

rights more “tangible,” the Declaration set “before men’s eyes the ideas which they must strive to reach” and gave them standards which “could be invoked before the law.”

When the committee had a unanimously supported document to present to the General Assembly, Roosevelt “mapped out...strategy very carefully,” reviewing every word of the document with each voting member. Her diligent marshalling of support convinced the Soviet Union to abstain from the General Assembly vote rather than be the lone voice in opposition to the adoption of the Declaration.

Calling its creation “a great event in the life of mankind,” Eleanor Roosevelt considered the Universal Declaration of Human Rights her finest achievement. During the last 14 years of her life, she was its most outspoken champion at home and abroad. Roosevelt challenged audiences with the question, “When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?”

“Where Do Human Rights Begin: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” will be on display in the Cathedral Gallery through mid-January. This exhibit of more than 100 photographs and excerpts from Eleanor Roosevelt’s writings introduces visitors to her efforts to promote peace, address issues of concern to refugees, labor, women, and people of color, and to develop comprehensive housing, education, and diplomatic policies.

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Eugene Fleming

On the Road to Equality

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Orders 9980 and 9981, directing the military and federal government to end more than eight decades of segregation in the armed forces. The Pentagon marked the occasion with public events under the title “Executive Orders 9980 and 9981: 50 Years on the Road to Equal Opportunity.”

The National Park Service’s newest inter-agency partnership, Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, preserves and interprets a significant event in the history of race relations in the U.S. Navy. Administered in partnership with the Navy, Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial honors the memory of black and white munitions handlers and officers who gave their lives and were injured in an explosion on July 17, 1944, recognizes those who served at the magazine, and commemorates the role of the facility as a transshipment point for arms during World War II.

Construction at Port Chicago began in 1942. By 1944, two ships could be loaded with arms simultaneously. African-American Navy ordnance battalions headed by white officers were assigned to munitions loading at Port Chicago. They received cargo handling training, but no special

training in handling highly explosive materials. The Navy had no clear direction for handling munitions, and Coast Guard instructions, published in 1943, were often violated because they were neither safe enough nor fast enough for Port Chicago’s specific environment. Due to tight schedules at the new facility, deviations from these safety standards occurred. Under orders to move faster in order to fill quotas, officers and men experimented with new procedures. Competition developed for the most tonnage loaded in an eight-hour shift.

On the evening of July 17, 1944, the empty SS *Quinault Victory*, less than a week old, prepared for loading on her maiden voyage. The SS *E.A. Bryan* had just returned from her first voyage and was loading across the platform. The holds were being packed with high-explosive and incendiary bombs, depth charges, and ammunition—4,606 tons of munitions in all. There were also 16 rail cars on the pier, containing another 429 tons. 320 cargo handlers, crewmen, and sailors wereworking in the area.

At 10:18 p.m., a hollow ring and the sound of splintering wood sounded from the pier, followed by an explosion that ripped apart the night sky. Witnesses said that a brilliant white flash shot into

Black sailors assemble munitions. Photo courtesy U.S. Navy.



the air, accompanied by a loud, sharp thundering. A column of smoke billowed from the pier, and fire glowed orange and yellow. Flashing like fireworks, smaller explosions went off in the cloud as it rose. Within six seconds, a deeper explosion erupted as the contents of the *Bryan* detonated as one massive bomb. A seismic shock wave was felt as far away as Boulder City, Nevada. A pillar of fire and smoke stretched over two miles into the sky above Port Chicago.

The *Bryan* and the structures around the pier were completely destroyed. The largest remaining pieces of the 7,200-ton ship were the size of a suitcase. A plane flying at 9,000 feet reported seeing chunks of white hot metal “as big as a house” go flying past them. The shattered *Quinault Victory* spun into the air. Witnesses reported seeing a 200-foot column on which rode the bow of a ship, its mast still attached. Its remains crashed back into the bay 500 feet away. All 320 men on duty that night were killed instantly. The blast smashed buildings and rail cars near the pier on the base. People on the base and in town were sent flying or were sprayed with splinters of glass and other debris. The air filled with the sharp cracks and dull thuds of smoldering metal and unexploded shells as they showered back to earth as far as two miles away. Damage was reported as far away as 48 miles across the bay in San Francisco.

Men from nearby units, along with local and regional emergency crews, and civilians quickly responded to the disaster. They sprang into action when a fiery inferno erupted in a nearby railway boxcar filled with high explosives. Their quick and decisive action prevented further casualties or damage to the facility. Five were cited by the commanding officer, Capt. Merrill T. Kinne, “for their heroic effort in fighting the fiery inferno in the ammunition boxcar after the explosions....” Effus S. Allen, William A. Anderson, James A. Camper, Jr., John A. Haskins, Jr., and Richard L. McTerre were awarded the Navy’s Bronze Star.

The men of Port Chicago were vital to the success of the war, and yet they are often forgotten. Of the 320 men killed in the explosion, 202 were the African-American enlisted men assigned the dangerous duty of loading the ships. In addition to those killed, 390 were wounded. They were evacuated and treated, and those who remained were left with the gruesome task of cleaning up. Less than a month after the worst home-front disaster of World War II, Port Chicago was again moving munitions to the troops in the Pacific.

After the explosion, the Navy instituted a number of changes in munitions handling procedure. Formalized training became an important element, and certification was required before a loader was allowed on the docks. The munitions themselves were redesigned for safety while loading.

The explosion caused workers to examine their society. Nearly two-thirds of the 320 men killed were African-American sailors from division of the ordnance battalion. What had been minor grievances and problems before the explosion began to boil as apprehension of returning to the piers intensified. On August 9, less than one month after the explosion, the surviving men were ordered to begin loading munitions at a different facility. Of the 328 men of the ordnance divisions, 258 initially refused. In the end, 208 who eventually relented, faced summary courts-martial and were sentenced to bad conduct discharges and the forfeiture of three months’ pay for disobeying orders. The remaining 50 were singled out for general courts-martial on the grounds of mutiny. The sentence could have been death, but they received between eight and fifteen years at hard labor. Soon after the war, in January 1946, all of the men were given clemency and an opportunity for discharge “under honorable conditions.”

The explosion and later mutiny proceedings helped illustrate the high costs of racial discrimination. Pushed by the progressive press and public criticism in 1945, the Navy reluctantly began working toward desegregation, creating some mixed units and ships. When President Truman ordered that the Armed Forces and the federal work force be desegregated in 1948, the Navy could say that Port Chicago had been a very important milestone in assessing the costs of racial segregation.

Port Chicago, California was later condemned to make room for the expansion of munitions handling for Korean, Vietnam, and Cold War operations in the Pacific. The Magazine became Concord Naval Weapons Station.

Compiled by Eugene Fleming, a visual information specialist in the Pacific West Region and San Francisco Pacific Great Basin Support Office. Also a Navy veteran, and photojournalist, he currently serves in the Naval Reserve in the San Francisco Bay Area.