

FRIENDS OF  
PORT CHICAGO  
NATIONAL  
MEMORIAL

portchicagomemorial.org



VIA FEDERAL EXPRESS

September 7, 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: Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50**

Dear Senators Feinstein, Padilla, Reed and Inhofe:

I am writing on behalf of the Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial (Friends of Port Chicago), the official fundraising partner of the National Park Service for the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, to express our support for the exoneration of the "Port Chicago 50." The House of Representatives recently passed H.R. 7900 (The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023) and the bill has been received by the Senate. This bill contains an important provision, Section 529D, which expresses Congressional support for exoneration and for having the military records of these courageous men upgraded to honorable discharges. We urge that the Senate adopt H.R. 7900, and if the Senate chooses to enact a different version of this bill, we urge that it contain the text of Section 529D.

**Background.** On July 17, 1944, there was a massive waterfront explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine, which was a large munitions depot where U.S. ships bound for the Pacific Theater were loaded with munitions. The explosion killed more than 320 sailors and injured 390 others. Most of the dead and injured were young African Americans. This tragedy was the worst home-front disaster of World War II and involved nearly 15 percent of all African American casualties during the entirety of the war.

Before the explosion, sailors were used as stevedores, who worked loading ships around the clock, under extremely dangerous conditions and without training in how to handle or load the munitions. The officers demanded speed, pitting one crew against another in competitions and placing wagers on the



outcome. After the explosion, the surviving seamen were ordered to clean up the disaster, a gruesome and dispiriting task, and then after the cleanup, they were ordered back to loading munitions.

More than 200 men initially refused to return to work, due to the unsafe conditions and the lack of training. After the Navy threatened mutiny charges, most of the men complied, but fifty men – who became known as the Port Chicago 50 – refused to return to loading munitions. These men were tried in courts martial at Yerba Buena Island in the fall of 1944. The defendants were convicted of mutiny and sentenced to up to 15 years of hard labor followed by a dishonorable discharge. Most of the men served 2-3 years, before the Navy commuted their sentences.

The fifty sailors were supported by then-NAACP Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall, who through the press highlighted the discriminatory nature of the trial and called into question the Navy's segregationist policies. Instead of individual representation, each of five defense attorneys represented ten different defendants. Evidence of the dangerous working conditions was excluded from the trial, even though those conditions was the impetus for the sailors' refusal to return to work. And the court's deliberations for such a large mutiny trial so brief it raised concerns about the basic fairness of the proceeding.

Thurgood Marshall launched a national campaign on behalf of the men, and his advocacy gained the support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Although the appeal of the men's convictions was officially denied, the matter focused increasing attention on the unfair trial proceedings and more broadly on the discriminatory conditions in the Navy. In response, the Navy released most of the men from prison after commuting their sentences.

The events at Port Chicago represent an important moment in our nation's civil rights movement. The Navy was desegregated in 1946, followed by desegregation of the remainder of the armed services in 1948.

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. In 2009, the site was designated as a unit of the national park system.

But the mutiny convictions remain.

**Exoneration.** It is time to correct the historical record and exonerate the Port Chicago 50. In 2015, then-Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus, in supporting the request by Senator Feinstein and then-Senator Boxer, recommended executive action on behalf of the Port Chicago 50. While this recommendation for executive action did not come to fruition, there is clear precedent for action by



Congress. In 2001, Captain Charles B. McVay III, captain of the USS Indianapolis, was exonerated of his wrongful court martial and the Navy inserted a letter into his military record reflecting his exoneration, as directed through a National Defense Authorization Act,

We ask the same for the Port Chicago 50. Fortunately, the House of Representatives passed a bill in July that seeks to advance this important and long-overdue goal. As stated in Section 529D of H.R. 7900:

SEC. 529D. SENSE OF CONGRESS REGARDING THE PORT CHICAGO 50.

It is the sense of Congress that--

- (1) the American people should recognize the role of racial bias in the prosecution and convictions of the Port Chicago 50 following the deadliest home front disaster in World War II;
- (2) the military records of each of the Port Chicago 50 should reflect such exoneration of any and all charges brought against them in the aftermath of the explosion; and
- (3) the Secretary of the Navy should upgrade the general and summary discharges of each of the Port Chicago 50 sailors to honorable discharges.

We urge that the Senate pass the House bill and, if it chooses to pass a different version of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, that the Senate include the crucial text above. We greatly appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marc R. Bruner".

Marc Bruner  
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cc: The Honorable United States Vice President Kamala Harris  
The Honorable United State Representative Mark DeSaulnier  
The Honorable United States Representative Barbara Lee  
K. Lynn Berry, Superintendent, National Park Service