

On Mutiny Considered as One of the Fine Arts

Cap'n John Yossarian

2003

Mutiny is such a potent threat to military organizations—and the States who use them avoid even mentioning the word. Instead, military commanders and civil authorities fall back on euphemism in order to avoid announcing the news that they most fear—during the First World War, for example, a major mutiny by French troops was mentioned in murmurs as “collective indiscipline”; while the war dragged on in Vietnam, the US Army reported increasing numbers of “battlefield refusals.”

According to at least one military historian, the words “strike,” “unrest,” “protest,” and “dissatisfaction” are also politically-correct terms for mutinous conditions. (1) Remember this when the corporate news media reports on a “strike for better conditions” by US occupation troops in Baghdad.

Acts of collective military insubordination can involve anything from the refusal to perform the most menial designated tasks to armed, open, active uprisings against commanding officers. Whichever the case, these actions challenge a commander's judgment and control, thereby contaminating the chain of authority and significantly weakening the foundations of the organization and stability of the military corps, its leaders, and the governmental regime that it is propping up. In an effort to contain the contagion of dissent, mutiny is treated strictly as a management problem—even in situations when the unforeseen has sparked a breakdown of authority, individual officers are trained to take full responsibility for the motivation, morale, discipline, and conduct of those troops assigned to them.

Military academies were created to professionalize the officer corps and, in the process, cut down on the possibility of insubordination in the ranks. It's no surprise, then, that at Annapolis and West Point, there are courses taught by military psychologists on how to deal with unruly troops. A history course for officers on mutiny and desertion is available at the Maxwell Air Force Base, and the syllabus promises to teach students about “the underlying causes of discontent and the immediate triggers of insubordination,” while emphasizing “the methods adopted to deter, crush, or alleviate unrest in one's own ranks while promoting the same in the ranks of one's enemy.”

Active military officers study mutinies carefully and take the subject very seriously, it seems. It stands to reason that the threat (or, I should say, “promise”) of military disintegration seems to have haunted every army since the first war in human history. But these stories get covered up and buried deep, and the historical narratives that are fed to students in the classroom consist primarily of triumphalist tales of heroism and loyalty as the norm.

If one takes the time to scratch the surfaces, however, there are some intriguing accounts available, especially of those involving colonial military operations like the sepoy mutiny in India, the 1901 revolt of the British West African Regiment in the Gold Coast, and the famous incidents of rebellion during the Vietnam War (at the Presidio stockade in 1968, aboard the *USS Constellation* in 1973). For information on incidents during other periods of US history, Allen Bowman's *The Morale of the American Revolutionary Army* and Ella Lonn, William Blair, and John Beatty's *Desertion During the Civil War* provide a number of threads that can be followed to learn more.

The next time someone begins to drone on about World War II as “The Good War” (a phrase chosen ironically by Studs Terkel but used reverentially by everyone else), you may want to steer the conversation towards three

important mutinies by Americans: the Heart Mountain and Port Chicago mutinies of 1944 and the Freeman Field Mutiny of 1945.

The Heart Mountain uprising occurred when the US Army added insult to injury by drafting second-generation Japanese-American men held in concentration camps in Wyoming. Seizing upon the draft notices as an opportunity to protest their incarceration and loss of civil liberties, a Fair Play Committee was formed. Four hundred prisoners attended the meeting where the Fair Play Committee announced that its members “refuse to go to the physical examination or to the induction if we are called.” Despite the subsequent governmental crackdown, one out of every nine young men imprisoned at Heart Mountain failed to appear for their Army physicals. Eighty-five of these were later arrested and charged with draft evasion; a supportive journalist in Denver who had been covering the mutiny was also arrested for “conspiracy to counsel draft evasion.” They were sentenced to three years in prison, half of whom did their time at the federal pen in Leavenworth. President Harry Truman pardoned all wartime draft resisters in December 1947. (2)

On July 17, 1944, two munitions ships exploded while being loaded at the US Navy munitions depot at Port Chicago, California. More than three hundred men—202 of whom were enlisted African-Americans who, because of segregation, had been forced into taking menial jobs at slave wages under unsafe conditions—were killed. Another 300 were injured in the blasts, which were said to be the result of the equivalent of five kilotons of TNT (the same yield as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima) and amounted to 15% of the total number of Black casualties sustained during the Second World War.

When a Navy Court of Inquiry cleared all the white officers of responsibility and put the blame of “incompetence” on the untrained African-American ammunition handlers, the traumatized Black sailors who survived the explosions mutinied. The Navy responded by arresting 258 men and holding them chained below decks in a cramped barge at the depot. Fifty of the mutineers were selected by the Navy to be court-martialed as “leaders” of the revolt and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. (3) After the Navy desegregated in 1945, the fifty mutineers were released but were ordered to continue serving in the Navy and sent to small bases scattered throughout the islands of the South Pacific. (4)

The 1945 Freeman Field Mutiny was also activated by institutional racism when the commander of an Army Air Corps base in Indiana arrested 162 African-American pilots who had entered a whites-only officers club. These B-25 bomber pilots were veterans of the air war over Germany and part of the “Tuskegee Airmen” who were central to the “Double-V” campaign, “V” being “victory” over fascism in Europe and Jim Crow in the US.

“When the [European] war ended, they [the military establishment] wanted to get rid of us and they started with the troublemakers, which included me,” recalled Oliver Goodall, one of the pilots. The white commander tried to quell the unrest by issuing a direct order to the Black men instructing them to sign a statement promising to uphold the racial segregation laws of the base, and 101 of them openly refused to obey the order, the maximum penalty for which was execution. Training missions in preparation for attacks on Japan were put behind schedule because of the mutiny at the ironically-named Freeman Field. The charges were eventually dropped, but three of the mutiny’s leaders charged with assaulting a provost marshal during the arrests at the officers’ club were court-martialed for “offering violence against a superior [sic] officer” and paid a fine. (5)

In all three of these cases, individuals felt that their sense of moral outrage and social justice far outweighed the command to subordinate themselves to military discipline. US troops today encounter (and help to perpetuate) injustices and exploitation that are at least as brutal as those experienced by mutineers fifty years ago. Rather than writing off enlisted men and women as inherently counter-revolutionary, we should remember that many of these soldiers are not there out of patriotism but because they have been forced to become low-paid wage slaves on the front-lines of globalization. What better place for class-conscious agitation than within the ranks of the US armed forces? We need to spread the word to the troops in Iraq that mutiny is far more noble, just, and heroic than anything that the Pentagon can make them do.

Endnotes

1. Elihu Rose, *The Anatomy of Mutiny: Armed Forces and Society* (1982), 561–73.

2. Eric Muller, *Free to Die for their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II*. (University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Douglas W. Nelson, *Heart Mountain: The History of an American Concentration Camp* (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976).

3. In general, military commanders claim that mutinies happen because a handful of charismatic individuals are able to sway disgruntled soldiers toward rebellion. However, some researchers believe that the power of mutiny is exaggerated by authorities-it may be that it is the opportunities and the force of circumstances which surround a mutiny that creates the leaders and not the other way around. See Bruce Allen Watson, *When Soldiers Quit: Studies in Military Disintegration* (Praeger, 1997) and *Motivating Soldiers: Morale or Mutiny*, edited by Peter Karsten (Garland, 1998).

4. Robert L. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in US. Naval History* (Warner Books, 1989).

5. James C. Warren, *The Freeman Field Mutiny: A Tuskegee Airman's Story* (Conyers, 1996).

fifth Estate

Cap'n John Yossarian
On Mutiny Considered as One of the Fine Arts
2003

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/362-fall-2003/on-mutiny-considered-as-one-of-the-fine-arts>
Fifth Estate #362, Fall, 2003

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net