

Senate Resolution No. 69

Introduced by Senators Glazer, Hall, Huff, and Mitchell

Relative to the Port Chicago Disaster

WHEREAS, On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago naval base on the Sacramento River in 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, located 1.5 miles away; and

WHEREAS, Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships was 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; and

WHEREAS, The two ships and the large loading pier were totally annihilated and an estimated \$12,000,000 in property damage was caused by the huge blast; and

WHEREAS, 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; and

WHEREAS, The specific cause of the explosion was never officially established by a Court of Inquiry, in effect clearing the officers-in-charge of any responsibility for the disaster and, insofar as any human cause was invoked, laying the burden of blame on the shoulders of the African American enlisted men who died in the explosion; and

WHEREAS, Following the incident, many of the surviving African American sailors were transferred to nearby Camp Shoemaker where they remained until July 31, 1944, when two of the divisions were transferred to naval barracks in Vallejo near Mare Island and another division returned to Port Chicago to help with cleaning up and rebuilding the base; and

WHEREAS, Many of these men were in a state of shock, troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion; however, they were provided no psychiatric counseling or medical screening, except for those who were obviously physically injured; none of the men, even

those who had been hospitalized with injuries, were granted survivor leaves to visit their families before being reassigned to regular duties; and none of these survivors were called to testify at the Court of Inquiry; and

WHEREAS, Captain Merrill T. Kinne, Officer-in-Charge of Port Chicago, issued a statement praising the African American enlisted men and stating that “the men displayed creditable coolness and bravery under those emergency conditions”; and

WHEREAS, After the disaster, white sailors were given 30 days’ leave to visit their families—according to survivors, this was the standard for sailors involved in a disaster—while only African American sailors were ordered back to work the next day to clean and remove human remains; and

WHEREAS, After the disaster, the preparation of Mare Island for the arrival of African American sailors included moving the barracks of white sailors away from the loading area in order to be clear of the ships being loaded in case of another explosion; and

WHEREAS, The survivors and new personnel who later were ordered to return to loading ammunition expressed their opposition, citing the possibility of another explosion; the first confrontation occurred on August 9, 1944, when 328 men from three divisions were ordered out to the loading pier; the great majority of the men balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and confined for three days on a large barge tethered to the pier; and

WHEREAS, Fifty of these men were selected as the ringleaders and charged with mutiny, and on October 24, 1944, after only 80 minutes of a military court, all 50 men were found guilty of mutiny—10 were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 24 sentenced to 12 years, 11 sentenced to 10 years, and 5 sentenced to 8 years; and all were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy; this was the largest mass mutiny trial in the United States to this day; and

WHEREAS, After a massive outcry the next year, in January 1946, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison and “exiled” for one year overseas before returning to their families; and

WHEREAS, In a 1994 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 divisions at Port Chicago”; and

WHEREAS, In the 1994 investigation, the United States Navy, prompted by Members of Congress, admitted that the routine assignment

of only African American enlisted personnel to manual labor was clearly motivated by race; and

WHEREAS, The United States Congress reduced the death benefit to those killed in Port Chicago from \$5,000, the normal amount given, to \$3,000, simply because the sailors were African American; and

WHEREAS, In many cases, families of sailors killed in the disaster were never told they were entitled to consideration for the death of their relative; and

WHEREAS, In 2009, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine Memorial site was designated as part of the National Park Service; and

WHEREAS, Despite the gross injustice faced by these sailors, only one of the men charged with mutiny was given a pardon by President Clinton in 1998; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate of the State of California, That the Senate urges the President and the Congress of the United States to take all necessary action 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, which occurred in the town of Port Chicago, California, in 1944; and be it further

Resolved, That the Senate further urges the President and the Congress of the United States to take action to ensure that the treatment of sailors by the United States Military after the Port Chicago disaster is rectified by providing for the full exoneration of all those who were wrongfully court-martialed and having the military records of those involved cleared of any wrongdoing or discharge references that were other than honorable, regardless of whether those sailors are alive or deceased; and be it further

Resolved, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of this resolution to the President and Vice President of the United States, to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, to the Majority Leader of the Senate, and to each Senator and Representative from California in the Congress of the United States.

Senate Resolution No. 69 read and adopted by the Senate June 23, 2016.

Attest: _____
Secretary of the Senate