

BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PITTSBURG

In the Matter of:

Supporting House of Representatives)
Concurrent Resolution 16 – Efforts to)
Exonerate the Port Chicago 50)

RESOLUTION NO. 23-

WHEREAS, 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 unjustly court-martialed by the Navy; and

WHEREAS, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Contra Costa County, California, was a vital supply facility for the Navy during World War II, shipping ordinance for use in the Pacific Theater; and

WHEREAS, under the rules governing the Navy at the time, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine was operated as a segregated facility in which undertrained and poorly equipped African-American sailors, under the supervision of white officers, exclusively conducted the hazardous task of loading ammunitions aboard ships; and

WHEREAS, there had been numerous complaints and warnings about the unsafe nature of the loading operations, including the conduct of contests by white officers to achieve the most rapid loading of ships despite the inherent dangers involved with such actions; and

WHEREAS, on the night of July 17, 1944, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine and much of the town of Port Chicago were destroyed by a cataclysmic explosion that killed 320 men, 202 of whom were African-American enlisted men; and

WHEREAS, these losses on a single night represented one-fifth of all African-American naval casualties during World War II; and

WHEREAS, following the catastrophe, none of the African-American survivors were provided survivor leave or other recuperative services provided to the white personnel, including the officers; and

WHEREAS, African-American survivors of the explosion were ordered back to the Port Chicago site to conduct cleanup operations; and

WHEREAS, on August 9, 1944, with no cause determined for the explosion and no additional training having been provided to the African-American loaders, 328 men from the three divisions were ordered to the loading pier at the nearby Mare Island, which served as the Port Chicago replacement facility; and

WHEREAS, many of the men expressed concern about the inadequacy of safety procedures and training, leading to 258 being arrested and confined for three days on a large barge tied to the pier; and

WHEREAS, the confined sailors were threatened with prosecution and potential execution, leading 208 to return to work; and

WHEREAS, the 50 who refused to return to loading operations were subjected to the largest mass mutiny trial in naval history, which resulted, on October 24, 1944, in a conviction on the charge of mutiny and a sentence of up to 15 years imprisonment and dishonorable discharge from the Navy; and

WHEREAS, after appeals and widespread protests in January 1946, which included the participation of future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the Port Chicago 50 were released from prison but their convictions remained on their records; and

WHEREAS, in a 1944 investigation, the United States Navy stated that “there is no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible for the posting of only African-American enlisted personnel to loading the divisions at Port Chicago”; and

WHEREAS, the unfairness of the Port Chicago mutiny prosecution would ultimately serve as one of the catalysts for the 1948 Executive Order requiring desegregation of the Armed Services; and

WHEREAS, the Committee of Natural Resources of the House of Representatives conducted hearings on the Port Chicago case in 1993 and in 1994, Congress, on a bipartisan basis, passed legislation creating the Port Chicago National Memorial as a feature of the National Park Service, including plaques commemorating those who lost their lives at the site in 1944; and

WHEREAS, in 1999, a pardon was granted to one of the few surviving members of the Port Chicago 50, Freddie Meeks, by President William Clinton following a thorough review of the case; and

WHEREAS, since 1999, substantial legal, academic, and journalistic inquiry has documented the inherent racial motivation behind the operations at Port Chicago and the prosecution of the Port Chicago 50; and

WHEREAS, in 2000, Congress approved S. J. Res. 26 to post-humously exonerate Captain Charles, B. McVay III, captain of the USS Indianapolis, for his wrongful court-martialed, and President William Clinton signed that resolution on October 20, 2000; and

WHEREAS, the language of that resolution was enacted as section 545 of the Floyd D. Spence National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2001 (Public Law 106-398), including language that Captain McVay’s military record “should now reflect that he is exonerated for the loss of the USS Indianapolis and so many of her crew”; and

WHEREAS, on December 16, 2015, the Secretary of the Navy, the Honorable Ray Mabus, wrote to the President “strongly support[ing] executive action in favor of the 49 remaining sailors with general court-martialed convictions or the 207 with summary court-martialed convictions... in light of the well documented challenges associated with uniformed service by African-Americans during that era”; and

WHEREAS, on July 17, 2023, the Nation marked the 79th anniversary of the Port Chicago disaster, and the unjust racial motivated convictions remain on the records of the Port Chicago 50.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the City Council of the City of Pittsburg supports House of Representatives Concurrent Resolution 16 which recognizes the service and sacrifice of those who served and perished and also exonerates the Port Chicago 50 who were convicted of the charge of mutiny and upgrades the general and summary discharges of the Port Chicago 50 to honorable discharges.

PASSED AND ADOPTED by the City Council of the City of Pittsburg, at a regular meeting on the 7th day of August 2023, by the following vote:

AYES:

NOES:

ABSTAINED:

ABSENT:

Shanelle Scales-Preston, Mayor

ATTEST:

Alice E. Evenson, City Clerk