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Office of the  
Secretary of the Navy  
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Mr. Walter White,  
National Association for the  
Advancement of Colored People,  
100 Massachusetts Avenue, N. W.,  
Washington, D. C.

My dear Mr. White:

The Secretary of the Navy has forwarded your telegram of September 16th to this Bureau for consideration and reply. It concerns conditions at Mare Island and the subordinate activity at Port Chicago.

First, you state that there is a policy to assign Negroes exclusively to the hazardous job of loading and unloading ammunition. If this were true, it would be a most serious charge because it would indicate that the Navy was fighting a war on a race basis. However, it is not true in any respect.

It should be pointed out that the loading and unloading of ammunition is no more hazardous, if as much so, than the manufacture and production of that ammunition. Nor is it any more hazardous than the unloading and carrying of the ammunition either at the combat point of destination on shore, or the handling and passage of that ammunition aboard ship. More pertinent to your inquiry, however, is the fact that in the manufacture and production of the ammunition, Negro and white personnel, Navy and civilian, are used indiscriminately. In the loading and handling of ammunition at ammunition depots and mine depots, both Negro and white personnel are used. To illustrate, white personnel are used for this particular duty at several of the ammunition depots. Both Negro and white personnel are used at Hastings, Yorktown, Mare Island, and Port Chicago. Again, at our advanced bases in the combat areas, Negro and white personnel are used indiscriminately.

It is true that some of this work is extra hazardous. In the space of a few months, there were serious explosions both at Pearl Harbor and at Port Chicago. There were no more casualties among Negro Naval personnel as a result of these explosions than among white personnel. However, these assignments are no more hazardous than many other assignments both aboard ship and at advanced bases, where there have been Navy casualties, Negro and white. The Department will never select any race for exclusive assignment to, or exemption from, hazardous duty.

CC: The Secretary of the Navy

57-2-11

The second point raised in your telegram is your fear that the situation on the West Coast will be aggravated by reason of the court-martial of fifty Negro personnel who refused to carry on with their tasks after the Port Chicago explosion. The fact that there has been an explosion, or the fact that a ship has been damaged, cannot furnish the basis or justification for any member of the Naval Service to decide that his assignment is risky and that it is time for him to quit. Any man, Negro or white, who lays down his arms under these circumstances will be court-martialed.

Not only did this action at Port Chicago have nothing to do with the fact that the personnel were Negro, but the Department would not under any circumstances remove the Negro personnel from this type of duty. To do so would be a declaration by the Department that it had determined that Negroes were unfit for hazardous duty. Negro personnel in the Navy have shown the same devotion to duty and the same disregard of risk that white personnel have shown, and the Department would be acting without justification if it were to say that a lower or less severe standard of courage should be required of Negroes than whites.

As the Secretary told you in his reply, your candor and frankness in raising these questions are appreciated because they give the Department an opportunity to set forth its position. Since the interest of your Association is the advancement of colored people, I know you will agree that the points above discussed, decided on the basis of military principles applicable to Negro and white alike, are at the same time indicative of the fact that in these matters, the Department is not dealing with races, but with members of the Naval Service.

Sincerely yours,

J. E. Donfeld  
Rear Admiral, U.S.N.  
Acting Chief of Naval Personnel