

"THE PRICE OF FEAR"

story by
William C. Martell

On July 17th, 1944, at 10:19 pm. the Navy Munitions Base at Port Chicago, California and the town of Port Chicago more than a mile away, were blown off the face of the earth. 322 people were killed, more than 400 more were seriously injured. It was the largest state-side disaster of World War II, making headlines in every paper across the United States.

But the incidents following the explosion never made the headlines. 208 of the survivors were Court Martialed by the Navy. The remaining 50 were charged with Mutiny, punishable by death. Because they spoke out about unsafe working conditions... and they were Black. This is the true story of the largest Mutiny Trial in Navy history. An event which led to the desegregation of the United States Armed Forces.

ACT ONE

FIFTY BLACK MEN in hand cuffs and leg irons are escorted by armed guards down a narrow hallway to the jail cells. Though this is a Navy Trial, the NAACP has sent in a hot young lawyer to help the defense. His name: Thurgood Marshall.

Marshall talks to several of the prisoners, including the "ring leader" Leroy Randall. Randall tells about the events leading up to the trial, and we relive them.

Randall and his friends (Lou, Tex, "Boomerang" Al, and Jim) take young newlywed Kenny under their wing, showing him how to survive the dangerous back breaking work at Port Chicago.

The Armed Forces during World War Two are completely segregated. Regardless of training, Black sailors are sent to Port Chicago (and other sites) to load ammo. There are no Black ships. The work is dangerous to begin with, but Lt. Denatto has thrown away all safety procedures in order to load ships faster. There's a war on and DeNatto is looking for a promotion.

It's not uncommon for live bombs to be poured out of a wheel barrow into a ship's hold when the winch breaks

down. This has already lead to a few minor explosions. But only Black (expendable) men were injured, so work resumed immediately.

Kenny makes a mistake, and Lt. Denatto punishes him by making him work the graveyard shift as well. When Randall and the rest of the guys are going to bed, Kenny still has to work.

ACT TWO

THE MEN ARE ASLEEP when the ships explode. The blast sends flames in a three mile diameter, shooting fire and debris more than 9,000 feet into the air. The barracks disintegrate, and the men are hurled a hundred yards across the base. Jeeps FLY past, crashing into buildings. Shells, parts of train cars and ships, and broken glass rain down on the base.

Has Japan attacked? No: Two ammo ships have exploded.

Randall and the men put out the fires at the base and send the wounded to the hospital. Randall is part of a rescue group which drives down to the piers... But they don't get far. The piers and the road leading to them are now a massive crater.

The next morning: Randall, Tex, Lou, and Al are part of the clean up and rescue party. All they find are bodies and parts of bodies. Including young Kenny. His new bride is now a widow.

After the clean up, the survivors are transferred across the Bay to Mare Island Navy Station. All are emotionally scarred.

At Mare Island they re-paint barracks. Randall thinks they will receive "survivor's leave", then be re-assigned to non-hazardous duty. None of the men ever want to load ammo again.

The Navy covers up the real reasons for the explosion at Port Chicago (unsafe working conditions), by blaming the Black enlisted men for clumsy handling of the explosives.

While Port Chicago is being rebuilt, Mare Island becomes the Navy's ammo loading port. Randall and the

survivors are sent back to work loading dangerous explosives. But refuse.

All 258 survivors are escorted by armed guards to a barge-prison, to think about their decision not to load explosives.

Three days later they are escorted onto the Parade Grounds and given a choice: Load ammo or be Court Martialed for Mutiny. Because it is Time Of War, the penalty for Mutiny is death by firing squad. The Admiral has all of the men who will load ammo stand on one side of the field, those who want to be shot for mutiny stand on the other. "Boomerang" Al shakes Randall's hand, and the two friends move to separate sides of the field. Al would rather take a chance with the ammo than with the Navy's racist prosecutor James Connors. Randall and forty three men go to jail.

ACT THREE

Randall tells Thurgood Marshall about the interrogations. Connors is looking for a scape goat. Randall is chosen because of his attitude and intelligence. The two men lock horns in a dramatic interrogation. A battle of wits, fought later in court.

Six other Black Navy men are added to the forty four. Random choices to bring the trial total to fifty.

All fifty are asked to sign statements admitting that they were part of an organized mutiny against the US Navy. Some men are coerced into signing. Some refuse.

Thurgood Marshall oversees the Navy Trial. No jury, just a seven man panel of white Navy Officers who will judge the fifty.

The Defense proves the statements were the product of coercion and has them thrown out of court. They further prove that the loading procedures at Port Chicago were unsafe, and that the men were not part of an organized mutiny... They were just afraid of loading dangerous explosives.

After the Defense rests, Marshall congratulates Randall on the impending verdict. But Randall believes the entire trial was for show: All 50 men are going to be found guilty and shot, no matter what the evidence says.

After six weeks of hearings and 100 witnesses, the seven man tribunal takes 80 minutes to decide: Guilty of Mutiny.

Both Thurgood Marshall and Eleanor Roosevelt appeal to the Supreme Court for leniency. The Port Chicago 50 were eventually given fifteen years in jail and dishonorable discharges. To this day, they have not been pardoned or received veteran's benefits.

END

"The Price Of Fear" wgaw# 332074 (1986) by William C. Martell