The Port Chicago 50 Study Guide

The Port Chicago 50 by Steve Sheinkin

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Sheinkin, Steve. The Port Chicgo 50. Roaring Brook Press, 2014.

The Port Chicago 50 is a historical account by Steve Sheinkin geared toward young readers of World War II and civil rights that details the 1944 Port Chicago disaster, and the ensuing trial in which Joe Small and other black workers refused to return to work under unsafe conditions. The book is told in the third-person past-tense narrative mode, with Sheinkin interrupting the narrative at numerous points for purposes of context and to relay other important information.

When World War II broke out, blacks were very limited to the roles they could play in the United States Armed Forces. Nevertheless, countless African-Americans like Joseph “Joe” Small, Percy Robinson, Robert Routh, and Spencer Sikes enlisted to defend America for various reasons. For example, many wanted to prove themselves capable of combat roles in the military, while others hoped that stellar service would lead to greater rights for blacks in general in America. Facing pressure from civil rights groups and important leaders – both white and black – the U.S. Navy changed its policy to allow blacks to be trained as seamen, though blacks would not be allowed to serve at sea except as mess attendants. The Navy feared that racism and segregation would compromise their ability to win the war.

Despite this, Joe Small and the others in his basic training class still looked forward to serving America, though they were disappointed in being relegated to shore work. They were even more concerned when it was revealed they would be serving at Port Chicago, an isolated installation with a large pier at the end of railroad tracks, where they would be loading live ammunition onto Naval ships. Small was even more concerned by the lack of safety precautions (for example, mattresses were what were used to stop bombs on rail carts from slamming into ships after being unloaded from train boxcars and taken down to the pier), and was disturbed that only black men, supervised by white officers, would be loading the ammunition and bombs onto the ships. There were no whites at all doing the actual loading. Despite their ignored concerns and fears that they expressed to their commander, Lieutenant Delucchi, Small and a few hundred other blacks worked courageously and tirelessly to quickly and efficiently load ships for war.

A few years passed uneventfully. Things suddenly changed on the night of July 17, 1944. Small and his detachment had just bedded down for the night when a massive explosion, followed by an even bigger explosion, rocked Port Chicago. Men scrambled down to the pier, which had been obliterated. Two ships in dock being loaded were destroyed and sunk. Hundreds were dead, their bodies torn apart and unrecognizable. The cause of the explosions was not known, but Small and his men were commended for the way they handled the situation, putting out fires and assisting with rescue efforts. Robert Routh was blinded by the explosion, and sent to the hospital for his injuries. The Navy quickly began investigating the explosion, and though no official blame was

placed, many officers at Port Chicago blamed Small and the black loaders, calling them careless and stupid.

On August 11, 1944, Small and the remaining Port Chicago men were ordered back to work loading ammunition at another port. Small and a few hundred others refused to return to work because nothing had changed in terms of safety or the kind of work involved. Various officers attempted to convince the men to return to work, but only when charges of war time mutiny that carry the penalty of death were threatened, did the majority of men return to work. Only Small and 49 others – The Port Chicago 50 – refused. They said they would follow any order except loading ammunition. They knew they were doing the right thing by refusing this order, but the Navy saw otherwise. The men were arrested and tried for mutiny. The judges found them all guilty, and the men were sentenced to 15 years hard labor – a light sentence given the nature of the situation, owed largely to the skill of the defense attorney, Gerald Veltmann.

As Small and his fellows began their prison sentences, Thurgood Marshall, a black civil rights lawyer for the NAACP, along with leaders like Eleanor Roosevelt, took up their cause. They insisted the trial was a farce because the men involved are black, and because they never actually mutinied. At the same time, enormous pressure from blacks and whites alike compelled further integration of the armed forces. It was decided that Small and the others would be released and allowed to serve at sea instead around the same time all military roles were opened up to blacks. Small and the others heroically and ably served out their Naval careers before retiring to successful civilian lives. However, they were haunted for the rest of their lives by the events of the explosion and trial. Small, along with the others, never doubted they did the right thing, no matter how much it cost them. In the 1990s, it was declared that the work loading ammunition that Smalls and the other black men were ordered to do was indeed the result of racism – but convictions of mutiny remain to the present day because no evidence was found of racism in the trial itself.

First Hero – Work and Liberty

Summary

The names of the Port Chicago 50 are listed at the beginning of the book.

First Hero – Mess Attendant Dorie Miller, a black native of Texas, was on board the USS West Virginia in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, doing laundry when the naval installation came under surprise attack by the Japanese on December 7, 1941. Miller began to help move wounded men, then manned an antiaircraft gun. As the West Virginia began to sink, the dying captain ordered everyone to abandon ship. For his heroic actions, Miller was given the Navy Cross, the highest decoration possible in the Navy. Admiral Chester Nimitz himself pinned the medal on Miller, saying it was the first time a black man has received such an award in the Pacific Fleet, and that he did not believe it would be the last. Miller then went back to doing laundry, which was the only position open to black men in the Navy at the time.

The Policy – America declared war on Japan. Japan's ally, Nazi Germany, declared war on America. The United States then officially entered World War II. American men began enlisting in the American Armed Forces in droves, but blacks could still only serve as mess attendants in the Navy. (Steve Sheinkin interrupts the narrative to give a brief recounting of black military service in history. Traditionally, blacks had always initially been denied military service until the need for more men became too great. During these times of service, black units were usually segregated and led by white officers. When they did fight, they fought well. However, the policy of segregation and limiting black service never changed.) As the American military prepared for World War II, civil rights groups began to challenge military policies about limiting African-American service. Navy Secretary Frank Knox responded that there was nothing he could do because racism and segregation were too deeply rooted in American society. President Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed, but found a poor compromise: The Navy would train blacks as sailors, but they would be limited to low ranks, serving ashore, and only serving as mess attendants if they were at sea.

Despite this, many black men were willing and happy to serve their country. They wanted the chance to prove themselves like Dorie Miller. Among them were 17-year-old Jack Crittenden, Chicago teenager Percy Robinson, Albert Wiliams, Jr., Martin Bordenave (who was so eager to join he lied about his age and enlisted at 16), 17-year-old Tennessean Robert Routh who enlisted with his father's signature granting him permission, and New Jersey truck driver Joseph Small. Small, who hesitated about whether to join the Army, was randomly stamped into the Navy by the physician who examined him. Small had natural leadership abilities, dating back to his time in the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. This gift of leadership would make him a hero in the Navy – and get him into serious trouble.

Port Chicago – Joseph Small and the other recruits were sent to the U.S. Naval Training Center at Great Lakes, Illinois, on Lake Michigan. Despite the change in policy for recruiting blacks, Small, Percy Robinson, DeWitt Jameson, and other blacks were segregated from the whites in their own hastily built training center. Black camp commander Lieutenant Commander Daniel Armstrong had the base decorated with images of black war heroes, but policy would not allow black troops to train in specialized areas, such as electricians, radiomen, and mechanics, believing blacks were not smart enough to do so. Even the blood supply was segregated, though military leaders knew there was no difference between the blood of whites and blacks – yet no one would challenge the practice. When Secretary Knox visited Great Lakes, he did not come to the black camp, as he and others did not consider the blacks “real” sailors. Despite this, blacks still wanted to serve and fight in order not only to prove their worth, but to win better rights back home. From Great Lakes, the black sailors were sent to their postings.

Many went to Port Chicago Naval Magazine in San Francisco, California. The men were disappointed, as they would not be stationed on ships according to the policy. The place, Percy Robinson observes, is nothing more than a big open place with a dock in the middle of nowhere. It is revealed that they will be loading ammunition and explosives onto naval ships. While white officers give the orders, only blacks will be handling the explosives. Port Chicago commander Captain Nelson Ross does not like having blacks (or any minorities) working, because he does not believe they are as capable of hard work. Ross has one mission, and that is to load ships up with ammunition and bombs. He does not want anything compromising his operations. Still, there is another problem. Small realizes that training at Great Lakes did not include handling bombs and explosives, and they are not receiving any training at Port Chicago. Not even all of the white officers have been given training, and even then, it has only been a very basic set of instructions in handling bombs and explosives. Professional civilian stevedores offer to help teach the Navy how to do these things properly, but the Navy never responds. Seventeen-year-old Spencer Sikes is convinced he will die at Port Chicago.

Work and Liberty – The men naturally come to look to 22-year-old Small for leadership, even trusting him to wake them up for breakfast. Small reflects on how, since he was a kid, his father reared him to be self-reliant and independent. Small and his unit had to always be ready for work by 6:45 a.m., where they were overseen by Lieutenant Ernest Delucchi, a short, stocky man in his early thirties who was a teacher in civilian life. Delucchi was hot-tempered, but recognized Small’s leadership abilities, allowing him to march outside the ranks and call cadences. After the men marched to the docks, they unloaded rail cars where the bombs and munitions are rolled to the docks, then were loaded onto the ships. Mattresses prevented the bombs from hitting the ships. Small worried about the relative lack of safety, and was not convinced by officers who assured him there was nothing to worry about. Small worried that a concussion could blow up a bomb, even without a detonator attached.

Small and the others constantly worried about explosions. Small came to work the winch operator job. Small and Delucchi came to have a good rapport with each other,

and Delucchi believed Small should be promoted even though Small was still too young for it. Meanwhile, the men kept working in eight-hour shifts on, eight-hour shifts off, three days a week, followed by either a duty day (light jobs around the base, such as laundry) or a day of liberty (a day off). On liberty days, Small and the men went to Pittsburg, where Black Diamond Street allowed for black patrons to visit bars, restaurants, and other such places. Even while in uniform, Small and the other men faced racism by being interrogated about what they are doing and where they are going. They gained the respect and friendship of some white sailors, but they could not always get on with racist locals.

Analysis

The author portrays the irony of a country fighting for freedom while denying freedom to its own citizens in its military fighting for freedom. This is the complex situation that America faced when it entered World War II. It is clear America was fighting for freedom, yet denied freedom to many of its own citizens. This is particularly true of African-Americans who, though they were allowed to serve in the military, were heavily restricted in what roles they may play. The Navy, in particular, declared that it was powerless to institute changes because of wider sociocultural implications and causes. In many cases, this was because racism has even infected the Navy. Even with a relaxing of these protocols, blacks were still restrained in what they may and may not do. Even with the example of Dorie Miller's heroism at Pearl Harbor, Navy officials were not convinced that blacks could fight. However, World War II would come to challenge conventional assumptions about blacks and race relations. It all began with Miller, and would expand because of countless other heroic blacks by the end of the war.

Sheinkin carefully explains that, despite racism and segregation at the beginning of the war, black Americans were still very eager to serve America. They enlisted in droves. They wanted to defend their home, their country, and prove themselves capable of combat and service. Tragically, many wanted to fight in the hopes that it would help bring about the rights they had been guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution. Sheinkin provides firsthand testimony from Joe Small and other veterans still alive at the time of writing to underscore the desire and reasoning to serve, despite the difficulties they faced. Despite the racism, segregation, and difficulties Joe Small and the others would face, they knew they were doing the right thing. It was not the first time they would have to do the right thing even though it would be hard, and their lesson becomes a lesson to readers in the thematic argument that the right thing to do is sometimes the hardest. Readers should understand that, despite the racial politics of the era, not everything was black and white. Many whites in the armed forces were sympathetic to blacks, but believed their hands were tied. Blacks, who by all rights should have felt no compulsion to volunteer, did in droves despite the racism.

The reader should also understand very clearly that, despite racism and segregation, black Americans performed admirably and heroically in their roles. They did not allow themselves to be brought down by these circumstances, but did the best they could given the situation. Such is the case at Port Chicago, which was a clear display of

racism. Only blacks were assigned to actually load the ammunition onto the ships. The lack of safety precautions further rightfully concerned Joe Small and the others, but their concerns about safety were glossed over or outright ignored. Nevertheless, Joe Small and the other men in Port Chicago are determined to serve their country and do their job despite the danger – yet another demonstration of Joe Small believing that he was doing the right thing despite it being so dangerous. Indeed, there is a running theme of dangerous working conditions creating the propensity for danger – such as a mattress being what stops a bomb from rolling into a ship. It should be noted that the lack of safety conditions for the black loaders was largely because they are black. It was clear that that superiors thought less of them than whites, for no whites were doing the loading directly. Even sympathetic, professional white civilian loaders were appalled by the situation – and their offers to help train the blacks were turned down by an uncaring commander.

Vocabulary

antiaircraft gun, policy, leadership, mutiny, incendiary, stevedores, cadence, accosted

The Lawyer – The Inquiry

Summary

The Lawyer – Throughout the country, black newspapers received accounts of poor treatment and conditions faced by black servicemen, especially by way of segregation. Things were worse in the South. For example, black Corporal Trimmingham and his fellow black soldiers were denied meals everywhere in a small Louisiana town, until the train station agreed to serve them but only if they ate standing up in the kitchen in the back. Trimmingham rightfully watched angrily as German prisoners were allowed to sit down and eat in the dining room.

Thurgood Marshall, lead attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), meanwhile sought to tackle abuses suffered by black servicemen. A native of Baltimore, Maryland, Marshall worked while on the move through the country, having had a long personal struggle against racism himself. He knew racism and segregation were both immoral and illegal under the Constitution, and worked 16-hour days. Every day brought something different – from wrongful arrests to challenging local unconstitutional laws. Usually, Marshall lost his cases, owing to racism, segregation, and existing policy. Black servicemen and women read these accounts in the black papers, as most mainstream papers did not cover them, and wondered how the government could allow such things to continue on. They knew things would come to a head, soon, and that one little incident would light the fuse.

Hot Cargo – In April, 1944, Captain Merrill T. Kinne became commander of Port Chicago. Kinne's mission remained the same: load the ammunition on the ships as quickly as possible. Kinne, like others, worried blacks would not be as efficient as whites at working, and so decided to challenge them to work harder and faster by promoting competition and rewarding the best teams of loaders with free movies. Percy Robinson saw how much faster things begin to move, while Albert Williams saw everything as a rush. Small recalled the officers pushed their men to work faster, as the officers began pitting teams against one another and wagering bets on them. The rush led to accidents and carelessness, such as accidentally swinging the winch too far and hitting the side of a ship with a cargo net full of ammunition. On another occasion, men scrambled because red liquid began leaking out of a bomb, which was later explained to be dye for the use of bombers so they would know where their bombs were hitting. Small saw all of this and passed along concerns to Delucchi. Delucchi did not seem very concerned.

In July, 1944, 1,431 black enlisted men worked at Port Chicago, supervised by 71 white officers and guarded by 106 white Marines. On July 17, Robert Routh felt a sense of foreboding, even though the day was beautiful. The E.A. Bryan was docked at port, taking on 8,500 tons of bombs and ammunition. Half had already been loaded. Albert Carr, a civilian plumber, headed to Port Chicago to fix a steam-powered winch. Carr fixed the brake, then left quickly, saying he did not like the look of things around the port. Joe Small and his team unit, Division Four, finished up work at three. Spencer

Sikes looked forward to a date that night with a local girl named Alverta. At six that evening, the Quinalt Victory arrived at Port Chicago to take on ammunition, docking across the pier from the Bryan. Loading operations were overseen by Lieutenant Commander Glen Ringquist. “Hot cargo,” or bombs with fuses already attached, were being loaded. At 9:30 p.m., Kinne visited the docks to see how things are going, then headed out. Joe Small’s unit prepared for lights-out at 10 p.m. a mile away at the barracks.

The Explosion – It was 10:18 p.m. when Small heard a thunderclap-like boom coming from the pier. At first, the men thought they were under attack, but the initial boom was followed by an even louder single one. The sky lit up with explosions and the windows of the barracks were blasted out. Ringquist, who had just left the pier, turned around at once. Miles around the port, people saw the explosions, including a handful of sailors like Morris Rich who were on leave from their ships. They knew instantly that everyone on board was dead. Sikes and Alverta were seeing a movie when they heard the blast and learned about what has happened. Sikes brought Alverta home, then rushed back to base. Commander Kinne rushed out of the officers’ quarters to see what had happened. Fiery debris was falling down from the sky, threatening boxcars full of ammunition. Men and officers worked quickly and efficiently to put out fires. Percy was injured in the blast, and though wanting to help, was sent to the hospital to get sewn up. When Cyril Sheppard rushed toward the pier, he discovered it, and both ships, were gone.

The Inquiry – Robert Routh lost his left eye, and the sight in his right eye from the explosion. Spencer Sikes, upon returning to his barracks, discovered his pillow and mattress pierced with sword-sized shards of glass, meaning had he been at base asleep, he would now be dead. The 1,200-foot pier had been destroyed. The Quinalt Victory had been sunk, and part of the stern could be seen above the water. The Bryan, which had ten million pounds of explosives on board, could not even be seen. Bodies, and pieces of bodies, littered the entire area and the water. Only 51 bodies could be identified; 320 men were dead, 202 of them black loaders; 390 more men were injured from the blast. While the cause was still being investigated, Admiral Carleton Wright, one of the top West Coast Navy officials, praiseed the men who responded to the blast, including blacks, calling them real Navy men. On July 21, the Navy convened a court of inquiry. It became clear the smaller initial explosion sparked the second, larger explosion and everything that followed. What now remained to be seen was what caused the first blast. While some eyed loading competitions, it is believed by many others that the real problem was the black sailors themselves. Only white officers were asked to testify, and so the court concluded that the black sailors were not intellectually or temperamentally fit to handle high explosives, and were carless with their handling. Small and the other black sailors were transferred to Camp Shoemaker.

The men discussed the cause of the explosions. Some believed it was an accident involving hot cargo, while others believed it was actually an enemy sneak attack, while still others believed it had to do with the boxcars. Congress took up a bill to compensate residents around Port Chicago, and families of the dead. Mississippi Congressman John Rankin, a racist pro-segregationist, argued that many of the families receiving

compensation will be black, so the amount was lowered from $5,000 to $3,000. The Pittsburgh Courier blasted back at the racism, asking why the heroes of Port Chicago risked death. The paper argued that whites and blacks were the same, and the conscience of all America should be touched by the sacrifice of the men at Port Chicago.

Joe Small and his comrades were next transferred to Mare Island Naval Shipyard, where they learned they would continue to load explosives. A petition circulated among the men asking for transfers, but Smalls destroyed the list, saying they had committed to something and must see it through. The men were issued the same kinds of work gloves they had at Port Chicago, which worried them. The night before they were due to return to work, some insisted they would refuse to do the work, and asked Small what he intended to do. Small did not yet know, but did know the Navy had treated him unfairly. He wondered what would give him the right to disobey orders. Small accepted that there were no easy answers – but he would not do the same work under the same conditions or the same men.

Analysis

Working conditions created the propensity for danger at Port Chicago. Sheinkin takes these chapters to begin to effectively lay out the dangers of the men working loading, and clearly lays out the consequences. The refusal of commanders to allow the black loaders to be properly trained, combined with the increased hectic pace of loading for the sake of petty wagers, free movies, and the idea of contests, created a recipe for disaster. Although the exact cause was not known, what was known is that an initial explosion, and a secondary larger explosion destroyed the pier of Port Chicago, and the two ships at dock. Additionally, hundreds died, hundreds more were injured, and there was tremendous damage for miles around the report – the worst fear of the Port Chicago loaders fully realized. Despite the disaster, Small and the survivors rushed down to help put out fires, tend to the wounded, and prevent more ammunition and explosives from being ignited. Running into the face of danger was the right thing to do, but it was a very hard thing to do, all in keeping with the thematic argument that the right thing to do is sometimes the hardest.

Despite racism and segregation, black Americans performed admirably and heroically in their roles. This is true of the Port Chicago men who continued to risk their lives loading ammunition, and who risked their lives after the explosion by going to help the wounded and preventing the disaster from becoming even worse. Readers should very carefully note that Small and the others who responded to the explosion were highly praised by some officers for their courage and their heroism. Sheinkin continues to use firsthand accounts of events to prove his points – such as the praise given to the men in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. This will prove to be a source of great irony in coming months when the men were accused of cowardice and charged with mutiny for refusing to return to working under the same conditions.

While the Navy did not officially blame the black men of Port Chicago for the disaster, many white officers did. This was in stark contrast to the praise they received for their response to the disaster. The men around Joe Small in turn worried that they would be forced to do the same kind of work again, despite the now-obvious potential for catastrophe. Many were willing to do whatever it took not to have to work under the same conditions. They wanted to see safety improved, but the rush of war and racism among many Navy commanders makes safety a non-issue. Because of this, the seeds of the Port Chicago mutiny were sown in the days before Joe Small and the others were due to return to work. Many of the men began circulating a petition, but Small had the petition destroyed because they had not yet received orders and because it would not have boded well for them. Readers should pay attention to Small's act very carefully. It proves Small did not premeditate the stand he would make in the days to come. Small's leadership is again on display here. Small himself wondered what he would do if he was ordered to begin loading ammunition again under the same conditions. He came the conclusion that he would not return to work under the same conditions. Sheinkin is also very careful to lay out how Small's thoughts and actions played out, as he intends to demonstrate that mutiny – of which Small and the others would soon be charged with – was not what Small had in mind.

Vocabulary

foreboding, pressurized, malfunctioning, hot cargo, convened, court of inquiry, rabidly

Column Left - The Fifty

Summary

Column Left – The next day, August 9, 1944, Delucchi ordered the men to fall in to prepare for work. Docked at the pier was the empty ammunition ship USS Sangay. Delucchi ordered his chief petty officer, Elmer Boyer, to hurry the men into formation because some of them were milling around. The men marched to a T in the road, where Delucchi ordered the column left toward the pier. The men refused. Delucchi asked if they would go back to work. They refused. Delucchi ordered Small front and center, who refused to return to duty. The men of the unit refused to go if Small refused to go. Delucchi then headed to the administration building. About 15 minutes later, Jefferson Flowers, a military chaplain, went to see Small and his men to see what is going on. Flowers attempted to persuade the men to do their duty, as men around the world were doing the same even though it was dangerous. The men told Flowers they would follow any order except loading ammunition.

Delucchi then returned to remind the men they had sworn an oath to obey orders, and that people who supported blacks would be less likely to support them if they heard about this. Base commander Joseph Tobin arrived next, to repeat the order to work as base commander. Some men agreed to go. Joe Small, Percy Robinson, and most others refused. Tobin reminded the men that the consequences of disobeying orders in a time of war could be court-martial, and that individual sailors did not get to decide which orders they follow.

That afternoon, Lieutenant Carleton Morehouse organized Division Eight for loading duty. Eight men agreed to load, but 96 refused. The same thing happened in another unit. Of the 328 men ordered to load that day, 258 refused. Those who refused were marched down and put aboard a barge under guard. Small and Delucchi had a private conversation as this happened. (The details of the conversation were later disputed, Sheinkin explains, but both men agreed Delucchi wanted Small to keep the men in good order on the barge.)

Prison Barge – Except for meals and other necessities, the refusing men were kept on the barge under guard. Many of the men began having second thoughts. Small explained that any man who returned to work would be viewed as a traitor. The entire unit must go, or none should go. Other men become rebellious and antagonizing toward those who want to keep order. The Marines on guard duty warned they would shoot at the slightest provocation. Small decides to call together a meeting. Small reminded the men that the officers were looking for a reason to have something on them. Small explained that nothing could be done to them as long as they did not give the officers a reason. Percy Robinson knew the entire situation was difficult, but that they had a commitment. Percy himself wanted to see improved working conditions and desegregation of the base, and so could not give in.

On the third day, Admiral Carleton Wright, commander of the Twelfth Naval District, arrived to speak to the men. He said he has heard that some of them want to go to sea, but he did not believe they have the guts to go to sea. Wright revealed he personally handled ammunition for 30 years, and that he has a healthy respect for ammunition. He told the men what they were doing was mutiny, and that mutiny in a time of war carried the death penalty. He told them he would personally recommend mutiny and the death penalty if they refused to return to work. Small and the others were stunned. Some even began to cry. Others worried about their families. The commanders of the three units ordered the men back to work. They had only seconds to make a life-or-death decision. Two hundred and fourteen men decided to return to work; forty-four did not, including Small.

The Fifty – Small and the other remaining men were kept under guard on the barge. Six men were sent to the barge when they backed out of working at the last minute. Four days passed, and Small was brought to a meeting with Wright. Wright knew Small was the leader of the men on the barge, and ordered him to bring the men back to work, or Small would be shot. Small called him a son of a bitch, and told him to shoot. Small was then sent back to the barge, unharmed. Robert Routh followed the story from his hospital bed, knowing he would be among the 50 if he could see. Small, meanwhile, considered the mutiny charge to be nonsense because no one had attempted to take control of the base, replace officers, or assume their positions. Wright sent along a report to the new Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, saying that the Port Chicago 50 refused to perform their duties not based on racial policy or chaotic working conditions, but irrational fear. Wright also asked for a change in policy to allow white men to begin to handle the loading job as well. Forrestal approved the policy change, while President Roosevelt himself recommended only light punishments for the 208 men who had agreed to go back to work, given their understandable mass fear following the explosion. Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor, decided to keep an eye on the situation as it evolved.

The 208, in keeping with Roosevelt's recommendations, lost three months' pay. The 50 others were charged with mutiny. Lieutenant Commander James Coakley was assigned the role of prosecutor. Coakley began questioning the men prior to the trial, hoping to pin everything on Small as ringleader, but the men said anyone who knew what is going on with ammunition handling did not need a leader to decide. Small himself denied orchestrating the mutiny. Small did not deny that the men looked to him as a leader, however. He also denied that anyone beside himself spoke at the barge meeting to keep things in order. Coakley, however, believed Small was the ringleader and instigated everything. He was convinced by the barge meeting in which witnesses reported Small saying they have the officers in a bind. The court martial was set to open on September 14, 1944. Lieutenant Gerald Veltmann, a 34-year-old Texas native, was assigned to defense along with a team of four young lawyers. Vetlmann was hopeful and courageous, too young to be afraid of anyone.

Analysis

The author, Sheinkin, continues in this section to contend that sometimes the right thing to do is also the hardest thing to do. Joe Small and the men who refused to load ammunition believed this as they took a stand against every white officer – and even the chaplain – on the base. It was a hard stand to make, and a very courageous one, because Small and the others did not know what their fate would be. This is made all the more precarious by the fact that they are black at a time of great racism and segregation in the Navy. Despite this racism and segregation, Joe Small and the mutineers were very much still eager to serve the Navy - just not in loading ammunition under conditions as they were. However, the intervention of the Admiral Wright, who threatened charges of mutiny that carry the death penalty given the state of war in which the nation found itself, caused all but 50 men to return to work. Among them was Joe Small. As the author has noted in previous chapters through a careful laying out of evidence and firsthand accounts by the men who were there, the decision to refuse to return to work was largely spontaneous – and certainly not premeditated.

The evolving situation throws the chain of command and the policies of the Navy into crisis. Step by step, Sheinkin lays out the response of Navy authorities so that readers can see how officers and leaders attempted to deal with the situation as it unfolded, from encouragement and verbal orders to return, to threats of court martial and execution. Forrestal and others scrambled to protect the Navy as accusations of racism and opposition to racial policies mounted by saying the mutiny had nothing to do with racism and everything to do with irrational fear. This is a stark contrast to the officers who praised the men of Port Chicago for their heroism directly after the explosion only a few weeks before. The men of Port Chicago then had to be made to look like mutineers and cowards in order for the Navy to deflect blame from itself not only for Port Chicago, but for the policies it had so far pursued in the war relating to race and segregation. Even those relatively content with racial policies – such as the president – begin asking questions, while the president's wife, Eleanor, decided to keep an eye on the situation as it evolved.

The situation itself illustrates important things about race relations during World War II in that, as noted previously, not everything was black and white. Some of those most concerned with the fair treatment of the Port Chicago 50 were themselves white. Some, like Forrester, believed they are powerless to make any real difference in such situations, but saw the Navy as the primary priority, not race relations, policies, or integration. Others, like Coakley, were determined to destroy the Port Chicago 50 because they were black, let alone the actions they had taken in refusing to load ammunition.

Vocabulary

provocation, desegregation, mutiny, death penalty, discrimination, irrational fear, premeditated, court martial

Treasure Island – The Verdict

Summary

Treasure Island – On the morning of September 14, 1944, Small and the other 49 men were taken to a barracks on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, which had been converted temporarily into a courtroom presided over by Rear Admiral Hugh Osterhaus and six other high-ranking naval officers. These seven officers would decide the fate of the 50. All 50 answered “not guilty” to charges of mutiny. Coakley then proceeded with his case, seeking to methodically argue a conspiracy among the men to mutiny. Commander Tobin was called first for questions, then was cross-examined by Veltmann. Veltmann’s strategy was to undermine Coakley’s arguments, and he was courageous in doing so from the start. For example, he argued with Tobin over the following of orders, noting that the men said they would follow any order except loading ammunition, not that they would disobey all orders. Veltmann also honed in on the point that none of the 50 tried to take over the base or engage in riotous actions. Delucchi was called next, and revealed that he heard men saying they would not go to work for white mother-f---ers. No one knew if the statements were true or not, because no one could find any corroborating witnesses. Veltmann destroyed Delucchi’s testimony because Delucchi could not pinpoint which man specifically said what.

Prosecution – As the mutiny trial was underway, changes began to take shape. Secretary Forrestal and President Roosevelt decided it was time to change racial policies, and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest King agreed to help however he could. Meanwhile, Coakley called to testify the sailors who went back to work, who in turn said that they heard talk of “sticking together.” Coakley also used the petition as evidence of premeditation. Veltmann countered that none of the men could remember exactly what wording was on the petition, casting doubt on the idea that the petition was a source for mutiny. Coakley later zeroed in on the barge meeting of August 10 as proof of Small being the ringleader and plotting mutiny. Veltmann countered that the meeting was for purposes of keeping order. The other witnesses all said they did not want to go to work not because of Small, but because of their fear of handling live ammunition in unsafe conditions. It was around this time that Thurgood Marshall was contacted to provide legal help for the 50. In early October, Marshall received permission from Secretary Forrestal to sit in on the trial. He then flew to California.

Joe Small – Ten days in, Coakley wrapped up the prosecution. The following day, Veltmann began the defense. Veltmann wanted to give every member of the accused the chance to speak for himself, but worried about losing the attention of the judges. As such, he began with the most important of the accused, Joe Small. Veltmann allowed Small to speak about the explosion and working conditions prior to the refusal to work. This helped to underscore the point that the sailors had good reason to be worried after the explosion. Small denied the barge meeting was about mutiny, but did lie and say he never said anything about having the officers in a bind. As Marshall watched, he recognized intelligence and courage in Veltmann, and stupidity in Coakley. Marshall

visited with the accused between court sessions. Despite Veltmann's strengths, Marshall knew the whole story – about racial policy, working conditions, and segregation – was not being addressed.

The Verdict – Veltmann spent the next two weeks calling each of the accused to the stand. By doing this, he intended to show there was no mutiny by in turn showing that each person was his own individual, and that each has his own reason and story for doing what he did. For example, there was John Dunn, weighing only 104 pounds, who was not cleared by his weight to work ammunition loading – but was ordered to do so anyways. There was Julius Dixson, prone to dizzy spells, who was forced to work even when declared medically unfit for working. Another, Ollie Green, injured in the Port Chicago blast, had recently suffered a broken wrist when he refused to load ammunition. Green also provided testimony about the races to load ammunition. This was the first time this information was made public. No matter what Coakley did, he could not get anyone to admit to a mutiny or that Joe Small was in charge. His outbursts caused Marshall to realize Coakley was prejudiced against blacks and thus means the accused would not receive a fair trial. Marshall issued a statement demanding the Navy do an investigation into the Port Chicago disaster and trial, posing questions such as why all the men loading ammunition were black, and why the men were being raced. Closing statements were made soon in the court case, and all 50 men were found guilty of mutiny.

Analysis

World War II challenged conventional assumptions about the black race and race relations. This was made very clear as the white defense lawyer, a Texas native named Gerald Veltmann, should have by all accounts been racist and careless in his work – but he was not. Veltmann not only passionately argued in defense of Small and the other so-called mutineers because he had been assigned the case, but because he actually believed in Small and in the case he was arguing. Veltman, Sheinkin demonstrates, cared nothing for the color of the skin of the men he was defending, but cared about the facts, evidence, and truth. Veltmann was brilliant, and was able to effectively undermine Coakley's arguments against Small and the other 49 men. Sheinkin takes great care to outline the arguments and efforts of Veltmann in this endeavor, devoting much of an entire chapter to this extent. However, Marshall, who sat in on the case, despite his admiration for Veltmann, knows that the entire story was not being told. Marshall believed correctly that racism lied at the very heart of the case, and he believed it must be made known. Readers should note that Sheinkin wants to tell the entire story relating to the Port Chicago men, and so takes great care to truly dive into their pasts, their persons, and their experiences at Port Chicago. While Sheinkin airs the Navy's official position on the situation - and provides the opinion of the Navy relating to the case - it is the stories of those accused that Sheinkin really wants to let shine through. Marshall also came to recognize in Coakley not a rabid defense of the Navy, but a display of Coakley's own horrendous racism. The case had become personal for Coakley in a way that had everything to do with race, and little to do with the case itself.

By allowing the men to speak for themselves, however, Veltmann (like the author, through his own technique of allowing the men to speak for themselves) was able to very clearly portray the kind of rampant racism going on in ammunition loading at Port Chicago. For example, there was the underweight John Dunn who was ordered to load ammunition despite his weight only because he was black. Yet, despite Veltmann dismantling all of Coakley's arguments, the 50 were still convicted. Marshall went on to lead the charge in defense of the Port Chicago 50 even after they were sentenced and sent to jail, as readers will learn in coming chapters. Interestingly enough, the case sparked outrage across the country, with many whites even opposing what was being done to the 50 men. Despite the obvious racism on display, black Americans were still very eager to serve America at this time. More and more continued to enlist alongside their white brothers, knowing the good of the country and the possibility of a better future were worth more than not serving because of racism and segregation in the military. The Navy knew it had a problem with race, segregation, and its policies, and the Navy knew that it needed to solve the problem quickly.

Vocabulary

accused, methodically, conspiracy, strategy, prerogatives, immaterial, corroborating, cohesive, chided, indignant, devious

Hard Labor – Epilogue: Civil Rights Heroes

Summary

Hard Labor – Cyril Sheppard and the others were horrified and devastated by the guilty verdict. Small was shaken by the news, but not surprised, having expected the outcome as it was from the beginning. All 50 men were sentenced to 15 years of hard labor. Many of the men began to cry, while others were too stunned to say anything. The 50 were then handcuffed and taken to the Naval Disciplinary Barracks at Terminal Island in Southern California. Small knew everything has been rigged.

The men knew their future rested with Thurgood Marshall. Marshall wrote directly to Forrestal about the situation, ranging from why only blacks were loading ammunition to the case itself. Forrestal privately knew that segregation was a major aggravation for the Navy, and an unnecessary one. Integration had already begun on board ships, and the mixed crews got along fine. It was realized that segregation elsewhere was actually harming the war effort, not helping it. Forrestal decided to further integration, but saw no need to reduce or remand sentences in the Port Chicago mutineers. Lester Granger, a civil rights leader, was hired by Forrestal as a civilian advisor to integration efforts.

While Small and the others were in prison, Marshall and his allies kept up the fight for their freedom and their rights. Thousands of people signed petitions in support of the 50. The prison sentences Small and his men faced consisted of everything from repairing nets to clearing driftwood from beaches to breaking big rocks into little rocks. Marshall, meanwhile, worked on an appeal, showing the original trial had been a sham. It was decided the decision in the case would be reconsidered without evidence that should never have been admitted, such as Delucchi's, but the court that followed upheld all 50 convictions. Marshall tried to meet with Forrestal personally, but Forrestal finds justice to have been done in the case. Marshall realized the legal process was now dead.

Small Goes to Sea – Despite the outcome of the second trial, the public continued to champion the case of the 50, including Eleanor Roosevelt herself. Forrestal privately realized the 50 had been given harsh sentences, especially because the war ended in victory for America. Forrestal would not admit the Navy had made a mistake, but was ready to take other steps. It was now January 1946. Forrestal ordered the imprisoned 50 men released and transferred to active duty at sea. Joe Small and the other men were thrilled. Out at sea, white sailors asked the men what really happened at Port Chicago. When they learned the truth, the white sailors said they would have done the same thing. Across the Navy, all bans on blacks serving in the Navy were lifted. They were then allowed to do any job in the Navy. In July 1948, President Harry S. Truman lifted a military-wide ban on all branches regarding race, color, religion, and natural origin. Marshall was happy with this, but knew much more work still had to be done.

Small, meanwhile, befriended a white Alabaman named Alex after fighting Alex for saying it is the first time he had ever eaten food with a "nigger." Alex became a fierce defender of Small ashore when bartenders refused to serve him, and when Small faced racism of any kind. Small later asked Alex what made him decide to befriend a black man. Alex explained he had learned from Alex that a man is a man.

Epilogue: Civil Rights Heroes – In July 1944, Lieutenant Jack Robinson was charged with insubordination for refusing to move further back in a bus, but found not guilty. Three years later, the world noticed Jackie Robinson at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. Changes in America were never smooth, Sheinkin explains through Robinson's example, but civil rights and racial changes headed for the better. While Brown v. Board of Education and Rosa Parks were important parts of the Civil Rights Movement, Sheinkin says, it all began in earnest with Port Chicago's 50 men.

Sheinkin reveals the fate of many of the men in the book: Percy Robinson, who went back to work after Wright's death threat, served at sea, was honorably discharged from the Navy and enjoyed success in life as an environmental engineer in Los Angeles. Robert Routh, blinded, went on to receive a Master's Degree in Sociology, worked as a counselor for the Veteran's Administration, became president of the Blinded Veterans Association, and ended up attending the same church as Robinson. Many, like Freddie Meeks and Albert Williams, could never talk about Port Chicago and the trial because it hurt too much. Joseph Small moved back to New Jersey, got married, and went into construction. Despite his heroism, Small's conviction haunted him for the rest of his life, limiting his opportunities. Nevertheless, Small ensured he hired both whites and blacks for his construction crews, and dealt with everyone fairly.

Despite the negatives in their lives, the 50 did their best to focus on the positive, Sheinkin explains. He reveals that, for decades, the Navy was pressured to review the case of the 50, and in 1994, conceded that racism did play a role in forcing blacks only to load ammunition, but that racism did not play a role in the trial. In 1996, Sheinkin reveals that Joe Small died at age 75. All of the Port Chicago 50 have since died, and all remain convicted mutineers. Sheinkin reveals that none of the 50 ever doubted they were right, even long after the events happened.

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Analysis

After being convicted of mutiny (which in and of itself is a staggering thing), the Port Chicago 50 were given the comparatively light sentence of 15 years of hard labor.

Readers should be clear on the fact that, had Veltmann not been so effective in his work, the 50 men may have even been sentenced to death. As the 50 men headed to jail, Thurgood Marshall, Eleanor Roosevelt, civil rights groups, and Americans of all colors got to work on their behalf. Marshall pursued legal action at every possible turn, but he was rebuffed each time due to racism, policy, or uncaring officials – things that frustrated Marshall, but did not convince him to give up. Despite Marshall being rebuffed, great changes were underway thanks not only to public pressure and the influence of white and black leaders alike, but from facts and evidence based on experience. The United States Armed Forces came to see that polices of segregation and race were making things worse – not better. As such, the policies were lifted – and even more blacks rushed to join the military. World War II challenged conventional assumptions about the black race and race relations, and all for the better. Sheinkin structures the final chapters of his book in such a way as to lay out not only these changes in military policy, but the changes in the lives of the man involved.

Sheinkin wants readers to understand what Joe Small and the others had to contend with – both in their service years, and long after. Sometimes the right thing to do is also the hardest; this much is clear to the Port Chicago 50 and the reader at the end of the book. Every step of the way, Joe Small and the other 49 American men with him faced racism, danger, hatred, and institutional opposition because of their skin color – but in the end, Small and the others prevailed to a limited extent. None of them had any regrets about the stand they chose to make, and all would make it again. Joe Small, until the day he died, was convinced that he did the right thing to refuse orders to return to work in difficult conditions. Interestingly enough, despite the outcome of the situation, neither Joe Small nor any of the others regreted their decision to serve in the Navy, or to risk their lives to defend the United States. The equality of rights they all hoped for did indeed come with time – though until the day they all die, the conviction of mutiny remains over their heads.

Vocabulary

dazed, rigged, integration, hearsay, insubordination, hero

Important People

Joe Small

Joseph “Joe” Small is the central figure in the Port Chicago mutiny. A black American truck driver from New Jersey, Joe volunteers for service to defend America after Pearl Harbor. Unable to decide on joining the Army or the Navy, he is randomly assigned to the Navy. There, he is sent to training at Great Lakes, where he meets, befriends, and comes to serve alongside Percy Robinson, Robert Routh, and others at Port Chicago. Joe and the others are deeply disturbed by their service in Port Chicago, primarily because of the fact that they will be forced to serve ashore where they will load ammunition and explosives onto ships in unsafe conditions.

Following the Port Chicago disaster, Joe and the survivors are transferred to Mare Island Naval Shipyard, where Joe and the others refuse to obey the singular order of loading ammunition under the same kinds of conditions. For this, they are arrested, tried, convicted of mutiny, and sentenced to 15 years of hard labor. Their sentences are commuted, however, and Joe and the others are sent to sea to serve as Navy policies about black service change. After his service ends, Joe returns to New Jersey where he gets into construction, and ensures he hires both black and white men to work for him. Joe Small never comes to regret his decision to make a stand at Mare Island, and remains proud of it until he dies.

Percy Robinson

Percy Robinson is a black Chicago native who enlists in the Navy after Pearl Harbor is bombed, anxious to defend America but also to prove himself and advance the black race. Percy is courageous, and is one of the members of the mutineers who refuse to return to work under the same conditions as before. After Admiral Wright’s death threat, however, Robinson grudgingly returns to work. When Navy policies change, he is allowed to serve at sea. After the war, he becomes a successful environmental engineer. Later in life, he reconnects with Robert Routh when it is discovered both men attend the same church.

Robert Routh

Robert Routh is a young black American who enlists in the Navy after Pearl Harbor in order to defend his home and his country. Routh is among those who want to prove themselves and advance the cause of blacks through stellar service in the Armed Forces. Routh comes to work at the Port Chicago pier, where he is blinded in the explosions. In the hospital, Routh cheers on the 50 men who refuse to return to work, wanting to be able to join them but being unable to because of his confinement in the hospital. After the war, he receives a Master’s Degree in Sociology, works as a

counselor for the Veteran's Administration, becomes president of the Blinded Veterans Association, and ends up reconnecting with Robert Routh.

Spencer Sikes

Spencer Sikes is a young black American man who enlists in the Navy after Pearl Harbor in order to defend his home, his country, and to advance the cause of the black race. Sikes worries he will die at Port Chicago, thanks to the unsafe working conditions. Sikes is out on a date the night of the explosion, which is a blessing for him: had he been asleep, he would have been cut to pieces by sword-sized shards of glass, which instead pierced his pillow and his mattress.

Dorie Miller

Dorie Miller is the first black man to receive a Navy Cross in the Pacific Fleet. Dorie Miller, serving at sea in the only capacity a black man may serve at sea at that time – as a mess attendant – is instrumental in saving countless lives by evacuating wounded men and operating an anti-aircraft gun against the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. Despite his heroism and award, Miller is forced to return to doing laundry, as Navy policies do not permit him to serve in any other role.

Gerald Veltmann

Gerald Veltmann is a 34-year-old white Texas native who becomes the defense attorney for the Chicago Port 50. Veltmann effectively works to undermine the prosecution not only because Veltmann is a brilliant attorney, but because he believes in the 50 men he is defending. Because of Veltmann's efforts, death sentences are avoided, and the 50 are given a sentence of 15 years of hard labor.

James Coakley

Lieutenant Commander James Coakley is the white officer acting as prosecution attorney against the Port Chicago 50. Coakley is rabidly racist, and his outbursts betray his personal hatred of the men he is seeking to have convicted. Coakley's arguments, though systematically dismantled by Veltmann, nevertheless carry the day.

Carleton Wright

Admiral Carleton Wright, commander of the Twelfth Naval District, plays a complicated role in events surrounding the Port Chicago disaster and the ensuing mutiny trial. Wright, who grew up in the Navy loading ammunition, praises the black sailors who responded so well to the disaster –only to condemn them later on when they refuse to follow orders. Wright declares he will press for mutiny charges which, in times of war,

carry penalties of death, if the men do not return to work. His threats convince all but 50 men to return to work. Wright goes on to act against the 50, continuing to condemn them through the trial.

Ernest Delucchi

Lieutenant Ernest Delucchi is the commander of the unit in which Joe Small serves at Port Chicago. Delucchi is hot-tempered but seems to get along well with Joe Small up until push comes to shove following the Port Chicago disaster. Delucchi quickly turns against his unit when Joe Small and the others refuse to return to work. Delucchi comes to lie about them in court, doing everything he can to throw them under the bus and have them convicted.

Merrill T. Kinne

Captain Merrill T. Kinne is the second commander of Port Chicago while Joe Small and the others are workers there. Kinne’s primary aim is to ensure efficiency and speed in loading. To increase productivity, he creates a competition-based situation in which teams rush to beat each other for total tonnages loaded on ships, with the winning team getting free movies at the end of the week. Kinne’s policy is the wrong policy for the wrong place, as it creates an even more chaotic work environment, making accidents more common and creating an even greater potential for disaster.

Objects/Places

Black enlistment policy

The black enlistment policy of the U.S. Navy is symbolic of systemic racism. The policy bars blacks from serving at sea in any role other than mess attendant, and denies blacks standard basic training undergone by whites. The Navy keeps the policy in place to reflect sociocultural conditions across the country, but changes the policy to allow blacks freedom to serve in any function at sea or ashore when empirical evidence and public pressure become too great.

Explosives and munitions

The explosives and munitions in this book symbolize danger and racism, as only black lives were risked by having to load them unsafely. Explosives and munitions, including massive bombs, are used in war and required to be loaded on supply ships bound for the front. This must be done quickly and efficiently, as such supplies are constantly in demand. Joe Small and other blacks come to load ammunition, bombs, and explosives as the job is dangerous, and black lives are considered worth less than white lives at the time by the Navy. Joe Small and the other black loaders fear for their lives, as a lack of safety conditions means daily dangers.

Loading competitions

Loading competitions are symbolic of command carelessness. When Captain Kinne takes over Port Chicago, he decides to increase productivity by making work a competition: whatever team loads the most tonnage by the end of a week gets free movies. Many white officers even begin taking bets over whose team can load the fastest. This leads to haste and rushing, creating an even bigger danger and potential for tragedy.

Free movies and wages

Free movies and wages are symbolic of command carelessness and how trivial both the black lives and work at Port Chicago are to those in charge. Free movies and wages are the source of spurring competition among the black teams loading ammunition and explosives. That things so trivial should be bet on the speed at which men risk their lives to load ammunition onto boats in a time of war demonstrates a lack of focus, a lack of care, and racism towards those doing the loading so as to put their lives on the level of a free movie.

Red dye

Red dye is symbolic of a false alarm and the potential for real danger, as well as an omen for coming bloodshed. Red dye is used in bombs in order to allow those using the bombs to see where targets are being struck. The black loaders at Port Chicago do not know about the dye, so when dye begins pouring out of a bomb one day, the loaders panic and scramble to get away. Many are hurt in the process. It demonstrates just how fast a situation can turn, how careless people have been in teaching the loaders about their work and what they are handling, and illustrates the potential for catastrophe. The color of the red dye reflects the color of human blood, which will be spilled in the coming disaster.

Hot cargo

Hot cargo is a Naval slang term for bombs with detonators attached. As the war drags on, much of the bomb tonnage being loaded by Joe Small and other black workers is “hot” or “live,” meaning detonators are attached and the bomb can be exploded. Hot cargo is being loaded on the night of the Port Chicago disaster.

Explosions

The explosions that rock Port Chicago occur at 10:18 p.m., symbolize tragedy, and symbolize the fulfillment of prophecy. The dangerous loading situation at Port Chicago ultimately leads to an initial explosion, followed by even larger explosions that destroy the pier and sink to Navy supply ships, resulting in hundreds of deaths, injuries, and massive damage elsewhere. The explosions convince Joe Small and the survivors that they can never again return to work under such conditions.

Great Lakes

Great Lakes, Illinois, is the Naval training center where Joe Small and other black volunteers are sent for basic naval training. Great Lakes has a main set of facilities for whites, and a hastily-constructed camp for blacks following the Navy’s decision to allow blacks to serve in limited ways as sailors. Many whites, including the then-Secretary of the Navy, do not consider blacks “real” sailors, but despite this, Joe Small and other black men are still proud of serving America even if many in America are condescending of their sacrifice. Following training at Great Lakes, Joe and many of the other black sailors are sent to Port Chicago.

Port Chicago

Port Chicago is a military supply facility located near San Francisco, California, that specializes in the loading of ammunition, bombs, and explosives. It is to Port Chicago

that Joe Small and many other black men are sent to load such things onto supply ships. Port Chicago is described as an empty, open place, with some buildings, a single long pier, and a lot of empty land. The place becomes home to Joe Small and his fellows for three years, as Joe and the black men, under supervision of white officers, do the grunt work in loading the ships by hand. Port Chicago's lax safety measures leads to the explosion and tragedy of July 17, 1944, when Port Chicago is effectively destroyed. The pier and two ships are obliterated, while many other buildings are damaged. The greatest cost comes in human life, as hundreds are killed and hundreds more wounded.

Mare Island

Mare Island Naval Shipyard, located near Vallejo, California, is where Joe Small and the Port Chicago survivors are transferred following the disaster. Mare is busier than Port Chicago, but operates by the same standards for loading ammunition as Port Chicago. Because of this, Joe Small and 49 other men ultimately refuse to return to loading because they fear a repeat of Port Chicago. Joe and the men referred to as mutineers are arrested, then transferred to Treasure Island to be tried.

Treasure Island

Treasure Island is the location of a U.S. Naval installation in San Francisco Bay, and is where the Port Chicago 50 are put on trial for mutiny in a barracks transformed into a makeshift courtroom. For several weeks, Joe Small and the other men who refused to return to work are tried for mutiny. They are prosecuted by Coakley, defended by Veltmann, and visited by Thurgood Marshall. Joe Small and the other 49 men are ultimately convicted of mutiny and sentence to 15 years of hard labor.

Themes

Despite racism and segregation, black Americans were still very eager to serve America.

Despite racism and segregation, black Americans were still very eager to serve America, argues Steven Sheinkin in his book The Port Chicago 50. Sheinkin reaches this conclusion and argues this point not only drawing on evidence, but the very words and beliefs of the men themselves who served. It is important to Sheinkin that he views the event not only from a general standpoint so that readers can contextualize everything going on – but also directly through the experiences of the men themselves.

Prior to World War II, blacks had served heroically, courageously, and admirably in wars dating back to the American Revolution. Despite their willingness to fight and die for America, their country did not wholly accept them or give them equal rights. Nevertheless, blacks continued to volunteer for service in the American military because they had hope for the future, and because they wanted to prove they were better than how they had been made out to be. This is true of Dorie Miller, who served in America's Navy during peacetime, only to be plunged into World War II by way of Pearl Harbor.

Despite the racism and segregation that existed across America, including in the military, hundreds of thousands of black men came to serve in America's military forces. All of them wanted to protect and defend their home – right or wrong, America was still their country, and was their best chance for a better future. Individually, the men who came to serve at Port Chicago all did so for different reasons as well as wanting to defend their homeland. Jack Crittendon realized that all Americans, no matter their background, were facing a common enemy that must be defeated. Percy Robinson wanted to join to prove blacks were just as capable of things like combat as whites.

For others, joining the military was not only about defending home, but building the foundation for a better future. For Robert Routh, military service meant better opportunities for blacks and the hope that the country could be a better place for blacks because of the sacrifices made for the country by blacks in military service. As such, it would prove racism and segregation were baseless things. Joe Small was anxious to serve his country for many of these reasons, but his decision to enlist in the Navy in particular came by chance.

Despite racism and segregation, black Americans performed admirably and heroically in their roles.

Despite racism and segregation, black Americans performed admirably and heroically in their roles. Black Americans were still very eager to serve America, argues Steven Sheinkin in his book The Port Chicago 50. Sheinkin reaches this conclusion and argues

this point not only drawing on evidence, but the very words and beliefs of the men themselves who served. Despite the enormous pressure that Joe Small and other blacks faced even in the military, they refused to let such cruelty and discrimination get the better of them, and exhibited sterling professionalism in their work.

When Joe and other blacks were sent to Great Lakes for basic naval training, they were dismayed to find hastily-constructed, segregated facilities for them. When the Secretary of the Navy came to visit the base, he ignored the black sailors assembled to greet him, believing that black sailors were not “real” sailors. Despite their basic training, the black men were not allowed to train in any specialized fields, such as radio operations or mechanics. Additionally, blacks could only be allowed to serve at sea in the non-combat role of mess attendant, meaning that most blacks would be forced to serve on land.

Despite these racist situations and setbacks, Joe and the other black Americans serving alongside him kept their heads held high, determined to do their part for their country. They were further dismayed to find they would be serving at Port Chicago, where they would be responsible for the loading of ammunition onto ships in unsafe conditions. They were specifically assigned to this work because they were black. Even then, Joe Small and his fellow black Americans refused to let things get the better of them, so bravely set to work. Even after the explosion, Joe and other black sailors rushed down into the chaos to help the wounded and prevent any more explosions. They were applauded for their heroism.

When Joe and the survivors were ordered to do the same work at Mare Island, they courageously refused to return to work under the same conditions as before. The racism hurled against Joe and his fellows – with insults ranging from a lack of intelligence to cowardice – are withstood by Joe and the others because they believed they were doing the right thing by refusing to risk their lives unnecessarily. They were particularly targeted by Coakley and others because they were black – but withstood their punishment to be allowed to serve in the Navy at sea when the Navy changed its racial policies.

World War II challenged conventional and racist assumptions about the black race and race relations.

World War II challenged conventional and racist assumptions about the black race and race relations, argues Steven Sheinkin in his book The Port Chicago 50. These racist assumptions and conventions about blacks were largely responsible for sociocultural conditions, which in turn barred blacks from playing a wider role in military service until toward the end of World War II. However, World War II proved to be the great equalizing force.

The book addresses three then-contemporary, primary assumptions and conventions about blacks. First, blacks were considered to be less courageous and therefore less capable of combat roles. Second, blacks were not considered to be intelligent enough

for combat, or even more specialized forms of work. Third, blacks were considered too lazy to do the work of white men.

From the start, Dorie Miller shattered all three conceptions. At Pearl Harbor, Miller courageously not only helped to evacuate wounded men, but manned an antiaircraft gun to fight back against Japanese planes. Miller, who never fired an antiaircraft gun before, and who never been trained in using one, had seen them operated and was smart enough to quickly figure out how to use one – and effectively use one. Miller's tireless efforts to save the lives of his fellow seamen and to shoot at Japanese planes were an exhausting effort that proved he was far from lazy.

Joe Small and his own comrades quickly came to disprove all of the then-conventional assumptions about blacks. Joe and the other black men at Port Chicago demonstrated tremendous bravery not only by working as explosives loaders under dangerous conditions, but risked their lives again after the explosion to rescue wounded men, put out fires, and prevent more explosions. Joe's ability to learn how to use a winch without formal training was demonstrative of his intelligence. The fact that Joe and the black loaders were able to efficiently and safely handle and load countless tons of explosive ordnance was also proof that he and his fellows were far from lazy.

As the Navy was later forced to admit, segregation, meant to help, only hampered the Navy's efforts. Integrated Naval crews came to reveal no problems, and ships do just as well with black men on board in every possible role. Rather than being in opposition to one another because of segregation, the men came to work with one another and considered one another brothers. At the same time, the integration led to greater understanding between the races, as Alex admits to Joe Small that Joe has convinced him that a man is a man.

Working conditions created the propensity for danger.

Working conditions created the propensity for danger, argues Steven Sheinkin in his book The Port Chicago 50. Working conditions faced by the men who work at Port Chicago during World War II did ultimately lead to disaster. These working conditions ultimately led to what became known as the Port Chicago 50 Mutiny.

Because of racism, only blacks were given the task of loading ammunition, explosives, and bombs onto Naval ships during most of World War II. Joe Small and the other men at Port Chicago were less concerned with this than they were concerned by the alarming safety conditions – or lack thereof – at the Port. First and foremost, none of the men were given any real, formal training in handling their cargo, let alone what kind of cargo they would be handling. This led to incidents such as the red dye scare. Even when white civilian loaders offered to teach the black sailors how to do the job, the commander of the base ignored the offer.

Working conditions themselves were deplorable. Cargo was to be offloaded from boxcars on trains to small rail carts, then pushed down the rails to the pier, where it was

to be loaded onto the ships. The only thing preventing the carts from crashing into anything were mattresses. Spencer Sikes was so appalled by these working conditions that he believed he would die working at Port Chicago. Joe Small's concerns about working conditions were passed along to superiors, but ignored, discounted, or dismissed.

Things only became more dangerous when the new base commander instituted a competition-based system where teams that loaded the most tonnage by the end of the week were to be given free movies. The situation became even worse when some of the officers begin making monetary bets with one another over whose teams would be the most successful. Accidents increased, and the potential for real danger was so great that a civilian who came to repair a winch left as fast as he could because he feared being killed. On July 17, 1944, the worst fears of everyone were realized when Port Chicago was destroyed in an explosion.

Sometimes the right thing to do is also the hardest.

Sometimes the right thing to do is also the hardest, argues Steven Sheinkin in his book The Port Chicago 50. Doing the right thing often means facing opposition, challenges, and hardships that might not have otherwise been faced had a stand for the right thing not been made. Such was the case of Joe Small and the other members of what became known as the Port Chicago 50 Mutiny.

Following the Port Chicago disaster, Joe and the survivors rightfully worried about what tasks they would next be assigned. They feared they would be sent back to loading ammunition and explosives somewhere else. Their worst fears were well-founded, as when they were restationed at Mare Island, they were ordered to begin loading ammunition and explosives once again. Joe knew that to return to such working conditions was to risk his life unnecessarily once again. As a result, he made the difficult decision to refuse only that order.

Joe Small and a few hundred others came to resist the order to return to loading. Coaxing by the chaplain, and exhortations by other officers failed to send the men back to work. Only when the commander of the district threatened court-martial, mutiny, and penalties of death did the majority of men return to work. Only Joe and forty-nine others refused the order, still rightly concerned about working conditions and safety. For this, they were branded cowards and mutineers. Coakley, the prosecuting attorney, especially became vitriolic toward them because they were black. Despite this, Joe Small and the others stood strong.

When the court reached its verdict, Joe and the others were saddened but not surprised to be found guilty of mutiny. He and the others were sentenced to fifteen years hard labor, which devastated them. Despite the punishment, the men remained convinced they did the right thing. These sentences were commuted, however, with a change in Naval policy which allowed blacks to serve in any role at sea. Having stood up for what they believed in, Joe Small and his fellow 49 Americans were reassigned to serve on

ships. However, the mutiny continued to hang over their heads for the rest of their lives. None ever came to regret the refusal, however.

Styles

Structure

Steven Sheinkin divides The Port Chicago 50 into unnumbered, titled chapters that recount the Port Chicago disaster, mutiny, ensuing trial, and the lives of the convicted long after. The title of each chapter directly reflects the contents of that chapter, with each chapter being arranged chronologically to illustrate unfolding events (with the exception of the chapter The Policy, which goes back in time to examine the history of African-American service in the United States Armed Force). The book is interspersed with numerous photographs of the individuals and events written about, to give readers a clear, visual understanding of who the men involved were, and to see the scope of the disaster at Port Chicago – and what those men involved were actually facing. Importantly, Sheinkin begins the book by listing all 50 men of the Port Chicago 50, so that their names will not be lost to history, and as a tribute to their courage and heroism.

Perspective

Steve Sheinkin writes The Port Chicago 50 from a perspective supportive of the 50 men and their actions; and wherever possible, Sheinkin includes the actual words of the men themselves so that they may tell their own story relating to the Port Chicago disaster. Sheinkin effectively argues that the 50, in addition to the other blacks who worked at Port Chicago, were forced to do such dangerous work because of their race and the racist policies of the U.S. Navy at the time. Because the men were not given fair treatment in service or a fair trial after arrest because of their race, Sheinkin ensures that the men have the ability to speak for themselves in the book. Sheinkin's narrative is peppered with quotes from Joe Small and the other 49 men, so that readers may directly understand events as the men actually involved saw them and understood them.

Tone

Steve Sheinkin adopts a casual, personal tone in his writing in The Port Chicago 50 as he lays out his arguments in defense of Joe Small and the other men considered mutineers. The casual tone and straightforward language he adopts is in deference to readers, most of whom will be younger as the book is identified as a history book primarily for young readers. The personal tone that Sheinkin adopts also matters because he treats his subjects – Joe Small and the other 49 – in a very personal way. These are not only men who are convicted of mutiny, but they are men at the root of everything else. As such, they are human beings with their own stories, and these stories need to be told. This gentle tone toward the Chicago 50 is done out of respect to honor them, for in life they were not given a fair trial or fair treatment. Sheinkin intends

to help set the record straight with his book, including making sure readers know the Port Chicago 50 were individual men with individual lives.

Quotes

And then Dorie Miller, one of the first American heroes of World War II, went back to collecting laundry. He was still just a mess attendant. It was the only position open to black men in the United States Navy.
-- Steve Sheinkin (First Hero)

Importance: Dorie Miller presents a tragic case for black service early in World War II, on the day America is thrust into the global conflict when the Japanese launch a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Blacks may not serve in combat positions, but Miller helps fight the Japanese while rescuing wounded men. His actions earn him the Navy Cross, the highest honor in the Navy, and make him the first recipient of such an award in the Pacific Fleet. But because of Navy policy, Miller must go back to doing laundry.

True, there was an obvious contradiction in a nation fighting for freedom while denying it to its own citizens in the military.
-- Steve Sheinkin (The Policy)

Importance: The initial policy of the United States Military is to employ blacks in non-combat roles. In the Navy, this means only letting blacks serve as mess attendants. But pressure from civil rights groups leads to a shift in policy, a compromise that is not the best but a step in the right direction. Blacks may now train as sailors, but they cannot hold high ranks or serve at sea except as mess attendants. The shift in policy leads to thousands of black Americans signing up to fight for their country.

The first thing they did was to start segregating us.
-- DeWitt Jameson (Port Chicago)

Importance: Despite the shift in policy, and despite countless thousands of black Americans signing up to serve their country, they are still segregated while training. A hasty black-only training camp is thrown together, in which black men are led by black officers are severely limited with what they can do. Still, the black servicemen are eager to prove themselves, willing to deal with the humiliations and racism in order to prove their worth.

All the officers standing up on the pier and giving orders were white. All the sailors handling explosives were black.
-- Steve Sheinkin (Port Chicago)

Importance: When Small and the other black sailors arrive at Port Chicago, they are disappointed because they will not be serving at sea, but on land loading explosives into ships. Blacks are the only ones assigned to loading the explosives, while white officers supervise and give orders. This state of affairs demonstrates just how little many in the Navy thought of blacks, as if their lives were worth less because only they were given the dangerous work of handling explosives at Port Chicago.

American troops needed massive quantities of ammunition, and they needed it fast.
-- Steve Sheinkin (Hot Cargo)

Importance: Here, Sheinkin explains the reality of the unsafe work conditions at Port Chicago. With a war on, ammunition is in desperate need. As such, Small and the black sailors of Port Chicago must work quickly to load ships. At the same time, competition for free movies and bets creates an even bigger rush in the work environment, as teams of men compete to outdo the other. This creates a serious danger, as rushing leads to carelessness.

Joe Small was still awake at 10:18 p.m. He was lying on his stomach when he heard what sounded like a thunderclap coming from the direction of the pier.
-- Steve Sheinkin (The Explosion)

Importance: Here, Sheinkin describes how Joe Small experienced the initial explosion. Having gotten into bed and having prepared for sleep, Joe hears the initial explosion, which is followed by an even bigger explosion which blasts all the windows out, destroys the pier, sinks one ship, and destroys another. Small and the others rush down to the pier to see what they can do to help. The scene is disastrous, and hundreds are dead.

Small knew he was being treated unfairly by the Navy, but did that give him the right to disobey orders?
-- Steve Sheinkin (The Inquiry)

Importance: After the disaster at Port Chicago, Joe and his unit are ordered back to do the same job in a different place. Joe and his men are rightfully concerned about their safety, and refuse to follow orders to return to loading ammunition. Joe knows they are being treated unfairly by the Navy, but wonders what gives him the right to disobey orders. He realizes that doing what is right gives him the right to disobey orders, so he and hundreds of others initially refuse the orders.

So I came to the conclusion that I was not going back to the same work under the same conditions, under the same men. And that was it.
-- Joe Small (The Inquiry)

Importance: Joe describes his though process here. He explains he is not going to work in the same situation as before, as nothing has changed or been improved. He recognizes that his life, and the lives of others, are at stake. As such, he cannot make a choice to return to loading ammunition, knowing that blacks are the only ones being given the job, and because of the lack of safety precautions.

Back in his cell, thinking over the questions he'd been asked, Small realized what a deep hole he was in. Clearly, the officers saw him as the leader of a carefully crafted rebellion. The believed Small, in midnight barracks meetings, had convinced the men of his division to join him in mutiny.
-- Steve Sheinkin (The Fifty)

Importance: Because Small is a natural leader, and because Small is looked up to by the other men, he becomes a target for the prosecution. Coakley paints Small as a ringleader, meaning that Small could get in serious trouble if it is believed he is indeed the ringleader. Fortunately, all of the 49 other men refuse to paint Small in this way, arguing they made their own choices.

There is no sufficient evidence of mutiny or conspiracy. These men are being tried for mutiny solely because of their race.
-- Thurgood Marshall (Prosecution)

Importance: When Marshall sits in on the case, he quickly realizes the 50 are being tried not because of mutiny, but primarily because of their race. Marshall recognizes that the entire story is not being told. The case is focusing on the mutiny after the explosion, and not on racism and segregation in the Navy itself which led to the trial. Marshall then resolves to make sure people know what the underlying motive is for mutiny accusations.

All fifty men were found guilty of mutiny.
-- Steve Sheinkin (The Verdict)

Importance: Small and the others are devastated by the verdict. They are all found guilty of mutiny and sentenced to 15 years hard labor. Fortunately, continued efforts by Marshall, Eleanor Roosevelt, and others, lead to the sentences being done away with as the 50 are assigned to active duty sea service. The 50 honorably finish out their careers in the Navy in such a way.

A man is a man.
-- Alex (Small Goes to Sea)

Importance: Alex, an Alabama native, is prone to prejudices before meeting Joe Small. After the two initially fight, they become best of friends. Small later asks Alex why he changed his mind about blacks and being friends with a black man. Alex explains it is because he has learned a man is a man, period.

I was fighting for something. Thing were not right, and it was my desire to make things right. I have never felt ashamed of the decisions that I made. I did what I thought was best, and I did it in the best way I knew how.
-- Joe Small (Epilogue: Civil Rights Heroes)

Importance: Joe Small, reflecting on the events of the trial, does not regret his decision to oppose orders to keep loading ammunition. He knows it was the right thing to do, and so is not ashamed of his stand. Small's position is the position of all the other fifty as well. None of them regret the decision that they made, knowing it was the right thing to do.

Topics for Discussion

Reasons for Serving

Despite racism and segregation, black Americans were still very eager to serve America in World War II. What reasoning do Joe Small and the other African-American servicemen in the book give for wanting to serve? Why do you believe this is so?

Reasons for Serving

There is tremendous irony in America fighting in World War II for freedom when so many other men and women were denied equal freedoms in America, and in America's military. Despite recognizing these ironies, the Navy is slow to change enlistment and service policies. Why is this so? Is the Navy to be faulted for this, especially when blacks are so willing to serve despite these policies? Why or why not?

Heroism

Despite racism and segregation, black Americans perform admirably and heroically in their roles in World War II before the policies change regarding black service. Why do black Americans choose to serve so well despite being relegated to only certain service roles? What does this say about the character of such men?

Heroism

Do you believe it is heroism or cowardice that Joe Small and 49 other men refuse to return to work at Mare Island? Why? Do you believe it is heroism or cowardice for the other men, apart from the 50, who agree to return to work at Mare Island? Why or why not?

Challenging Conventions

World War II challenges conventional and racist assumptions about the black race and race relations. What are some of these racial conventions and assumptions? How do the individuals discussed in the book challenge these conventions and assumptions? What is the result? Why?

Challenging Conventions

Do you believe the Chicago Port 50 had a real role in changing Navy policies regarding black service as civil rights heroes? Why or why not? What reasons does the Navy

ultimately come to for changing their racial policies through the challenging of conventions? Why is this so?

Working Conditions

Do Port Chicago working conditions create the propensity for danger, and exhibit rampant racism? If so, how? If not, why not?

Working Conditions

Given that Port Chicago is a stand-alone incident, can the Port Chicago 50 be faulted for refusing to return to work at Mare Island? Why or why not?

Doing the Right Thing

Joe Small, and each of the members of the Port Chicago 50 believe they are doing the right thing by refusing the order to return to load ammunition and explosives. Why do they believe this? Do you believe they have done the right thing? Why or why not?

Doing the Right Thing

Although Joe Small and many others believe the Port Chicago 50 have done the right thing, many do not and consider them only mutineers. After reading Sheinkin's book, what is your opinion of the Port Chicago 50? Do you believe they truly are mutineers, civil rights heroes, or something in between? Explain.