

Introduced by Senators Glazer, Hall, Huff, and Mitchell

March 15, 2016

Senate Resolution No. 69—Relative to the Port Chicago Disaster.

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 was the worst home-front disaster of the war;
18 and

19 WHEREAS, The specific cause of the explosion was never
20 officially established by a Court of Inquiry, in effect clearing the
21 officers-in-charge of any responsibility for the disaster and, insofar
22 as any human cause was invoked, laying the burden of blame on
23 the shoulders of the African American enlisted men who died in
24 the explosion; and

25 WHEREAS, Following the incident, many of the surviving
26 African American sailors were transferred to nearby Camp

1 Shoemaker where they remained until July 31, 1944, when two of
2 the divisions were transferred to naval barracks in Vallejo near
3 Mare Island and another division returned to Port Chicago to help
4 with cleaning up and rebuilding the base; and

5 WHEREAS, Many of these men were in a state of shock,
6 troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion; however,
7 they were provided no psychiatric counseling or medical screening,
8 except for those who were obviously physically injured; none of
9 the men, even those who had been hospitalized with injuries, were
10 granted survivor leaves to visit their families before being
11 reassigned to regular duties; and none of these survivors were
12 called to testify at the Court of Inquiry; and

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

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

22 WHEREAS, After the disaster, the preparation of Mare Island
23 for the arrival of African American sailors included moving the
24 barracks of white sailors away from the loading area in order to
25 be clear of the ships being loaded in case of another explosion;
26 and

27 WHEREAS, The survivors and new personnel who later were
28 ordered to return to loading ammunition expressed their opposition,
29 citing the possibility of another explosion; the first confrontation
30 occurred on August 9, 1944, when 328 men from three divisions
31 were ordered out to the loading pier; the great majority of the men
32 balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and confined for three
33 days on a large barge tethered to the pier; and

34 WHEREAS, Fifty of these men were selected as the ringleaders
35 and charged with mutiny, and on October 24, 1944, after only 80
36 minutes of a military court, all 50 men were found guilty of
37 mutiny—10 were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 24 sentenced to
38 12 years, 11 sentenced to 10 years, and 5 sentenced to 8 years; and
39 all were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy; this was
40 the largest mass mutiny trial in the United States to this day; and

1 WHEREAS, After a massive outcry the next year, in January,
2 1946, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison and
3 “exiled” for one year overseas before returning to their families;
4 and

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

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

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

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

20 WHEREAS, In 2010, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine
21 Memorial site was designated as part of the National Park Service;
22 and

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

26 *Resolved by the Senate of the State of California*, That the Senate
27 urges the President and the Congress of the United States to take
28 all necessary action to restore honor to, and rectify the mistreatment
29 by the United States Military of, any sailors who were unjustly
30 blamed for and convicted of mutiny after the Port Chicago disaster,
31 which occurred in the town of Port Chicago, California, in 1944;
32 and be it further

33 *Resolved*, That the Senate further urges the President and the
34 Congress of the United States to take action to ensure that the
35 treatment of sailors by the United States Military after the Port
36 Chicago disaster is rectified by providing for the full exoneration
37 of all those who were wrongfully court-martialed and having the
38 military records of those involved cleared of any wrongdoing or
39 discharge references that were other than honorable, regardless of
40 whether those sailors are alive or deceased; and be it further

1 *Resolved*, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of
2 this resolution to the President and Vice President of the United
3 States, to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, to the
4 Majority Leader of the Senate, and to each Senator and
5 Representative from California in the Congress of the United
6 States.

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