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BLACKS VS. NAVY BLUE

World War II was a crucible in which a new era of race relations was forged in the United States. For the first time more than a million black men and women served in the armed forces, about half of them overseas. The war also accelerated the migration of blacks to northern and western cities and gave them more economic and political clout than ever before. With Adolf Hitler demonstrating the evils of racism, respectable people and publications no longer could openly espouse white supremacist doctrines. Segregation nevertheless persisted in the United States, and nowhere more obviously than in the military itself. World War II was essentially conducted as a Jim Crow operation by the army, navy and marines, with nearly all black personnel assigned to segregated units commanded by white officers.

The inconsistency of fighting Nazism with racially segregated military units was not lost on black Americans. Accordingly, the armed forces became a special target of protest and organizational activity (helping pave the way for the civil rights activism of the post-war

era). A number of specific incidents focused attention on wartime military segregation, among them the important Mare Island mutiny court martial trial of September and October, 1944. The refusal by fifty black sailors to load ammunition ships at the Mare Island Naval Depot in northern San Francisco Bay produced the navy's first mutiny court martial of the war and the longest and largest mutiny trial in navy history. It also resulted in protests and pressures that helped bring about a remarkable transformation in the navy's racial policies.¹

The so-called mutiny at Mare Island had its origins in pre-war navy personnel policies. In 1941 blacks were still excluded from all naval assignments except the messman's service. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox argued that to allow black sailors to do other tasks would "provoke discord and demoralization." Admiral Chester

Charles Wollenberg is Reviews Editor of the magazine and author of *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975*.

The Mare Island Mutiny Court Martial

Bits of wreckage (marked by arrows) protrude from the water at Port Chicago, all that remained of the two ammunition ships which exploded. In the foreground are the shattered remnants of the dock with its railroad equipment and installations.



*The surviving stevedores were
reassembled at Mare Island and . . .
ordered to load ammunition ships.
Some 328 men refused.*

W. Nimitz explained that “the policy of now enlisting men of the Colored race for any branch of naval service except the messman’s branch was adopted to meet the best interests of general ship efficiency.”

For a time after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the navy tried to maintain its policy of using blacks exclusively as “chambermaids for the braid.” When Dorie Miller, a black messman, manned a machine gun and shot down at least four Japanese planes during the Pearl Harbor attack, navy brass initially played down the incident, apparently to prevent attention to the fact that black men could perform well in combat. But under pressure from civil rights groups and President Franklin Roosevelt, Navy Secretary Knox finally announced on April 7, 1942, that black enlistees henceforth would be accepted for “general service.” The “messman only” era was at an end.²

The navy’s new policy was not one of integration, however. A segregated facility for black recruits was established at Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois, with smaller segregated installations set up at Memphis and Hampton Institute in Virginia. Except for messmen, blacks were assigned to shore duty only, primarily as stevedores and seabees in segregated units commanded by whites. In 1943 the navy began accepting black draftees and a very few black officer candidates. In 1944 the secretary of the navy established a unit of black Waves, members of the women’s reserve, and assigned black crews to two auxiliary vessels. Also in 1944 the navy published a “Guide to the Command of Negro Personnel” which proclaimed that “the navy

accepts no theories of racial differences in inborn ability” and cautioned officers against referring to blacks as “niggers,” “nigras,” “boy,” “coon,” “darkey,” or “jig.”³ But the official policy of segregation continued.

One of the first naval installations to receive “general service” black enlistees was the Port Chicago Naval Magazine on San Francisco Bay, a facility about thirty-five miles northeast of San Francisco and fifteen miles east of Mare Island. Following Secretary Knox’s “general service” order of 1942, segregated units of black sailors were assigned to load ammunition ships at Port Chicago. On the evening of July 17, 1944, about half of the Port Chicago stevedores were loading the *Quinalt Victory* and *E. A. Bryan* when a massive explosion rocked the entire area. The blast looked like a “flaming doughnut,” a “blinding flash that literally filled the sky.” After the fire subsided, the place where the men had been working was described as “a scorched earth scene,” with both ships and the pier at which they were docked totally destroyed. Most buildings on the naval base and in the town of Port Chicago had been damaged, and windows were shattered in nearby Martinez. Approximately 320 men died in the blast, more than 200 of whom were black sailors who had been loading the ammunition.⁴

In the days following the event, a navy spokesman expressed doubt that the exact cause of the explosion would ever be known, and he commended the surviving black personnel at Port Chicago for their “coolness and bravery.” Off-duty and in their barracks at the time of the blast, the men had immediately begun fighting fires and searching for survivors. They were later joined by black sailors from Mare Island, and eventually four of the men who had battled the flames raging among the boxcars loaded with ammunition received decorations. Admiral C. H. Wright, commandant of the Twelfth Naval District, particularly commended the black sailors who “gave their lives in the service of their country. . . . Their sacrifice could not have been greater had it occurred on a battleship or a beachhead.”⁵

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Exclusive Aerial Photos of the Disaster

San Francisco Chronicle EXTRA

THE CITY'S ONLY HOME-OWNED NEWSPAPER

FOUNDED 1865—VOL. CLIX, NO. 4 CCCC SAN FRANCISCO, WEDNESDAY, JULY 19, 1944 DAILY 5 CENTS, SUNDAY 15 CENTS

BLAST DEATH TOLL NOW 377; 1000 INJURED!

Terrific Explosion In the Bay Region

Damage at Port Chicago Is Well Over Five Million; No Cause Has Been Found

The Army Brings Up Armored Car And Troops to Protect Property; Only a Few Bodies Are Recovered

Death toll resulting from the explosion Monday night at Port Chicago, on San Francisco Bay of tons of war munitions in the holds of two ships mounted to the 377 mark yesterday as semi-official estimates were compiled.

Damage was estimated to be more than \$5,000,000, excluding the cost of the munitions lost. The ships were valued at about \$4,200,000.

Destruction of the huge Army arsenal at Benicia, only seven miles from the scene of the Port Chicago catastrophe was averted by miraculous chance. The blast, according to military officials, caused damage there estimated at \$100,000 to the arsenal facilities and injured six persons.

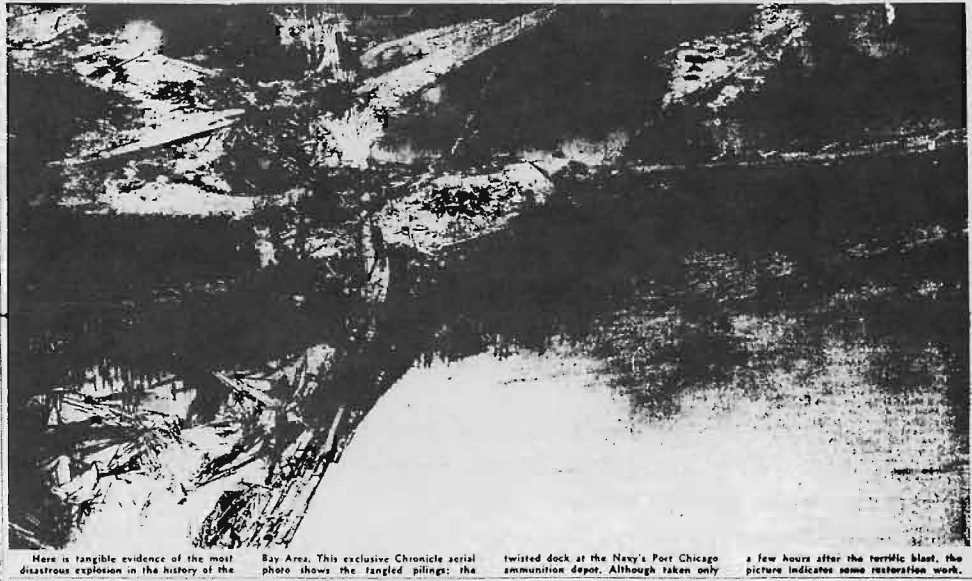
Reports from official sources gave this death toll:

KNOWN DEAD

- 154 Estimated Navy personnel.
- 8 Navy officers.
- 10 United States Maritime Commission seamen.
- 2 Coast Guardsmen.
- 3 Civilian railroad workers.

377 TOTAL

To that total must be added Navy specialists said, members of the armed guard crew of a guard crew in restricted military information. The total sources estimated



Here is tangible evidence of the most disastrous explosion in the history of the Bay Area. This exclusive Chronicle aerial photo shows the tangled pilings; the twisted dock at the Navy's Port Chicago ammunition depot. Although taken only a few hours after the terrific blast, the picture indicates some restoration work.

On August 9 and 10, some three weeks after the tragedy, the surviving stevedores were reassembled at Mare Island and, for the first time since the explosion, ordered to load ammunition ships. Some 328 men refused to do so, explaining that they feared another blast. After the initial refusal to work, Captain N. H. Goss, commander of the Mare Island depot, instructed his 3 division officers to give individual work orders to each man, and while this apparently was not done in all cases, 70 sailors did subsequently agree to load ammunition. On August 11 Admiral Wright addressed the remaining 258 men. He permitted about 25 men to state their

grievances and reported that they did so "freely and respectfully." After Wright's speech, all but 44 of the sailors agreed to work, although 6 more men later refused. The 50 men abstaining were then separated from their units and held in detention.⁶

On August 13 Captain Goss prepared a written memorandum to summarize the oral report he already had given Admiral Wright. The memo not only covered the facts of the incident, but also included Goss's views on the roots of the problem. Goss stated that ever since blacks had been assigned to Port Chicago and Mare Island, there had been "agitators, ringleaders among

these men." He also thought that the sailors had been subjected to "outside propaganda and subversive influence." Goss apparently considered himself an expert on what he called the "normal characteristics of Negroes," and he believed that the Port Chicago men were unusual because they had "a persistent disposition to question orders, to argue, and in effect to attempt to bargain." Another "new characteristic" which Goss had "never observed before among Negroes" was sensitivity about discrimination. This he could not understand, given "the extreme care and patience which has been exercised both at Mare Island and Port Chicago to avoid discrimination." Goss concluded that "concerted action and persistent refusal to obey orders" among the men "indicated a mutinous attitude." He recommended that the 50 hold-outs be charged with mutiny before a general court martial. The 208 who agreed to work after Admiral Wright's speech should be charged with a lesser offense before a summary court martial. The 70 who chose to return to work on August 10 should be free from disciplinary action.⁷

Admiral Wright had already forwarded Goss's oral recommendations to Washington by August 13. Wright himself was not so free with his personal opinions as Goss, but he did note in his report to Washington that he believed that "a considerable portion of the men involved are of a low order of mentality. . . ." Wright urged that ammunition handling was a "logical use" of black personnel but said that "pains must be taken" to avoid the appearance of discrimination. The admiral suggested a rotation system in which the black men would occasionally be given other duties and the assignment of some white units to the task of loading ammunition.⁸

Wright's report was addressed to the new secretary of the navy, James V. Forrestal, who had replaced Frank Knox after the latter's death in the spring of 1944. Forrestal approved Wright's recommendations and on August 28 wrote to President Roosevelt informing him

of the situation. The initial draft of the letter to the president simply covered the facts of the case and the disciplinary action planned. But the final draft signed on August 28 included the proposal to rotate black sailors in other jobs and to assign white units to handle ammunition. Forrestal told the president that these measures would "avoid any semblance of discrimination against Negroes."⁹

The mutiny trial of the black sailors began on September 14 at Treasure Island Naval Base in San Francisco Bay. Retired Admiral Hugo S. Osterhaus presided as president of the seven-man trial board. Chief prosecutor and trial judge advocate was Lt. Commander James F. Coakley. Before the war, Coakley had been an assistant district attorney in Alameda County in an office once headed by Earl Warren. (After the war Coakley was elected district attorney, and he gained prominence in the prosecution of Berkeley demonstrators in the 1960s.) The five-man defense team at Treasure Island was led by Lt. Gerald E. Veltmann.

The defense lost its most important legal battle before the trial began. Veltmann had submitted a pre-trial brief calling for dismissal of the mutiny charge in which he quoted from *Winthrop's Military Law and Precedents*. *Winthrop's* defined mutiny as "unlawful opposition or resistance to, or defiance of superior military authority with a deliberate attempt to usurp, subvert or override the same." The brief argued that this definition clearly required that men charged with mutiny must intend to seize or overthrow command. At worst, he argued, the Mare Island sailors had simply disobeyed an order with no intent to "usurp, subvert or override" authority.¹⁰

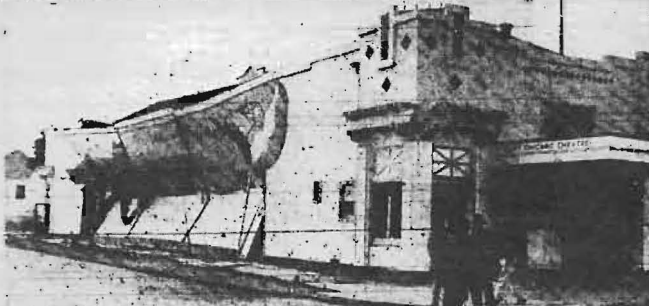
The prosecution countered with its own quotation from *Winthrop's*: "Collective insubordination or simultaneous disobedience of a lawful order by two or more

Where Death and Destruction Struck

San Francisco Examiner
July 19, 1944
B



WRECKAGE—This is a general view of the enormous damage done to the dock area at Port Chicago by the explosion of the two ammunition ships. Literally blown to matchwood, the debris in the background is what was left of railroad equipment and installations. Concussion reduced the two automobiles in the foreground to little more than candidates for the junk yard.



BUCKLED—This is the exterior of the Port Chicago motion picture theater, one wall buckled. The entire audience of 185 escaped with only minor injuries. Joe Meyer, manager of the theater, who was in the projection booth, was knocked unconscious, but recovered quickly enough to call down to the theater and tell everyone to leave quietly.



RUBBLE—A glassup scene on the Port Chicago waterfront which was reported earlier of U.S. Observers pointed out that an aerial attack by stickbomber bombs could not have created more havoc and destruction. One witness who narrowly escaped injury said: "I thought the Japs had come over for sure in answer to our recent B-29 bombings of their country."



GAME GOES ON—The Navy adjusted men's recreation hall was more than a mile away from the actual explosion, yet one wall was blown completely out and another part of the building collapsed. In the above scene showing the blown-out wall, a shore policeman has nonchalantly picked up a cue and is pictured making a few practice shots on one of the pool tables.

*Faced with conflicting definitions
[of mutiny], the trial board sided with
the prosecution.*

persons . . . is an endeavor to make a revolt or mutiny." Commander Coakley argued that under this definition, he was not required to prove that the defendants intended to seize command. Instead, "evidence showing a joint, collective and persistent refusal by two or more men to work after a lawful order to do so" could constitute mutiny. Faced with conflicting definitions, the trial board sided with the prosecution and refused to dismiss the charge.¹¹

Coakley then had to show that there had been an organized effort or conspiracy to disobey orders among the men. On the second day of the trial his attempt to do so created another major legal battle. The prosecution presented the testimony of officers who said that they heard black sailors encouraging their compatriots not to load ammunition. The sailors reportedly used such phrases as "Don't go to work for the white m— — — f— — —," "Let's all stick together," and "We have the officers by the b— — —." The problem with this "evidence" was that none of the witnesses could identify the persons who were supposed to have made these remarks. Lt. Ernest Delucchi, for example, testified that he heard the comments while standing in formation with his back to the men. Veltmann argued that this testimony was inadmissible hearsay and that even if the statements had been heard, there was no way of telling if any of the defendants had made them. Again, however, Admiral Osterhaus ruled in Coakley's favor and allowed the testimony to be entered in the record.¹²

Despite these major blows to the defense case, Veltmann and his colleagues waged a spirited legal battle. In cross-examination they forced prosecution witnesses to

admit that the defendants had been polite and respectful and had obeyed all orders except those to load ammunition. Lt. P. H. Pembroke, a navy psychiatrist, testified that the Port Chicago explosion could produce such great trauma among the survivors that the men might reasonably refuse to load ammunition out of a "sense of self-protection." He pointed out that the men had received no psychiatric assistance in dealing with this trauma. Chaplain J. M. Flowers testified that when he admitted his own fear to the defendants and urged them to overcome their fear in order to help "the men in the foxholes," one of the sailors had replied, "In the foxholes a man has a chance to fight back."¹³

The heart of the defense case was the testimony of the accused themselves, and all fifty men appeared on their own behalf. Generally, they testified that they had acted out of fear and had no intention of challenging military authority. They denied planning the work stoppage and said that a petition that had circulated among the men had only requested a change of duty, not urged men to refuse to work. None of the defendants admitted making statements encouraging others to disobey orders, and most claimed they never received individual orders to load ammunition. Many of the men said they would have obeyed such orders had they been given.¹⁴

Occasionally, the defendants' testimony included some unusual facts. Ollie Green had a broken wrist, and John Dunn was seventeen years old and weighed just 104 pounds, yet both men had been ordered to do the heavy work of loading ammunition. Joe Small described the panic that ensued among the defendants when a piece of paper became caught in the fan in the detention barrack and produced a loud, cracking noise. Several men contended that pre-trial statements taken by the judge advocate's staff were inaccurate. Alphonso MacPherson testified that during the pre-trial interview Coakley had told him to "come clean" or "you will probably get shot." Coakley angrily denied MacPherson's charge, accusing Veltmann of "hitting below the belt."

A verbal battle ensued until Admiral Osterhaus observed that MacPherson had not been shot and that it was time for lunch. When defendant Frank Henry neglected to say "sir" in answer to one of Coakley's questions, the prosecutor asked "Did you learn to say 'sir' when you talk to an officer. . . . Why don't you say it instead of being so insolent?" Veltmann vehemently objected to Coakley's remark, and this time Osterhaus agreed with the defense.¹⁵

In spite of their testimony to the contrary, it is likely that the defendants were motivated by more than fear of another explosion. Robert L. Allen, editor of *Black Scholar* magazine, has recently interviewed some of the surviving Mare Island "mutineers," and he concludes that the work stoppage was a legitimate planned protest against general conditions of segregation and discrimination in the navy and specifically against the lack of recreational facilities, safety precautions, and fair treatment at Port Chicago. At the subsequent court martial, Allen persuasively argues, fear of conviction on mutiny charges led the defendants to deny that they had planned the incident.¹⁶

Although the confidential reports and memoranda of the navy command indicate concern about the "appearance" or "semblance" of discrimination at Port Chicago, the defense lawyers never identified discrimination as an explanation or justification for the Mare Island incident. In this the lawyers were greatly at odds with leaders of the Bay Area's black community. Joseph James, president of the San Francisco branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), said he was "well aware of the pattern of discrimination practiced in the navy and very much concerned about this trial." Mrs. Irma Lewis of Oakland stated, "We mothers want to know why these loading

crews are all Negroes." Reverend C. D. Tolliver of San Francisco also felt it was "unfair that Negroes should always be assigned to dangerous tasks," and J. C. Henderson, an Oakland attorney, believed that "the discriminatory policy of the navy and the overall conditions to which the boys on trial have been subjected should be considered." Henderson explained, "Sometimes it becomes hard to turn the other cheek, even though the oppressor is our brother."¹⁷

By 1944 Bay Area black leaders were struggling to cope with the consequences of a massive increase in the region's black population. Wartime production created thousands of new industrial jobs, and black immigrants from the South were a major new source of manpower. Between 1940 and 1944, San Francisco's black population grew from less than 5,000 to over 12,000. Similar increases occurred in Oakland and Berkeley, and far greater rates of growth were recorded for the shipyard towns of Richmond and Vallejo, adjacent to Mare Island. For the region as a whole, the black population increased by more than 200 percent between 1940 and 1944.¹⁸

Local NAACP President James noted that before the war, Bay Area blacks seldom encountered "Jim Crow treatment" and "recognizing their apparent good fortune, generally exercised care lest they attract too much attention." But the population boom, James observed, had resulted in increasing examples of blatant prejudice. Housing discrimination was producing the area's first black ghetto neighborhoods. Over half the new black population worked in the shipyards, and the chief shipyard union, the boilermakers, required blacks to join segregated "auxiliary locals." In 1944, 1700 black workers at Marinship Company in Sausalito refused to pay union dues unless allowed to join the regular boiler-maker locals. The Marin County company honored its union contract by firing the rebels, but in January of 1945 the California supreme court ordered their reinstatement. Joseph James observed that by 1944 the local

NAACP branch was carrying "the burden of protest and representation for the Negro community."¹⁹

It was no surprise that the NAACP became involved in the Mare Island case. In late September, James asked assistance from the organization's New York headquarters. On October 10, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP chief counsel, flew to San Francisco with special travel priority supplied by Navy Secretary Forrestal to observe the trial. Marshall met with prosecution and defense lawyers and interviewed all fifty defendants. He soon was convinced that the men were being unjustly prosecuted: "They have told me they were willing to go to jail to get a change of duty because of their terrific fear of explosives, but they had no idea that verbal expression of their fear constituted mutiny." Marshall stayed in the Bay Area twelve days, and his presence helped attract national attention to the trial, particularly that of the national black press. Before leaving, Marshall promised that the NAACP would "expose the whole rotten navy setup which led to the Port Chicago explosion and in turn to the so-called 'mutiny' trial." "Negroes in the navy don't mind loading ammunition," he cautioned, "they just want to know why they are the only ones doing the loading."²⁰

Meanwhile, the trial at Treasure Island droned on. On October 18, more than a month after the court martial body originally convened, the defense finally finished presentation of its case. Coakley then called several prosecution rebuttal witnesses to counter a number of allegations made by the defense. Division officers, for example, were called to deny defense testimony that crews loading ammunition had sometimes been forced to race against each other. Members of the judge advocate's staff assured the court that no coercion had been used in taking pre-trial statements and that the statements were accurate, though not always in the defendant's exact words.²¹

On October 23, Lt. Veltmann presented the defense's final argument. He repeated his objection to the mutiny

charge and argued that the defendants had taken no overt action to "usurp, subvert or overthrow" authority. Again Veltmann objected to the use of hearsay evidence and questioned whether precise orders had been given to all the men. He contended that the defendants had been motivated by understandable fear rather than a desire to seize authority.

Commander Coakley's final prosecution argument disputed Veltmann on every point. The prosecutor argued that the men had repeatedly disobeyed orders given over a three-day period. He contended that the defendants had discussed the matter among themselves and urged others to join them and that this constituted a "collective refusal" to accept authority. The men who participated in such a refusal had entered into a conspiracy to mutiny "whether they realized it or not," and fear was no defense for such a crime. Coakley concluded that "any man so depraved as to be afraid to load ammunition" deserved no leniency.²²

Apparently, Coakley's arguments were persuasive. The trial had lasted thirty-three days and produced a transcript of over 1400 pages. Theoretically, there were fifty separate sentences to decide. Yet on October 24 the trial board deliberated just eighty minutes, during which they also managed to eat lunch, and then found all the defendants guilty. The sentences were not immediately announced, but the board had unhesitatingly sentenced each man to fifteen years detention, reduction of rating to apprentice seaman, and dishonorable discharge.²³

The trial board's decision was only the first step toward final sentencing, however. Admiral Wright would review the decision, and his findings would in turn be reviewed by the advocate general's office in Washington. Finally, Secretary Forrestal would approve the final decision. At each stage, sentences could be reduced but not increased. On November 15 Admiral Wright confirmed the guilty verdicts but reduced the sentences of forty men because of youth or lack of previous misconduct. Five defendants had their confinement reduced to

Seated around the table in front of the fifty accused seamen are the navy officers who conducted the men's defense at the Treasure Island court martial trial.



eight years, eleven to ten years, and twenty-four to twelve years. The remaining ten received the full fifteen-year sentences.²⁴ The men were then taken to Terminal Island Disciplinary Barracks in Southern California to begin serving their time.

Expressing shock and outrage, the November, 1944, issue of the NAACP magazine, *Crisis*, reported that Thurgood Marshall and his staff were preparing a legal brief on behalf of the convicted sailors. The magazine also quoted Marshall as saying that the men were tried "solely because of their race and color."²⁵ Marshall was more circumspect in his brief. The document, addressed to the advocate general, repeated the defense objections to the mutiny charge and to the admission of hearsay evidence. In addition, it objected to the procedure of a mass trial for all fifty defendants, arguing that this made it difficult to determine degrees of individual guilt and innocence. Marshall condemned the pre-trial publicity surrounding the case, particularly navy press releases and photographs which made it clear that all the defendants were black. Marshall also charged that Coakley had subtly injected racial prejudice into the proceedings. The prosecutor had questioned defendants from the North about their homes, for example, but not those from the South. Marshall argued that Coakley was attempting to give the impression that the incident was due to northern black ringleaders and troublemakers.²⁶

On April 3, 1945, the NAACP counsel followed up his written brief with a personal appearance at the advocate general's office in Washington, D.C. Marshall discussed his impression of the defendants, describing them as without "group cohesion" and "apart on everything, including intellect, respectfulness, if you please, and capability of making up their own minds." Half were under twenty-one, and a couple were "just plain kids." He again bitterly attacked Coakley's conduct at the trial, charging him with prejudice and unethical behavior. Marshall commented that the defense lawyers did a good job, but he argued that as naval officers they were

limited in the issues they could raise at the trial and hinted that discrimination might be one of those issues. Finally, he reminded the advocate general's staff that "the convictions will forever stand as a disgrace to the entire Negro personnel of the United States navy."²⁷

Even before Marshall's personal appearance, an advocate-general staff memorandum had raised some of the same legal points as the NAACP brief. The memo also questioned the admittance of hearsay evidence and the loose definition of mutiny accepted by the court. Accordingly, on May 17, 1945, Acting Navy Secretary Ralph A. Bard informed Admiral Wright that Forrestal wished the court martial trial board to reconvene and reconsider the case without using hearsay evidence and in light of a definition of mutiny which required a "deliberate purpose to usurp, subvert or override" authority. In effect, Forrestal was agreeing with the original defense objections, but he was not throwing out the case. He only asked the trial board to reconsider the decision. The board met briefly and on June 12 "respectfully adhered" to its original verdict. One week later Admiral Wright approved the verdict and repeated the same sentence reductions he made the previous November. On July 13 Bard announced that the navy found the proceedings at Treasure Island fair and the sentences legal, but that the secretary of the navy would still consider mitigating factors.²⁸

While the Mare Island case made its way through the navy's appeal channels, Forrestal began moving to liberalize the service's racial policies. In September, 1944, he replaced the commander of the black training facility at Great Lakes, and its rigid segregation policies began to change. In June, 1945, the bureau of naval personnel announced the full integration of all its training facilities, and in August the predominantly white members of

an integrated Great Lakes training batallion elected a black as their "honor man." In 1944 and 1945 black crews were assigned to some small combat ships, and integrated crews were tried on auxiliary vessels. In December, 1945, Forrestal finally ordered that "in the administration of naval personnel, no differentiation shall be made because of color."²⁹

Forrestal's actions were undoubtedly influenced by growing evidence of racial tension and conflict in the navy. In December, 1944, a full-scale riot broke out between black seabees and white marines on Guam. In 1945 black seabees at Port Huencinc, California, staged a hunger strike to protest discrimination. But the Mare Island "mutiny" remained the most publicized incident, and Forrestal was determined that there would be no repetition of the case. In December, 1944, he ordered that the task of ammunition loading henceforth should be given to "a cross-section of recruit-training graduates."³⁰

Forrestal's most significant action on racial matters was the appointment of Lester Granger as his "special representative" to study race relations in the navy. Granger, a black graduate of Dartmouth (Forrestal's *alma mater*), had served five years as executive secretary of the Urban League. In the six months following his navy appointment in March, 1945, Granger travelled 50,000 miles and visited sixty-seven naval installations at home and abroad. He consulted hundreds of officers and found many of them "anxious to remove barriers." He also talked to about 10,000 black sailors without their officers present. In these "heart-to-heart" discussions, the men spoke "freely and sometimes bitterly about conditions they faced daily." Granger made periodic reports to Forrestal and claimed to notice "very progressive changes" on a month-to-month basis.³¹

In this changing environment, it is not surprising that the navy brass increasingly viewed the sentences of the Mare Island defendants as unnecessarily harsh. When the war ended in August of 1945, there was no longer the

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same need to "set an example." On September 8, the chief of naval personnel recommended a reduction of the men's sentences by one year. On October 15, a Captain Stassen wrote a staff memorandum to Forrestal defending the Mare Island verdict and even arguing that a "non-colored" batallion would have received tougher treatment. Nevertheless, Stassen suggested the sentences be reduced to a total of two years for defendants with good conduct records and three years for all others, with credit given for the nearly one year already served.³²

Forrestal approved Stassen's recommendations on October 17, but that was not to be the secretary's final word on the matter. Granger and perhaps other staff members pressed for full amnesty, and they convinced the secretary to agree to this proposal by the end of December. On January 6, 1946, Granger informed the *New York Times* that the sentences of most of the Mare Island defendants, along with those of thirty-six seabees arrested on Guam, would be "set aside." On January 7, more than fifteen months after the original court martial sentences, the navy officially announced that forty-seven of the fifty Mare Island sailors had been returned to active duty and would be given honorable discharges if they completed their enlistments with good records. Two other defendants in navy hospitals presumably would be returned to active duty when released from treatment. One man was kept in detention because his conduct record "did not warrant consideration." The executive officer at the Terminal Island Disciplinary Barracks informed the NAACP that the men under his

“All restrictions . . . of assignments
for which Negro personnel are eligible
are hereby lifted.”

care had been released and were “presumably overseas.”³³

Granger also told the *New York Times* that the majority of black naval personnel still were “bitterly convinced that a general policy debarred them from advancing as rapidly as their abilities warranted.” But he quite accurately predicted that such policies would soon disappear. On February 27, 1946, the navy issued Circular Letter 46-48 which read: “Effective immediately all restrictions governing types of assignments for which Negro personnel are eligible are hereby lifted. Henceforth they shall be eligible for all types of assignments, in all ratings in all facilities and in all ships . . . in the utilization of housing, messing, and other facilities, no special or unusual provisions will be made for the accommodation of Negroes.”³⁴ Jim Crow no longer wore a navy uniform.

In the four years from early 1942 to early 1946, the navy had moved from having the most restrictive racial policy among the armed forces to the most liberal. The monumental change had been a three-stage process moving from almost complete exclusion of blacks to segregation and then to integration. Of course, reality never fully corresponded to official policy. Racial separation was incomplete in the early war years, and racism and *de facto* segregation persisted in spite of Forrestal’s orders to the contrary. In 1946 more blacks were still in the messman’s service than any other naval branch. But the navy had taken a substantial step; it had removed its official sanction from segregation and white supremacy. When President Harry Truman ordered the complete integration of all armed forces in July,

1948, only the navy was already in technical if not full compliance.³⁵

In the midst of the Mare Island trial, Walter A. Gordon, a prominent black Berkeley attorney, observed that “any policy that brings about segregation based on race is bound to lead to points of conflict.”³⁶ This was the lesson the navy had learned. The change in navy racial policies may have been partially due to manpower needs and the personal convictions of Forrestal and others in the service hierarchy. Pressure from civil rights groups and the black press certainly played a major role. But it was incidents such as the Mare Island “mutiny” that dramatized the ideological and moral inconsistencies of segregation and proved that black sailors would fight back against racism. It demonstrated that a segregated navy meant a disorderly navy. Lester Granger believed that the release of the Mare Island defendants reflected “the anxiety of navy officialdom to justify its racial record.”³⁷ The release of the prisoners also symbolized the navy’s realization that it could no longer afford the hypocrisy of segregation.

The photographs on pages 63 and 73 are Official US Navy photographs. The newspaper pages are from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 19, 1944, pages 1 and 2.

Notes

1. The best short description of the Mare Island incident is in Florence Murray, *The Negro Handbook 1946-47* (New York, 1947), p. 347-349.
2. Lawrence D. Reddick, “The Negro in the United States Navy During World War II,” *Journal of Negro History*, April, 1947, p. 202-208; Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts* (Columbia, Mo., 1969), p. 101; Lee Nichols, *Breakthrough on the Color Front* (New York: 1945), pp. 55-58; Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History: a New Perspective* (New York, 1974), pp. 167-170.
3. Reddick, “Negro During World War II,” 209-215; Harry Lorin Binsse, “Negroes in the Navy,” *Commonweal*, September

- 21, 1945, pp. 546-547; Richard J. Stillman, *Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces* (New York, 1968), pp. 22-23; Denis Nelson, *Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy* (New York, 1951), oo. 27-37.
4. *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Francisco News*, *San Francisco Examiner*, July 18, 19, 20, 1944.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. Murray, *Negro Handbook*, 347-348; "Commandant, 12th Naval District, C. H. Wright to Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, 12 August, 1944," memo on microfilm, Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.
 7. "Commandant, 12th Naval District from N. H. Goss, 13 August, 1944," memo on microfilm, Naval Historical Center.
 8. "Wright to Forrestal, 12 August, 1944."
 9. "Memorandum for the President from James V. Forrestal, 28 August, 1944," microfilm, Naval Historical Center.
 10. "Objection of Accused to Charge and Specification" in "Case of Julius J. Allen *et al.*, Trial Transcript," microfilm, Naval Historical Center.
 11. "Judge Advocate's Trial Brief on the Law of Mutiny" in "Trial Transcript."
 12. "Trial Transcript," 42-43, *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 16, 1944.
 13. "Trial Transcript," 103-104, 106; *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 19, 1944.
 14. "Summary Testimony in the Case of Julius J. Allen," in "Trial Transcript," 4-6.
 15. "Summary Testimony," 3-6; *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 28, October 5, 6, 11, 1944; "Trial Transcript," 348-349, 368, 688-694, 106, 1000-1001.
 16. Robert L. Allen, "Black Protest and Resistance in the Military During World War II: The Port Chicago 'Mutiny' of 1944," unpublished paper, San Francisco, 1978.
 17. *California Eagle*, September 21, 1944; *People's World*, September 18, 1944.
 18. Charles S. Johnson *et al.*, *The Negro Worker in San Francisco* (San Francisco, 1944), pp. 1-5; Miriam Roher, "Trouble Coming in California," *The New Republic*, January 21, 1946, pp. 84-85; Joseph James, "Race Relations on the Pacific Coast, San Francisco," *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, November, 1945, pp. 166-168.
 19. James, "Race Relations," 167-175; "Fight Over Jim Crow," "Negro Problem Worries the Coast," "Ban Outlawed," *Business Week*, March 4, December 23, 1944, January 13, 1945.
 20. *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 11, 29, 1944; *Baltimore Afro American*, October 21, 1944; *Pittsburg Courier*, October 28, 1944; *California Eagle*, October 19, 1944; *People's World*, October 17, 1944.
 21. *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 18, 19, 1944; "Summary Testimony," 7-8.
 22. "Trial Transcript," 1372-1435; *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 24, 25, 1944; *San Francisco News*, October 23-24.
 23. "Summary Testimony," 8; *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Francisco Examiner*, October 25, 1944; *San Francisco News*, October 24, 1944.
 24. "District Naval Staff Headquarters, Twelfth Naval Headquarters, 15 November, 1944," memo on microfilm, Naval History Center; *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 18-19, 1944; *New York Times*, November 19, 1944.
 25. *Crisis*, November, 1944, pp. 344, 362; January, 1945, p. 20.
 26. *Crisis*, April, 1945, p. 110; "Memorandum Brief for the Accused" in "Trial Transcript."
 27. "Statement of Thurgood Marshall Esq., 3 Apr. 1945" in "Trial Transcript."
 28. "Memorandum for Admiral Lowe 5 Feb. 1945;" "Ralph A. Bard to Commandant, 12th Naval District 17 May, 1945;" "Records of Proceedings in Revision;" "District Staff Headquarters, 12th Naval District" all on microfilm, Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.; Murray, *Negro Handbook*, 349; Nelson, *Integration*, 80.
 29. Nelson, *Integration*, 21, 47-49; Nichols, *Breakthrough*, 58-60; Reddick, "Negro During World War II," 217.
 30. Nelson, *Integration*, 210; Reddick, "Negro During World War II," 214.
 31. Lester B. Granger, "Racial Democracy, the Navy Way," *Common Ground*, Winter, 1947, pp. 61-66; Reddick, "Negro During World War II," 215-216.
 32. "Secretary of Navy from Chief of Naval Personnel 8 Sept. 1945;" "Captain Stassen to the Secretary of Navy 15 Oct. 1945" memos on microfilm, Naval Historical Center.
 33. *New York Times*, January 7-8, 1946; *Baltimore Afro American*, January 10, 1946; *Pittsburg Courier*, January 12, 1946.
 34. Nelson, *Integration*, 21.
 35. Reddick, "Negro During World War II," 218.
 36. *People's World*, September 18, 1944.
 37. Granger, "Racial Democracy," 67.