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October 19, 1944

Hon. James V. Forrestal
Secretary of the Navy
Navy Department
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Forrestal:

I have just returned from San Francisco where for the past twelve days I have been investigating the circumstances leading to the court martial of the fifty Negro seamen charged with mutiny, which is now being conducted on Yerba Buena Island. As to the trial itself, I am convinced that the accused were advised of their rights to civilian counsel prior to the trial and that they had signified their willingness to accept naval counsel. While attending the trial for several days, I was convinced that defense counsel, headed by Lieutenant Gerald E. Veltmann, is doing a splendid job in defending these men and within the limitations of Navy rules, is doing everything possible toward protecting their rights at the trial as well as the development of the case itself. In addition to attending the trial, I made an investigation as far as possible into the incidents leading up to the Port Chicago explosion and conditions immediately prior to the accident. As a result of this explosion, I believe I have returned to the duty of leading a committee from the United States Navy to look at the court martial proceedings that such an explosion as occurred at Port Chicago would have a direct effect upon the minds of the men who were near the explosion.

leged refusal to obey orders, resulting in the present trial. I, of course, realize it would be impossible to make a thorough investigation since I am a civilian. There are many factors involved in the working conditions in the Twelfth Naval District which could not be brought out in the court martial. I am convinced that there are sufficient facts involved to warrant a thorough and complete investigation by your office as to the following conditions, which existed in the Twelfth Naval District:

1. Why is it that the only naval personnel loading ammunition regularly were Negroes with the exception of their officers and petty officers?
2. Why is it that Negro seamen, many of whom have had special training in such schools as gunnery schools, were nevertheless relegated to the duty of loading ammunition?
3. Why is it that these men were not given any training whatsoever in the dangers to be found in loading ammunition or the proper methods to be used in loading ammunition?
4. Why is it that men with no prior experience whatsoever were given the duty of handling winches in the loading of ammunition when civilian longshoremen were not permitted to handle winches on ammunition unless they had had several years' experience in winch handling?
5. Why is it that Negro seamen with no prior experience in ammunition were given the job of hatch tender in the loading of ammunition?
6. Why is it that officers "raced" their gangs in contests in the loading of ammunition?
7. Why is it that one of the accused, Seaman Green, while suffering with a broken wrist, despite the fact that the Navy doctors ordered him on the sick list, was not placed on the sick list, but was ordered to load ammunition?
8. Why is it that the Negro seamen who had been loading ammunition and who were at Port Chicago at the time of the explosion were not given any leave whatsoever as a result of this explosion, but were forced to return to the duty of loading ammunition? A Psychiatrist from the United States Navy testified at the court martial proceedings that such an explosion as occurred at Port Chicago would have a lasting effect upon the minds of the men who were near the explosion.

Hon. James V. Forrestal

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Practically all of the Negroes at Port Chicago were trained at great length and were led to believe that they were being trained to serve as regular seamen. This they are anxious to do. When these men were assigned to Port Chicago instead of being given an opportunity to serve in whatever branch of the service they might find themselves fitted, they were, solely because of their race or color, restricted to the task of loading ammunition and other menial tasks.

As a result of the action of the Twelfth Naval District in releasing some of the men who allegedly refused to obey orders, shipping 150 of the men to the Pacific around the middle of August, the giving of summary courts to some of the men and the singling out of an even 50 to be charged with mutiny, Negro members of the armed forces, as well as Negro and white civilians, believe that a thorough, complete and impartial investigation by your office is essential at this time.

We have been receiving reports in this office for several months and my investigation in the Pay Area seems to justify all of the complaints we have received concerning the discriminatory policies being practiced by the Twelfth Naval District.

In this request for an impartial investigation we by no means wish to reflect at all upon the manner in which the actual court martial proceedings are being conducted. It is for that reason we believe the investigation is necessary.

Sincerely yours,
Thurgood Marshall
Special Counsel

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