Contents

CHAPTER ONE:
LIFE IN THE AGE OF SAIL
ERNEST PROTHERO 1

CHAPTER TWO:
THE ANTI-NAVALISTS
CRAIG L. SYMONDS 21

CHAPTER THREE:
THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES NAVY IN THE SUPPRESSION OF
THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE
GEORGE M. BROOKE, JR. 27

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE SOMERS MUTINY
SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON 41

CHAPTER FIVE:
MUTINY?
EDWARD L. BEACH 53

CHAPTER SIX:
A NAVAL SIEVE: THE UNION BLOCKADE IN THE CIVIL WAR
WILLIAM N. STILL, JR. 67

CHAPTER SEVEN:
A STRATEGY OF SEA POWER AND EMPIRE
RUSSELL F. WEIGLEY 75

CHAPTER EIGHT:
ANGLO-AMERICAN DIFFERENCES DURING WORLD WAR I
DEAN C. ALLARD 103

CHAPTER NINE:
AROUND CHESAPEAKE BAY
RICHARD HOUGH 117

CHAPTER TEN:
CONTROLLING AVIATION AFTER THE WORLD WAR
WILLIAM M. McBRIE 131
CHAPTER ELEVEN:
FROM GALLIPOLI TO GUADALCANAL
GUNThER E. ROTHENBERG 151

CHAPTER TWELVE:
WAR PLAN ORANGE, 1897–1941: THE BLUE THRUST
THROUGH THE PACIFIC
EDWARD S. MILLER 159

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC, 1941–1943: PEAKS AND TROUGHS
J. DAVID BROWN 171

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:
FIGHTING WITH THE NAVY: THE WAVES IN WORLD WAR II
D’ANN CAMPBELL 189

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:
PORT CHICAGO MUTINY
LEONARD F. GUTTRIDGE 205

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:
THE BATTLE OFF SAMAR
WILFRED P. DEAC 213

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:
“THE REVOLT OF THE ADMIRALS” RECONSIDERED
JEFFREY G. BARLOW 227

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:
ERRORS OF THE KOREAN WAR
COMMANDER MALCOLM W. CAGLE, USN 241

CHAPTER NINETEEN:
A NEW KIND OF WAR
VICTOR H. KRULAK 247

CHAPTER TWENTY:
HIGH-LOW
ADMIRAL ELMO R. ZUMWALT, JR., U.S. NAVY (RETIRED) 267

CHRONOLOGY 285
MAP 302
APPENDIX 303
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 304
After the First World War it was the navy’s unwritten policy to discourage the recruitment of black Americans. Those accepted served for the most part as stewards. At the time of Pearl Harbor there were no black officers and very few black seamen above the steward level. (The Caine’s chief steward and steward’s mates are black and stereotypic.) Wartime conscription produced a wider acceptance of blacks, who were, however, still subjected to segregated training and assignment. By the middle of 1943 there were more than one hundred thousand black enlisted men in the navy and still no black officers, an abnormality impossible to ignore. The navy’s Bureau of Personnel issued a letter deeming it “important from the standpoint of morale that Negroes be assured the same opportunities for promotion as other enlisted personnel.” Plans were implemented for appropriate officer indoctrination. Even so, a disproportionate number of blacks, educated and illiterate alike, were shunted into dead-end or unpopular shore-based fields. And this is the reason why, only three months after thirteen black men became the first of their race to receive officer’s commissions in the United States Navy, all fifty of the same service charged with conspiracy and mutiny were also black.

Since its construction in 1942 as a subcommand of the Naval Ammunition Depot at Mare Island, twenty miles north of San Francisco, the Port Chicago loading base had been manned almost entirely by black seamen supervised by white officers. Some of the facility’s personnel may have understood that their work was of decisive importance to the outcome of distant land, sea, and air battles, but theirs was a thankless, depressing, and dangerous line of work that
none of them, black or white, were likely to have relished. For the officers, periodic relief was possible in jaunts to Oakland or San Francisco. Commercial transport into Port Chicago served the black workers, but they found that war-bred settlement to be no haven of hospitality.

Subsequent court testimony would describe “the colored enlisted personnel [as] neither temperamentally nor intellectually capable of handling high explosives.” They were “poor material for training”—this toward explaining why they had been given no preliminary stevedore instruction. To make up for this deficiency, some of the officers had instituted weekly training sessions, but by and large they themselves, like their men, had to learn on the job, their only textbook a Coast Guard manual entitled Regulations Governing Transportation Of Military Explosives On Board Vessels During The Present Emergency. Known as the Red Book, it was quickly outdated and had little useful to say about the TPX-loaded Mark 47 depth bombs being hoisted from four of sixteen railroad boxcars and lowered through the hatches of the 7,212-ton Liberty Ship E. A. Bryan on the night of 17 July 1944.

The loading proceeded under floodlights. Half the men engaged were on the dock, the rest in the E. A. Bryan’s five holds, receiving the cargo. On the other side of the five-hundred-foot-long pier another ship, the Quinault Victory, awaited, and about seventy crew members of both vessels were present, also sentries. By 10 P.M. nearly five thousand tons of explosives had been loaded—antiaircraft shells, incendiary clusters, and fragmentation bombs, besides the Mark 47 depth bombs. These latter were of a relatively new type and not to be confused with the conventional TNT-primed depth charges, which the Red Book said could be loaded aboard ship in ordinary cargo nets without protective trays to cushion the shock of landing. TPX always had to be handled more gingerly than TNT. A dent in the outer covering might be enough to detonate the material, as the navy’s Bureau of Ordnance conceded, citing “‘container dent’ sensitivity . . . new to the literature of explosives” as one of the two fatal elements in what occurred at Port Chicago, the other being “a careless act of someone who perished.” A hoist might have been allowed to swing against the ship’s side or been dropped from too great a height into the hold. Perhaps the absence of those protective trays under the depth bombs was to blame. Only conjecture suggests why the Liberty Ship suddenly exploded. Generating shock waves felt fifty miles away, the first blast was enough to have killed all who could have provided eyewitness testimony. Other explosions followed, destroying the Quinault Victory, railroad cars, the pier, and a fire barge. Boiling gases mushroomed 12,000 feet into the summer night sky, and of the 320 dead, two-thirds of them black Americans, only 51 bodies would be found sufficiently intact for identification.

“As was to be expected, Negro personnel performed bravely . . . carried on in accordance with our service’s highest traditions.” Thus declared Adm. Carleton H. Wright, in command of the Twelfth Naval District, praising survivors within a week of the disaster. As for those who had died, “their sacrifice could not have been greater had it occurred on a battleship or a beach-head.”
Scarcely a month later his tone had changed, the admiral warning scores of black sailors manifestly averse to further hazarding such sacrifice that mutinous conduct in wartime bore a fearful risk of its own, that of a firing squad.

The Port Chicago explosion had injured more than four hundred men. Psychological scars were to be expected as well. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal believed that putting fit survivors immediately back to work at handling ammunition was “the preferred method of preventing them from building up mental and emotional barriers which, if allowed to accumulate, become increasingly difficult to overcome.” They had not gone back to work at once, if only because of the devastation to the Port Chicago facility. But neither were any given furloughs, despite the survivors’ jumpiness, dazed manner, and other symptoms of trauma. The loading divisions were instead quartered at local installations, such as the Camp Shoemaker naval training center and the naval barracks at Vallejo.

On 8 August, twenty-two days after the explosion, the ammunition carrier San Gay arrived at Mare Island Ammunition Depot and berthed at Pier 34 East. Railroad boxcars filled with shells and detonators drew up alongside. The ship was rigged for loading, hatches were opened, and the dispersed divisions were alerted that evening for a resumption of their ammunition-loading duties. Thereupon, the officers in charge discovered that in the three weeks of unrelieved confinement since the explosion at Port Chicago the men had developed a distinctly uncooperative mood.

At about noon the following day Lt. Ernest Delucchi of the fourth loading division reported personally to Comdr. Joseph R. Tobin, who was in charge of the Vallejo naval barracks, that instead of boarding the ferry to Mare island as ordered, practically all 105 of his men had drifted off in the opposite direction and halted at the mess hall. When the lieutenant returned from the commander’s office, he found them listening impassively to a chaplain, who offered to stand alongside them on the loading dock if only they would go back to work. Obedient to a point, the men allowed themselves to be lined up on the parade ground, where appeals were made to their racial pride. They were next ushered into the recreation building and marched upstairs to the chaplain’s office, which doubled as a movie-projection room, where Commander Tobin began to tell each man individually that unless he returned to work disciplinary action would surely follow. The commander had not progressed very far when he was informed by telephone of disorders in other divisions. The message was more or less the same. The men would obey any order except that which put them back on loading ammunition. By nightfall those who still refused numbered 258. They were separated from the rest, berthed on a lighter tied up at the pier, and assembled the next morning on the baseball diamond, to be addressed by the commanding officer of the Twelfth Naval District.

Admiral Wright had held that assignment for eight months. He had come to it straight from a Pacific war zone, where almost half of his cruiser flotilla had been blasted out from under him by Japanese destroyers. With such experience fresh in mind he was unlikely to have felt much sympathy for the men.
who stood before him. Even so, out of fairness he probably recognized that they may not have fully apprehended the gravity of their conduct. Here was a situation calling for plain language. He reminded the men that GIs on Saipan were in desperate need of the ammunition they refused to load. He warned them that continued refusal amounted to mutiny and concluded with the fearsome thrust that though loading ammunition was risky, they were now courting a greater hazard, that of death by a firing party.

The admiral’s blunt delivery had an effect. Mutiny? Said one black loader, “We thought mutiny was like when you kill people or take over something . . . that it could only happen on a ship on the high seas.” When the admiral finished talking, division officers once more ordered a return to work. The men divided themselves into two groups, those willing to obey and those who felt otherwise. Some wept as they made their choice. The obedient group now proved the far larger, numbering 208. They were not yet in the clear. Having originally refused orders, they were taken to Camp Shoemaker for interrogation and summary court-martial. The holdouts, fifty still defiant, were also borne off, to confinement in the guardhouse. And what ensued during the balance of the month would extend the controversy over the original conduct of the black ammunition loaders to include doubts concerning the propriety of some of the navy’s investigative and judicial methods.

The compliant 208 were interviewed separately and in the presence of armed guards. Replies were extracted under the threat of a general court-martial. Men were coerced into testifying against one another. The questioners drafted statements, which several of the men refused to sign, protesting that their words were twisted.

A legal officer interrogated the recalcitrant fifty in the Camp Shoemaker brig, asking if they knew the definition of mutiny. Apparently none did, so “I read the definition from Courts and Boards. I read, I think, part of section 46.” (Section 46 of the current Naval Courts and Boards defined mutiny as “unlawful opposition or resistance to or defiance of superior military authority, with a deliberate purpose to usurp, subvert, or override such authority.”) One of the men expressed his fear of loading ammunition. “I told him ‘you failed to obey orders, that’s mutiny and is about the same as looking down a gun barrel.’”

And thus Capt. Nelson Goss, commanding officer of the Port Chicago installation, formally reported it to Admiral Wright. “A refusal to obey orders, sufficiently concerted and sufficiently persisted in to appear mutinous . . . occurred on the part of three divisions of (negro) personnel . . . followed [by] the two remaining divisions.” Agitators were “undoubtedly” involved, the men having been subject to “outside propaganda . . . subversive influence.” All along the men had “exhibited the normal characteristics of negroes” but lately had begun showing a “persistent disposition to question orders, to argue, and in effect attempt to bargain.” Their joint action and continued disobedience “indicated a mutinous attitude.”

When official reports of the case reached his desk, the president of the United States suggested that only nominal sentences be imposed on the peni-
tent 208, for they had acted out of “mass fear and . . . this is understandable.”
Perhaps equally understandable, considering the enormous wartime pressures
he was under and his unpublicized declining health, is Franklin D. Roosevelt’s
omission, in his brief comment, of any reference to the fifty prisoners whose
initial disobedience had been motivated by the same fear. Evidently no one
drew his attention to the anomaly either. Charges were drafted: “Having
conspired each with the other to mutiny against the lawful authority of their
superior naval officers . . . by refusing to work in the operation of loading am-
munition [they] did . . . make a mutiny . . . in that they did . . . wilfully, con-
certedly and persistently disobey, disregard, and defy a lawful order with a
deliberate purpose and intent to override superior military authority, the United
States then being in a state of war.”

News of the impending trial of fifty young black sailors for mutiny touched
off protests from organizations and private citizens alike. The National Associ-
ation for the Advancement of Colored People sent Eleanor Roosevelt a bro-
chure fiercely critical of the navy’s action. It “seems a sad story,” wrote the
president’s wife to Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, and she hoped “spe-
cial care will be taken.” The navy was certainly reacting to charges that the
work of loading munitions was deliberately assigned to black personnel.
Admiral Wright felt that there was no more “racial discrimination” at Port
Chicago than at another loading facility in his Twelfth Naval District that ex-
clusively employed whites. All the same, forwarding his initial report to
Washington, the admiral had stated that while it was perfectly “logical” to use
blacks at ammunition sites, some means of biracial rotation should be consid-
ered to check an unjustified impression that they were singled out for such
work. Forrestal endorsed the idea in a memo to the White House. The assign-
ment of more whites to ammunition-handling duties would “avoid any sem-
b lance of discrimination against Negroes.” By the end of the year white and
black Americans were taking turns on the rebuilt Port Chicago loading pier—
without, of course, any integration of units. All this was a separate develop-
ment, unconnected with the court-martial proceedings, throughout whose
thirty-three autumn days the subject of racial discrimination arose fleetingly if
at all, the principal arguments turning upon the nature of mutiny and whether
the accused could be shown to have committed it.

They had understandable cause for fear. Their minds may have rebelled
against the notion that their own government would order them all shot to
dead. Neither, perhaps, did the legal officers involved in the case soberly be-
lieve that things would get that far. But they might. Those sailors who had
thought that mutiny meant only trying to take over a ship now knew better.
Some had believed at the time that when their superiors at Port Chicago had
talked of a firing squad, they were using exaggeration to scare them into obedi-
ence. Now they realized that because of their conduct on that occasion they
might indeed die. It was possible.

The trial was conducted within a converted marine barracks on Yerba
Buena Island and was open to the public as if to indicate that, notwithstanding
the wartime need for secrecy, in this matter the navy had nothing to hide. The
defendants were provided with a skillful five-man legal team, one lawyer for
each group of ten. But the court was no less capable and of a more hard-shelled
character, seven officers of senior rank presided over by a rear admiral brought
out of retirement. A future district attorney, tough on antiwar protesters in the
1960s, led the prosecution as judge advocate. Once again viewpoints clashed
over definitions, interpretations, and shades of meaning. Both sides drew
earnestly upon William Winthrop, “recognized,” declared defense counsel, “as
the leading authority on military law.” That luminary had identified mutiny as
essentially requiring “a deliberate purpose to usurp, subvert or override supe-
rior military authority.” As the accused had entertained no such aim, the case
against them should be dismissed. The judge advocate, Lt. Comdr. James F.
Coakley, brushed this motion aside. It was not the prosecution’s duty to prove
the required motive, which was sufficiently implicit in the men’s disobedience.
Joint, collective, and persistent refusal to work might commonly be termed a
strike when indulged in by civilian stevedores, but in the military it was mutiny.
And there were those statements, more than fifty of them, amounting to full
confessions.

Those statements, already suspect, escaped close examination. Even the
question of disobedience lost its clarity when Commander Tobin admitted
under defense’s persuasion that he could not assert from personal knowledge
that any sailors except the six or seven he had interviewed were positively or-
dered to work. Neither were the prosecution’s arguments claiming conspiracy
all that compelling. While the wording of the charge presupposed conspiracy,
the actual charge was of “making a mutiny.” In this light, and ignoring the
judge advocate’s protests against hairsplitting, the defense considered itself
bound only to disprove mutiny, defined by the specification as willful, con-
certed, and persistent disobedience with a view toward overriding authority.
The defense went about this task by getting the seamen to testify one after an-
other that although frankly too scared to load any more ammunition, they had
not jointly plotted refusal to do so and had indeed received no direct orders.
Where, then, was the specific intent to override, Winthrop’s “essential ele-
ment,” ratified as such by Naval Courts and Boards? That intent may be openly
declared in word or implied in deed, neither of which was manifest in the con-
duct of the defendants. All that could be established was that following the “de-
struction and carnage” of the July explosion each man “of his own initiative”
decided against handling ammunition.

Perhaps nothing could have better mirrored the ambiguity surrounding
legal definitions of mutiny than the confidence, matching that of the defense
counsel, with which the judge advocate also invoked Winthropian precepts.
Coakley focused on that same “essential element” to which the other side at-
tached so much importance. “A combination . . . to refuse or perform military
service . . . if persisted in after due warning, may certainly be treated as
mutiny.” Specific intent? Such refusal was clear proof of it. The disobedience
of one man alone could not amount to mutiny. “But,” Coakley continued, “when you have a large number, as in this case, in a mass or group refusal to obey an order, you have an extraordinary case of conspiracy . . . an extraordinary case of mutiny.” His line of reasoning prevailed. When the trial concluded on 24 October, the court deliberated only eighty minutes before returning a verdict of guilty for every one of the Port Chicago fifty.

No death sentences were handed down, but the penalties imposed were harsh enough—fifteen years’ imprisonment and dishonorable discharge. (The 208 given summary courts-martial had drawn bad-conduct discharges and three months’ forfeiture of pay.) Admiral Wright reduced some sentences but only minimally, to eight-to-ten years’ jail terms, with the dishonorable discharges left standing. By this time, however, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was actively involved. An NAACP lawyer flew west, met the prosecution and defense teams, and interviewed the convicted men. The lawyer was Thurgood Marshall, at thirty-six already prominent in the NAACP, having recently argued his first case before that highest judicial body of which he was destined to become a member. Marshall lost no time in denouncing the trial as racist and unfair. In a forceful appeal brief to the Judge Advocate General of the United States Navy he insisted that “there is no set rule as to what is mutiny.” He was, moreover, disturbed by the short time it had taken the court to reach a verdict that blanketed fifty Americans with ignominy. They were, under the law, entitled to individual consideration. Their court-martial was “the largest . . . that has ever been held. It is the first in this war for mutiny.” Racial pride hung in the balance. The convictions would “forever stand as a disgrace to the entire Negro personnel of the United States Navy. I do not know of any crime that civilians hate more than mutiny . . . .”

The questions that naval lawyers involved in the Port Chicago appeal process privately asked one another reflected Thurgood Marshall’s reminder that there existed “no set rule” governing mutiny. Had the development of separate rules specifying disobedience, neglect of duty, etc., so narrowed the crime of mutiny that it could now mean only acts to subvert or override superior authority? Was the actors’ aim to secure dominance in their sphere of activity, “for example, confining the ship’s captain and taking over the operation of the ship?” Could disobedience of one order, and obedience to all others, constitute mutiny?

It was a case that would not die easily. When Forrestal ordered the court reconvened on the grounds, brought to his attention by Marshall, that it had relied excessively upon hearsay evidence—“twenty-three pieces of testimony . . . were inadmissible”—it nevertheless stuck to its findings. But as the end of the war approached, the dissatisfaction registered by black Americans in army and navy service loomed as an urgent problem. Racial disorders had broken out on the island of Guam. More than seventy black soldiers were court-martialed in Honolulu for refusing to work. At Camp Rousseau in California a thousand black members of a naval construction battalion (Seabees) staged a two-day hunger strike against “racial discrimination,” and while no charges were brought
against the strikers, the base commander was transferred. The navy issued a fifteen-page booklet, “Guide to the Command of Negro Naval Enlisted Personnel,” directing officers to avoid stereotyped views and the use of derogatory terms. At the same time, it hoped to put the Port Chicago affair to rest with a conspicuous display of lenity. Prison sentences were reduced to one year. The war had been over for five months when the Navy Department restored all but a hospitalized three of the fifty convicted to active duty and promised them honorable discharges if they behaved themselves.

Improvements emerged. Dated 27 February 1946, an edict, while by no means ending de facto discrimination in the navy, stipulated that “Negro personnel . . . henceforth shall be eligible for all types of assignments, in all ratings, in all facilities and in all ships.” The repaired installation at Port Chicago would survive for another twenty years, until the navy razed it completely to construct an expanded loading base—employing civilian stevedores—for the supply of U.S. forces fighting in the Vietnam War. What remained unaltered on the navy’s books were the mutiny convictions of the Port Chicago fifty.*

*In the summer of 1990 a number of American congressmen asked the secretary of the navy to review the case and set aside the convictions if they seemed unwarranted. Controversy broke out anew, some surviving veterans recalling the trial proceedings as unjust. Other black Americans who had obeyed orders to load ammunition after the explosion claimed that if any at Port Chicago were deserving of praise and sympathy it was themselves, not the mutineers. The congressmen’s request, at the time of this writing, has not been met.