



## Agenda Report

**DATE:** APRIL 18, 2023

**TO:** CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** CITY MANAGER'S OFFICE

**SUBJECT:** CONSIDERATION OF A RESOLUTION SUPPORTING THE LOCAL, STATE, AND FEDERAL EFFORTS TO EXONERATE THE PORT CHICAGO 50

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### **STATEMENT OF ISSUE:**

The City of Walnut Creek has a long history of supporting veterans, through annual Veterans Day and Memorial Day commemorations, and could take another step to show support by adopting a resolution supporting efforts underway to exonerate and restore honor to the Port Chicago 50.

### **RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

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

### **DISCUSSION:**

One of the hidden stories 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 was killed instantly. The total loss of life was devastating; 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. Two hundred fifty-eight 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. They 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

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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.

Residents of Walnut Creek learned more about the story of the Port Chicago 50 during the City’s Memorial Day ceremony in 2021. The niece of a man who survived the blast, who is also the president of the Port Chicago National Memorial, shared stories from that time that were revealing and shocking. Many in the audience were hearing about the tragedy for the first time.

The Port Chicago 50 remains a stain on our military history, and efforts continue to try to correct the record and bring honor to, and rectify the mistreatment of, any sailors who were unjustly blamed and convicted for the disaster. Through adoption of a Resolution (Attachment 1) 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.

**FINANCIAL IMPACTS:**

None

**ALTERNATIVE ACTION:**

The City Council could choose not to adopt a resolution supporting the local, state, and federal efforts to exonerate the Port Chicago 50.

**DOCUMENTS:**

Attachment: Draft Resolution

**CITY COUNCIL ACTION RECOMMENDED:**

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

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