

Assembly Joint Resolution

No. 33

Introduced by Assembly Members Bonilla and Thurmond

March 7, 2016

Assembly Joint Resolution No. 33—Relative to the Port Chicago 50.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AJR 33, as introduced, Bonilla. Port Chicago disaster: African American Sailors of the United States Navy.

This measure would respectfully urge the recognition that the trial and conviction of the 50 African American sailors of the United States Navy for mutiny in connection with their service at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord, California, during World War II were wrongfully pursued because of racial prejudice and respectfully urge the Congress of the United States to publicly exonerate those 50 African American sailors of the United States Navy in order to further aid in healing the racial divide that continues to exist in the United States.

Fiscal committee: no.

- 1 WHEREAS, The deadliest home-front disaster of World War
2 II occurred at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord,
3 California, on July 17, 1944, when an explosion at the naval facility
4 killed or wounded 710 people, 435 of whom were African
5 American; and
6 WHEREAS, This single disaster accounted for more than 15
7 percent of all African American naval casualties during World
8 War II; and
9 WHEREAS, After the disaster, 258 African American survivors
10 of the explosion refused to resume the loading and unloading of

1 ammunition at the naval facility, citing inadequate training and
2 the use of unsafe practices; and

3 WHEREAS, According to a United States Navy report, “the
4 actual work of loading ammunition and explosives aboard the ships
5 was performed exclusively by Afro-Americans under the
6 supervision of white officers and Afro-American petty officers”
7 and “the routine assignment of Afro-American enlisted personnel
8 to manual labor was clearly motivated by race and premised upon
9 the mistaken notion that they were intellectually inferior and thus
10 incapable of meeting the same standards as their white
11 counterparts”; and

12 WHEREAS, One of the ships was loaded with around 4,600
13 tons of ammunition and high explosives, some of which weighed
14 650 pounds with activating mechanisms or fuses installed; and

15 WHEREAS, At that time there was no formal training in safe
16 methods of ammunition handling given to enlisted men, and the
17 United States Navy failed to adequately provide these men with
18 the tools necessary to operate under safe working conditions, even
19 after the explosion occurred; and

20 WHEREAS, Weeks before the explosion, the longshoremen’s
21 union warned the United States Navy that there would be a disaster
22 if the Navy continued to use untrained seamen to load ammunition
23 and offered to send experienced longshoremen to train Navy
24 recruits in safe handling of ammunition, but this offer from the
25 union was ignored by the United States Navy; and

26 WHEREAS, Subsequent research has confirmed the use of
27 unsafe ammunition loading methods at the naval facility at the
28 time and has recognized the existence of pervasive racial prejudice
29 in the United States Navy during World War II; and

30 WHEREAS, As documented in the book “The Port Chicago
31 Mutiny” by Dr. Robert L. Allen, a worker described Port Chicago
32 as a “slave outfit,” adding that “we were considered a cheap labor
33 force from the beginning”; and

34 WHEREAS, White officers would encourage African American
35 sailors to compete while loading ammunition and explosives while
36 those officers placed bets among themselves; and

37 WHEREAS, Following the explosion, many of the African
38 American survivors expected to be granted survivors’ leave before
39 being reassigned to regular duty, but that leave was not granted,
40 even for those who had been hospitalized, and all African American

1 men were sent back to work loading ammunition under the same
2 officers as before; and

3 WHEREAS, White officers were permitted to go home for
4 30-day leaves; and

5 WHEREAS, Fifty sailors of the United States Navy, all African
6 American men, ultimately were tried and convicted of mutiny for
7 failing to obey orders to resume loading activities; and

8 WHEREAS, A mutiny is active revolt with the intent of taking
9 charge, but a refusal to work is a passive act of resistance without
10 intent to seize power; and

11 WHEREAS, Thurgood Marshall, then a chief counsel for the
12 NAACP, was reported to state he saw no reason why the men
13 should be tried for mutiny, which implies a mass conspiracy, rather
14 than on lesser charges of individual subordination and blasted the
15 trial by stating that the defendants were being tried for mutiny
16 “solely because of their race and color”; and

17 WHEREAS, The United States Navy has concluded that there
18 can be “no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible for the
19 posting of Afro-American enlisted personnel to the loading
20 divisions at Port Chicago,” and similar racial prejudicial bias has
21 been documented in the conduct of the trial that resulted in the
22 court-martial of the sailors at Port Chicago; and

23 WHEREAS, Virtually all of the convicted sailors were released
24 from prison early in 1946 and were given a general discharge from
25 the Navy “under honorable conditions,” and the United States
26 Navy announced at the time that race would no longer be a factor
27 in filling its jobs; and

28 WHEREAS, In 1999, Freddie Meeks was pardoned by President
29 Bill Clinton in recognition of the injustice he suffered as one of
30 the convicted sailors, and at the time of his pardon, Mr. Meeks
31 said, “After all these years, the world should know what happened
32 at Port Chicago. It should be cleared up that we did not commit
33 mutiny, and we were charged with that because of our race”; and

34 WHEREAS, In 2003, the National Park Service dedicated the
35 Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial at the disaster
36 site, which serves not only as a tribute to the 320 men who died
37 in that World War II explosion, but also as an acknowledgment
38 of that event as the touchstone for desegregation in the military
39 and the beginning of civil rights for all Americans; and

1 WHEREAS, In a July 17, 2014, letter recognizing the 70th
2 anniversary of the tragedy, President Barack Obama acknowledged
3 the African American sailors at Port Chicago, stating, “Faced with
4 tremendous obstacles, they fought on two fronts – for freedom
5 abroad and equality at home”; and

6 WHEREAS, All of the sailors involved in the Port Chicago
7 cases have passed away, but their family members and friends
8 continue to request that the sailors be cleared of all charges; now,
9 therefore, be it

10 *Resolved by the Assembly and the Senate of the State of*
11 *California, jointly*, That the Legislature respectfully urges the
12 recognition that the trial and conviction of the 50 African American
13 sailors of the United States Navy for mutiny in connection with
14 their service at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord,
15 California, during World War II were wrongfully pursued because
16 of racial prejudice, as evidenced by the racial bias in the United
17 States Navy’s original findings in their cases and the different
18 treatment afforded to the convicted sailors’ white counterparts and
19 officers; and be it further

20 *Resolved*, That the Legislature respectfully urges the Congress
21 of the United States to publicly exonerate the 50 African American
22 sailors of the United States Navy who were convicted of mutiny
23 in connection with their service at the Port Chicago Naval
24 Magazine in Concord, California, during World War II in order
25 to further aid in healing the racial divide that continues to exist in
26 the United States; and be it further

27 *Resolved*, That the Legislature respectfully urges the Congress
28 of the United States to take action to retroactively convert the
29 general discharge granted to each of the 50 African American
30 sailors to an honorable discharge; and be it further

31 *Resolved*, That the Chief Clerk of the Assembly transmit copies
32 of this resolution to the President and the Vice President of the
33 United States, to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, to
34 the Majority Leader of the Senate, to each Senator and
35 Representative from California in the Congress of the United
36 States.

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