

1944 blast at Benicia arsenal shakes up Solano

By Nancy Dingler

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Windows shattered and walls cracked the night of July 17, 1944 throughout Solano County. Citizens of Fairfield and Suisun ran into the streets, fearing that the Japanese had penetrated U.S. defenses and were dropping bombs. Speculation ran the gamut from German v-rockets to the arsenal at Benicia blowing up.

Those in cars immediately pulled off the road, fearing their gas tanks had ruptured. The police had a report that someone saw a plane explode because the sky became very bright. The glow from the explosion could be seen as far away as San Francisco.

Approximately 10:18 that evening, at Port Chicago, located near Benicia, two munition ships, the E.A. Bryant and Quinalt Victory, blew up while being loaded with bombs for the war effort.

Several small boats, including the Miahelo, a Coast Guard patrol boat, at half-mile from the pier, reported being hit by a 30-foot wall of water. The Miahelo nearly capsized and left the wheelman badly wounded. A 16-inch shell, which did not explode, hit the engine room of a small tanker, the SS Redline. The shock wave caved in buildings as far away as downtown Benicia.

It was one of the worst homefront disasters of WWII. A total of 320 men, 202 of who were black, on the pier and aboard the two ships, were killed instantly. Another 390 military and civilian personnel were injured. The dead represented 15 percent of the black casualties for the entire war.

The Navy blamed the cause of the explosion on the black loaders. The charge, at the time, was "rough handling by individual or individuals." The dead sailors could not defend themselves; however 288 black sailors knew that no one had been properly trained to handle the explosives and refused to continue loading any other ships, until proper training was initiated.

During WWII, the Navy had established Port Chicago as an ammunition depot. Port Chicago was a small town on the Sacramento River, with about 1,500 people. Its location was particularly ideal along the river, which could be easily forded by large ships. A rail line was also in place. Mare Island was not far away, where they also had an ammunition depot.

Most of the ammunition arrived by train from Hawthorne, Nev., was held in boxcars and parked between protective concrete barriers until unloaded. Loading went on 24 hours a day, almost exclusively by black sailors. The ammunition was unloaded by hand-to-hand trucks, or carts. Larger bombs were rolled down a ramp onto cargo netting, which then was winched onto the ships.

The ammunition included small-caliber bullets, incendiary bombs, fragmentation bombs, depth charges and bombs up to 2,000 pounds.

The scene at ground zero was devastating. Very few intact bodies were found. It appeared that the E.A. Bryan vaporized along with its cargo of 4,600 tons of ammunition, while the Quinalt Victory was lifted clear out of the water by the blast, turned around and broken into pieces at least 1,000 feet from its original position. The largest piece of the ship was a 65-foot part of the keel, with its propeller still attached, that stuck out above the water line at low tide.

No trace of the 12-ton locomotive was ever found. The rail cars were reduced to kindling. Off-duty sailors and officers tried to reach the site of the explosion to attempt a rescue operation. One of them was quoted in an interview: "We got halfway down there on the truck and stopped. Guys were shouting at the driver from the back of the truck. "Go on down. What are you staying up here for?" The driver replied, "Can't go no further. See, there wasn't no more dock. Wasn't no railroad. Wasn't no ships."

The next morning, 200 black enlisted men, along with other military personnel from Port Chicago and Mare Island, began the grim task of searching for bodies. "You'd see a shoe with a foot in it, and then you'd remember how you'd joked about who was gonna be the first one out of the hold. You'd see a head floating across the water - just the head - or an arm . . . "

Out of the 288 men who refused to load the ships until further training, 50 were identified and charged with mutiny, sentenced to various lengths of incarceration and dishonorably discharged. After a public outcry, in January 1946, 47 of the men were released from prison, exiled for one year overseas, before returning to their families. Fifty years later, President Clinton granted a full pardon to them.

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