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SJR-15 Port Chicago 50. (2021-2022)

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Senate Joint Resolution No. 15

CHAPTER 112

Relative to the Port Chicago 50.

[Filed with Secretary of State August 19, 2022.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SJR 15, Glazer. Port Chicago 50.

This measure would respectfully urge the President of the United States and the Congress of the United States to take action to restore honor to the sailors unjustly blamed for, and the sailors convicted of mutiny following, the disaster at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord, California during World War II and to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those sailors, including the full exoneration of those who were convicted at court-martial.

Fiscal Committee: no

WHEREAS, On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago naval base on Suisun Bay, at the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers in California, were suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion, which wrecked the naval base and heavily damaged the Town of Port Chicago, located 1.5 miles away; and

WHEREAS, Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships was killed instantly, some 320 American naval personnel, two-thirds of whom were African American enlisted men. Another 390 military and civilian personnel were injured, including 226 African American enlisted men; and

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

WHEREAS, This single, stunning disaster accounted for nearly 15 percent of all African American naval casualties during the whole of World War II and was the worst homefront disaster of the war; and

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

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

WHEREAS, Many of these men were in a state of shock, troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion; however, they were provided no psychiatric counseling or medical screening, except for those who were obviously physically injured. None of the men, even those who had been hospitalized with injuries, were granted survivor leave to visit their families before being reassigned to regular duties, and none of these survivors were called to testify at the court of inquiry; and

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

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

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

WHEREAS, The survivors and new personnel who later were ordered to return to loading ammunition expressed their opposition, citing the possibility of another explosion. The first confrontation occurred on August 9, when 328 men from 3 divisions were ordered out to the loading pier. The great majority of the men balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and confined for 3 days on a large barge tethered to the pier; and

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

WHEREAS, Thurgood Marshall, working as special counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, watched some of the court-martial proceedings and subsequently began a publicity campaign to gather public support for the release of the men. Marshall additionally obtained permission from each of the 50 men to appeal their case to the Judge Advocate General of the Navy; and

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

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS, In 2010, the Port Chicago memorial site was designated as part of the National Park Service; and

WHEREAS, In 2019, the United States Navy transferred a park to the East Bay Regional Park District after a “decades-long effort” to turn the area into a park; and

WHEREAS, In 2021, the East Bay Regional Park District’s board of directors unanimously renamed the park the Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50, the first regional park in the County of Contra Costa to be named after a Black person; and

WHEREAS, The City of Concord endorsed the renaming of the park at its May 25, 2021, city council meeting; and

WHEREAS, The newly named park is planned to include a joint visitor center with the National Park Service that will contain historic information about the Port Chicago 50 and will commemorate the role that Thurgood Marshall played in defending the Port Chicago 50, in addition to his efforts in the desegregation of the United States Armed Forces; and

WHEREAS, United States Representative Mark DeSaulnier has requested \$10,000,000 in federal funds for this visitor center; and

WHEREAS, The entire site totals to be 5,046 acres and the park itself will take up roughly 2,540 of those acres. The remaining redevelopment will additionally include commercial space and housing units; and

WHEREAS, Despite the gross injustice faced by these sailors, only one of the men charged with mutiny was given a pardon by President William J. Clinton in 1999; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate and the Assembly of the State of California, jointly, That the Legislature of the State of California respectfully urges the President of the United States and the Congress of the United States to take action to restore honor to 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; and be it further

Resolved, That the California State Legislature respectfully urges the President of the United States and the Congress of the United States to take the necessary actions to ensure those sailors' treatment is rectified by the full exoneration of all who were court-martialed, whether alive or deceased, and having the military records of these men cleared of any court judgment or less-than-honorable discharge; and be it further

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