

Port Chicago 50 (Courage, Community)

The actions of the Port Chicago 50 during the Second World War exemplified the courage and community aspects of the Seven Cs.

At the beginning of the Second World War, the Navy required Black Sailors to serve in one of two positions: messman or steward. As the war continued, however, more jobs opened up to Black Sailors, although ships were not fully integrated. At Port Chicago, California, Black Sailors, trained for combat, loaded munitions on ships bound for the Pacific instead. White officers oversaw their work, often betting one another to see whose team could load the fastest. Neither the Black Sailors nor the officers were trained adequately for the dangerous work. When observing the poor working conditions and lack of training, the longshore union warned that catastrophe was imminent.

On July 17, 1944, a massive explosion occurred when munitions detonated while being loaded onto a cargo vessel. The explosion killed 320 Sailors and civilians and injured 390 others. Most of the dead and injured were enlisted Black Sailors. In the aftermath, Black Sailors were ordered to clean up the devastation and then to resume loading operations at another facility nearby. Without additional training or an explanation for what had happened at Port Chicago, dozens of Sailors refused, going on strike. Navy leadership quickly told these men that if they continued to strike, they would be put on trial for mutiny.

In the end, most of the Sailors returned to duty. Fifty men—referred to as the "Port Chicago 50"—were court-martialed and convicted of mutiny. They received 15-year prison sentences. Forty-seven of the 50 were released in January 1946; the remaining three (those considered to be the leaders of the "mutiny") served additional months in prison. During and after the trial, the NAACP and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt questioned the fairness and legality of the court-martial proceedings. Due to public pressure, the United States Navy reconvened the court-martial board in 1945; the court affirmed the guilt of the convicted men. Widespread publicity surrounding the case ultimately led the Navy to change its practices and initiate the desegregation of its forces after World War II.

Most of the Port Chicago 50 never received justice during their lifetimes. Many of these Sailors lived the rest of their lives concealing their experience even from their own families. In 1999, President Bill Clinton granted a pardon to Freddie Meeks, one of the few Port Chicago 50 Sailors still alive. The remaining 49 Sailors have never received a pardon for their actions.

Courage is defined as "the moral and mental strength to do what is right, even with criticism or adversity." How did the actions of the men who became known as the Port Chicago 50 reflect this definition?

Community is defined as “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.” What else can “community” mean to a Sailor? How did the actions of the Port Chicago 50 exemplify that definition of community?