



August 31, 2022

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Alex Padilla
United States Senate
112 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
728 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable James Inhofe
Ranking Member, Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
205 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

RE: Letter of Support Seeking Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50

Dear Senators Feinstein, Padilla, Reed and Inhofe,

On behalf of Citizens for Historical Equity we write today to share our support for the exoneration of the Port Chicago 50. We support the efforts to rectify the mistreatment by the military of those sailors, including the full exoneration of all who were court-martialed for their legacy, families' and communities' honor. We further stand in support of having the military records of these men cleared of any court judgment or less-than-honorable discharge.

On July 17, 1944, there was a large waterfront munitions explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine which killed more than 320 sailors, over 200 of whom were Black. The explosion also injured 390 others, including 226 African American enlisted men. Prior to the explosion, these men were working significant hours with munitions continuously being loaded despite being provided little to no training. This incident represents nearly 15 percent of all African American casualties during the entirety of World War II. It was the worst home front disaster of the war. Despite the significant loss of life and injury, as well as \$12 million in property damages, the specific cause of the explosion was never officially determined by a court of inquiry. Instead, the blame was placed on the shoulders of the men who died in the explosion. When ordered to return to loading munitions, over two-hundred sailors refused to return to work due to the unsafe working conditions which resulted in the explosion. These sailors courageously advocated for safety for themselves and others in requesting adequate training and equipment before

returning to work. In response, the Navy identified fifty Black sailors as the leadership of the organized action. The Navy unjustly charged these individuals with mutiny. This decision resulted in one of the most significant mutiny trials in U.S. military history. The fifty sailors were supported by then NAACP Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall who through the press raised the racist nature of the trial and called into question the Navy's segregationist policies. As an outcome of the trial, the Port Chicago 50 were wrongfully convicted of mutiny. They were sentenced to years in prison and hard labor. Following the guilty verdict, Thurgood Marshall began a national campaign to spread the word about the event and the fifty sailors who were wrongfully convicted. His advocacy gained the support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and brought much needed attention to the injustices of segregation. Though his appeal of their convictions was officially denied. The following year, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison, the remaining three served additional months. During and after the trial, questions were raised about the fairness and legality of the court-martial proceedings. The United States Navy reconvened the courts-martial board in 1945. Unfortunately, the board failed to reverse the decision.

In 1994, the National Park Service's Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial was dedicated to the lives lost in the tragic event. The memorial serves as the final resting place for the sailors who died. It is located on the waterfront where the explosion occurred. Inland from the memorial, the Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50 covers 2,500 acres. The regional park will honor the courage and legacy of the Port Chicago 50 and all those who sacrificed their lives in our nation's ongoing struggle for social justice, racial equality and workers' rights. The inland former Naval property was transferred to the East Bay Regional Park District through a Public Benefit Conveyance on July 19, 2019.

The bravery of these men directly led to the desegregation of the U.S. Armed Services and is now viewed as a catalyst for the civil rights movement. As the civil rights movement forced our nation to move toward correcting the errors of the past, it is time to exonerate the fifty men whose bravery led to a more just and inclusive military.

Increasing in importance every day, the fifty men whose bravery led to a more just and inclusive military require exoneration. We look forward to working together in the months ahead to make this a reality.

Sincerely,

Citizens for Historical Equity

CC: The Honorable United States Vice President Kamala Harris
The Honorable United State Representative Mark DeSaulnier
The Honorable United States Representative Barbara Lee
East Bay Regional Park District Board of Directors
East Bay Regional Park District General Manager Sabrina Landreth