“300 Killed In Bay Munition Ship Blast,” July 18, 1944

Oakland Tribune

Shells Rocket Far Afield

Continued From Page 1

Navy until their nearest of kin have been notified, but it was disclosed that nine officers known to have been stationed at the post are missing. They presumably have been killed.

In addition to the depot's personnel, two men were missing from Coast Guard picket boats, two were injured, and two were missing from the fireboat that answered the first alarm.

The Coast Guard issued immediate warnings to all mariners in the Bay to look out for ammunition that might be floating on the surface. They pointed out that it constituted a menace.

John Miller, former sheriff of Contra Costa County, now civilian defense co-ordinator for the area, estimated that at least 200 civilians were injured when the ships blew up. They were treated at hospitals throughout the county and by private physicians.

However, the Navy and civilian authorities agreed, there undoubtedly were hundreds of others hurt who didn't seek medical attention immediately.

Ammunition Magazine Shattered Shambles

The ammunition magazine, a comparatively new installation one mile out of Port Chicago, was a shambles when the first spectators reached it. Buildings were collapsed and hearse were carrying a procession of bodies out of the reservation.

Officers declined to talk what had happened in the stockade, but it was apparent that the explosion blasted buildings to the ground without spreading the detonations. It was possible that block-buster bombs were mixed with the ammunition that exploded.

Force of the explosion was so great that it knocked the needle off the seismograph at the University of California and led people in Oakland to think they had been bombed by the Japanese.

Householders in the upper Bay area were wide awake with the first brilliant flash of light. Then they felt the two explosions, hardly a moment apart. They fled into the streets, few of them to sleep again during the night.

The Red Cross was alerted and prepared to take care of as many as 1500 persons from Port Chicago. The little town virtually was evacuated, and between 150 and 200 homes appeared to be uninhabitable. Not a single building
“300 Killed In Bay Munition Ship Blast,” July 18, 1944, cont.

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RUMORS SPREAD

Rumors poured through the night. At one time, a Coast Guard lieutenant warned that there was a third ship that might blow up, but the crowd refused to fall back.

A Marine with a loaded Garand rifle forced the men and women to the side of the road so that the loaded ambulances could come out. All of the emergency vehicles were directed east into the little town of Port Chicago, which was trying to pick itself out of the splintered glass at the time.

Spectators drove all the way from San Francisco and Oakland to see the damage, but found themselves turned back far from the gates to the Navy installation.

The town of Martinez refused to go to bed. Officers said, and the street corners were crowded with chattering groups.

WORSE THAN ‘06 QUAKE

Even before the ambulances had quit roaring through the streets, city employees and building owners were out sweeping up the glass. Most of them said it was worse than the earthquake of 1906.

Hospitals’ attendants in all the communities in the area lost count of the injured. They treated scores for broken bones, others for cuts and bruises and still others for shock, but they gave up early in their attempt to list the names of all the injured.

The entire region was in chaotic movement for three hours after the initial explosions.

Undertakers parceled as far away as Stockton received bodies before they could call in attendants. Identities at first were virtually impossible.

The Red Cross rushed in supplies of plasma and sent more than a hundred cows to the area.

Every type of vehicle, from taxicabs to trucks, was pressed into service to move the dead and injured. The cars formed a steady parade through the depot gates, which were flooded-lighted to aid the sanitary.

The armed guards moved into the crowd from time to time to enforce the “No Smoking” rule. Jittery to begin with, they refused to let anyone smoke near the installation.

Man after man came out of the depot to mingle with the crowd and all told different stories. It was impossible on the scene to get a clear picture of what had happened.

Some of the men had been near the ships. Others were working a short distance away. Still others were in their barracks. No two could agree as to what happened after the first blinding flash and explosion.

Floyd Lee Scott, 19, a painter who was in the Navy barracks, said he felt the two shocks and started running. He couldn’t pick out one scene around him “because everything was falling all over,” but he did hear shouts for help from all sides.

Scott escaped uninjured, but his clothing was ripped from his body. He eventually staggered into the sheriff’s office in Martinez and told his story.

The Army and Navy took over communications from Martinez and it was impossible to place a telephone call in the town for hours. Authorities kept in touch with each other by shortwave radio, but even that medium was jammed before the first casualties were brought out of the plant.

SEEK INFORMATION

Meanwhile, excited residents all around the north bay area were trying to reach telephone operators for information.

Many of them had seen shell fragments tear through their house walls. Some even had found unexploded shells in their yard. All had felt the terrific double concussion that broke windows and caved in walls in the immediate vicinity.

People as far away as the East Oakland residential area felt the blast and were reeled from their beds.

Some said it felt like an earthquake, but most agreed at the moment that it was an explosion. They rolled out in their night clothes and shouted back and forth across the streets when they were unable to reach telephone operators.

The blast shook homes and rattled doors and windows, but apparently did little actual damage.

Reporters heading into the damage area found the first physical signs of the blast near Martinez. There, storekeepers and home-owners were sweeping up the glass.

Neon signs were broken, wooden walls were leveled and power poles were knocked to the ground. It looked as if a cyclone had blasted its way through the countryside.
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The Red Cross was alerted and prepared to take care of as many as 1,500 persons from Port Chicago. The little town virtually was evacuated and between 150 and 200 homes appeared to be uninhabitable. Not a single building in the town escaped damage and most were described as “complete losses.”

Thousands of dollars more damage done in Martinez, but it apparently confined itself largely to broken windows.

Shells were hurled as far as Walnut Creek, and some observers said they heard a high-explosive shell go off over the town. Reports still were reaching the sheriff’s office late today of explosives that scattered over the countryside.

The Navy said that the two ammunition ships did not blow to bits but it was obvious that everything above the waterline on both vessels had been torn to pieces.
Glass and debris littered streets in most of Contra Costa County, and at an early hour today men, women, and children were walking the streets wearing bloody bandages. Military police and shore patrol helped them to dressing stations where nurses and doctors gave first aid.

Volunteer workers poured in from all parts of Alameda, Solano, and Contra Costa counties, but the Army and Navy took over the situation and conducted operations after the first hour.

Every road into the area was jammed with traffic and white-clad nurses mingled with Red Cross volunteers as hastily-summoned help came to the scene from all sides.

**AMBULANCES JAM ROADS**

A double line of vehicles, principally ambulances and hearses, was parked bumper to bumper for more than a mile west of the scene.

Highway patrolmen, auxiliary police and soldiers and sailors were pressed into traffic duty, but the cars of the curious continued to roll into the area.

Red-lighted emergency cars screamed in from the east and west.

Special convoys of station wagons, automobiles and ambulances were sent from towns all around the bay and as far north as Sacramento.

Hundreds of women gathered outside the Marine-guarded gates of the depot, anxiously waiting word of the men who had been caught on the ships.

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**"WORSE THAN '05 QUAKE"**

Even before the ambulance had quit roaring through the streets, city employees and building owners were out sweeping up the glass. Most of them said it was worse than the earthquake of 1905.

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Undertaking parlors as far away as Stockton received bodies before they could call in attendants. Identification at first was virtually impossible.

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