

STAFF REPORT TO THE CITY COUNCIL

DATE: Regular Meeting of August 8, 2023

TO: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

SUBMITTED BY: Kwame P. Reed, Acting City Manager/Economic Development Director *KPR*

SUBJECT: Resolution to Support Local, State, and Federal Efforts to Exonerate the Port Chicago 50

RECOMMENDED ACTION

It is recommended that the City Council adopt a resolution to support local, state, and federal efforts to exonerate the Port Chicago 50.

FISCAL IMPACT

The recommended action has no fiscal impact.

DISCUSSION

This item is for discussion and possible action by the City Council.

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.

Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships were 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. Weeks later, seamen were ordered back to work loading munitions at the same location. Two-hundred fifty-eight African American 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 Yet their convictions were never rescinded, and the “Port Chicago 50” carried with them charges of mutiny until they died.

ATTACHMENTS

A. Resolution