



**OFFICE OF THE CITY MANAGER/EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
65 Civic Avenue  
Pittsburg, CA 94565**

**TO:** Mayor and Council Members

**FROM:** Garrett Evans, City Manager

**SUBJECT:** Adoption of a City Council Resolution Supporting House of Representatives Concurrent Resolution 16 - Efforts to Exonerate the Port Chicago 50

**MEETING DATE:** August 7, 2023

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On February 17, 2023, Congressman Mark DeSaulnier (CA-10), Barbara Lee (CA-12), and John Garamendi (CA-08) introduced House of Representatives Concurrent Resolution 16 – Recognizing the victims of the Port Chicago explosion of July 17, 1944, the 79th anniversary of the greatest homeland loss of life of World War II, and exonerating the 50 African-American sailors known as the Port Chicago 50, who were unjustly court-martialed by the Navy (H. Con. Res. 16). This resolution is part of the ongoing effort to right the historic injustice of the wrongful conviction.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact.

**RECOMMENDATION**

City Council adopt the attached Resolution in support of House Concurrent Resolution 16.

**BACKGROUND**

On the night of July 17, 1944, two Liberty ships, the SS Quinault Victory and SS E.A. Bryan, were being loaded with explosive incendiary bombs, depth charges, and ammunition. At 10:18pm, two massive explosions at the docks, just seconds apart, lit up the sky.

All 320 of the men on duty that night died instantly, almost two thirds of whom were African American. The Naval Magazine was completely destroyed. The surviving African-American sailors were made to cleanup the grisly scene, their white counterparts were granted a 30-day survivor's leave to return home, heal from their wounds, and visit family and loved ones. The African-American sailors were never granted such a leave.

Days after the gruesome cleanup, and with the war raging on and troops still needing ammunitions overseas, the sailors were sent to Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo. There they learned they would soon be again tasked with loading explosives onto ships. The Navy's investigation into the cause of the disaster was not yet complete, so sailors and commanding officers did not know what precautions to take in order to prevent another disaster. The sailors would be serving under the same leadership responsible for previous safety violations and there would be no changes to procedures, conditions, or safety practices.

On August 9, 1944, when 328 sailors were directed to march toward the ships to load ammunitions, the sailors all stopped in their tracks. When asked if they would resume handling explosives, the majority of them resisted. Some sailors were too traumatized from the events to continue working with explosives. Others wanted to be assigned to different duties. Still others were tormented by the fact that white sailors were granted leave while African-American sailors were not only denied leave but made to clean up body parts after the explosions. They all wanted their lives to be valued the same as the white sailors who were being safeguarded from the dangers of loading munitions.

Rather than train the sailors, bring working conditions up to a safer environment, or reassign white sailors to loading duties, the Naval officers packed 258 of the African-American sailors onto a prison barge and threatened them with death-by-firing-squad if they did not return to loading munitions. After three days on the overcrowded barge, 208 of the sailors reluctantly returned to loading.

In an act of non-violent civil disobedience, fifty (50) of the sailors, now known as the Port Chicago 50, stood firm and refused to continue loading ammunitions until the Navy changed their policies and practices. Although the standard charge for disobeying an order is insubordination, which carried a punishment of forfeiture of pay and dishonorable discharge, Port Chicago leadership pushed for a more severe charge. The men were pronounced guilty of conspiracy to commit mutiny and were indiscriminately sentenced to 15 years of prison and hard labor.

In the months following the verdict, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) publicly advocated for the Port Chicago 50 to be released from prison. In April 1945, on behalf of the 50 sailors, Thurgood Marshall appealed the case directly to the Navy's Judge Advocate General's Office in Washington DC. Although the Navy refused to publicly concede that racial discrimination and bias influenced its judgment of the sailors, just 205 days after Marshall's appeal case was denied, the sailors' sentences were commuted or reduced and they were quietly released from prison. Rather than allow the sailors to go home and join their families, the young men were given the "opportunity to complete their enlistments" serving the Navy overseas performing tasks like sweeping, picking up trash, and other menial tasks.

### **SUBCOMMITTEE FINDINGS**

This item was not presented to a subcommittee.

## **STAFF ANALYSIS**

The City previously adopted two resolutions to support the efforts to exonerate the Port Chicago 50. In the early 1990s, Congressman Miller, along with Congressmen Dellums and Stark, other members of Congress sought a review of the conviction charged against the sailors. In 1992, Congress enacted Congressman Miller's legislation creating the Port Chicago National Memorial at the site. On September 7, 1999 through Resolution 99-9016, the City signed on to memorialize Congress and the President of the United States act to vindicate the sailors unjustly convicted of mutiny and their effort to rectify any mistreatment.

On June 6, 2016 through Resolution 16-13194, the City once again, signed on to California Senate Resolution 69 – Relative to the Port Chicago Disaster which was introduced by Senators Glazer, Hall, Huff, and Mitchell. This resolution also urged the President and Congress to exonerate, clear of the records, restore honor, and rectify federal military mistreatment of the sailors.

H. Con. Res. 16 recognizes the service and sacrifice of those who served and perished due to the explosion at Port Chicago. H. Con. Res. 16 also exonerates the Port Chicago 50 sailors convicted of the charge of mutiny against the United States and all other charges brought against them. It upgrades the general and summary discharges of the Port Chicago sailors to honorable discharges.

The City Council of the City of Pittsburg supports H. Con. Res. 16 and the effort 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.

ATTACHMENTS:     Resolution  
                          Text of H. Con. Res. 16

Report Prepared By: Melaine Venenciano, Director of Records and Council Services