

Port chicago disaster

[Environment](#), [Natural Disaster](#)



The Port Chicago Disaster On the 24 of July 1944, a memorandum was written from Captain W. S. Parsons, USN to Rear Admiral W. R. Purnell, IJSN. It was a report on the most destructive explosion on United States soil at that time. It was known as the Port Chicago Explosion. Captain Parsons worked in the Bureau of Ordnance as their Liaison Officer. So he was a prime candidate for the job. Rear Admiral Purnell was the head of the Military Policy Committee. This memorandum was not intended to incarcerate people, determine its cause, nor report defects in the design of munitions depots.

Its sole purpose was to collect data from the damage done and to find the exact time when the explosion happened. Captain Parsons determined the exact time based on seismic activity. He determined the time of detonation occurred at approximately between 2218-2244 on the 17 of July, 1944. It was found that approximately 2000 tons of high explosion were present on the dock at the time of the explosion. He also determined that light damage extended approximately 1500 yards from the explosion. This was minor damage but significant none the less.

From ground zero and out to approximately 1000 feet it was determined that there was total destruction. However, at 1000 feet there were 3 civilians that remained alive; these were the closest survivors to the blast. This horrible disaster could have been prevented, only if certain factors were addressed accordingly. Within the confines of the munitions depot at port Chicago, there was racism. Akers states: The general classification test employed at this time placed the black ratings at Port Chicago 'in the lowest twelfth of the Navy.

According to their superiors, these men were unreliable, emotional, lacked capacity to understand or remember orders or instructions, were particularly susceptible to asspsychology and moods, lacked mechanical aptitude, were suspicious of strange officers, disliked receiving orders of any kind, particularly from white officers or petty officers, and were inclined to look for and make an issue of discrimination. For the most part, they were quite young and of limited education. 1 Black men, no matter what they scored on their classification test were put into these laborious work parties.

If they scored high enough and there were empty billets, they would be transferred to another duty station. Therefore, there was a lack of good leaders to be had. This is a prime example of discrimination. Another example of racism at this munitions depot is that: Negroes in the Navy don't mind loading ammunition. They just want to know why they are the only ones doing the loading! They want to know why they are segregated; why they don't get promoted. 2 This stated that the racism was severe and the morale of the black sailors was very low.

When morale was low, they started to ask questions and the quality of work that and more prone to accidents. In addition, white officers were put in charge of these loading parties and the black sailors did not like them. On top of that, the commanding officer, Captain Kinne, demanded a quota often tons per hatch per hour. These white officers deemed this goal, of the commanding officer, too high. But they had to fulfill it nonetheless or else their jobs were on the line. Allen stated, "... officers sometimes raced working divisions against each other to speed up loading. 3 This caused workers to work at an unsafe speed and often times a shell would drop to the

deck. Allen also stated: As Carr [the wench maintenance personnel] looked on, one man lost his grip on a shell; it dropped two feet and hit the deck with a thud. This showed that the rate at which they loaded ammunition onto the ships was unsafe. It made the possibility for a disaster very high. Still the Captain Kinne, the white officers had quotas to fill so they ignored these ominous signs and kept on pushing. Only if they could have slowed down the load rate, this disaster could have potentially been avoided.

Another factor that could have prevented this disaster would be training. According to Julius J. Allen in his court martial trial he stated, " There was no training in ammunition handling. " 5 These black Junior sailors were not trained to handle high explosives, at the same time, the white officers were inadequately trained to supervise the loading process of high explosives. According to Freddie Meeks: When those bombs, slathered in grease, bounced down the plank, they'd bang into other bombs and everyone would pray to Almighty God. They made terrible sound.

Sometimes, you thought they would explode. You'd almost have a heart attack to hear those bombs hitting together... I'd ask the lieutenant about it and he'd say don't worry. 6 The black sailors were weary of working with these explosives but were told by officers that the larger munitions were not active and could not explode and that they would be armed with their fuses upon arrival at the combat theater. Because of the inadequate training of the white officers, they disillusioned the black sailors. The black sailors would believe them because of their lack of training with explosives as well.

Therefore, this made for carelessness in the handling of the high explosives because all personnel apart of the loading parties did not know that the

<https://assignbuster.com/port-chicago-disaster/>

shells had the potential to explode because the training was negligent. Another aspect is the equipment used for handling of the high explosives. Handling of these larger explosives such as bombs and shells involved breaking individual munitions out with levers and crowbars from boxcars. The shells were packed in tightly with packing material, and they were heavy cylindrical shapes.

The black sailors would roll them along the wooden pier, packing them into nets, lifting them with a winch and boom, lowering the bundle into the hold, and then dropping the individual explosives a short distance by hand into place. This series of actions was rough enough that naval shells were sometimes damaged and began leaking identification dye from their ballistic caps. This should have been a major warning that an explosion was explosives. Therefore, the explosives were more prone to damage because of the kind of crude equipment they were using.

In addition, the powered winches used on cargo ships were used to speed up the handling of heavy loads. One winch was operated at each of the ship's five cargo holds. During loading operations, the winches were worked hard, requiring steady maintenance in order to remain operable. Winch brakes, a safety feature provided for stopping the load from falling if the winch's main power was lost, were not often used by a skilled winch operator s the load could be more quickly maneuvered using various power settings than by application of the brakes.

Disused brakes sometimes seized up and stopped working. Additionally, the winches on the SS E. A. Bryan were steam-powered and showed signs of wear, even though the ship was only five months old. Equipment could have

been a factor, but also the lack of personal protective equipment was another factor. In many cases there was no personal protective equipment provided by the munitions depot. In an interview with Carl Tuggle, he stated that: If you wanted to wear gloves, you purchased them. That was the only way you had gloves to wear and to use while you were working.

At night we were provided clothing to keep us from the elements on the dock at night because it was cold, but otherwise we supplied everything else ourselves. ⁷ Since the black sailors often were not promoted they remained stagnant with the position of Junior sailor. Therefore, they would not make a lot of money and not have money to buy proper personal protective equipment. This made the work parties more prone to accidents. It was so dangerous that even Commander Paul B. Cronk, head of a Coast Guard explosives-loading detail tasked with supervision of the working dock, warned the Navy that conditions were unsafe and ripe for disaster.

The Navy refused to change its procedures and Cronk withdrew the detail. The Navy still put a blind eye to the munitions depot at Port Chicago therefore the disaster was waiting to happen. This may have been the most destructive explosion, but it was almost expected as Captain Parsons reported, "... Port Chicago was designed for large explosions. " ⁸ He stated that the munitions depot designed at Port Chicago was designed for large explosions and because of the design; there was a very minimal loss of life outside of the munitions depot.

Nonetheless, it was eventually determined that 320 of the men on duty at the pier died instantly, and 390 civilians and military personnel were injured, many seriously. Surprisingly, this was a major loss for the black sailor
<https://assignbuster.com/port-chicago-disaster/>

community in which, "... roughly 15 percent of all the black casualties in the US Navy during the entire war. " 9 Shortly after the disaster, Port Chicago assigned white sailors to work alongside black sailors loading ammunition. This was the first step towards desegregation. To fix the lack of training, the Navy instituted new training and safety procedures for the handling of high explosives.

If and only if the Navy listened to the Coast Guard Explosives-Loading detail supervising the loading of the explosives, the Port Chicago explosion would have never happened and this memorandum would have never been written.

1. Regina T. Akers, " The Port Chicago Mutiny, 1944," in *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century: An International Perspective*, ed. Christopher M. Bell and Bruce A. Elleman (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 200. 2. Robert L. Allen, " Final Outcome? Fifty Years after the Port Chicago Mutiny," *American Visions* 9 (1994).

[http:// search. ebscohost. com.](http://search.ebscohost.com)

[http://search. ebscohost. com](http://search.ebscohost.com)

[http://montfordpointmarinesandhonor. blogspot. com/2013/09/](http://montfordpointmarinesandhonor.blogspot.com/2013/09/)

[http://search. epnet. com/Login. asp? lp= login. asp&ref= https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2Eua%2F&authtype= ip, uid](http://search.epnet.com/Login.aspx?lp=login.asp&ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2Eua%2F&authtype=ip,uid)

[https://ja. wikipedia. org/wiki/%E3%83%9D%E3%83%BC%E3%83%88%E3%82%B7%E3%82%AB%E3%82%B4%E3%81%AE%E6%83%A8%E4%BA%8B](https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E3%83%9D%E3%83%BC%E3%83%88%E3%82%B7%E3%82%AB%E3%82%B4%E3%81%AE%E6%83%A8%E4%BA%8B)

<https://assignbuster.com/port-chicago-disaster/>