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California State Senate

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NINTH SENATE DISTRICT



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November 15, 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 Full Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50

Dear Senators Feinstein, Padilla, Reed and Inhofe,

I am writing to support the exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 and the efforts to rectify the mistreatment by the military of those sailors, including the full exoneration of all who were court-martialed. I also support 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 that killed more than 320 sailors, of whom over 200 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 little to no training. This deadly incident represented nearly 15% 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 ammunitions, over 200 sailors refused to return to work due to the unsafe working conditions. These sailors courageously advocated for the safety of themselves and others and requested adequate training and equipment before returning to work. In response, the Navy identified 50 Black sailors as the leadership of the organized action and charged these individuals with mutiny.

This decision resulted in one of the most significant mutiny trials in U.S. military history. The 50 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. The Port Chicago 50 were then wrongly convicted of mutiny and 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

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50 sailors wrongly convicted. His advocacy gained the support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and brought much-needed attention to the injustices of segregation.

Though the appeal of the Port Chicago 50 convictions was officially denied, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison the following year, with the remaining three serving additional months. During and after the trial, questions were raised about the fairness and legality of the court-martial proceedings. The 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 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 honors 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 the Port Chicago 50 led to the desegregation of the 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 50 men whose bravery led to a more just and inclusive military.

For these reasons, I strongly urge you to support the full exoneration of the Port Chicago 50.

Sincerely,

Nancy Skinner
State Senator, District 9

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