The Great WWII Port Chicago Disaster - A Nuclear Blast?

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In 1944, the Port Chicago disaster killed hundreds of Americans in a single blast. Was it an accident, or was it America's first atomic weapons test?

On the night of 17th July 1944, two transport vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago (California) naval base on the Sacramento River were suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion. The incredible blast wrecked the naval base and heavily damaged the small town of Port Chicago, located 1.5 miles away. Some 320 American naval personnel were killed instantly. The two ships and the large loading pier were totally annihilated. Several hundred people were injured, and millions of dollars in property damage was caused by the huge blast. Windows were shattered in towns 20 miles away, and the glare of the explosion could be seen in San Francisco, some 35 miles away. It was the worst home-front disaster of World War II. Officially, the world's first atomic test explosion occurred on 16th July 1945 at Alamogordo, New Mexico; but the Port Chicago blast may well have been the world's first atomic detonation, whether accidental or not.

The Ship

The E. A. Bryan, the ship which exploded at Port Chicago, was a 7,212-ton EC-2 Liberty ship commanded by Captain John L. M. Hendricks of San Pedro,

California, and operated by Oliver J. Olson & Co., San Francisco. It was built and launched at the Kaiser Steel shipyard in Richmond, California, in March 1944. She made a maiden voyage to the South Pacific and then was ordered into the US Navy's Alameda Shipyards where the five-ton (10,000-pound maximum load) booms and gear on the no. 1 and no. 5 holds were removed and replaced with 10-ton booms and gear. It then docked at Port Chicago on 13th July 1944. At 8:00 a.m. on 14th July, naval personnel began loading ammunition.

The E. A. Bryan had been moored at Port Chicago for four days, taking on ammunition and explosives night and day. Some 98 men of Division Three were hard at work loading the Bryan, and by 10:00 p.m. on 17th July the ship was loaded with some 4,600 tons of munitions including 1,780 tons of high explosives.

The second ship, the Quinalt Victory, was brand new; it was preparing for its maiden voyage. The Quinalt Victory had moored at Port Chicago at about 6:00 p.m. on the evening of 17th July. Some 102 men of the Sixth Division, many of whom had only recently arrived at Port Chicago, were busy rigging the ship in preparation for loading of ammunition which was due to begin by midnight.

In addition to the enlisted men present, there were nine Navy officers, 67 members of the crews of the two ships along with an Armed Guard detail of 29 men, five crew members of a Coast Guard fire barge, a Marine sentry and a number of civilian employees. The pier was congested with men, equipment, a locomotive, 16 railroad boxcars, and about 430 tons of bombs and projectiles waiting to be loaded.

Most of the enlisted men, upon first arriving at Port Chicago, were quite fearful of the explosives they were expected to handle. But, over time, many of the men simply accommodated themselves to the work situation by discounting the risk of an explosion. Most men readily accepted the officers' assurances that the bombs could not explode because they had no detonators.

The Explosion

Just before 10:20 p.m., a massive explosion occurred at the pier. To some observers it appeared that two explosions, only a few seconds apart, occurred: a first and smaller blast was felt; this was followed quickly by a cataclysmic explosion as the E. A. Bryan went off like one gigantic bomb, sending a column of fire and smoke more than 12,000 feet into the night sky.

Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships was killed instantly: some 320 men, 200 of whom were black enlisted men. Very few intact bodies were recovered. Another 390 military and civilian personnel were injured, including 226 black enlisted men. This single, stunning disaster accounted for almost one-fifth of all black naval casualties during the whole of World War II. Property damage, military and civilian, was estimated at more than US$12 million.

The E. A. Bryan was literally blown to bits. Very little of its wreckage was ever found. The Quinalt Victory was lifted clear out of the water by the blast, turned around and broken into pieces. The largest piece of the Quinalt Victory which remained after the explosion was a 65-foot section of the keel, its propeller attached, which protruded from the bay at low tide, 1,000 feet from its original position.

There was at least one 12-ton diesel locomotive operating on the pier at the time of the explosion. Not a single piece of the locomotive car was ever identified: the locomotive simply vanished. In the river stream, several small boats half a mile distant from the pier reported being hit by a 30-foot wall of water.

In an interview, one of the men described his experience of the disaster:

I was reading a letter from home. Suddenly there were two explosions. The first one knocked me clean off... I found myself flying toward the wall. I just threw up my hands like this, then I hit the wall. Then the next one came right behind that. Phoom! Knocked me back on the other side. Men were screaming, the lights went out and

glass was flying all over the place. I got out to the door. Everybody was... that thing had... the whole building was turned around, caving in. We were a mile and a half away from the ships. And so the first thing that came to my mind, I said, 'Jesus Christ, the Japs have hit!' I could have sworn they were out there pounding us with warships or bombing us or something. But one of the officers was shouting, 'It's the ships! It's the ships!' So we jumped in one of the trucks and we said, 'Let's go down there, see if we can help.' 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 the hell are you staying up here for?' The driver says, 'Can't go no further.' See, there wasn't no more dock. Wasn't no railroad. Wasn't no ships. And the water just came right up to... all the way back. The driver couldn't go no further. Just as calm and peaceful. I didn't even see any smoke.

Rescue assistance was rushed from nearby towns and other military bases. The town of Port Chicago was heavily damaged by the explosion but fortunately none of its citizens was killed, although many suffered injuries.

During the night and early morning, the injured were removed to hospitals, and many of the black enlisted men were evacuated to nearby stations, mainly to Camp Shoemaker in Oakland. Others remained at Port Chicago to clear away debris and search for what could be found of bodies.

The search for bodies was grim work. One survivor recalled the experience:

I was there the next morning. We went back to the dock. Man, it was awful; that was a sight. 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. Bodies... just awful.

Some 200 black enlisted men volunteered to remain at the base and help with the clean-up operation.

Three days after the disaster, Captain Merrill T. Kinne, officer-in-charge of Port Chicago, issued a statement praising the black enlisted men for their behavior during the disaster. Stating that the men acquitted themselves with "great credit," he added, "Under those emergency conditions, regular members of our complement and volunteers from Mare Island displayed creditable coolness and bravery."

The Aftermath

Four days after the Port Chicago disaster, on 21st July 1944 a Naval Court of Inquiry was convened to "inquire into the circumstances attending the explosion." The inquiry was to establish the facts of the situation, and the Court was to arrive at an opinion concerning the cause or causes of the disaster. The inquiry lasted 39 days, and some 125 witnesses were called to testify.

However, only five black witnesses were called to testify -- none from the group that would later resist returning to work because of unsafe practices. The Court heard testimony from survivors and eyewitnesses to the explosion, other Port Chicago personnel, ordnance experts, inspectors who checked the ships before loading, and others.

The question of Captain Kinne's tonnage figures blackboard, and the competition it encouraged, came up during the proceedings. Kinne attempted to justify this as simply an extension of the Navy's procedure of competition in target practice. He contended that it did not negatively impact on safety and implied that junior officers who said it did, did not know what they were talking about.

The Court also heard testimony concerning the fueling of the vessels, possible sabotage, defects in the bombs, problems with the winches and other equipment, rough handling by the enlisted men, and organizational problems at Port Chicago.

But the specific cause of the explosion was never officially established by the Court of Inquiry. Anyone in a position to have actually seen what caused the

explosion did not live to tell about it.

Although there was testimony before the Court about competition in loading, this was not listed by the Court (or the Judge Advocate) as in any way a cause of the explosion (although the court saw fit to recommend that, in future, "the loading of explosives should never be a matter of competition" -- a small slap on the hands of the officers).

Thus, the Court of Inquiry in effect cleared the officers-in- charge of any responsibility for the disaster, and in so far as any human cause was invoked, the burden of blame was laid on the shoulders of the black enlisted men who died in the explosion.

The Mutiny

After the explosion, many of the surviving black sailors were transferred to nearby Camp Shoemaker where they remained until 31st July; then the Fourth and Eighth Divisions were transferred to naval barracks in Vallejo near Mare Island. During this period, the men were assigned barracks duties but no ship-loading was assigned. Another group, the Second Division, which was also at Camp Shoemaker until 31st July, returned to Port Chicago to help with the cleaning up and rebuilding of the base.

Many of the men were in a state of shock, troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion in which so many of their friends had died. All were extremely nervous and jumpy. "Everybody was scared," one survivor recalled. "If somebody dropped a box or slammed a door, people be jumping around like crazy. Everybody was still nervous."

There was no psychiatric counseling or medical screening of the men except for those who were obviously physically injured. The men's anxiety was probably made worse by the fact that they did not know what caused the explosion. Rumor and speculation were rife. Some thought it was caused by an accident, some suspected sabotage, others did not know what to think. Apparently the men were not informed that the Navy

was conducting an investigation. Certainly, none of those who would later be involved in the work stoppage was called to testify at the Court of Inquiry.

The men talked among themselves. They had not yet been ordered back to their regular duty and no one knew what would happen next, but many of them hoped they would be transferred to other stations or to ships.

Many of the survivors expected to be granted survivors' leaves to visit their families before being reassigned to regular duties. But such leaves were not granted, creating a major grievance. Even men who had been hospitalized with injuries were not granted leaves.

The survivors and new personnel expressed their opposition to returning to loading ammunition, citing the possibility of another explosion. The first confrontation occurred on 9th August. A ship had come into Mare Island to be loaded with ammunition, and the Second, Fourth and Eighth Divisions, 328 men, were ordered out to the loading pier. The great majority of the men balked, and eventually 258 men were arrested and confined for three days on a barge tied to the pier. Officers told the men they faced serious charges, including mutiny for which they could be executed. They were also being threatened by guards with being summarily shot.

In early September, 50 men were selected as the ring-leaders and charged with mutiny. On 24th October 1944, after only 80 minutes of deliberation by a specially convened military court, all 50 men were found guilty of mutiny. Ten were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 24 sentenced to 12 years, 11 sentenced to 10 years, and five sentenced to eight years. All were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy.

After a massive outcry over the next year, in January 1946, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison and exiled for one year overseas before returning to their families.

Of the Navy personnel who died in the blast, most -- some 200 ammunition-loaders -- were black. Indeed, every man handling ammunition at Port Chicago was

black, and every commissioned officer was white. This was the standard operating procedure in the segregated Navy at that time.

Development of the Uranium Bomb

About 400 to 600 pages of reports and memoranda on Port Chicago are held at the Los Alamos (Manhattan Project) Laboratories. They were declassified in 1981. The most substantial record of the accident was prepared by US Navy Captain William J. Parsons and transmitted to US Rear Admiral W. R. Purnell, member of the Atomic Bomb Military Policy Committee and Parsons' superior officer.

Parsons is credited with designing the ordnance for the first atomic bomb and bringing it to battle-ready status. He was assigned to Los Alamos and named Deputy Director under J. Robert Oppenheimer and Division Leader for the Ordnance Engineering Division established in June 1943. They developed, designed and constructed the uranium-235 gun-bomb used on Hiroshima. Immediately after the Port Chicago disaster, Captain Parsons was elevated to the rank of Commodore, USN. He was subsequently the bombing officer aboard the B-29, the Enola Gay, which dropped the U-235 bomb on Hiroshima. After Hiroshima, Parsons was elevated to the rank of Rear Admiral, US Navy.

Parsons was a member of the LeMay Subcommittee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff which became the Joint Crossroads Committee in 1946. He was Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Special Weapons prior to his appointment as Chairperson of the Joint Crossroads Committee which planned the Bikini Atoll tests. He was also Deputy Task Force Commander for Technical Direction of the Bikini tests. Parsons died in 1952.

Specifications for the U-235 gun-bomb used at Hiroshima were complete by February 1944, according to Volume I of the Manhattan District History. Hardware for at least three uranium-235 guns was ordered at the end of March 1944. According to the US Department of Energy Oak Ridge records, 74 kilograms of U-235 was available by December 1943, 93 kg by December 1944

and 289 kg by December 1945. The uranium-235 gun-bomb weighed about 9,000 pounds when assembled.

Effective 1st August 1944, Los Alamos Laboratories were reorganized, all work on the U-235 gun-bomb was curtailed, and efforts were concentrated on the plutonium-239 Nagasaki bomb.

The Government's Story

The US Government claimed that 1,780 tons of high-explosive TNT-equivalent exploded spontaneously at Port Chicago. (This is in contrast to the two previous ship explosions, Mont Blanc in Halifax in 1917, and SS Fort Stikine in Bombay in 1944, which followed shipboard fires.) The government claimed there was not enough uranium-235 available for a bomb. This is now known to have been a lie, as noted above. According to the declassified Oak Ridge documents, 15.5 kilograms of U-235 is needed for a gun-bomb. The December 1943 inventory was 74 kg of U-235, and in December 1994, six months after Port Chicago, it was 93 kg. If a nuclear weapon was detonated at Port Chicago, it is likely to have been one of the U-235 gun-bombs built after March 1944.

The Evidence for an Atomic Explosion

The force of the blast was greater than the 1,780 tons of high explosives could have caused, when one considers the total disintegration of the ship, the size of the blast crater, the tidal wave, the destruction of the Quinalt Victory, the 12-ton locomotive, etc.

Eyewitnesses reported "an enormous blinding incandescent." The Navy reported "the first flash was brilliant white," such as is now known to be characteristic of nuclear explosions which achieve several tens of millions of degrees Centigrade in milliseconds. Conventional explosives reach a maximum of 5,000&degree;C and do not give off a white flash except when mixed with magnesium. There was no magnesium on the list of explosives loaded onto the Bryan. The white flash occurs with atomic bombs of five

kilotons and greater.

The Port Chicago disaster gave rise to a Wilson condensation cloud like those at Bikini -- now known to be characteristic of atomic bombs detonated in vapor-laden atmospheres.

The seismic records show a very rapid detonation not characteristic of conventional explosions but the signature of atomic explosions. There was a typical nuclear fire ball.

The Film

The Navy has a film record of the disaster at its Concord Naval Weapons Station. After being challenged, the Navy claimed this was a Hollywood simulation of a miniature explosion. The film shows a typical nuclear explosion, which would have been hard to simulate. According the Navy, the film was created to support their argument to the US Congress sometime in the 1960s that the remains of the town of Port Chicago be purchased by the Navy and incorporated into the Concord Naval Weapons Station as a buffer zone in the event of another large explosion.

Significantly, the Navy did not claim the film was a re-creation until after it was suggested that the film could be the record of a nuclear detonation. However, Dan Tikalsky, public affairs chief at Concord, told Peter Vogel, writing for The Black Scholar magazine, that the film was a nitrate-base film, which would require the film to have been produced prior to 1950 when nitrate-base film was replaced with non-explosive cellulose-base film.

Peter Vogel wrote in the Spring 1982 edition of The Black Scholar:

Based on viewing an edited video copy of that film which was made available to me, I have concluded that the film records, in every detail, the progression of the actual explosion of July 17, 1944 at Port Chicago. For example, early frames of the film suggest a record of the expansion of the Wilson condensation cloud during

which the formation of the ball of fire is obscured. Furthermore, the movements exhibited by several large, independent fragments of the explosion over time compared to the speed of the explosion itself are evidence of the very large distances those fragments travelled during the course of the film sequence.

It is obvious, of course, that only an intentional film record of the blast could have been made since the probability of having, by chance, a motion picture camera rolling and pointed in the right direction at the right time at night is exceedingly remote.

If the explosion was filmed at the Port Chicago site, it would follow that the explosion was planned and anticipated.

The July 1944 blast caused a crater 66 feet deep, 300 feet wide and 700 feet long in the river bottom. A five-kiloton nuclear bomb on the surface of wet soil creates a crater 53 feet deep and 132 feet in diameter. Some of the blast was absorbed by the ship's hull, so it may have exceeded five kilotons.

Residual radiation exposures in this area are unknown, as Port Chicago was used also as a decontamination port for ships exposed to nuclear blasts in the Marshall Islands.

Los Alamos Laboratories have an inventory of all munitions loaded onto the Bryan before the disaster. For 18th July 1944, there are two empty boxcars, DLW44755 and GN46324, listed with an asterisk. The asterisk refers to a note at the bottom of the page: "Papers showing that these cars were loaded we destroyed, so cars do not show on attach[ed] list." These may have been the cars which carried two parts of the uranium-235 gun.

Conclusion

After examination of the historical evidence, the testimonials of survivors and eyewitnesses, the subsequent investigations as well as the film record, it is hard not to reach the conclusion that the blast at Port

Chicago was in fact an atomic explosion -- which, if so, would make it the world's first atomic detonation.

What really needs to be investigated further is whether or not this device was deliberately detonated by the military, using low-ranking (black) personnel as guinea pigs to test its effects.

Primary Sources of History

There are two primary sources, The Los Alamos Project, Volumes I and II (distribution, 1961), which contains the official history of the Manhattan Project, code-name for the atomic bomb program in World War II, and a Los Alamos declassified document entitled "History of the 10,000-ton Gadget," which dates from about September 1944.

Manhattan District History-Project Y: The Los Alamos Project, Volumes I and II, LAMS-2532, Los Alamos, Paragraph 11:20, refers to work accomplished at Los Alamos following 1st August 1944 in describing the process of an atomic explosion. It is almost identical with the Los Alamos document, "History of the 10,000-ton Gadget," procured by Peter Vogel, a Santa Fe historian. Both appear to describe an actual nuclear explosion. Joseph O. Hirschfelder (later of University of Wisconsin at Madison) was director of the project at Los Alamos. Paragraph 11:20 of the Manhattan District History (supposedly prepared in November 1944) reads:

Much more extensive investigation of the behavior and effects of a nuclear explosion were made during this period than had been possible before, tracing the history of the process from the initial expansion of the active material and tamper [Tuballoy, an inert neutron-reflective material] through the final stages. These investigations included the formation of the shock wave in the air, the radiation history of the early stages of the explosion, the formation of the ball of fire, the attenuation of the blast wave in air at greater distances, and the effects of blasts and radiations of [sic] human beings and structures. General responsibility for this work was given to Group T-7, with the advice and assistance of [the British Mission consultant] W. G.

Penney.

Los Alamos Laboratories Theoretical Division Group T-7 (Damage) was formed in November 1944 and had been the former Group O-5 (Calculations) of the Ordnance Division. As was noted, William Parsons was the Division Leader for Ordnance. He reported to J. Robert Oppenheimer. Both O-5 and T-7 were headed by Hirschfelder. The responsibility of G-7 was to complete the earlier investigations of damage and of the general phenomenology of a nuclear explosion.

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A MUSHROOM CLOUD

What really happened at Port Chicago in 1944, a nuclear explosion?

By Harry V. Martin C. FreeAmerica and Harry V. Martin, 1995

Everyone within a 50-mile radius of Port Chicago - located in Contra Costa County, felt a tremendous blast. At first most residents in the Bay Area, including Napa County, thought it was an earthquake. The night was Monday, July 17, 1944. Port Chicago has now been named the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

The Hiroshima blast was a year later, in August 1945. Not until the Hiroshima and the Nagasaki blasts was the general population of the world aware of terms such as "bright white light" and "mushroom cloud" in reference to a military explosion.

The coincidences and the oddities surrounding the Port Chicago explosion are only surfacing today. Some of those are:

* The U.S. claimed it could not test the Hiroshima bomb because it only had a small supply of U-235, allowing for the making of only two bombs. Records obtained from the U.S. Government indicate that enough U-235 existed in 1944 to make several bombs, and more in

1945. * The head of Port Chicago was promoted to commodore immediately after the explosion and also headed up tests in the Pacific, and was also aboard the Enola Gay when it dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. After Hiroshima he was made a rear admiral. He was Captain Parsons - who had been stationed at Los Alamos Laboratories before the explosion at Port Chicago. * Liberty ships were loaded while crews remained aboard the vessel. The Liberty ship that exploded at Port Chicago had no crew aboard. * Documents from Los Alamos show that at the time of the Port Chicago explosion it was believed that the only way to deliver an atomic bomb to the enemy was by ship, detonating in the harbor. It was called the Hydrodynamic Theory of Surface Explosions. * Records of contents of two box cars unloaded at Port Chicago are missing. A complete list of all box cars were kept - except those two. Did it contain the 9000 pound bomb? * Port Chicago was rebuilt in one week after its destruction. Two hundred black sailors died in the explosion. * There was a Navy mutiny at Port Chicago after the blast. * The Navy was photographing the entire blast from across the Bay. * In a top secret report on a nuclear detonation after Port Chicago, the notes state that it was a "Port Chicago-type" explosion in similarity and form. * One of the highest rates of cancer in the United States is in Contra Costa County.

The story seems too incredible to believe - that the U.S. would test a weapon on itself. In order to ascertain the truth of this matter, one must study old reports. In the beginning of this series, the simplest reports to study are the uncensored news reports of local newspapers, such as the St. Helena Star and the Napa Journal - The Napa Journal was bought out in the 1950's and became the Napa Register. These eye witness reports were made in the pre-atomic age, when no one knew about atomic weapons - what they were, how they worked, what devastation they created, what they looked like, or for that matter, that they even existed. It was one of the most closely guarded top secrets of World War Two.

"One of the few to see the flash from here was Tom Street, who happened to be standing in the patio if his Spring Mountain home when the blast came," reported

the July 21, 1944 edition of the St. Helena Star. "First there was a sudden mushroom of white light, followed an instant later by another, then a few moments later the intense roar and the concussion of the blast. At the rate of about a mile for every 5 seconds, it required a little over 4 minutes for the blast to reach St. Helena." In another account in the same newspaper, it states. "The force of the explosion was felt at the Mt. St. Helena observation tower, but apparently the range of the mountains at the end of the valley stopped the concussion, for Lake County residents didn't feel it."

"The hills of the Napa Valley were momentarily illuminated by sunlight." reported the Napa Journal.

Differences In Nuclear Explosions - Port Chicago Blast Re-Examined

By Harry V. Martin Second in a Series c. The Napa Sentinel, 1990

A major disaster, such as that of Port Chicago, can always remain a mystery - and often time sparks the interest of "conspiracy theorists." In most cases, time erodes the evidence, But in the case of Port Chicago time has not wiped out the evidence - the U.S. military and scientific community are good record keepers. Because of the existing records on Port Chicago, the court martial of 50 black sailors, various records from Los Alamos, and reports from nuclear agencies and the media provide a succinct road map to the Port Chicago disaster.

The local news accounts of the blast on July 17, 1944, all focus on a flashing bright light and a mushroom cloud - all written before the general public or the news media were even aware of the dawn of the nuclear age. One of the critical points of contention in the theory that Port Chicago's explosion may have been nuclear, is the radiation factor. The purported bomb would have been a low-yield weapon detonated in shallow water. One of the key authorities on the effect of nuclear weapons is a publication prepared by the United States Department of Defense and published by the United States Atomic

Energy Commission in April 1962. Entitled, "The Effects of Nuclear Weapons", the publication states on page 60, "There may well be some fallout or rainout onto the surface of the water (or a ship or shore station) from the radioactive base surge, but in many cases it is expected to pass over without depositing any debris. Thus, according to circumstances, there may or may not be radioactive contamination on the surfaces of objects in the vicinity of a shallow underwater nuclear burst." The theory advanced by Peter Vogel - who is a journalist and who also studied physics with nuclear physicist Edward Teller - is that a nuclear weapon was in the hold of a Liberty Ship.

But before entering Vogel's scenario, which has some contradiction with official records, it is important to note how Vogel was drawn to such a theory. It started innocently enough in Santa Fe, New Mexico - a town across the Rio Grande from Los Alamos. Vogel was at a rummage sale conducted by the Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church. At the bottom of a box of equipment, which had been donated to the church, he found a photocopied document taken from Los Alamos Laboratories in the Autumn of 1944 - a few months after the Port Chicago explosion. The document is entitled, "History of 10,000 ton gadget."

Vogel traced the document to Paul Masters, who was employed at the Laboratories as a photographic darkroom technician and photographer. Part of Masters' duties was to operate a large blueprint-type machine upon which were made copies of bomb drawings and other originals too large for conventional copying machines. The document is the earliest known description of the progression of the explosion of an atomic bomb. It is very concise and contains previously top secret information about the actual design of an atomic bomb. On the bottom line in Step 11, the document reads, "Ball of fire mushroom out at 18,000 ft, in typical Port Chicago fashion." The Port Chicago explosion was characterized by a brilliant white flash, and a ball of fire which mushroomed out above Suisun Bay to an observed altitude of 10,000 feet before its ascent was obscured by the dark of night.

What is so important about this particular document? It compared a hypothetical nuclear explosion to the actual explosion at Port Chicago, possibly implying that the Port Chicago disaster, itself may have been due to a nuclear detonation. Vogel found that document in 1980 - he has followed the trail of Port Chicago ever since.

The U.S. government had never made an official "finding" on Port Chicago. It speculated that the black sailors had handled the ammunition carelessly. One factor the U.S. government has been emphatic about, is that there was not sufficient U-235 in 1945, and that the Hiroshima bomb was dropped untested. If there was not sufficient U-235 available to make a bomb, how could Vogel theorize that the Port Chicago blast was nuclear?

Apparently few, if anyone, had bothered to check the records of the United States Department of Energy on U-235 production. The results are very surprising - and reflect on the possibility that the U.S. government was not forthright in its statements. The minimum critical mass for U-235 is approximately 15.5 kilograms. The Hiroshima bomb might have contained up to 60 kilograms of U-235. In checking the official data from the Enriching Operations Division of the Department of Energy at Oak Ridge, the records reveal that in 1943 the U.S. had 74 kg. of U-235 available for a bomb - six times that of the minimum requirement. By 1944 it had 93 kg. or seven times the minimum, and by 1945, 289 kg. were available. According to official government records, sufficient U-235 was processed in 1944 - the date of the Port Chicago blast - to make six minimum nuclear bombs.

The American public has grown to visualize nuclear weapons being dropped from B-29s or from missiles. But in 1944, at the time of the Port Chicago blast, the belief was that the United States did not have any type of aircraft capable of carrying a bomb, nor airfields close enough to Japan to carry such a weapon. The B-29 was not operational, nor was the island of Tinian, in the Mariana Islands, under U.S. control. Documents from Los Alamos show that at the time of the Port Chicago explosion, it was believed that the only way to deliver an atomic bomb to the enemy was by ship, detonating it in

the harbor. It was called the Hydrodynamic Theory of Surface Explosions.

Vogel's theory, based on the documents he had found - compared with official government documents and eye witness reports - is plausible. But a lot more evidence is needed. Has that evidence been found? If Vogel's theories are totally false, why then is a Bay Area television station preparing a documentary. Several major news organizations are after the story and why has the U.S. Government suddenly retroactively reclassified Technical Paper #6 entitled Port Chicago Explosion so that it is now top secret after nearly half a century?

Cause Of Port Chicago Blast Never Determined

By Harry V. Martin Third in a Series c. The Napa Sentinel, 1990

At 10:18 p.m. on Monday evening, July 17, 1944, a giant explosion rocked Suisun Bay. The blast killed 320 Naval personnel and registered 3.4 on the Richter Scale in parts of Nevada. The Liberty Ship E. A. Bryan was being loaded at Port Chicago in northern Contra Costa County. Its reported cargo was 4600 tons of ammunition, including 1780 tons of high explosives. The nighttime explosion was reported as a bright white light over the sky of the San Francisco Bay Area, followed by a mushroom cloud and a strong concussion. Windows in Vacaville, Concord, Vallejo, Benicia, Martinez, Napa, and San Francisco were all blown out. Heavy doors and locks in Yountville and ship hatches at Mare Island were blown off because of the resulting concussion from the explosion.

Peter Vogel, a journalist and a man who also studied with the father of the American H-bomb, Dr. Edward Teller, told a KVON audience a few weeks ago that the explosion was that of a nuclear bomb and that it was purposefully set off as a test. Vogel's theory is based on the strength of the explosion, the secrecy after it happened, and documents from Los Alamos Laboratories which described a nuclear test blast as

having simulated the Port Chicago explosion - that test was conducted a few months after the Port Chicago disaster. Of critical importance to Vogel's theory that the United States used its' own sailors as a test for the first nuclear device, was the number to explosions that occurred. He claims there was only one explosion.

THERE WERE TWO EXPLOSIONS - NOT ONE

News accounts in 1944 of eye witnesses all universally state there were two explosions. Articles from the Napa Journal, St. Helena Star Bulletin, Martinez Gazette, Vallejo Times Herald, Vallejo News-Chronicle, Oakland Tribune and San Francisco newspapers, all report two explosions. The Second explosion was mightier than the first. It was during the second explosion that the white flash and the mushroom cloud was reported.

In 1964 No Share the Glory was published by native Vallejoen Robert H. Pearson. Pearson's book, which was the untold story of the great Port Chicago disaster of 1944, focuses on black American sailors who mutinied after the Port Chicago explosion. Black sailors were not allowed to sail on U.S. warships during the war and were used for the task of loading munitions on the ships. Pearson's book describes the eye witness accounts of people who saw the Port Chicago blast first hand - from Coast Guard men on patrol, a tanker crew that was nearby, the commander of Port Chicago, and those who somehow escaped the carnage, but nontheless saw it happen.

Before the explosion, the E.A. Bryan was low in the water - heavily laden with tons of ammunition. When the Bryan exploded 323 men, five ships, a diesel engine, 16 boxcars and a small town were totally destroyed. Twelve other cities were damaged. Damage was reported as far away as 200 miles. Pearson stated on page 19 of his book. "It is estimated that the force of the blast was greater than that of a five kiloton atomic bomb." That estimate was provided in the 1960s - when the world knew atomic weapons. The contents that were loaded into the Bryan consisted of 4600 tons of fuses, Detonators, guncotton, and 10 tons of smokeless powder in bulk, The most critical and most unstable of the

explosives on the ship's manifest - 1780 tons of high explosives - were loaded last. Hold Number One held incendiary bombs and small arms ammunition; Hold Number Two contained 3-inch 0.50 shells; Hold Number Three held serial bombs, some tail vanes and 5-inch 0.38 naval shells; and Hold Number Four contained fragmentation cluster bombs and a few 14-inch naval shells; The closed Hold Number Five was reported to have contained 40mm shells and small arms ammunition.

It is important to establish some critical historical points to embrace or reject Vogel's KVON discussion. The building of Port Chicago as a Naval Ammunitions Depot commenced in June 1943. The first loading pier was completed for use in May of 1944 - two days before the explosion - the Port was only 80 percent finished. the reason the Port had not been completed by then was the fact that there was a material and labor shortage - common in wartime.

NEW SHIP REFITTED

The Bryan had been launched at the Richmond Kaiser Shipyard in March 1944 and had just finished her maiden voyage to the South Pacific. Though it was a brand new ship, the Navy ordered the Bryan to dock at the Alameda shipyard two days before its reporting to Port Chicago. The Navy installed two 10-ton booms at the Number One and Number Five holds - replacing the 5-ton booms. The Captain of the Port in San Francisco, Lt. E. J. Carswell, boarded the Bryan and found it completely safe, and then issued a permit to load ammunition aboard the vessel.

The loading plan was filed. All the records of the munitions loaded aboard the Bryan are still available - except information about the contents of two box cars. The government claims that somehow, the record of those two boxcars are missing - yet they should have been part and parcel of the first manifest, which is still available.

Lt. Commander Glen Linqueist, naval inspection officer for the 12th Naval District, also found everything

satisfactory aboard the Bryan prior to the loading of munitions. The new gear installed at Alameda Shipyards was also found to be in satisfactory working order.

Most of the crew from the Bryan took leave from the ship. On several occasions during the three day loading process, shells and bombs were accidentally dropped - but none resulted in any type of explosion or damage. Along side the Bryan was the S. S. Quinalt Victory, a 7606 ton vessel which had only been commissioned a week before the blast.

The Bryan was loaded with 5292 barrels of bunker C-type diesel fuel oil. The Navy had recently refitted the Bryan with a 10-ton crane to fit Holds Number One and Five. But, during the entire loading process, Hold Number Five remained closed. The Commander of Port Chicago, Captain Merril T. Kinne, was appointed to his post on April 12, 1944 - three months before the explosion.

What was the Bryan's destination? It was destined for Tinian, in the Mariana Islands. Tinian was where the Enola Gay took off to drop the first atomic bomb on Japan in 1945.

CAUSE NEVER OFFICIALLY DETERMINED BY NAVY

The actual cause of the Port Chicago disaster was never officially or publicly established. Three days after the explosion, Rear Admiral Carleton H. Wright, commander of the 12th Naval District, convened a board of inquiry in San Francisco. After hearing all the evidence, the board could not determine the exact cause or circumstance of the first explosion, but did issue a list of seven circumstances that might have caused the disaster.

"That the Naval and Coast Guard personnel killed or injured in this explosion and listed in the Finding of the Facts, were killed or injured in the line of duty and not because of their own misconduct. The probable cause of the first explosion listed in the order of chance are:

* Presence of a supersensitive element which was detonated while handling. * Rough handling by a person or individuals. This might have happened at any stage of the loading process from the breaking out of the cars to the final stowage in the holds. * Failure of handling gear, such as the falling of a boom, failure of a block or a hook, parting of a whip, etc. * Collision of the switch engine with an explosive-loaded car, possibly in unloading. * An accidental incident to the carrying away of the mooring lines of the Quinalt Victory or the bollards which the Quinalt Victory was moored, resulting in damage to an explosive component. * The result of an act of sabotage. Although there is no proof to support sabotage as a possible cause, it cannot be eliminated as a possibility.

Eye witnesses reported seeing both ships secure and all gear in place moments before the first blast. The theory of the crane or equipment falling, or a ship loose from its mooring cannot be sustained by eye witnesses, thus eliminating those possibilities.

REMAINING PART OF SERIES

In the two remaining articles in this series, we will examine a unique report never made public before - The Computational Evaluation for the Energy Released in the Port Chicago Explosion: a different theory than Vogel claimed on KVON. Why nine German officers and two guard dogs are secretly buried in Benicia - having died within a short span of time from the Port Chicago blast: What scientists at Los Alamos deduce from the explosion: and some critical eye witness reports. Did this explosion in anyway impact the conduct of the waning years of World War Two? Those questions will be thoroughly examined in the remaining part of the series.

Evidence Points To A Port Chicago Nuclear Device

By Harry V. Martin Fourth in a Series c. The Napa Sentinel, 1990

The question of Port Chicago really comes down to two

basic questions:

1. Was the Port Chicago blast caused by a nuclear explosion?

2. If it was, did the United States government purposely set off the bomb as a test?

These are the two allegations which were made on KVON radio by Peter Vogel, a journalist and a man who also studied with the father of the American H-Bomb, Dr. Edward Teller.

In previous articles we have discussed Vogel's theory, the impact of the blast, the history of the port and the ships involved, the findings of a Board of Review, eye witness accounts, and the fact - established by official records of the U.S. Department of Energy - that the U.S. government did have the capability of producing several nuclear weapons at the time of the Port Chicago blast - despite denials to the contrary. Now we're down to the nuts and bolts of answering the two basic questions involved. Technical Report No. 6. Army-Navy Explosives Safety Board, on the Port Chicago blast has been reclassified by Los Alamos Lab - it could answer at least one the questions asked. The Napa Sentinel is seeking the documents under the Federal Freedom of Information Act, and may file suit in federal court to have the documents declassified after 45 years.

A research paper was submitted on December 7, 1988 entitled Computational Evaluation for the Energy Released in the Port Chicago Explosion. This report evaluates the energy released by the 1944 explosion at Port Chicago on July 17, 1944. The explosion occurred while the Liberty ship E.A Bryan was loading 1780 tons of high explosives and 4600 tons of ammunition - the shipment was destined for Tinian - the island from which the Enola Gay took off enroute to dropping the first atomic bomb on Japan, the Hiroshima bomb was dropped 13 months after the Port Chicago explosion.

The research document creates the theoretical energy released at Port Chicago, based upon the calculation and probable energy source, using the 1780 tons of high

explosive. The paper analyzes detonation of fuel, high explosives and a nuclear bomb. These sources are then compared to the probable energy expended into production of the Bay floor crater, heat energy and seismic energy caused by the 1944 explosion.

The report states simply, "If the probable energy expended markedly exceeded that which a chemical explosion could supply, then an additional source of energy (possible nuclear) must have been present." The report states, "It is not now possible to determine with certainty the precise nature of the 1944 explosion at Port Chicago. The reclassification of a pertinent document, Technical Report No. 6, Army-Navy Explosives Safety Board, prohibits any such definitive conclusions. However, given the size of the crater formed by the explosion and the distance the debris was scattered, a calculation of the theoretical explosive energy released can be compared to the probable source of the energy." The report uses a "worst case" scenario to the amount of energy generated. This means that the report provides the benefit of the doubt toward aspects subscribing to a non-nuclear explosion. For instance, it assumes that all 1780 tons of explosives were aboard the ship and went off high order (spontaneously) and all at full power). And that the ship's fuel was at capacity and detonated.

"At this point, the only conclusion to be drawn is a follows: While there may have been an additional explosive energy source present (such as a low yield nuclear device), the explosive energy derived from the conventional munitions is in agreement with the lower limit for the calculated total energy given-off by the explosion, and thus, the explosion might have been purely conventional (non-nuclear) in origin."

The specific facts the report could rely on were that the amount of explosives present was 1780 tons, and the size of the crater created by the explosion, was 66 feet deep, 300 feet wide and 700 feet long.

The report did discover that a measurement of the blast crater in 1944 had more than doubled in size by 1946 - indicating that the government may well have made every attempt to retrieve any remains or evidence still at

the bottom of Suisun Bay. The report could not confirm the type of fuel used by the Bryan, but selected the probability of diesel fuel. The Sentinel has ascertained that the ship was indeed loaded with 5292 barrels of bunker C-type diesel fuel oil.

The report further states that Vogel's comment as to the fireball being white does not prove it was nuclear in origin. The report also states that it is unlikely that the fuel aboard the vessel caused the explosion.

The report estimates the magnitude of the blast was between (10)18 to (10)72 ergs. Is this the magnitude of a non-nuclear or a nuclear explosion? The report addresses that issue. If the Port Chicago disaster had been caused by a chemical explosion, the maximum energy expenditure would be expected to approach (10)18 ergs - the low end of the estimated magnitude of the Poet Chicago blast. the report qualifies that statement. "However, the likely expenditure for such a chemical explosion would be a fraction of this value, since the maximum value would require all the explosives and fuel to go off in high order fashion. If the Port Chicago disaster had been caused by a nuclear bomb, the energy expenditure would be expected to approach the order of (10)72 ergs."

"While the energy expenditure from a nuclear explosion fits this calculation of energy expenditure better than does the chemical explosion, a purely chemical explosion would have produced sufficient energy to be in agreement with the low end of the calculated range. Therefore, no conclusion can be drawn at this time as to the exact nature of the explosion: further information would be required to refine the calculated energy figure and reduce its uncertainty. Unfortunately, since this information has now been reclassified, calculation refinements are no longer possible," the report concludes.

So what we have in this report is the estimate of a magnitude. The only way a conventional explosion could have caused the blast was if everything had gone off at one time - something that is not too common in munitions explosions. Add this report to other

information to:

* the report of a nuclear explosion entitled, History of 10,000 ton gadget, which states on the bottom line of Step 11, "Ball of fire mushroom out a 18,000 ft, in typical Port Chicago fashion." * the reclassification four decades later of a report on the Port Chicago blast - which has no military value today: * and the top government scientists dispatched to Port Chicago after the blast, and their respective role in the building of nuclear weapons: * the specific destination of the Bryan - Tinian in the Mariana Islands, the same site the Enola Gay used to take off from to drop the first atomic bomb on Japan: * and the Hydrodynamic Theory of Surface Explosions, which indicated that the bomb would have to be delivered by surface ship because there was no aircraft that could carry the weight, and the U.S. did not have a close enough base to Japan for aircraft delivery.

There is very strong evidence to suggest that a nuclear weapon was indeed at Port Chicago - a bomb enroute to Tinian or some other South Pacific Island. But was Port Chicago a test for the bomb? Would the government purposely destroy a port that was only 80 percent completed? Would it destroy two brand new ships? Would it kill 320 U.S. Naval personnel?

Just because a nuclear weapon probably existed at Port Chicago does not mean the port was a test sight of the bomb. This question is explored in the final article on Tuesday.

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PORT CHICAGO - CONCLUSION By Harry V. Martin Last of a Five Part Series c. The Napa Sentinel, 1990

More than two years before the United States entered World War II, Albert Einstein sent a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, informing him that a nuclear bomb was possible. That letter was written on August 2, 1939. "A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory,"

Einstein wrote. "However, such bombs might very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air."

U.S. government sources have verified that the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945 were transported to Tinian Airstrip in August 1945 enroute to bomb Hiroshima, the B29 barely made it off the ground. The bomb had to be armed in mid-flight. There have been persistent - yet unverified reports - that a heavily guarded compound at Mare Island during World War II contained components of a nuclear weapon.

Contrary to public belief, the final specifications of the atomic bomb used on Hiroshima had been completed by mid-February 1944. This is verified by a 600 page report on the Manhattan District History. The hardware for at least three of the Hiroshima-type weapons were ordered by the end of March, 1944.

STRONG EVIDENCE

There is very strong circumstantial evidence to indicate that a nuclear weapon was aboard one of two ships that blew up at Port Chicago on the evening of Monday, July 17. What makes the evidence so strong, is not only written documentation concerning the blast, but also the itinerary of key people in the nuclear community after the blast. A Los Alamos document that describes the testing of an atomic device - and all its parameters - clearly states in Step 11. "Ball of fire mushroom out at 18,000 ft. in typical Port Chicago fashion." The Los Alamos document, prepared a short time after the Port Chicago explosion, History of 10,000 Ton Gadget, provides 11 steps of a nuclear explosion: (Though you do not have to understand nuclear physics, follow the steps to the end.)

1. Detonation. 2. Detonation wave reaches temper 18,5 x 2,54 over 7 x 10. 3. Temp and active fully compressed. 4. Neutrons multiply and shock wave hits temper 18/2 x 10. 5. Shock wave passes through H.E. and case to reach air 74/2 x 10. 6. Radiation squirts out, temperature drops and isothermal sphere formed. 7. Strong blast wave expands. 8. Ball of fire fully expands. 9. Blast wave reaches damage area.

10. In a test, blast wave would reach installation and observers at 10,000 yards. Also ball of fire reached height of 2000 ft. and completely disintegrated into turbulent convection currents.

11. Ball of fire mushroom out at 18,000 ft in typical Port Chicago fashion.

The fact that this classified document on the testing of an atomic bomb came from Los Alamos and specifically refers to Port Chicago, is clear evidence of a nuclear device. But that is not all the evidence available.

CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS

In a classified document dated July 21, 1944 - four days after the Port Chicago explosion - there is more fragile evidence of something out of the ordinary. The District Intelligence Officer wrote confidential memorandum 11-3-16137 to the Commandant Twelfth Naval District. The report states, there were reports "of a shiny black car reported to have been seen at approximately 2130 (hours) at the foot of the pier, but no information was developed to indicate that any unauthorized vehicle of such description was seen to enter or leave the (Port Chicago) Naval Magazine at any time which might reasonably be connected with the explosion." The vehicle was not a Navy vehicle nor was its business explained, but it did have authorization to be near the pier, suggesting a top secret meeting. Were the occupants of the vehicle from the scientific community? There are possible links we will explore later in this article.

At the same time, the Navy was photographing Port Chicago from across the Bay - a safe distance from the explosion. The Navy captured the Port Chicago explosion on a nitrate-base film. That film was held in the safe of the Concord Naval Weapons Station. The Navy claims that the film was a simulation of the Port Chicago explosion filmed for Hollywood in the 1960s But nitrate-base film has not been produced since prior to 1950.

Though Peter Vogel, who theorized that a nuclear

weapon existed at Port Chicago, was granted permission to review the film and obtain still shots - once his theory of an atomic weapon was known by the Navy, the film was destroyed. About the same time, a key document, Technical Report No. 6 on the Port Chicago Explosion was suddenly reclassified to top secret after years of being declassified. Some Los Alamos scientists have privately stated that the explosion at Port Chicago was caused by an atomic weapon.

TOP NUCLEAR SCIENTISTS INVESTIGATE PORT CHICAGO

Perhaps the most convincing aspect of the atomic bomb theory, is not what happened before the blast - but after. The test document, History of 10,000 Ton Gadget, was prepared by a group at the Los Alamos laboratories under the direction of Joseph O. Hirschfelder. His group's work is found in the Manhattan District History, Project Y. The Los Alamos Project. Vol. 1. 1944 I.A.M.S. 2532, Los Alamos 1961. The Manhattan Project has become known to the public as the building of the first atomic bomb. The Manhattan Project documents refer to work accomplished after August 1, 1944, and in particular the History of 10,000 Ton Gadget. Hirschfelder was given the responsibility for completing the earlier investigation of damage of the general phenomenology of a nuclear explosion. These investigations included the formation of the shock wave in the air, the radiation history of the early stages of the explosion, the formation of the ball of fire, the attenuation of the blast wave in air at great distances, and the effects of blast and radiation on human beings and structures.

Immediately following the Port Chicago explosion, a team of Los Alamos Laboratories scientists made an assessment of the Port Chicago explosion. There exists some 400 - 600 pages of reports and memoranda at Los Alamos which report the various parameters and artifacts of the Port Chicago explosion. U.S. Naval Captain William J. Parsons prepared the data and had them transmitted to Rear Admiral W. R. Purnell, who was a member of the Atomic Bomb Military Policy Committee, Admiral Purnell was Parsons' superior officer. Parsons

was the bombing officer on board the Enola Gay, which dropped the U235 weapon over Hiroshima. In 1946 he was chairman of the Joint Crossroads Committee, which planned the Bikini test, and he was Deputy Task Force Commander for Technical Direction of the Bikini nuclear tests. Parsons was instrumental in designing, constructing and testing the world's first atomic bomb. He worked directly under J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Parsons authored a report on Port Chicago - Effects of the Tidal Wave in the Port Chicago Explosion. Throughout the investigation of the Port Chicago blast, the nuclear research laboratories at Los Alamos, the key figures in the building of the atomic bomb, all link to Port Chicago. Los Alamos also maintains copies of the records of 16 box cars that contained munitions for Port Chicago. The records of two of those box cars, however, are not available. Were they used to carry nuclear components?

It is reasonably safe to indicate, with reference to various articles already published in this series, that an atomic weapon did exist at Port Chicago at the time of the July 17, 1944 explosion. The next question, testing Vogel's theory, is: was Port Chicago used by the U.S. government to test the first atomic bomb?

A TEST OR AN ACCIDENT?

Vogel maintains that Port Chicago was used as a test site for the first atomic bomb. "If the explosion was filmed at the Port Chicago site, it would follow that the explosion was planned and anticipated." Vogel states. "There is very little doubt in my mind that the explosion and disaster which occurred at Port Chicago was the result of an intentional detonation of a U235 gun assembly weapon, which was conducted to demonstrate the effects of a surface delivery of that device to a harbor facility." But was it?

To explore Vogel's theory, it is necessary to take some of the elements used by Vogel. A large part of his theory rests on the insistence that there was only one explosion. In almost every report, newspaper articles of that time, or eyewitness statements, two explosions were reported.

Those reports, articles and statements may be correct - while at the same time, Vogel's theory may also be correct. A nuclear explosion has two phases - the pressure phase and the suction phase. These two phases may actually sound like and appear to be two different explosions, when in fact it is the same explosion occurring seconds apart. Most witnesses have stated the explosions were about 45 seconds apart. They report that the dock blew up first and then the ship. Vogel's theory of one explosion cannot be discounted - nor can the two explosion theory.

If there were two explosions, there is a strong possibility of an accident in the loading of conventional ammunition aboard the E.A. Bryan, which in turn ignited the low-yield nuclear device which weighed approximately 9000 pounds.

RE-CREATING EVENTS

A re-creation of the events of July 17, 1944, are necessary to test Vogel's theory. The scenario presented is one that coincides with official classified Navy documents of the investigation, eye witness reports, newspaper reports, and other publications.

The ammunition depot at Port Chicago was only 80 percent completed, but was one of the main sources of supply for the Pacific fleet. The dock facilities could handle the largest ammunition carriers in the Navy. It was under the jurisdiction of the Naval Commander at Mare Island.

The E.A. Bryan docked at Port Chicago on July 13 and the loading of munitions began at 8:30 a.m. that morning and continued until the explosion 109 hours and 49 minutes later. Here is a list of the contents being loaded:

* 50.04 tons of 20-mm HEI Tetryl Cartridges. * 50.09 tons of 5-inch 38-calibre Common Projectiles. * 36 tons of 16-inch Tar. Mk2-4A Projectiles. * 87.55 tons of 1000 lb. GP AN-M65 TNT Bombs. * 106 tons of 1000 lb. AP AN-M33 Bombs. * 26 tons of Fin assemblies for AN M-65 Bombs. * 60.35 tons of incendiary Cluster M7. * 97 tons of 350 lb. DB AN-Mk 47 Torpex Bombs.

* 93.52 tons of 100 lb. Fragmentation Cluster An-M4. * 42 tons of 40-mm AP Tracer Cartridges.

The placement of the ammunition in the E.A. Bryan were as follows:

No. 1 hold - smoke bombs. No. 2 hold - Torpex. No. 3 hold - Tail fins for air bombs. No. 4 hold - Fragmentation bombs. No. 5 hold - 40-mm ammunition.

The Bryan's holds were as deep as a four-story building. The ship had only completed its maiden voyage earlier that year and had been refitted with 10-ton booms before arriving at Port Chicago.

Navy records indicate different problems plagued the loading of the E.A. Bryan. There had been trouble with the steam winches - which had no brakes, and meant that any cargo being hoisted could slam to the ground if steam power was lost at any time. There were also bearing and valve problems with the winches. More problems occurred when the crank bearing on the No. 2 winch began making a hammering noise - its bearing had to be replaced. On the day of the explosion a bleeder valve on the No. 4 winch had gone out and had to be repaired. A plumber repairing a nipple on the bleeder valve said upon completion of his repairs, "I don't like the look of things around here." The man had just observed one of the deck hands lose his grip on a shell - it dropped two feet and hit the deck with a thud.

The incendiary bombs had their activating mechanisms, or fuses, installed. They were considered "hot cargo" and were being loaded gingerly, one bomb at a time. "The men were having some difficulty getting the bombs out of the boxcar because they were wedged on so tightly," one officer testified.

AT THE HEARING

A Naval inquiry after the explosion called upon 125 witnesses to testify. At the hearing there was a major dispute centered on whether unsafe loading practices where employed at Port Chicago, and why no Coast Guard loading detail was present the night of the

explosion. The Coast Guard and the Port Director's Office had inexperienced personnel who were unable to properly supervise the loading operation and created problems for the work.

Records also show that as early as October 1943, the Coast Guard warned the Port Director, "Conditions are bad up there (at Port Chicago), you've got to do something about itÉif you aren't careful, something's going to happen, and you'll be held responsible for it." An effort to bring in contract stevedores and experienced officers failed. The captain of the port decided to withdraw the Coast Guard detail because conditions were so bad that he was unwilling to take responsibility for it. Contract stevedores were used at other Bay Area Navy facilities, but not at Port Chicago or Mare Island. The Coast Guard loading detail was absent on the night of the explosion.

The inquiry was also very concerned over encouraged competition between loading crews. "The loading of explosives should never be a matter if competition," the inquiry stated. The witnesses also stated that "the colored enlisted personnel are neither temperamentally or intellectually capable of handling high explosives. These men could not understand the orders which were given to them and the only way they could be made to understand what they should do was by actual demonstration." The court did find that there was rough and careless handling of the explosives being loaded aboard ships at Port Chicago.

"Inherent defects in the bombs might have been a contributory cause, but there must have been some overt act to cause the bomb to actually explode," the court stated. Though it never found an exact cause for the explosion, the court did consider the "Presence of a supersensitive element which was detonated in the course of rough handling."

Another classified document reveals concern for the loading of ammunition at Port Chicago. Confidential memoranda ND12-16-Bd (SC) S78 Serial 40312, from the Commandant Twelfth Naval District to the Officer-in-Charge, Naval Ammunition Deport, Port Chicago, was

written on September 23, 1944 - two months after the explosion. The memoranda called attention to the Torpex bombs - there were 97 tons of these bombs being loaded. "Torpex generates a hydrogen gas which causes expansion within the projectile, rending it necessary on occasion to release this gas in order to reduce the projectile's sensitivity to accidental detonation."

The 6-day-old Quinault Victory arrived at Port Chicago at approximately 7 p.m. on July 17 - less than three hours before the explosion. It was not being loaded, but was opposite the pier from the E.A. Bryan. It was the Quinault Victory that the visitors of the "shiny, black car" were visiting.

The box cars were on the pier. The first explosion is reported to have taken the pier out first - the second explosion on the ships.

TESTING VOGEL'S THEORY

Now, on the assumption that Vogel's theory is correct, that the government purposely blew up Port Chicago, there are certain characteristics that are important:

* The ship would not be mixed with loaded munitions because the total test result would be inaccurate. * Would the government destroy its most productive West coast ammunition port which was only 80 percent completed? * Would two brand new ships be used in a test, rather than older vessels? * Would an untested bomb be used in a populated area and jeopardize thousands of lives and critical infrastructure? * Would there be two explosions? And why would the pier area blow up before the ship?

There are too many improbabilities associated with Vogels' theory of a test - when other facilities in the South Pacific or more isolated, less important facilities could have been use as a test site.

POSSIBLE SCENARIO

Based upon the records and documents that have been made public and at least reviewed, the following

scenario might be drawn:

* The first atomic bomb was indeed loaded. Not on the E.A. Bryan, but on the Quinault Victory. * That bomb, like the two later dropped on Japan, was destined for the South Pacific. The bomb would be held on Tinian and a B29 - which already existed - would carry that bomb over Japan. * The "shiny, black car" contained scientists from Los Alamos, checking on the security of the system. * The Navy was filming Port Chicago - not to capture an explosion, but to provide a complete documentary of the ship's progress, the filming process would continue through delivery to Tinian and beyond. * Because it was an atomic bomb that exploded, the U.S. government had to classify everything so as to avoid the enemy learning of the device. Future reclassification could protect the U.S. from a major international embarrassment during a nuclear-freeze frenzy in this country. * There was some type of accident in the loading process, which caused a major explosion - but not he main one. That explosion ruptured and activated the nuclear device.

Obviously, these theories are speculative at best, but they are based upon the documentation that even some of the Naval inquiry people did not have in 1944. Regardless of Vogel's conspiracy theory - the fact is that Vogel has provided sufficient evidence to prove a very high probability that a low-yield atomic explosion destroyed Port Chicago - and that American sailors were the first nuclear casualties in warfare, not the Japanese.

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Additional Evidence Surfaces In Port Chicago Blast

By Harry V. Martin

Sometimes obscure personal documents from the past can help to substantiate theories of today. Recently the Napa Sentinel ran a series of articles on the Port Chicago explosion. The articles indicated that the theory of Peter Vogel, as voiced on KVON's Doubletalk, had plausibility in one area, and lacked supporting documentation in the other.

The article stated Vogel's theory was that an atomic

bomb exploded at Port Chicago was highly plausible according to documents obtained by Vogel and the Sentinel. The article disputed Vogel's claim that the atomic explosion was really a test conducted by the U.S. Navy. The Sentinel maintained that the explosion was an accident - and perhaps a nuclear accident, at that.

New information has surfaced to give additional credibility to the nuclear accident theory. Carl Wehr, who died some time ago, was a Navy commander at Port Chicago and other ammunition loading facilities on the West Coast. His widow still lives in St. Helena. Wehr wrote a history of his Naval career entitled Up Through The Hawse Pipe, a compendium of events of life in the working navy through the enlisted ranks to commission status. Wehr's records were not written for public review, but his comments on pages 33 through 36 give credence to the Sentinel articles. The Sentinel did not exist during Wehr's lifetime.

"By 1944, we were shipping 180,000 tons (ammunition) a month to the Pacific theater. We loaded ammunition out of every major port on the West Coast, the largest tonnage by far, going through facilities in the Bay Area - principally the ammunition depot at Port Chicago which was built primarily as a shipping terminal for ammunition," his personal notes state. Wehr indicates that some 250 box car loads of ammunition were in revetment on the base waiting to load, "The explosion aboard the Quinault Victory took took 322 lives, most of them instantly. The dead were the ship's crew, stevedores, and trainmen," The amazing fact, according to Wehr, who was a high official at Port Chicago, was that of the 250 car loads of ammunition waiting to be loaded and in the revetments, "none of the ammunition was damaged."

Wehr pointed out what he felt might have been the cause of the explosion, though he admits he had not seen any official reports. "We do know that Torpex bombs were being loaded that night and it's quite possible that one of these could have been roughly handled or even dropped down into the hold of the ship," he wrote. "Torpex was a new explosive introduced into the Navy early in the war, it was extremely powerful, much more than the standard

TNT, and more sensitive. Wehr cited two incidents related to torpex. "There were two accidents reported involving torpex bombs. In one case, a bomb fell from a bomb trailer being towed along a runway at an airfield near Norfork, Virginia and exploded. In another instance a torpex bomb exploded at the ammunition depot on Oahu in the Hawiian Islands. This occurred when the bomb was jolted in handling." Wehr also stated. "The explosive had a propensity on rare occasions to detonate with rough handling. And rough handling of ammunition in the loading operation was not uncommon." Wehr added, "One day at Port Chicago, I was standing near a hatch watching gun powder for fourteen inch guns being loaded. A damaged container holding nearly a hundred pounds of smokeless powder was set aside on the hatch cover, one of the loading crew was told to remove it, which he did - by rolling it along with his foot. The container got away from him and dropped through the open hatch and down two decks."

The Sentinel had projected that torpex bombs may have accidentally exploded - and if a nuclear device was at the Port, set it off as well.

Vogel theorized that the explosion was actually a test of an atomic weapon and the Port was expendable. The Sentinel theory indicated that whatever type of explosion it was, it was accidental. "The loss of the Port Chicago facility was aggravated by the severe restriction placed on the movement and handling of explosives at facilities other than those specifically designated for that use," Wehr wrote. "After the explosion, we couldn't transport a thirty caliber bullet over the Bay Bridges. Moreover, loading demands increased as tonnage escalated. For the invasion of Okinawa I needed berthing for twelve shiploads of Marine Corps ammunition. I flew to Seattle and, in conference with the Commandant of the Thirteenth Naval District and the Coast Guard, arranged for loading several ships at Tacoma." Wehr was admitting that the destruction of Port Chicago was a crippling blow to the war effort as a major push was being made to capture Okinawa and the Marianas.

The Sentinel articles also indicated that the atomic bomb that dropped on Hiroshima was shipped aboard the

cruiser U.S.S. Indianapolis. In Wehr's notes he states, "One night about midnight, I received a telephone call at home from a lieutenant at the Oakland Naval Supply Depot, saying the Southern Pacific had two express cars which had arrived at the rail yard with a shipment of classified material identified only as "Bowery." The cars were under Marine guard and what to do with them? I told him I knew nothing about it but would get on it first thing the next morning. At eight o'clock the next morning I went into the office of my commanding officer, Commander Weatherwax, and told him of the arrival of project "Bowery." He leaped to his feet and shouted, "Where the hell did you learn about Bowery? The Admiral, the Chief of Staff and myself know of this!" After he calmed down, he told me this was a highly classified project and he would take care of it himself. Later I learned that "Bowery" was the first atomic bomb shipment. It was loaded aboard the cruiser Indianapolis and shipped to Guam." He even verified the statement in the Sentinel that the Indianapolis was sunk after delivering the bomb.

After the Port Chicago blast, the manifest of the destroyed box cars were revealed after a public records request. The government supplied all the details of every boxcar - except two. The government indicated that the manifests of those two boxcars probably contained the nuclear components and that the manifests were classified top secret. In Wehr's report of the atomic bomb shipment to Port Chicago in 1945 - less than a year after the explosion - he stated the contents were contained in two box cars. Accidents do happen. In 1957 - 13 years after Port Chicago - an Air Force plane hit turbulence over New Mexico and it accidently dropped a hydrogen bomb, which was 625 times greater than the atomic bomb that was used on Hiroshima, The U.S. government covered up this accident until 1985, when an Albuquerque journalist began investigating New Mexico's nuclear weapons research facilities with a simple question: Have they ever had any nuclear accidents? He finally filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Pentagon - 10 months later the file was released. The 42,000 pound MK-17 bomb was the nation's first "droppable" hydrogen bomb. It was the largest bomb ever produced by the United States.

Fortunately, in this case, the explosives gouged a 25-foot crater in the earth, but the nuclear device was not detonated. Like the Port Chicago case, the U.S. government emphatically denied the accident, but when it released the public records, it showed the government had lied. The journalist challenged the governments first refusal to submit the material. He wrote, "It strains the credibility of the Air Force to contend that release of information about accidents involving 35-and 28-year-old weapons - which are now obsolete - will in any way endanger national security. "After 10 months, the investigative reporter received stacks of document from the Air Force Inspection and Safety Center concerning the nuclear accident.

The old diary and the Freedom of Information Act provides critical data that is not easily obtained from government officials - who will often deny events at first. When the media accepts the government's line, without verification, it only serves to aid deception and misinformation,. The Sentinel has filed a Freedom of Information Act request to obtain full documentation on the Port Chicago blast, including Technical Report No. 6 which was reclassified after inquiries about the explosion began to proliferate.

Comment

From Mrs. BigDaddy
11-6-00

After reading the articles relating to the explosion at Port Chicago I find it amusing that throughout the years no investigator ever asked my grandfather about this.

It was He, and his company (a marine contractor) that won the bid to clean up the mess afterwards. I still have some photos around taken at the time. Nothing very dramatic. One photo appeas to be the wreckage of a tug they lost to a bomb.

Dredging was the way it was cleaned up. The way it happened, they dredged and placed box cars full of bombs into the dredged area and then fill to cover the

mess. Any maps would show it as Bomb Island.

There was never any mention regarding an atomic blast,
Nor did he ever mention any special protection required
for the clean up.

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