



Staff Report

Date: December 13, 2022

To: City Council

From: Valerie J. Barone, City Manager

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Subject: **Considering adoption of a Resolution supporting the local, state, and federal efforts to exonerate the Port Chicago 50.**

Report in Brief

The City of Concord has supported past efforts which urge the President and Congress of the United States to take all necessary actions to restore honor to, and rectify the mistreatment by the United States Military of, any sailors who were unjustly blamed for and convicted of mutiny after the Port Chicago disaster, which occurred in the town of Port Chicago, California, in 1944.

Recommended Action

Adopt a Resolution supporting the local, state, and federal efforts to exonerate the Port Chicago 50.

Background

On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago naval base in Concord, California, were suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion, the incredible blast of which wrecked the naval base and heavily damaged the town of Port Chicago, located 1.5 miles away. Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships was killed instantly—some 320 American naval personnel, 200 of whom were African American enlisted men; and another 390 military and civilian personnel were injured, including 226 African American enlisted men. This single, stunning disaster accounted for nearly one-fifth of all African American naval casualties during the whole of World War II and was the worst home-front disaster of the war.

The blame for the explosion went to the African-American munitions handlers who had been killed in the disaster, yet had not been properly trained in the handling of those

explosives. A few weeks later, seamen were ordered back to work loading munitions at the same location. Two-hundred fifty eight black sailors were ordered to load these munitions, but due to what they felt were unsafe work conditions and themselves not being adequately trained in the proper handling of munitions, they refused orders. After being threatened with the death penalty, 208 of these men reluctantly returned to work. However, the remaining 50 were court-martialed and sentenced to 17 years in prison.

After the war had ended in 1945, the Navy announced that 47 of the 50 men would be released to active duty. Two remained in a hospital recuperating from injuries, while a third remained in prison due to bad conduct. Eventually, those of the 50 who had not committed later offenses were given a general discharge from the Navy under honorable conditions. Yet their convictions were never rescinded and the “Port Chicago 50” carried with them charges of mutiny until they died.

On May 24, 2016 and again on April 26, 2022, the Concord City Council unanimously supported passage of legislation to publicly exonerate the 50 African American sailors of the United States Navy who were tried and convicted of mutiny in connection with their service at the Port Chicago naval base. On October 11, 2022, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors adopted a similar resolution to the one Council is considering tonight.

Analysis

Through adoption of a Resolution (Attachment 1) the Concord City Council affirms support for all future efforts which urge the President and Congress of the United States to take all necessary actions to restore honor to, and rectify the mistreatment by the United States Military of, any sailors who were unjustly blamed for and convicted of mutiny after the Port Chicago disaster, which occurred in the town of Port Chicago, California, in 1944. This would be done by providing the full exoneration of those who were wrongfully court-martialed and have the military records of those involved cleared of any wrongdoing or discharge references that were other than honorable, regardless of whether those sailors are alive or deceased. To exonerate these men would close an ugly chapter in California’s history as well as illuminate and recognize the discrimination that took place at the time, in an effort to ensure events like these can never happen again.

Financial Impact

No fiscal impact.

Public Contact

The City Council Agenda was posted.

Attachment

1. Resolution supporting the local, state, and federal efforts to exonerate the Port Chicago 50.