sister, Alice, was at the time married to Lt. Ernest Delucchi, a major prosecution witness. Had this fact been known it could have provided grounds for requesting a mistrial. (The fact of Coakley's relationship to Delucchi was established in a television documentary aired by San Francisco KRON-TV in February, 1990. A copy of the documentary videotape is enclosed herewith.)

7. The verdict in the mutiny trial was reached with unseemly haste. All 50 defendants were found guilty after only 80 minutes of deliberation by the Court, which presumably included time for lunch as the decision was made during the noon lunch break. (126) This suggests that the Court's members perhaps had already decided in advance what their verdict would be. Indeed, in the KRON-TV documentary defense attorney Veltmann stated that he overheard Admiral Osterhaus, the senior court officer, declare, "We're going to find them guilty." This statement -- indicating the Court's prejudgment -- could be grounds for a mistrial.

8. Thurgood Marshall, then special counsel for the NAACP, filed an appeal brief on behalf of the defendants. Marshall argued, among other points, that inadmissible hearsay evidence had been allowed to taint the trial. (See Marshall's appeal brief appended to the mutiny trial transcript.) The then Secretary of the Navy advised the trial court that admission of hearsay evidence was an error and asked the court to reconsider its findings. Not surprisingly, the court affirmed its original decision.
I strongly agree with Thurgood Marshall's statement in his appeal: "Justice can only be done in this case by a complete reversal of the findings." I contend that the conviction of 208 black sailors in summary court martial and 50 black sailors in general court martial was racially motivated. The purpose of the highly publicized mutiny trial was to scapegoat these men and deflect attention from the appalling conditions (racism, lack of training, forced competition, improper safety procedures, etc.) at the Port Chicago base. These men and their families have endured the stigma of "mutineer" for nearly fifty years. It is time for justice finally to be done. I urge the Board for Correction of Naval Records to remove the stigma of these unjust convictions.

Respectfully submitted,

[Signature]
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San Francisco, California
January, February, 1994

Resolution: Miscellaneous #1

PORT CHICAGO SAILORS

WHEREAS: The Navy reopened the Port Chicago "mutiny" case of World War II at the urging of four Bay Area members of Congress; and

WHEREAS: The Navy brass has denied exoneration for the 50 black sailors accused of mutiny who refused to load ammunition on a ship after 320 were killed in an ammunition explosion at Port Chicago, the worst domestic accident in the war; and

WHEREAS: The ILWU offered to train sailors in the safe handling of explosives shortly before the accident but was rebuffed by the Navy; and

WHEREAS: The Navy makes the absurd claim that although black sailors were the victims of racial prejudice in the then segregated military, racism didn't taint the trial; THEREFORE BE IT

RESOLVED: That the ILWU call on the other AFL-CIO unions to help correct this historic injustice and recognize the bold action of these black sailors for what it was - a justifiable work stoppage on unsafe working conditions; and BE IT FURTHER

RESOLVED: That we request President Bill Clinton to issue an Executive Pardon.

Submitted by:
ILWU Local 10
Port Chicago Mutiny

Editor — The Navy's refusal to clear 50 black sailors of mutiny convictions from World War II was shameful. The charges against them were vindictive.

The two indisputable facts were: 1) Blacks were segregated in a "Jim Crow" military system and relegated to the most dangerous and onerous work. 2) In doing longshore work they had been given no training in the safe handling of explosives, even though the longshore union (ILWU) had offered such training. More ominously, the Navy's commanding officers, all white, bet each other as to whose units could load ammunition fastest.

Truly, this was a recipe for disaster. In fact, the worst domestic disaster of World War II ensued at Port Chicago. The "mutiny" that followed was a spontaneous and justifiable work stoppage. The ILWU at its last union convention voted to demand that "the government grant complete exoneration."

The Navy brass' argument that although the black sailors were victims of racism they received a fair trial just doesn't hold water. It seems to me that after the "Tailhook Scandal" and the homophobic hysteria, the Navy brass is on a "ship of fools" that is sinking fast.

JACK HEYMAN
Oakland
The recent decision by the Clinton administration to send $500 million in humanitarian aid to Rwanda will undoubtedly add to the debate about what to do with Rwanda. I am sure the decision will be welcomed by many Rwandans. Others will argue over the appropriateness of the form the aid took and its timeliness. The gesture of deploying the $500 million aid package at the end of July will be seen by some as being too little, too late. In this instance, I adhere to the saying, Better late than never.

To explain my feelings toward the administration decision, I'll paraphrase a journalist writing for The Independent of Ibadan, Nigeria: To the extent that Clinton's decision offers a plank to end the carnage, it deserves support. It is a bridge that must be consolidated for the restoration of sanity, decency and civil order. The United Nations and the world community must sustain the momentum and sense of urgency by mobilizing further international participation and financial aid to guarantee the mission.

The new policy came after months of savage fighting in which Hutus and Tutsis killed each other by the hundreds of thousands. Something had to be done when cholera and later dysentery began to finish what the firearms could not quite complete: 20,000 victims of the diseases buried so far. That something had to be done was the rationale the French used for their unilateral decision to intervene. They were soon followed by some “allies” on the African continent, particularly Senegal and Ghana. The French maintain that they were moved solely by humanitarian reasons. Not so, reacted voices from around the world. States an editorial in the German paper the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: “Most of the weapons with which the old regime was equipped — and which it passed on in part to its murdering militias — came from French

See Rwanda, page 7


The continuing debacle in Haiti has produced a curious breed of born-again interventionists: people who have for decades opposed the deployment of U.S. forces abroad are now leading the call to arms. President Jean Bertrand Aristide has, according to press reports, joined the ranks of those calling for an invasion, and even some Haitians who don’t want intervention are asking for it in the hopes of pressuring the Clinton administration to take a firm stand against the military. But it’s a dangerous game to ask for what you don’t really want: you may get it.

Faced with the evidence of the Bush and Clinton administration’s records toward Haiti, I
Sunday, July 17, the National Park Service dedicated the Port Memorial at Concord, California, in memory of the 320 men killed and 390 injured in a devastating explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine 50 years ago. When work was resumed after clean-up at the site, 258 black sailors in the racially segregated unit refused to return to work, citing unsafe working conditions and the lack of training in the handling of deadly explosives. Most of the protesters later went back to work, but 50 seamen held out. There were hasty court-martials, with the 50 young men given lengthy prison terms and dishonorable discharges. Those who returned to work after the refusal were convicted of lesser charges. After the war the sentences were reduced to time served and the dishonorable discharge status was reversed, with the Defense Department’s recognition that racial prejudice had played a part in the whole affair.

Early this year Secretary of the Navy John H. Dalton, after a review of the case, upheld the convictions. The Navy admitted that the black seamen had been assigned the hazardous work because of their race but denied that racial prejudice played a part in the court-martials. (Ironically, at about the same time that a notice of this decision appeared in the local paper, the media were reporting the ease with which the participants in the Tailhook scandal were being excused of wrongdoing.)

Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein and Representatives Ron Dellums, George Miller, Nancy Pelosi and Pete Stark have petitioned the President to review the case and issue a presidential order to expunge the convictions. The earlier review by the Navy was also prompted by requests by some of these legislators. They are to be congratulated for these efforts and encouraged to keep pursuing this matter.

On July 17 the San Francisco Chronicle published an editorial, “Remember Port Chicago,” concluding, “We strongly support the recommendation [of the legislators] and add that a complete exoneration, not a pardon, is in order. When that happens, the new national monument at Concord will honor the memories and the sacrifices of all the men who suffered at Port Chicago in 1944 — those who worked, those who died and those who stood up for their rights as Americans.”

The Los Angeles Times on July 10, 1994, also published an editorial supporting the legislators in their requests for reversal of the convictions. The day of the dedication, the CBS news program “Sunday Morning” featured an account of the incident, with interviews with some of the surviving sailors. It was apparent that these are very painful memories for the men. Also interviewed was Bay Area scholar Robert L. Allen, who thoroughly researched the incident and its aftermath, interviewing many of the participants. His book, The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny in U.S. History, is a sobering account of the overt racism that was part of the segregated military services of that era. It is part of our history, which we must acknowledge and work to correct. Please ask the President to issue a presidential order to expunge the convictions.
Now and then we receive calls at the center from young adults, usually around 18 years of age, who have just received information from the Selective Service informing them of their duties to register. More often, the calls come from concerned parents, who don't want their kids joining the military but are not sure what to do. A new book is going to make the job of counseling people considering conscientious objection considerably easier. The Book is C.O.—Conscientious Objector: Experiences of a Noncombatant in the Navy during World War II. The book's author, Charles E. Wallace, is a former teacher, coach, school administrator and professor of education, now living in retirement in Chico. In C.O., he relates some of his experiences with the bureaucratic Selective Service in the U.S. Navy.

Wallace had requested classification as a conscientious objector, outlining his moral beliefs. A conscientious objector is defined as "one who on the basis of religious or moral principles refuses to bear arms or participate in military service." Wallace clearly indicates grounds for his request: at the age of nine he formed his values as part of his "training to become a member of the Christian Church." Later these values were reinforced when he enrolled in Whittier College, a Quaker institution (Quakers are among America's earliest proponents of the philosophy of nonviolence and are known for their pacifist activism). He developed strong opposition to war and to killing another human being under any circumstances.

When it came, his induction notice had the classification 1A; eventually he was reclassified I-A-O (noncombatant). A noncombatant conscientious objector is defined as a "person who, by reason of religious training and belief, is conscientiously opposed to combatant military service in which he might be ordered to take human life, but not conscientiously opposed to noncombatant military service in which he could contribute to the health, comfort, and preservation of others."

Sworn in the Navy on July 5, 1945, the author became known as a "conchie" — "a status at par with that of blacks, communists, bed wetters, sleep-walkers and homosexuals."

From that moment on, it appears that everyone — from the guard who took him to "Company Q" (a make-shift prison cell) and refused to answer any of the author's questions, to the yeoman giving the medical exam to new inductees and the Navy psychiatrist who interviewed him — was set on breaking Chuck down.

Lt. Commander Abramowitz was the Navy psychiatrist. He is portrayed as an officer assigned to determine Wallace's sanity; what, other than mental illness, could explain Wallace's risking being singled out as a "conchie" during a war, and

See C.O. next page
From C.O., previous page

given the treatment reserved for blacks, communists and homosexuals?

During extended sessions, he drilled Wallace with questions about the author’s feelings toward his parents, his relationship with his mother, his sexuality, his relationship to the church, his choice of a college — as if the answer to these questions would somehow determine the outcome of the war against Hitler’s troops.

A day spent with a marine military police while under detention stood out in the mind of the author:

He began before taking me to breakfast, my clothes weren’t clean enough to be seen in the chow hall so he ordered me to take them off. He said I was too slow, then whapped me with his nightstick and had me wash my shirt and socks together. He stayed all morning, forcing me to scrub every inch of the deck (floor) with a hand rag and clean the head two or three times while he continued to whack me with the nightstick, kick me while I was on the floor and knee me in the groin when I didn’t move fast enough.

Blacks and homosexuals were being weeded out quickly in the Navy, and if many an officer had his way, “conchies” would be next. Accepting class 1-A-O inductees was problematic for the Navy. It was a long-held practice in the Navy that in time of battle, all of the men serving on a ship had special assignments for combat duty. Even members of the medical corps were assigned to ammunition stations when not actually engaged at dressing stations. Therefore, the total number of known conscientious objectors in the Navy was very small and never exceeded 200 at any one time.

The book’s appendices offer information on the law and regulations about conscientious objector classification. Section F of the Appendix provides the little-known information that an estimated

“70,000 to 75,000 militarily liable registrants, aged 18 through 44 years, filed claims of conscientious objection during the six and a half years of Selective Service operations during WWII. Of these an estimated 20,000 . . . were found exempt or deferrable for other reasons . . . As many as 25,000, however, were estimated to have been inducted for noncombatant service.”

After his discharge, Chuck chose to establish himself in the educational field: he earned an M.S. degree from the University of Southern California in 1947, and 10 years later an Ed.D. (doctorate in education) from the same school. Now 76, Chuck spends his time pursuing a variety of activities. He volunteers with organizations promoting an anti-war, anti-militaristic message: it was in that capacity as a draft counselor that Chuck approached me at the Chico Peace & Justice Center to “connect with the local peace movement.” He has done this type of work with the Ashland Peace House in Oregon, providing counseling regarding Selective Service.


C.O.—Conscientious Objector is available for sale through the Chico Peace & Justice Center ($7.95 per copy). It is also available in audio cassette (the two-cassette package is $14.95).
find support for U.S. or U.N. military intervention among longtime critics of American policy in the Third World puzzling. This support doubtless reflects the noxiousness of much of the articulate opposition to intervention. It also reflects the horrors of current conditions in Haiti. Some people may think it’s impossible for Haitians to stop these horrors themselves — or callous enough to suggest that they should. But endorsement of intervention ignores fundamental realities about U.S. foreign policy that one would have thought had not been forgotten.

There is no way for democracy and social justice to come to Haiti unless the Haitian people themselves take center stage. So we should not be asking whether the U.S. government ought to intervene, but how we can help a popular movement in Haiti to take back the country and put it in the hands of its own people.

To believe that U.S. policy would suddenly reverse itself if the United States were to intervene is what psychiatrists have called “magical thinking.” The U.S. government’s failure to help Aristide is rooted in its desire to preserve the status quo and its low-wage development model, not only in Haiti but throughout the region. Can anyone seriously maintain that the United States would use military force to install a government in Haiti that reflects the aspirations for economic and political change that inspired the people to vote for Aristide? To pose the question is to answer it.

If the U.S. invades, it might well not restore Aristide at all (see Wisconsin Democratic Congressman David Obey’s call for a 10-year occupation and “new elections” and the dismissal of Aristide by pro-interventionist Senator Sam Nunn). I don’t mean to suggest that a U.S. invasion would support military leader Raoul Cedras. Far more likely, it would try to promote someone like Marc Bazin, the “moderate” former World Bank official whom the U.S. supported against Aristide in the presidential elections. If he is too discredited by the coup, then perhaps the Clinton administration will opt for Robert Malval, Aristide’s current prime minister, who has shown himself more willing than Aristide to accede to U.S. pressures for “compromise.”

And if the United States did bring Aristide back, it would undoubtedly be as a figurehead constrained in a thousand ways by the U.S. military presence from carrying out a social and economic program even vaguely resembling the one he championed in his presidential campaign. Do we really want to take responsibility for introducing American troops (or U.N. forces following U.S. orders) into the equation of internal Haitian politics, enabling them to block a grassroots democratic movement not only now but for the indefinite future?

Bernac Celestin and others have suggested an internationally sponsored invasion by Haitian exiles. This might be a positive development if it means an initiative controlled by democratic Haitian exiles working with grassroots groups in Haiti, with outside governments embarrassed into contributing support. But any invasion choreographed and overseen by the United States — and it is hard to envision our government as it is presently constituted supporting any exile invasion without American choreography and direction — would suffer from the same basic flaws as outright U.S. military intervention.

The main way people in the United States can provide solidarity with the Haitian people’s movement for democracy and social justice is by pressuring our government to start really supporting Aristide politically. That would mean, for starters, an end to “background” comments about his supposed mental health problems or his “intransigence” because he is unwilling to enter into coalition with allies of the military. Such political support would require a serious housecleaning at CIA, the U.S. embassy in Port-au-Prince, and the Pentagon, all of whom have repeatedly spread lies about Aristide to Congress and the press.

For months, the Clinton administration has been foot-dragging on Haiti with disastrous result. Our government should have swiftly complied with Aristide’s requests for meaningful sanctions, for closing down U.S. assembly plants and for pressure on the Dominican Republic to stop violating the embargo. In response to enormous pressure, the administration has at long last complied with some of these requests. We should demand that these measures be sustained and extended in accord with the wishes of Aristide’s government.

We should also press Clinton to stop sending Haitian refugees back to horrific repression. The “new” refugee policy toward Haiti is a sham.
administration spokesperson says that when this policy finally gets under way, no more than 10 percent of the refugees will qualify for admission, as it will be limited to close associates of Aristide, journalists and other high profile individuals. All Haitian refugees should at least be given temporary protected status and allowed to stay in the U.S.

In this post-cold war moment, policy-makers are looking for a publicly respectable formula that explains why they should be able to fight the Gulf War, and why they shouldn’t have to go into Haiti or Bosnia. If they were open about it, they’d say, “We want to defend oil and the American ‘free-market’ system and American economic and military power, but we don’t want to do anything that runs the risk of letting loose popular forces abroad, or that would be popularly difficult at home.” We should make their goal of preserving a massive U.S. military force harder to achieve by building on the American people’s mistrust and discomfort about intervention.

At the same time we need to draw a sharp line between our own opposition to intervention and Pat Buchanan-style isolationist narcissism. Drawing this distinction requires that we challenge our government to live up to its rhetoric and carry out a truly democratic foreign policy. It requires that we talk about what a democratic U.S. foreign policy would be like: an affirmative, positive policy that gives political solidarity to movements for social change around the world and that has a radically different economic project.

Outside military intervention almost never provides a lasting solution to any internal crisis. And although there might be rare instances where intervention can help, a U.S. government still committed to imposing inequitable global austerity and U.S. preeminence is a highly unlikely candidate for carrying out such an intervention. We shouldn’t put the cart before the horse: our immediate task is to change the fundamentals of U.S. foreign policy, not to dispatch the Marines.

To bring the issues back to Haiti: Amy Wilentz said a few moments ago that her mind tells her not to intervene, but her heart tells her otherwise. My response is: Let your mind remind you of what U.S. troops will do when they get there, and your heart will have no trouble following.
deliveries." According to this account, bad conscience rather than good intentions explain France’s policy. The Times of London explains the intervention as France’s “obsession with preserving the reach of the French language.”

To the credit of the French, at least they realized what the rest of the world did not seem to care about: something had to be done about Rwanda. However, there should be but one motive behind any policy vis-à-vis Rwanda at this point: go to the aid of innocent victims; rescue people in danger of death.

At a time of year when activists are planning activities to commemorate the anniversary of the first use of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, efforts should not be spared to stop the genocide going on. For in many ways, the atrocities in Rwanda are not unlike the previous experiences of Jews and Armenians in Europe.

We have to do our part to help alleviate the suffering and feelings of despair, no matter how small it appears, and hope for better without losing touch with a certainty: in the end, Rwandans themselves will have to heal the wounds of the present horrors and build a nation. Maybe after Rwandans act upon this realization, they will teach a much-needed lesson to many regimes in Africa that have been following the same troubling pattern of relying on outside forces to solve their problems. A recent article in the Zambia Daily Mail said it all: “African governments have been too complacent in depending on Western participation in settling disputes. The lukewarm response from the international community to act and stop the brutal genocide in Rwanda have more than underscored the need for Africa to get its act together and stop being dependent on Western countries.”

Alioune

THE UNITY DAY PROJECT
On August 20, 1994, the Unity Day Project will unite the whole world in a day of peaceful protest against the death penalty. This special day will begin in Australia, proceed through Europe and then link up with the United States. The day will launch a 12-month campaign against capital punishment, and petitions collected during this period will be presented to the embassies of 103 nations that still have the death penalty.

In California, there will be a day-long vigil at the north steps of the State Capitol in Sacramento, with ecumenical prayer services, a candlelight ceremony and an encirclement of the Capitol building in the evening. The day begins at 7:00 a.m. and ends at 9:00 p.m.

At exactly 7:57 a.m., three minutes of silence will be observed simultaneously by Unity Day participants all over the world. Prayer services, led by local death penalty abolition groups, will then begin and continue all day.

At 7:00 p.m. there will be an ecumenical prayer service, followed by a candlelight vigil that will encircle the Capitol. Plan now to participate in this unique international event and demonstrate your opposition to the death penalty. For further details on the day’s events, please call Georgia Lyga at (916) 733-0255.
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LET THEM KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

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Port Chicago Remembered
by Margaret Landes

Sunday, July 17, the National Park Service dedicated the Port Memorial at Concord, California, in memory of the 320 men killed and 390 injured in a devastating explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine 50 years ago. When work was resumed after clean-up at the site, 258 black sailors in the racially segregated unit refused to return to work, citing unsafe working conditions and the lack of training in the handling of deadly explosives. Most of the protesters later went back to work, but 50 seamen held out. There were hasty court-martials, with the 50 young men given lengthy prison terms and dishonorable discharges. Those who returned to work after the refusal were convicted of lesser charges. After the war the sentences were reduced to time served and the dishonorable discharge status was reversed, with the Defense Department’s recognition that racial prejudice had played a part in the whole affair.

Early this year Secretary of the Navy John H. Dalton, after a review of the case, upheld the convictions. The Navy admitted that the black seamen had been assigned the hazardous work because of their race but denied that racial prejudice played a part in the court-martials. (Ironically, at about the same time that a notice of this decision appeared in the local paper, the media were reporting the ease with which the participants in the Tailhook scandal were being excused of wrongdoing.)

Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein and Representatives Ron Dellums, George Miller, Nancy Pelosi and Pete Stark have petitioned the President to review the case and issue a presidential order to expunge the convictions. The earlier review by the Navy was also prompted by requests by some of these legislators. They are to be congratulated for these efforts and encouraged to keep pursuing this matter.

On July 17 the San Francisco Chronicle published an editorial, “Remember Port Chicago,” concluding, “We strongly support the recommendation [of the legislators] and add that a complete exoneration, not a pardon, is in order. When that happens, the new national monument at Concord will honor the memories and the sacrifices of all the men who suffered at Port Chicago in 1944 — those who worked, those who died and those who stood up for their rights as Americans.”

The Los Angeles Times on July 10, 1994, also published an editorial supporting the legislators in their requests for reversal of the convictions. The day of the dedication, the CBS news program “Sunday Morning” featured an account of the incident, with interviews with some of the surviving sailors. It was apparent that these are very painful memories for the men. Also interviewed was Bay Area scholar Robert L. Allen, who thoroughly researched the incident and its aftermath, interviewing many of the participants. His book, The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny in U.S. History, is a sobering account of the overt racism that was part of the segregated military services of that era. It is part of our history, which we must acknowledge and work to correct. Please ask the President to issue a presidential order to expunge the convictions.
Fifty Years Ago Today, Segregation in the Military Ended With a Bang, and a Whimper

By John Boodrews
Special to The Washington Post

CONCORD, Calif.

The heat was cauterizing. Bedsheets clung to bodies like wet shrouds. Sleep was a twitching, thrashing dance. Seaman 1st Class Robert Routh, stripped to his skivvies, face slathered in cool Noxzema, rested his head on the crook of his arm. The faint moonlight latticed his face.

And then the sky turned bright as day. Light travels faster than sound. Sound travels faster than devastation. So after the flash came the roar, and an instant after that, the ferocious shaking that buckled the floorboards and set the barracks swaying like a rocking chair. The windows imploded.

Shattered glass sprayed the room, Ailing Route's eyes like sand. He scrambled to the floor and ducked under the lower bunks as torpedo Class Robert Routft, 19, witnessed what he believes was the greatest display of fireworks any man had ever seen, a churning kaleidoscope of reds, whites and blues of indescribable fury.

It was the finest thing he ever saw. It was the last thing he ever saw. The glass shredded his eyes.

Fifty years ago today, toward the end of World War II in a naval base named Port Chicago, 35 miles north of San Francisco, an explosion of unknown origin killed 320 men and maimed hundreds more. Though sabotage was suspected, it was never proved or even effectively alleged. Almost certainly, the explosion was an accident: equipment failure or human error in the handling of munitions being loaded at night onto two warships bound for the Pacific. Some say the blast packed nearly the explosive force of the Hiroshima bomb. It was the worst war-related disaster in the continental United States.

It was also a double tragedy. The loss of life and limb was staggering, but the aftermath carried horrors of its own. In the segregated Navy of 1944, Port Chicago had been run by the officers but staffed almost exclusively by black teenage seamen who were trained for combat but consigned to menial work. After the explosion 50 survivors refused to continue working under conditions they deemed, with ample reason, unsafe. They were hardly cowards or traitors. They were responding better to safety precautions and better training: many actually asked to be sent into combat. But it was wartime, and their blatant act of insubordination was to the Navy an intolerable offense. And so the 50 were charged with mutiny.

After a trial throbbing with racial overtones, they were convicted and sentenced to varying terms at hard labor. It was the largest mutiny trial in U.S. naval history, but its importance was eclipsed by the rolling events of the day. Still, in the history of the military and the American civil rights movement, the Port Chicago trial stands as a milestone, its work stoppage created the conditions where the liberals and conservatives in the military thought segregation was bankrupt as a policy," says Oakland sociologist Robert L. Allen, author of "The Port Chicago Mutiny."

Sometimes, great moments pivot on acts of great courage or wisdom or will. But sometimes they result from nothing more than strategic inaction—the stubborn defiance of misguided authority. Such was the case of the Port Chicago 50.

"In a sense," says historian Allen, "these men are heroes.

A desolate military outpost, Port Chicago was unapologetically segregated.
The Laborers’ Lot

Bob Routh was 17 when he rode a train from Pennsylvania to boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois. He talked his father into letting him enlist, arguing that putting on a uniform would help make America a better place for blacks. Equally important, it was his ticket out of the South. "I had no idea how much better things were beyond the Mason-Dixon line," he says. Routh, who enlisted in the Navy with an eighth-grade education, left a blind man. He went on to earn his master’s in sociology from Pepperdine College on the GI Bill. He works as a Veterans Administration benefits counselor in Los Angeles.

In 1944, Routh was assigned to an all-black unit. But they trained for war just like young white men. Bodies taut and minds geared for battle, he and his mates boarded trains to the West Coast and, they believed, embarkation.

"I was just one white officer saying, ‘The Navy’s going to war. You’re not. You’re going to the small end of the cone. You’re going to work on the mule. You’re going to work on the dock. You’re not going to be able to handle high explosives.’"

Louie Victory pulled in. The night before, he admits, he had been drinking. After checking in, he reported for duty. "He came in drunk and told me he was a sailor," recalls Joe Small, a young seaman who would be accused of leading the mutiny.

"It’s true, Joe," Small said. "It’s true. We were drunk. We went out and led an all-black unit off to war. We were drunk. We were out of our minds. We were not trained as seamen. We were trained as stevedores.

No one gave them safety manuals or training. "We were taught to go out there on a dock full of ammunition, wire nets spread out on the docks and the hold in the ship, and load it. And Joe Small was a young seaman who would be accused of leading the mutiny.

"I was as drunk as a white man, that we loved each other, that we respected each other," Small says.

Historian Allen later unearthed some documents that summed up the white officers’ attitudes. A Navy judge advocate, investigating the case, noted one white officer’s comment as the accused enlisted personnel are neither temperamentally nor intellectually capable of handling high explosives.

"talking at ‘Column Left’"

On July 17, the sailors labored long and hard in the warm California sun loading 150 tons of ammunition. In what’s known to history as the Port Chicago incident, 292 African Americans—most of them untrained seamen—were killed. The survivors were charged with mutiny and convicted of mutiny.

"We were just body parts in basements. I’d saved been butchered if I hadn’t listened to me."

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After the explosion, the survivors were ordered to sea in various ships. A year later,

An order went out to the fleet lines. ‘I’ll take any duty,’ this just aggravated the officer.

Two hundred fifty-eight black sailors and two white officers were hauled to the court martial. Among them were: Seaman 2nd Class Jack Crittenden, a 24-year-old retired Detroit traffic engineer, who was sentenced to three months’ hard labor. At the end of their service they were granted honorable discharges.

"I’d made up my mind that we’d either be shot than go back to those working conditions,” Meeks says.

The Port Chicago 50 were taken to Treasure Island, a naval installation in the middle of San Francisco Bay. They were guarded by Marines, day and night. ‘They’d have us on our knees picking up [cigarette] butts at a train station,” Meeks says. ‘The guard would say, ‘Get ahead and run. I’m not looking. They wanted us to run so they could shoot us down like dogs.

They were defended, prosecuted and judged by white judges.

Thurgood Marshall, then chief counsel for the NAACP, took up their case in Washington. He argued that the Navy officials ignored warnings from San Francisco waterfront unions that an explosion was inevitable because they were using unsupervised seamen.

"This is not 50 men on trial for mutiny,” Marshall told reporters. "This is the Navy on trial for its whole vicious policy toward Negroes. Negroes are not afraid of anything any more than white men are."

The Rubble Remains

Fifty years later, rubble from the explosion on the night of July 17, 1944, still lines the harbor. Chunks of concrete and rusted metal, rotting pilings, remnants from the splintered planks, poke up out of the water beside grave markers.

Port Chicago no longer exists. The Concord Naval Weapons Station, the West Coast’s largest munitions port, now encompasses the old depot. Most of the ammunition used in Korea and Vietnam, and even the 157-ton Traitors, were moved through Concord.

In 1972, Miller sponsored a bill to have a small base museum and monuments to those killed at Port Chicago. It will be unveiled today at the foot of the old Port Chicago loading dock. The names of the dead are etched on gravestones, placed on new led bricks surrounded by flora. Fort Meigs, a 15-year sentence.

A small base museum holds photos, clips and memorabilia from Port Chicago. A 15-foot statue of Marshal Meeks is a reminder that there is still a war.

No mention is made of the mutiny. The "trial and explosion," explains park spokesman Dan Tilghman, were separate incidents.

Jack Crittenden will not attend today’s commemoration. Fifty years after he was convicted of mutiny, he says he is still haunted by his experience. ‘I gone for my country and church. You can’t throw away your country and church. You can’t throw away your country and church. You can’t throw away your country and church.

The Lives of Avoidance

The black community and liberal white groups denounced the convictions. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt appealed futilely, to then-Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal. The sailors were shunted, handcuffed and sent by train—under Marine guards—with machine guns—as the Terminal Island Disciplinary Barracks in San Pedro, Calif., where they remained for 16 months. They were then ordered to sea on various ships. A year later,
Mutiny and Racial Injustice

The President should expunge the convictions of black sailors in World War II incident

President Clinton has an opportunity to right a racial wrong that lingers from the days of the segregated military during World War II. Next Sunday marks the 50th anniversary of an accidental explosion that killed 320 servicemen loading ammunition for the Pacific theater on a dock at Port Chicago in Concord, Calif. On July 17 the National Park Service will dedicate a memorial to the dead and injured at the site.

But there is much more to the story. Most of the dead were black sailors, working in segregated units and usually given the most menial and dangerous tasks in those days. When their unit was ordered back to loading live shells two weeks after the deadly blast, 258 black sailors refused, calling the conditions unsafe and their training inadequate. They were convicted at courts-martial, 50 of them for mutiny and sentenced to 15-year prison terms.

And, indeed, the case became a turning point for civil rights and was a key factor in President Harry S. Truman's historic decision to order the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948.

Yet the convictions still blot the records of the men, many of whom are still alive. After a lengthy review, Secretary of the Navy John H. Dalton upheld the convictions last Jan. 6. He admitted the black seamen had been assigned the hazardous ammunition work because of their race but denied that prejudice played a role in their courts-martial.

That is an unsatisfactory finale to the painful Port Chicago episode. Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein and Reps. George Miller, Ronald V. Dellums, Pete Stark and Nancy Pelosi, all of California, have asked President Clinton to expunge the convictions. We agree.
FIFTY YEARS AGO TODAY, the deadliest domestic disaster of World War II occurred on Suisun Bay at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine near Concord when two ammunition ships, a pier and a train went up in an explosive ball of flame that left 290 men dead and 390 wounded. That single tragedy accounted for 15 percent of all the blacks in the Navy who perished in World War II.

Today, the National Park Service is dedicating the Port Chicago National Memorial at Concord to the memory of those young sailors. It's a long-delayed tribute to their national sacrifice and the disaster's important role in prompting the postwar desegregation of the Navy and the other branches of the military.

But the dead and the maimed were not the only victims of the Port Chicago disaster, and there will never be a better occasion than now to recognize and redress the deep injustice done to hundreds of the survivors in the aftermath of the blast.

Two weeks after the catastrophe, when the loading of ammunition ships resumed, 258 black sailors — most of them teenagers — refused orders to go back to work. The segregated unit of black sailors, who loaded ammunition under the supervision of white superiors, cited the continuation of unsafe working conditions and their complete lack of training in the safe handling of live ammunition.

Eventually, most of the striking seamen went back to work, but 50 held out. They were quickly charged with mutiny and, following a hasty court-martial — conducted exclusively by white officers — were found guilty en masse and sentenced to lengthy prison terms and dishonorable discharges. The 208 strikers who had returned to work were convicted on lesser charges.

Even by the standards of the time, it was apparent that racial prejudice had pervaded the entire affair — a recognition that resulted in the Defense Department's reduction of the sentences two years later to time served and the restoration of honorable discharges. The case also contributed in a major way to President Truman's order to integrate the services.

But to this day, the Navy has refused to acknowledge that the convictions themselves were the product of a racist system, and the surviving victims of Port Chicago continue to be branded as mutineers. As recently as last January, under pressure from Congress, a naval review of the case concluded that, while racial discrimination played a role in the disaster, it did not affect the court-martial and the convictions, which were allowed to stand.

Naval justice operates according to its own peculiar code — a code that has shown itself singularly incapable of dealing with sex-related scandals in recent years. There is little reason to expect the Navy to find itself guilty of 80-year-old shortcomings at this late date.

But the overwhelming evidence of racism relating to both the tragedy and the trial — evidence painstakingly accumulated by the victims and their supporters over the last half century — cannot be dismissed to the yellowing pages of history. It must be acted upon — if not by the Navy then by the White House.

THE FINAL HOPE for justice lies with President Clinton. Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein and Representatives George Miller, Ron Dellums, Pete Stark and Nancy Pelosi have petitioned the president to review the case and issue a presidential order to exonerate the convictions from the records of each of the 258 victims of the court-martial.

We strongly support that recommendation, and add that a complete exoneration, not a pardon, is in order. When that happens, the new national monument at Concord will honor the memories and the sacrifices of all the men who suffered at Port Chicago in 1944 — those who worked, those who died, and those who stood up for their rights as Americans.
Remember Port Chicago

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Eventually, most of the striking seamen went back to work. The segregation of the Navy continued to the memory of those seamen. It is important to recognize and redress the deep injustice done to hundreds of the survivors in the aftermath of the blast.

The treatments added a five-inch lump to his head and stretched the skin of his face to the point where he was unable to move his mouth properly. It is understandable for a young man to want desperately to join the ranks of the giant sumo wrestlers, revered in Japan as national heroes and sex symbols. So we were outraged when the sumo association unfairly outlawed the scalp implants after the fact.

Harada tried to play by the rules, but now he is left with a cone head and a mouth that can barely be used to complain.

San Francisco Chronicle

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Fifty Years Ago Today, Segregation in the Military Ended With a Bang, and a Whimper

By John Boudreau
Special to The Washington Post

CONCORD, Calif., the heat was cauterizing. Bed sheets clung to bodies like wet shrouds. Sleep was a twitching, thrashing dance. Seaman 1st Class Robert Routh, stripped to his skivvies, face slathered in cool Noxzema, rested his head on the crook of his arm. The faint moonlight latticed his face.

And then the sky turned bright as day. Light travels faster than sound. Sound travels faster than devastation. So after the flash came the roar, and an instant after that, the ferocious shaking that buckled the floorboards and set the barracks swaying like a rocking chair. The windows imploded. Shattered glass sprayed the room, filling Routh's eyes like sand. He scrambled to the floor and ducked under the lower bunk as torpedo shells and chunks of ship metal rained down on the base.

When it was over and the building was still and flames licked the horizon, Routh screamed. But somebody screamed back that there was no sick bay anymore. Sick bay was rubble.

"That's when I started crying," Routh recalls.

In that final moment before the windows caved in, when there was light but not yet terror, Seaman 1st Class Robert Routh, 19, witnessed what he believes was the greatest display of fireworks any man had ever seen, a churning kaleidoscope of whites and blues of indescribable fury.

It was the finest thing he ever saw. It was the last thing he ever saw. The glass shredded his eyes.

Fifty years ago today, toward the end of World War II in a naval base named Port Chicago, 35 miles north of San Francisco, an explosion of unknown origin killed 320 men and maimed hundreds more. Though sabotage was suspected, it was never proved or even effectively alleged. Almost certainly, the explosion was an accident: equipment failure or human error in the handling of munitions being loaded aboard two warships bound for the Pacific. Some say the blast picked nearly the explosive force of the Hiroshima bomb. It was the worst war-related disaster in the continental United States.

It was also a double tragedy. The loss of life and limb was staggering but the aftermath carried horrors of its own. In the segregated Navy of 1944, Port Chicago had been run by white officers but staffed almost exclusively by black teenage seamen who were trained for combat but consigned to menial work. After the explosion 50 survivors refused to continue working under conditions they deemed, with ample reason, unsafe. They were hardly cowards or traitors. They were requesting better safety precautions and better training; many actually asked to be sent into combat. But it was wartime, and their blatant act of insubordination was to the Navy an intolerable offense. And so the 50 men were charged with mutiny. After a trial throbbing with racial overtones, they were convicted and sentenced to varying terms at hard labor.

It was the largest mutiny trial in U.S. naval history, but its importance was eclipsed by the roaring events of the day. Still, in the history of the military and the American civil rights movement, the Port Chicago trial stands as a milestone. It eventually spurred the Navy to begin desegregation in 1945.

"This work stoppage created the conditions where the liberals and conservatives in the military thought segregation was bankrupt as a policy," says Oakland sociologist Robert J. Allen, author of "The Port Chicago Mutiny.

Sometimes, great moments pivot on acts of great courage or wisdom or will. But sometimes they result from nothing more than strategic inaction—the stubborn defiance of misguided authority. Such was the case of the Port Chicago 50.

"In a sense," says historian Allen, "these men are heroes."

A desolate military outpost, Port Chicago was unapologetically segregated in 1944. That meant black-
The Laborers' Lot

Bobby Routh was 17 when he rode a train up from Tennessee to boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois. He talked his father into letting him enlist, arguing that joining up on a uniform would help make America a better place for blacks. Equally important, it was his ticket out of the South. “I had an idea of how much those things were being paid the Mexican-Irish line,” he says now. Routh, who entered the Navy with eighth-grade education, left a blind man. He went on to earn his rating as a radioman from Pepper-

corn College on the GI Bill, and now works as a Veteran Administration bond salesman in Los Angeles.

In 1944, Routh was assigned to an all-black unit. But they trained for war just like young white men. Bod-
i

ies taut and ready for girdled for bat-

tle, he and his mates bared trains for the West Coast and, they believed, eventual front lines.

Perry Robinson was one of those men.

“We wanted to prove we were as good as the white men, that we loved our country just much as they did and were willing to die for it,” says Rob-

inson, a lean man at the time. “The majority volunteered to go overseas.”

Instead of wardships, though, they were assigned to Port Chicago. “We were assigned to a scaven-

ger,” says Albert William Jr. “I thought I’d be on a ship.” I joined the Navy to fight. That’s what we were trained to be, warmen. We weren’t trained as ste-

vedores.”

No one gave them safety manuals or training. “We were just shown a bunch of film clips, of war nerves going on the docks and the hold in the ship and told to load,” recalls John Small, a winch operator who would be afloat leading the loading.

“I believe if we had been white they would have given us some sort of safety rules to handle the munitions safely,” he says. The work produced jiggered nerves and distrust, according to the men who survived. They stalked eight-foot shells for battlehips, two-ton boms that pounded the enemy, and every-

thing else the U.S. Navy hated at Japanese.

Meeks worked in the hold, where the men were “squeezed out and squashed flat from the sides.” Their hearts pumped fast when those “men in khaki” came up the stairs on the other side of the hold.

“I don’t know what God would just excuse us as God Almighty,” said a man.

“They made a terrible sound.”

With the earth shaking, Meeks thought they heard explosions. “You’d almost have a heart attack to hear those bombs hit-

ting!” says Meeks. “Fifty of us made up our minds that we’d rather be shot than go back to those working conditions,” Meeks says.

The Port Chicago 58

The Port Chicago 58 were taken to Treasure Island, a naval installation in the middle of San Francisco Bay. They were guarded by Marines, soldiers, and a police force. “Don’t Work Here,” said the sign that read, “Don’t Work Here.”

One man’s confidence proposal for families of the dead was reduced to $1,000 after Missis-

si Rep. John Rankin objected to the $5,000 congressional compensa-

tion proposal for families of the dead. “That’s a lot of money,” says Meeks. “Others are still look-

ing for their dead.

At the time of the incident, Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, commander of the 12th Naval District, communicated to the men for being a bouncer and an orderly in the Navy Exchange. Temperamentally no intellec-
tually capable of handling high expen-

sides.

“Talking at ‘Column Left’

On July 17, the sailors lurked long hours on the ship. At one point, at the end of a long day, E.A. Bryan, the ship’s cook, called the men together around a table.

“Who wants a beer?” Bryan asked.

The men hesitated, but there were none around.

“I’ll get us some,” Bryan offered.

“Great! Good job, Bryan!”

The men cheered and Bryan went to the bar for a beer.

“He walked back in the same way,” Bryan said. “The men all crowded around him, and Bryan gave them all a beer.”

Several weeks later, when the mu-

tineers charged the ship, they threatened to have them shot as traitors.

The black sailors were transferred to nearby Mare Island Naval Yard in Vallejo. This was the main base for San Francisco sailors, and it was here that the men were transferred to the ship that was named for the ship.

“The ship was going to sea, and we were ordered to pack up and turn in our uniforms,” Bryan said.

“I’m not going to see you again,” Bryan said. “You’ll never see me again.”

The men were packed up and sent to the naval base in San Francisco. The sailors were put in a cell block.

The ship was loaded, and the sailors were told to pack up and leave.

“No, you’re not going to do that!” Bryan said. “You’re going to do it!”

The men were forced to leave the ship.

“I thought they were going to kill us,” Bryan said. “I never thought they’d do that.”

The ship left, and the men were left behind on the dock.

“I thought they were going to kill us,” Bryan said. “I never thought they’d do that.”

The men were forced to leave the ship.

“I thought they were going to kill us,” Bryan said. “I never thought they’d do that.”