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National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Port Chicago Naval Memorial
National Memorial Magazine

In Their Own Words

is a collection of story cards that tell stories of Port Chicago in the words of people who were there. The Port Chicago explosion, the mutiny trial, and the response of African-American communities to these events exposed the shameful injustices of racism in the military. These events were a catalyst for the Navy, the armed services, and ultimately, the nation to weigh the costs of racial segregation. The memorial serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggles for equality and social justice today.

Cards with this symbol indicate sailors who died in the Port Chicago explosions on July 17, 1944.



Cards with this symbol indicate members of the Port Chicago 50, who were tried for mutiny in 1944.



Stories of Port Chicago



U.S. Navy

The pier at Port Chicago after the explosions

Port Chicago Naval Magazine was one of the most important U.S. Navy munitions depots, and the site of America's deadliest homeland disaster of World War II. It is many more stories as well: stories of racism and segregation in our military, dangerous working conditions on a munitions base, the court-martial of 50 African-American sailors, and the largest mutiny trial in U.S. naval history.

These cards tell stories of the individuals who were there: many died, some survived, and their lives were affected forever. These stories are told in their own words.



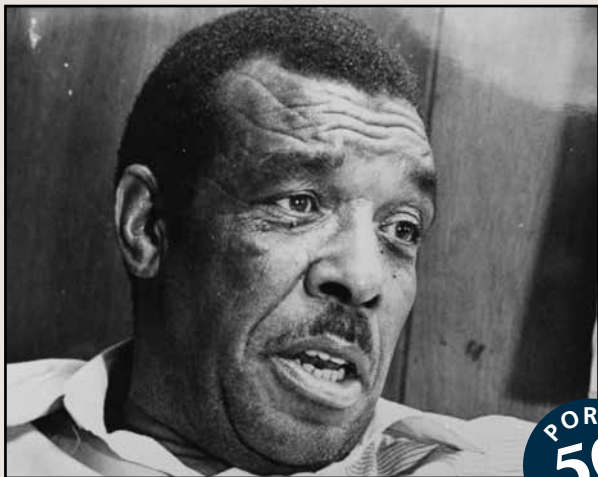
National Park Service, POCH 2.072

Navy dock workers loading ammunition

On July 17, 1944, at 10:18 pm, two explosions ripped through the quiet summer night at Port Chicago. Two ammunition ships, the *Quinault Victory* and *E.A. Bryan*, partially loaded with munitions, exploded. Both ships, the pier, and much of the neighboring town were destroyed. Everyone within 1,000 yards was killed — 320 men died (202 of them African-American), and nearly 400 more were injured (over 230 of them African-American).



Joseph Small



© USA TODAY NETWORK

Joe Small, 1982



“I was fighting for something. And if you would ask me to put a name on it, I don’t know. But things were not right and it was my desire to make things right. I have never felt ashamed of the decisions that I made. I did what I thought was best and I did it in the best way I knew how.”^{2.1}



Courtesy of Dr. Robert Allen

Joe Small, 1946

“I didn’t know anything about mutiny. I just knew that I didn’t want to work under the same conditions that I did work under and advance the chance of the same thing happening again.”^{2.2}

“My discharge from the Navy prevented me from receiving jobs that I would have received as a civilian. It branded me as a person incapable of following orders.”^{2.3}

Seaman First Class Joseph Randolph Small was stationed at Port Chicago in 1943, and convicted of mutiny in 1944. He was released from prison in 1946 and then worked on a ship in the South Pacific.



Gloria Magleby



NPS Photo, Oral Histories, POCH

Gloria Magleby

“The door was blown across the room and ended up over on that side . . . All the nails in the ceiling came out halfway. Dishes were all broken. We knew it was bad. But to my mind, my mind didn’t go to Port Chicago. . . It went to the Japanese. I figured the Japanese had dropped a bomb across the street from my house.”^{3.1}



National Park Service, POCH 2.0109

Port Chicago Main Street, 1944

“And it didn’t take long at turning the radio on and listening to the news to find out. I thought, ‘Oh, my gosh. I had just helped load one of those ships completely full of ammunition and both of them had exploded.’ I knew my job was in jeopardy. But guess what? Three days later, a knock at the door and here’s somebody from my job saying, ‘Come back to work. We’ve got to clean up the mess.’”^{3.2}

Gloria Magleby was an ammunition depot clerk at Port Chicago. She lived in Bay Point (formerly West Pittsburg) most of her life.



Freddie Meeks



Photo courtesy Daryl Meeks

Freddie Meeks



“When I first got to Port Chicago, oh, dumpy lookin’ place way back out there in the boondocks. . . . I really wanted to go out on the ship. But they had a lot of ammunition stored there though. . . . I don’t know, it made you kinda’ nervous. You always was uneasy about handlin’ all that ammunition. Bombs, torpedoes, whatever.”^{4.1}



Photo courtesy Daryl Meeks

Freddie Meeks

“We felt like we was gettin’ a raw deal, because we was the one that was doin’ the dirty work. We was the one that foolin’ with the ammunition. So why shouldn’t we have a leave of absence to get away, . . . But that didn’t happen.”^{4.2}

“We didn’t commit no mutiny. We didn’t take over no ship. We didn’t take over a base. We had no weapons. We didn’t even have a pen. We only refused to go back to work. Now how could that be mutiny?”^{4.3}

Freddie Meeks and 49 other defendants were found guilty of mutiny and sentenced 8–15 years in prison. He received a pardon from President Clinton in 1999.



Thurgood Marshall

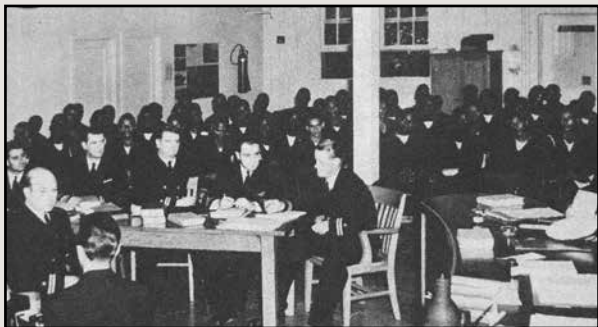


Courtesy of LOC 2003688132

Thurgood Marshall, 1957

“There is no sufficient evidence of mutiny or conspiracy. These men are being tried for mutiny solely because of their race.”^{5.1}

“I do not take up cases unless I am convinced the men are innocent. I was never so convinced that the evidence was insufficient in a case as I was listening to that case.”^{5.2}



Courtesy of Vallejo Naval History Museum

The mutiny trial, Treasure Island, September, 1944

“The NAACP is going to make it its job to expose the whole rotten Navy setup which led to the Port Chicago explosion, and in turn to the so-called ‘mutiny’ trial of fifty Negro sailors now taking place.”^{5.3}

“This is not an individual case. This is not fifty men on trial for mutiny. This is the Navy on trial for its whole vicious policy toward Negroes.”^{5.4}

Thurgood Marshall was lead lawyer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during the Port Chicago mutiny trial. He joined the defense as an observer and appealed the verdict unsuccessfully in 1945. In 1967, Marshall became the first black Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.



Eugene Coffee, Jr.



NPS, POCH 41 (Courtesy of Robert Harris)



Eugene Coffee, Jr.

“All of these men who served their country at Port Chicago deserve justice and vindication — the ones who died and the ones who survived. The systematic racism and bigotry they endured is still going on.”^{6.1}

“I have so many mixed emotions about this whole affair. I feel sadness, I feel anger, I feel a sense of pride, and a long-awaited sense of closure.”^{6.2}

Robert Harris, Eugene’s nephew



NPS Photo

The gravestone of Eugene Coffee, Jr.

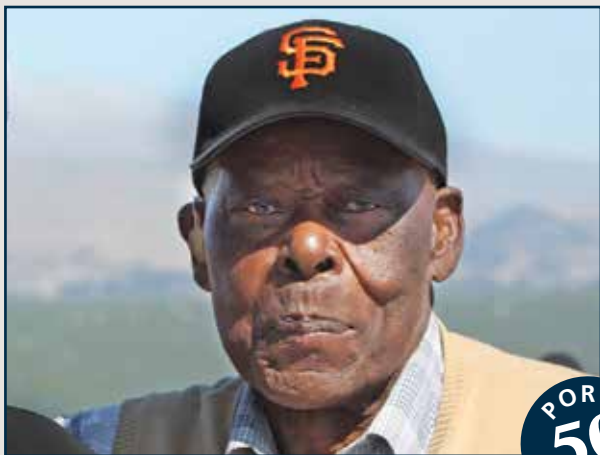
“Remembering what happened at Port Chicago is extremely important to my family on a very personal level. It took seventy-three years from the time of his death for his family to know the true circumstances surrounding his death. The truth about what actually happened at Port Chicago was steeped in racism and injustice, swept under the rug, disavowed and ignored by the United States Navy and America at large.”^{6.3}

Robert Harris, Eugene’s nephew

Eugene Coffee, Jr. died during the Port Chicago explosion on July 17, 1944. He is one of the few whose remains were positively identified; he is buried in Golden Gate National Cemetery.



Ollie Green



NPS/Luther Bailey

Ollie Green at the Port Chicago memorial ceremony, 2011



“The reason I was afraid to go down and load ammunition, them officers (were) racing each division to see who put on the most tonnage, and I knowed the way they was handling ammunition, it was liable to go off again.”^{7.1}



National Park Service, POCH 2.027

Barracks, post-explosion, one mile from the detonation site

“If we didn’t work fast at that time, they wanted to put us in the brig, and when the exec [executive officer] came down on the docks, they wanted us to slow up. That is exactly the way — put it on fast; if we didn’t put it on fast they want to put us in the brig. That is my reason for not going down there.”^{7.2}

Flying glass wounded Ollie Green in the face and chest during the explosion, and he refused to return to work loading ammunition. His surprise testimony at the trial (above) shocked both the prosecution and the defense.



J. Frank Coakley



Courtesy Vallejo Naval History Museum

“Collective insubordination, collective disobedience of lawful orders of a superior officer, is mutiny.”^{8.1}

Coakley, deliberately misleading the court on the law of mutiny

“I am going to give you another chance, but if you don’t come clean this time, I am going to see that you get shot.”^{8.2}

Alphonse McPherson’s testimony of Coakley’s threat at a pretrial interview



Courtesy Vallejo Naval History Museum

The mutiny trial, Treasure Island, September, 1944

“I have never run across a prosecutor with a more definite racial bias than that exemplified by Lieutenant Commander Coakley.”^{8.3}

**Thurgood Marshall in a letter to
Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal**

Lieutenant Commander James F. Coakley was the chief prosecutor at the mutiny trial. In the 1960s, he became the Alameda District Attorney who prosecuted antiwar activists and the Black Panthers.



Percy Robinson



National Park Service · POCH 40

Percy Robinson (right)

“The concussion blew in the window all over my body. . . . I put my arms up in front of my eyes. My left arm got mutilated, face, head, neck, shoulders and body got mutilated. . . . The second was just a few seconds afterwards. That lifted me out of the bunk. Threw me on the floor. And you could hear the people now, screaming and yelling, ‘Get out of the barracks! It’s coming down!’ So, I, myself, scuffle, crawl out, and took off for the outside.”^{9.1}



National Park Service, POCH 40

Percy Robinson (bending) loading ammunition

“I think I was in the hospital maybe, oh, a week. And I think the day after I returned to my outfit, we were ordered to go to work. And I still was bandaged up. . . . They hadn’t told us what we were going to do yet. But then they said, ‘Forward march.’”^{9.2}

“My mother taught me that if a white man threatened to hang you, he would do it at his first legal chance. . . . So, I believed that they had a legal chance to shoot us. So I was afraid. So I said, ‘Well, I’m not gonna’ give ’em a chance to shoot me. I’ll go back to work.’”^{9.3}

Percy Robinson was injured in his bunk during the explosion. After being threatened with death, he was docked three months pay and returned to work.



Warren Wise



Photo courtesy Joshua Wise

“All of a sudden, all the [injured] people started coming to the office. And that was a line of people, three people wide, for two and a half blocks. . . . So my mother and my brother started working on people, and I did kind of crowd control. . . . And they were fixing people up until quite early in the morning.”^{10.1}



National Park Service, POCH 2.102

Medics stitching up a patient

“They gave me a dump truck. I was thirteen. Nobody asked me my age, nobody asked me anything, just, can you drive this? . . . We took the convoy down to Port Chicago, and they loaded stuff into my truck. . . . we dumped whatever was in the trucks in the back, in this incinerator. . . . To this day, my mother never knew I was in Port Chicago.”^{10.2}

Warren Wise was thirteen and living with his parents in Pittsburg, about six miles from Port Chicago, at the time of the disaster. His mother and father were doctors who worked on the injured throughout the night. Warren helped out, then became part of the convoy removing remains from Port Chicago.



Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial



“If we forget the memories of Port Chicago, we invite them to live again. We shall not let that happen.” ^{11.1}

**Robert Stanton, Former Director
of the National Park Service**

“Port Chicago is not just a place — it is a powerful story . . . about courage, conflict, racial discrimination, and the struggle to overturn it.” ^{11.2}

Congressman George Miller



NPS/Tory Starling

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial

“This Friends Group successfully advocated to help achieve full National Park status to preserve its patriotic history, and the contributions of African American sailors in helping win WWII. We help honor all those who died, who were injured, and those who protested, and we want to clear the names and records of the so-called mutineers. We work to keep the story alive so the story is not forgotten. The many survivors of that tragic explosion I have spoken with want us all to know they gave their best in supporting the war effort.” ^{11.3}

Reverend Diana McDaniel

The Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial, created in 2007, supports and enhances the national memorial as an official fundraising partner of the National Park Service.



Jack Crittenden



Courtesy Dr. Sharon Crittenden

Jack Crittenden



“They told me I had a choice between the Marine Corps and the Navy. The man said, ‘Hey, we’ll take a skinny guy like you, fatten you up, and make a fine Marine out of you. And remember, the Marines are the first to land, they’ll make history right away.’ I said, ‘First to land?’ He said, ‘Yeah.’ So I said, ‘Where’s the Navy?’ And that’s how I came by the Navy.”^{12.1}



National Park Service, POCH 2.076

Unloading ammunition from a boxcar

“The trial; it wasn’t concerned about the people in the trial; it was concerned about the reputation of the Navy. It was already a fixed trial and a fixed this and a fixed that. It was just that kind of thing if you was like me, you know. I knew all I was being tried for I wasn’t guilty of, but I wasn’t thinking in that vein or nothing of that sort, so something we had to do and go through, as black seamen and as part of the Navy.”^{12.2}

Jack Crittenden joined the Navy thinking he would serve his country and prove himself worthy of the trust placed in him. As one of the Port Chicago 50, he refused to ask for a pardon for a crime he knew he didn’t commit.



John Felisbret



Courtesy of Jason Felisbret



John Felisbret

“I never got to meet my Uncle Juney. He was killed in the Port Chicago explosion and like many of the seaman who met their untimely death during that disaster, his remains were never found.” ^{13.1}

Jason J. Felisbret, John’s nephew



Courtesy of Jason Felisbret

John Felisbret's nephew and sister at the memorial

“I was in the military for over 20 years before my mother told me about this memory of Uncle Juney. She told me how he had served in the Navy during World War II loading ships in Port Chicago. . . She recalled that Uncle Juney was supposed to be on leave that day, but swapped duty with his shipmate. That would be his last kind act of service. His service to our country led the way for his brother, George, a soldier and his brother, August, a Marine.”^{13.2}

Jason J. Felisbret, John's nephew

John Felisbret died during the Port Chicago explosion on July 17, 1944. His remains were never found.



Robert Routh



NPS Photo

Robert Routh (left) with Robert Edwards

“I had said to my dad that I thought that I could make a contribution to changing the way Blacks was treated in this country. Now I don’t know whether I’ve done anything personally to bring about the change, but I do feel that Port Chicago certainly had an impetus in breaking down social barriers both in the military and in the civilian world.” ^{14.1}



The Recreation Hall after the explosion, 1944

“I couldn’t see clearly and that’s when I first realized then that I was hurt. And I called to my buddy, ‘Hey Moss. Come and get me and take me to the sick bay!’ And then somebody else holler, ‘Well, the sick bay has been blown up.’” ^{14.2}

“The left eye was lacerated so badly that [it] was removed that night. And then the right eye was lacerated and so consequently the right eye eventually lost the sight in that, too. So that was the beginning of the end and caused me to be a blind person.” ^{14.3}

Robert Routh was blinded in the Port Chicago explosions. Initially paid only \$41 for the loss of his eye, he fought for years for decent compensation.



Morris Rich



Morris Rich

“We walked to Port Chicago which was a mile and a half away . . . We walked in a little restaurant right next to the theater . . . we hadn’t been sitting there maybe five minutes or less and this explosion took place . . . it blew us out of the booth clear across the room. The first thing we thought is the Japanese were bombing . . . I crawled back under the table. I thought maybe the whole ceiling may be coming in. By the way, I never did get that sandwich.” ^{15.1}



The theater after the explosion

“[The street] was just cluttered with bodies and women and kids running, coming out of the theater . . . we tried to get back into the base. By that time I realized I was bleeding quite severe from my leg and from my nose . . . There was bodies lying all over the ground . . . guys that were injured and blown from the barracks out in the yards. Anyway, I went in there and got patched up a little bit.” ^{15.2}

“I’d wake up at night and I couldn’t move . . . I’m sure it was all from the shock and trauma of this whole thing.” ^{15.3}

Morris Rich arrived on the *Quinault Victory* the evening of July 17, 1944. He left the ship and walked into town less than an hour before the explosion.



Dewhitt Jamison



NPS Photo

Dewhitt Jamison at a Port Chicago memorial ceremony, 2011

“I was a second class petty officer ... they called it a ‘Suicide Division.’ ... if damaged ammunition came in or any type of ammunition, we had to handle that part ... We’d make it safe, if possible, until it was taken care of by a higher authority ... We did not have any formal training which we should have had. But we were not actually ignorant of the fact knowing that it was dangerous.” ^{16.1}



Pier and wreckage after the explosion

“I don’t think it was carelessness of any individual as far as loading the ship . . . I believe it was sabotage . . . I will die and go to my grave saying that.”^{16.2}

“My experiences at Port Chicago . . . was very, very educational in all ways . . . If I had to do it all over again . . . I would still do it again, hoping that I could make some changes . . . I have no regrets about being stationed at Port Chicago.”^{16.3}

Born in South Carolina in 1923, Dewhitt Jamison joined the Civilian Conservation Corps at fourteen. He served in the Navy from 1941 until the end of the war.



Dr. Robert Allen



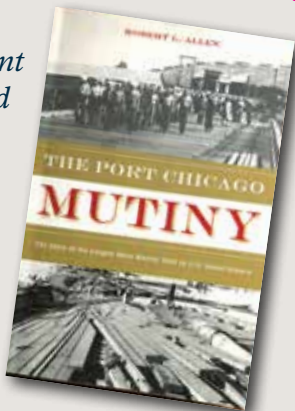
Courtesy Dr. Robert Allen

Dr. Robert Allen

“My work has actually been about memories. It’s been about the remembrance of Port Chicago.” ^{17.1}

“The voices of the sailors were missing and I realized if I wanted to really understand what had happened here, I would have to locate some survivors all those years later now and to interview and ask them about what had happened.” ^{17.2}

“It also became very apparent . . . that many of the men had actually never told anyone about what had happened, about their stories of being here. They’d never even told their families. And so the urgency of doing this work became even more evident to me. The urgency of collecting the stories before the stories become lost to all memory.”^{17.3} **Dr. Robert Allen**



“I’d like to think that although we cannot make up for the injustice that was done to those who lost their lives and those who were convicted, we can at least honor them by telling their story and making sure that we remember those lessons.”^{17.4}

**Kelli English, Chief of Interpretation and Education,
Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial**

Dr. Robert Allen is Professor Emeritus of Ethnic Studies and African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His book, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, tells the stories of many of the Black soldiers of Port Chicago.



Robert Edwards



National Park Service, POCH 20

Robert Edwards at eighteen

“I was eighteen years old when I went into the service ... We were supposed to take our boot training in Norwick, Virginia. And we made the crack then, ‘Well, I guess we’ll never have to worry about dying overseas because we’ll probably get killed right as soon as we go South. And the first time we’re told to get off the sidewalk and stick our head in the lap of a barrel, we’re going to fight for our freedom right then.’” ^{18.1}



National Park Service, POCH 2.077

Unloading ammunition from a box car

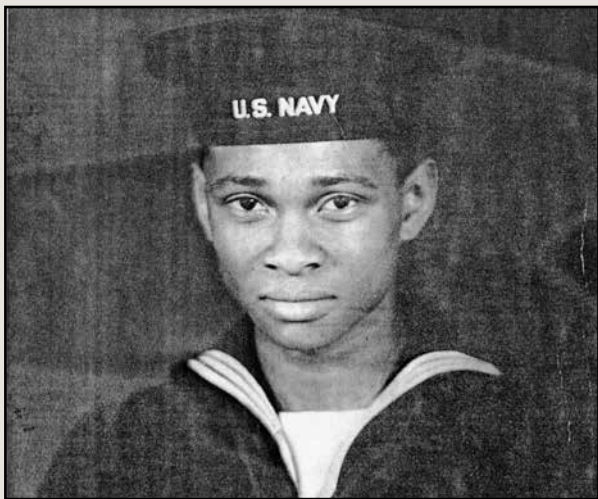
“[Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy] came in and reviewed every camp except the Black camp. He would not. And we read the next day in the paper that the Secretary of the Navy said that it was a disgrace that the United States had sunk so low as to allow Negroes into the Navy. So that didn’t make us feel very proud or patriotic.” ^{18.2}

“I tried to fight to have our discharge overturned and . . . to go back into the service and see that this was all racial and not deserved . . . They wouldn’t overturn it . . . After the last survivor is dead, they may apologize and overturn it.” ^{18.3}

Robert Edwards refused to load ammunition after the explosion and was given an Undesirable Discharge.



Sammie Boykin



National Park Service, POCH 20

Sammie Boykin as a young Navy recruit

“During training, we were reminded that we were Black soldiers and that the Navy had never taken many Blacks in the service as seamen. We were reminded that we were made cooks, chefs, . . . waiters and shoe shiners . . . We couldn’t be sailors.” ^{19.1}



National Park Service, POCH 2.037

Interior of the "Chow Hall" after the explosion

"We should have been in the chow hall, but we weren't and the whole roof fell in." 19.2

"Thinking back over the years on Port Chicago, on the explosion, the munitions that we were loading wasn't supposed to be armed. At least we were given that information." 19.3

"I cannot have closure, don't seem to be able to have closure, because I never was satisfied with and didn't get an explanation of what happened . . . The racial tension and there were threats made that no one paid much attention to." 19.4

Sammie Boykin was born in Alabama and joined the Navy after high school. He arrived in Port Chicago in 1942 and was discharged in 1945.



Port Chicago becomes A National Park



National Park Service, POCH

Site of the Pier today

The Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial was dedicated in 1994 to recognize the victims of the Port Chicago disaster, and the critical role played by Port Chicago during World War II.

Located at the Concord Naval Weapons Station near Concord, California, Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial is a powerful site with important stories to tell — stories evocative of the past and resonant for the future.



National Park Service, POCH

Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial

The U.S. Naval Magazine at Port Chicago played a vital role in the Pacific war effort. The loss of life caused by the tragic explosion, and the poignancy of the social justice struggles that ensued after the explosion compelled the nation to set aside Port Chicago as a place of national remembrance.

The events before and after the tragic explosion at Port Chicago were a catalyst for the racial integration of the armed services. We owe a debt of gratitude to both those who died here, and those who survived.



Sources

The quotes on these *In Their Own Words* cards are from the following sources:

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In Their Own Words

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