

P-file

OFFICE OF COMMANDANT
TWELFTH NAVAL DISTRICT
SAN FRANCISCO, 2, CALIFORNIA

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12 August 1944

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From: Commandant, Twelfth Naval District
To: The Secretary of the Navy
Via: (1) Chief of Naval Personnel
(2) Chief of Naval Operations

Subject: Refusal of enlisted personnel to handle ammunition.

1. On 11 August the Commandant was informed by the Commanding Officer of the Naval Ammunition Depot, Mare Island, that three divisions of enlisted personnel from the Naval Barracks, Port Chicago, had refused to perform their assigned duty in handling ammunitions to be discharged from a merchant vessel then berthed at the Ammunition Depot; that when the orders to work were repeated to the men individually 70 of them had obeyed and 258 continued to refuse to obey; that these 258 men had been segregated; and that necessary work was proceeding because of the detail of other men to this duty.

2. On 12 August the Commandant visited the Naval Ammunition Depot, Mare Island, for consultation with the Commanding Officer, and to address the insubordinate group. The men were given an opportunity to explain the reasons for their actions. About 25 did so and they appeared to speak freely but respectfully.

3. After this visit the men were again required to state whether they would comply with orders. All but 44 stated that they would do so. The recalcitrant 44 were again segregated. Today all except these 44 and 6 others who again changed their minds, were at work performing the assigned duty of unloading ammunition from a ship.

4. The following facts are of interest:

- (a) All of the men involved are Negro.
- (b) Petty officers, with the exception of Chief Petty Officers, of the three divisions are Negro. The highest Negro petty officers of the divisions were second class gunners mates. About 40% of all the Negro petty officers of these divisions persisted in the refusal to work when individually ordered to do so on August 10.
- (c) There are no divisions of white enlisted personnel performing similar work at the Naval Ammunition Depot or the Naval Magazine.

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- (d) The Negro divisions have heretofore turned in a satisfactory record in the loading of ammunition. Their records of tons per man per day equal those of civilian stevedores in this area.
- (e) Since the explosion at Port Chicago, Negro personnel at that station have done necessary work at the Naval Magazine in connection with transfer of ammunition including loading of barges.
- (f) This was the first occasion since the explosion at Port Chicago that these men had been called upon to perform work loading ammunition into, or discharging ammunition from, a ship.
- (g) Prior to the explosion at Port Chicago, there were insufficient qualified volunteers from the ammunition handling divisions at the Naval Ammunition Depot and at the Naval Magazine to make up outgoing drafts which these activities were at times called upon to supply.

5. After personal investigation and inquiry, the Commandant is of the opinion that:

- (a) Unusual and successful effort has been made at these two stations to avoid any semblance of discrimination against negroes.
- (b) The refusal to perform the required work arises from a mass fear arising out of the Port Chicago explosion. This fear is unreasonably associated with the handling of ammunition in ships, rather than in the handling of ammunition as such.
- (c) A considerable proportion of the men involved are of a low order of mentality, and as such are particularly susceptible to group influence and to the belief in wild rumors.
- (d) The use of negro enlisted personnel at ammunition depots is a logical employment where many of them will be more useful than in other naval assignments.
- (e) Pains must be taken to insure that there is no justification for an opinion that any type of hazardous work is assigned exclusively to negro personnel.
- (f) It is necessary that there be set up a system of rotation of duty which will insure that negro enlisted personnel at the Naval Ammunition Depot Mare Island, and the Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, be not retained indefinitely at those stations if they desire other duty for which they are suitable.

6. Authority has been received by telephone from Chief of the Bureau of Personnel for procurement and training of one battalion of white enlisted men for Port Chicago and one for the Naval Ammunition

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Depot, Mare Island. Authority has also been received to arrange necessary rotation.

7. No action will be taken against the 70 men who at first refused duty but who obeyed when individually ordered to do so. The 208 men who refused duty, but who complied with orders today will be tried by Summary Courts Martial on charges of refusing to obey orders. The 50 men who have now continued to override authority will be brought to trial by General Courts Martial on charges of mutiny.

C. H. WRIGHT

cc: CO, NADMI
CO, N.Mag, Pt.Chi.