

Senate Joint Resolution

No. 21

Introduced by Senator Wright

(Coauthors: Assembly Members Adams, Ammiano, Anderson, Arambula, Bass, Beall, Bill Berryhill, Tom Berryhill, Block, Blumenfield, Bradford, Brownley, Buchanan, Caballero, Charles Calderon, Carter, Chesbro, Conway, Cook, Coto, Davis, De La Torre, De León, DeVore, Eng, Evans, Feuer, Fletcher, Fong, Fuentes, Furutani, Gaines, Galgiani, Garrick, Gilmore, Hagman, Harkey, Hayashi, Hernandez, Hill, Huber, Huffman, Jeffries, Knight, Lieu, Logue, Bonnie Lowenthal, Ma, Mendoza, Miller, Monning, Nava, Nestande, Niello, Nielsen, John A. Pérez, V. Manuel Pérez, Portantino, Ruskin, Salas, Saldaña, Silva, Smyth, Solorio, Audra Strickland, Swanson, Torlakson, Torres, Torrico, Tran, Villines, and Yamada)

January 26, 2010

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

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SJR 21, as amended, 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

1 base and heavily damaged the town of Port Chicago, located 1.5
2 miles away; and

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

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

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

14 WHEREAS, The specific cause of the explosion was never
15 officially established by a Court of Inquiry, in effect clearing the
16 officers-in-charge of any responsibility for the disaster and insofar
17 as any human cause was invoked, laid the burden of blame on the
18 shoulders of the African American enlisted men who died in the
19 explosion; and

20 WHEREAS, Following the incident, many of the surviving
21 African American sailors were transferred to nearby Camp
22 Shoemaker where they remained until July 31, when two of the
23 divisions were transferred to naval barracks in Vallejo near Mare
24 Island; another division, which was also at Camp Shoemaker until
25 July 31, returned to Port Chicago to help with the cleaning up and
26 rebuilding of the base; and

27 WHEREAS, Many of these men were in a state of shock,
28 troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion; however,
29 they were provided no psychiatric counseling or medical screening,
30 except for those who were obviously physically injured; none of
31 the men, even those who had been hospitalized with injuries, were
32 granted survivor leaves to visit their families before being
33 reassigned to regular duties; and none of these survivors were
34 called to testify at the Court of Inquiry; and

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

39 WHEREAS, After the disaster, white sailors were given 30
40 days’ leave to visit their families—according to survivors, this was

1 the standard for soldiers involved in a disaster—while only African
2 American sailors were ordered back to work the next day to clean
3 and remove human remains; and

4 WHEREAS, After the disaster, the preparation of Mare Island
5 for the arrival of African American sailors included moving the
6 barracks of white sailors away from the loading area in order to
7 be clear of the ships being loaded in case of another explosion;
8 and

9 WHEREAS, The survivors and new personnel who later were
10 ordered to return to loading ammunition expressed their opposition,
11 citing the possibility of another explosion; the first confrontation
12 occurred on August 9 when 328 men from three divisions were
13 ordered out to the loading pier; the great majority of the men
14 balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and confined for three
15 days on a large barge tied to the pier; and

16 WHEREAS, Fifty of these men were selected as the ring-leaders
17 and charged with mutiny, and on October 24, 1944, after only 80
18 minutes of a military court, all 50 men were found guilty of
19 mutiny—10 were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 24 sentenced to
20 12 years, 11 sentenced to 10 years, and 5 sentenced to 8 years; and
21 all were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy; and this
22 was the largest mass mutiny trial in the United States to this day;
23 and

24 WHEREAS, After a massive outcry the next year, in January
25 1946, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison and
26 “exiled” for one year overseas before returning to their families;
27 and

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

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

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

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

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

7 *Resolved by the Senate and the Assembly of the State of*
8 *California, jointly,* That the Legislature of the State of California
9 respectfully memorializes the Congress and the President of the
10 United States to act to vindicate the sailors unjustly blamed for,
11 and the sailors convicted of mutiny following, the Port Chicago
12 disaster, and to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those
13 sailors; and be it further

14 *Resolved,* That the Legislature respectfully memorializes the
15 Congress and the President of the United States to take the
16 necessary actions to ensure those sailors' treatment is rectified by
17 the following:

18 (1) A survey is conducted to ensure that all families of sailors
19 that are eligible to receive benefits have received notification of
20 eligibility.

21 (2) Full compensation is provided on behalf of the sailors'
22 families that were not paid the benefit or only paid part of the
23 benefit, including appropriate interest on that compensation.

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

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

33 (5) A ship is named the "Port Chicago."

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

36 *Resolved,* That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of
37 this resolution to the President and Vice President of the United
38 States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and each

- 1 Senator and Representative from California in the Congress of the
- 2 United States, and to the author for appropriate distribution.

O