

Assembly Joint Resolution No. 33

RESOLUTION CHAPTER 93

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

[Filed with Secretary of State July 11, 2016.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AJR 33, 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 was wrongfully pursued because of racial prejudice and would 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.

WHEREAS, The deadliest home-front disaster of World War II occurred at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord, California, on July 17, 1944, when an explosion at the naval facility killed or wounded 710 people, 435 of whom were African American; and

WHEREAS, This single disaster accounted for more than 15 percent of all African American naval casualties during World War II; and

WHEREAS, After the disaster, 258 African American survivors of the explosion refused to resume the loading and unloading of ammunition at the naval facility, citing inadequate training and the use of unsafe practices; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS, Following the explosion, many of the African American survivors expected to be granted survivors' leave before being reassigned to regular duty, but that leave was not granted, even for those who had been hospitalized, and all African American men were sent back to work loading ammunition under the same officers as before; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS, In 1999, Freddie Meeks was pardoned by President Bill Clinton in recognition of the injustice he suffered as one of the convicted sailors, and at the time of his pardon, Mr. Meeks said, "After all these years,

the world should know what happened at Port Chicago. It should be cleared up that we did not commit mutiny, and we were charged with that because of our race”; and

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

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

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

Resolved by the Assembly and the Senate of the State of California, jointly, That the Legislature respectfully urges 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, as evidenced by the racial bias in the United States Navy’s original findings in their cases and the different treatment afforded to the convicted sailors’ white counterparts and officers; and be it further

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

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

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