

Introduced by Senator Wright

January 26, 2010

Senate Joint Resolution No. 21—Relative to the Port Chicago disaster.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SJR 21, as introduced, Wright. Port Chicago disaster.

This measure would memorialize Congress and the President of the United States to act to vindicate the sailors unjustly blamed for, and the sailors convicted of mutiny following, the Port Chicago disaster, and to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those sailors, as specified.

Fiscal committee: no.

1 WHEREAS, On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vessels
2 loading ammunition at the Port Chicago naval base on the
3 Sacramento River in California were suddenly engulfed in a
4 gigantic explosion, the incredible blast of which wrecked the naval
5 base and heavily damaged the town of Port Chicago, located 1.5
6 miles away; and

7 WHEREAS, Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships was
8 killed instantly—some 320 American naval personnel, 200 of
9 whom were African American enlisted men; and another 390
10 military and civilian personnel were injured, including 226 African
11 American enlisted men; and

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

15 WHEREAS, This single, stunning disaster accounted for nearly
16 one-fifth of all African American naval casualties during the whole
17 of World War II; and

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

7 WHEREAS, Following the incident, many of the surviving
8 African American sailors were transferred to nearby Camp
9 Shoemaker where they remained until July 31, when two of the
10 divisions were transferred to naval barracks in Vallejo near Mare
11 Island; another division, which was also at Camp Shoemaker until
12 July 31, returned to Port Chicago to help with the cleaning up and
13 rebuilding of the base; and

14 WHEREAS, Many of these men were in a state of shock,
15 troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion; however,
16 they were provided no psychiatric counseling or medical screening,
17 except for those who were obviously physically injured; none of
18 the men, even those who had been hospitalized with injuries, were
19 granted survivor leaves to visit their families before being
20 reassigned to regular duties; and none of these survivors were
21 called to testify at the Court of Inquiry; and

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

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

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

36 WHEREAS, The survivors and new personnel who later were
37 ordered to return to loading ammunition expressed their opposition,
38 citing the possibility of another explosion; the first confrontation
39 occurred on August 9 when 328 men from three divisions were
40 ordered out to the loading pier; the great majority of the men

1 balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and confined for three
2 days on a large barge tiered to the pier; and

3 WHEREAS, Fifty of these men were selected as the ring-leaders
4 and charged with mutiny, and on October 24, 1944, after only 80
5 minutes of a military court, all 50 men were found guilty of
6 mutiny—10 were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 24 sentenced to
7 12 years, 11 sentenced to 10 years, and 5 sentenced to 8 years; and
8 all were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy; and this
9 was the largest mass mutiny trial in the United States to this day;
10 and

11 WHEREAS, After a massive outcry the next year, in January
12 1946, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison and
13 “exiled” for one year overseas before returning to their families;
14 and

15 WHEREAS, In a 1994 investigation, the United States Navy
16 stated that “there is no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible
17 for the posting of only African American enlisted personnel to
18 loading divisions at Port Chicago”; and

19 WHEREAS, In the 1994 investigation, the United States Navy,
20 prompted by Members of Congress, admitted that the routine
21 assignment of only African American enlisted personnel to manual
22 labor was clearly motivated by race; and

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

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

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

33 *Resolved by the Senate and the Assembly of the State of*
34 *California, jointly*, That the Legislature of the State of California
35 respectfully memorializes the Congress and the President of the
36 United States to act to vindicate the sailors unjustly blamed for,
37 and the sailors convicted of mutiny following, the Port Chicago
38 disaster, and to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those
39 sailors; and be it further

1 *Resolved*, That the Legislature respectfully memorializes the
2 Congress and the President of the United States to take the
3 necessary actions to ensure those sailors’ treatment is rectified by
4 the following:

5 (1) A survey is conducted to ensure that all families of sailors
6 that are eligible to receive benefits have received notification of
7 eligibility.

8 (2) Full compensation is provided on behalf of the sailors’
9 families that were not paid the benefit or only paid part of the
10 benefit, including appropriate interest on that compensation.

11 (3) Full exoneration to all who were court-martialed, whether
12 alive or deceased, is granted, including, but not limited to, having
13 the military records of these men cleared of any court judgment
14 or less than honorable discharge.

15 (4) The remains of one of the unnamed graves from the Military
16 Cemetery at San Bruno, where unidentified sailors were placed,
17 are taken to Arlington National Cemetery and placed in a marked
18 grave with full names to commemorate the event and to represent
19 all those who died at Port Chicago.

20 (5) A ship is named the “Port Chicago.”

21 (6) The survivors and their families are invited to the White
22 House for a recognition ceremony; and be it further

23 *Resolved*, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of
24 this resolution to the President and Vice President of the United
25 States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and each
26 Senator and Representative from California in the Congress of the
27 United States, and to the author for appropriate distribution.

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30 **CORRECTIONS:**

31 **Text—Pages 1, 2, 3 and 4.**

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