



# STAFF REPORT

City Council

**Date:** July 19, 2023  
**To:** Mayor and City Council  
**From:** Michael Chandler, City Manager  
**Subject:** Resolution of Support for Exoneration of Port Chicago 50

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## Recommendation

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

## Background

A tragic chapter of American military history took place at the former Port Chicago naval base in Concord, California. On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vehicles loading ammunition onto a cargo vessel at the Port Chicago naval base were suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion. The blast wrecked the naval base and heavily damaged the town of Port Chicago, located a mile and a half away. Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships stationed there were instantly killed. The total loss of life was devastating and included some 320 American naval personnel, 200 of whom were Black enlisted men. Injuries to military and civilian personnel were close to 400, more than half of whom were Black. This single, stunning disaster accounted for nearly one-fifth of all Black naval casualties during the entirety of World War II and was the worst home-front disaster of the war.

Blame for the explosion was placed on the Black munitions handlers who had been killed in the disaster yet had not been properly trained in the handling of those explosives. Several weeks after the blast, seamen were ordered back to work loading munitions at the same location. A total of 258 Black sailors were ordered to load the munitions, but believed they were being subjected to unsafe working conditions as they had still not been adequately trained in the proper handling of munitions and therefore refused the orders. After being threatened with the death penalty, 208 of these men reluctantly returned to work. The remaining 50 were court-martialed for mutiny and sentenced to 17 years in prison with hard labor.

After the war 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offenses were given a general discharge from the Navy under honorable conditions, but their convictions were never rescinded. As a result, the "Port Chicago 50" carried with them the charges of mutiny until they died.

## **Discussion**

The Port Chicago 50 remains a stain on our military history, and efforts to try to correct the record – and importantly, to bring honor to and rectify the mistreatment of any sailors who were unjustly blamed and convicted for the disaster – continue to this day. Through adoption of the attached resolution, the City Council can affirm support for all future efforts to urge the President and Congress of the United States to take all necessary actions to restore that honor to those sailors who were unjustly blamed for and convicted of mutiny after the Port Chicago disaster. 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 that time so that it can never happen again.

## **Attachments**

- Resolution