

Synopsis for "Port Chicago"  
by David White

Many people know of the trial of the black US Navy mutineers in 1944, after the explosion of a munitions ship they were helping to load. But few know the whole story behind the explosion that killed 320 people, accounting for 20% of all black naval casualties of the war. This is - sadly - a true story.

In July of 1944, as the Second World War rages overseas, three shifts of black workers sweat around the clock to load ammunition and high explosives aboard the cargo ship *E. A. Bryan*, while the all-white officers keep charts on their progress and berate them to greater effort. Less attention is paid to safety, which is sacrificed for speed.

Raymond Wills, respected by his fellow black workers, exhorts his fellows to work as hard as they possibly can, show their patriotism, "and prove to the white man that we're just as good as they are!" He knows they deserve better, an opportunity to serve overseas, even to becoming officers. But he's savvy enough to know that things aren't going to change overnight. Some of Ray's friends have different opinions, ranging from the desire to instigate change (at any cost), to just wanting to go along and cause as little trouble as possible.

Ray and his fellows finish the first shift. Sweaty and tired, they head past the incoming second shift. Both groups toss barbs back and forth about who can load more ammo. Ray's buddies make plans about where to meet that night, and spend some of their hard-earned money.

At a quarter past ten that night, July 17th, Ray finds himself, along with his fiancé, at the Hilltop, a bar a couple miles from the docks. As they laugh and tell stories, we watch the second shift struggling in the dark, steamy holds of the ship. One crate of artillery shells almost topples over, but a worker throws his own body in the way to keep it upright.

Near the bow of the ship, two railroad cars are being inspected. Their arrival has been kept secret, and the check is performed by special officers from Los Alamos laboratories. They take great care in working around the large metal object inside, but something inside the first car doesn't seem right...

Suddenly, at the Hilltop, a flash illuminates the smoky bar. All motion slows to a crawl as the front windows shatter. But within a heartbeat, a second more powerful explosion rocks the building, throwing everyone off their feet, scattering tables, chairs, bottles, patrons. Ray and a few others pick themselves up and head off in a battered old truck down to the docks, to see if they can help. But the explosion was so enormous, the docks disappear a hundred feet inland. The ship's been vaporized.

In a whirlwind, we watch the ensuing trial, where the Navy calls 150 witnesses, but only 5 black sailors, and none of them loaders. Ray and the other loaders go through nightmares, panic attacks, then the indignity of the trial and a year's banishment. The guilty verdict echoes in his ears...

We next see Ray in 1965. He still works hard, he's still respected by his friends, and his fiancé is now his wife. And he thinks he's put that night behind him, until a young researcher from "African-American Review" appears at his door. The researcher, Malcolm Hobart, has some information for Ray: it's possible that the second explosion aboard the *Bryan* wasn't from any explosives the laborers placed onboard, but was actually the detonation of the first experimental atomic weapon, a 'cannon shell' capable of being fired from some of the Navy's larger battleships. But that's not the worst of the news. It's possible, although Malcolm doesn't believe it, that the Navy may have intentionally detonated the device, to test the effects of radioactivity on humans, most of them 'expendable' black laborers.

Ray is dumfounded. His feelings are in turmoil. He doubts that there ever was atomic material onboard. But Malcolm's evidence is solid, from tracking an officer from Los Alamos who approved the transfer of the two secret rail cars, to his promotion immediately after the explosion, to his appointment overseeing the Bikini Atoll atomic tests after the war. But the most damning evidence is an official Navy film Malcolm has uncovered - a film that, unbelievably, shows the entire explosion at Port Chicago that night: the first explosion dockside, then the second white-hot flash from within the front hold of the ship. It carries the undeniable signature of a nuclear explosion.

For the next five years, Ray must aid Malcolm in finding the men who served that day, and piece together everything they can about that fateful night. Ray must also contend with subtle and overt racism, even threats against his life. For many of his old friends, they'd rather let sleeping dogs lie. But Ray knows the men that died were blamed for that explosion, and he feels compelled to clear their name.

Through secret meetings and clandestine conversations, he and Malcolm get closer to the truth. And the truth is shocking: the US Navy had arranged a secret test, a plan to shell a Japanese-held island with an atomic warhead, but something went wrong and the warhead detonated aboard the ship. The Navy couldn't admit that in '44, and even now it's impossible to admit that the first atomic explosion was an accident on American soil! The film the Navy took was an accident itself; they had cameras rolling to document the ship's loading. They never expected trouble.

Eventually, Ray and Malcolm force the Navy into clearing the loaders' names, though at the cost of concealing the atomic trigger of the second blast. The film ends with Ray now trying to bury an even darker secret, that the Navy may still be lying about the true intentions of the blast. But with his friends' memory cleared, some of his ghosts have left him. Ray feels, in the kind of world he and Malcolm have uncovered, maybe that's enough.