

U.S. History  
Extra Credit

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Missing Pieces-Port Chicago Disaster (July 17, 1944)**

After reading *The Port Chicago 50* by Steve Sheinkin, read the following article and fill out the chart below and then complete the back of this handout.

What important details from the book are included?	What important details from the book are excluded?

Why does this article fail to mention the connection between the Port Chicago fifty and the desegregation of the military?

How does that missing information shape and deepen one's understanding of the impact of this event?

If you could only read this one source, what would you understand about the impact of the Port Chicago fifty?

**Read the following excerpt from an American history textbook and be prepared to discuss the following questions.**

Complaints about discrimination in the military reached a peak in July 1944 when an explosion at a naval ammunition depot at Port Chicago, near San Francisco, killed 300 stevedores, most of them black and untrained in the process of loading ammunition. When the navy assigned another group of black sailors to similar duty nearby, some of them refused, citing inadequate safety conditions. The resulting court-martial of 50 African American men was the largest mass trial in naval history. All of the sailors were found guilty of disobeying orders and received prison terms ranging from 8 to 15 years. After the war, the men were released on reduced sentences, but their convictions were not overturned, even after Congress requested a special naval review of the incident in 1994. In 1999, one of the men, Freddie Meeks, then 80, requested and received a presidential pardon.

*Liberty, Equality, Power:  
A History of the American People*  
Thomson Learning  
4<sup>th</sup> Edition  
2005

How does the perspective change again?

What is included that was left out of the History Channel article?

How does Sheinkin's book differ in its perspective and approach?



# JULY 17, 1944 : PORT CHICAGO DISASTER

An ammunition ship explodes while being loaded in Port Chicago, California, killing 332 people on this day in 1944. The United States' World War II military campaign in the Pacific was in full swing at the time. Poor procedures and lack of training led to the disaster.

Port Chicago, about 30 miles north of San Francisco, was developed into a munitions facility when the Naval Ammunition Depot at Mare Island, California, could not fully supply the war effort. By the summer of 1944, expansion of the Port Chicago facility allowed for loading two ships at once around the clock. The Navy units assigned to the dangerous loading operations were generally segregated African-American units. For the most part, these men had not been trained in handling munitions. Additionally, safety standards were forgotten in the rush to keep up frenetic loading schedules.

On the evening of July 17, the *SS Quinault Victory* and *SS E.A. Bryan*, two merchant ships, were being loaded. The holds were being packed with 4,600 tons of explosives—bombs, depth charges and ammunition. Another 400 tons of explosives were nearby on rail cars. Approximately 320 workers were on or near the pier when, at 10:18 p.m., a series of massive explosions over several seconds destroyed everything and everyone in the vicinity. The blasts were felt as far away as Nevada and the resulting damage extended as far as San Francisco. Every building in Port Chicago was damaged and people were literally knocked off their feet. Smoke and fire extended nearly two miles into the air. The pilot of a plane flying at 9,000 feet in the area claimed that metal chunks from the explosion flew past him.

Nearly two-thirds of the people killed at Port Chicago were African-American enlisted men in the Navy—15 percent of all African-Americans killed during World War II. The surviving men in these units, who helped put out the fires and saw the horrors firsthand, were quickly reassigned to Mare Island. Less than a month later, when ordered to load more munitions, but still having received no training, 258 African-American sailors refused to carry out the orders. Two hundred and eight of them were then sentenced to bad conduct discharges and pay forfeiture. The remaining 50 men were put on trial for general court martial. They were sentenced to between eight and 15 years of hard labor, though two years later all were given clemency. A 1994 review of the trials revealed race played a large factor in the harsh sentences. In December 1999, President Clinton pardoned Freddie Meeks, one of only three of the 50 convicted sailors known to be alive at the time.

The Port Chicago disaster eventually led to the implementation of far safer procedures for loading

ammunition. In addition, greater emphasis was put on proper training in explosives handling and the munitions themselves were altered for greater safety. There is now a national memorial to the victims at the site.

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