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**SR-110** (2023-2024)

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ENROLLED AUGUST 14, 2024

PASSED IN SENATE AUGUST 12, 2024

CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE— 2023–2024 REGULAR SESSION

## SENATE RESOLUTION

**NO. 110**

Introduced by Senator Bradford

August 05, 2024

Relative to Port Chicago 80th Anniversary.

### LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SR 110, Bradford.

WHEREAS, Eighty years ago, the deadliest homefront disaster of World War II occurred at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in the City of Concord, California, on July 17, 1944, when an explosion at the naval facility killed or wounded 710 people; and

WHEREAS, Two cargo ships, SS Quinault Victory and SS E. A. Bryan, were berthed at the munitions pier, and the latter vessel was ready to be loaded with over 4,000 tons of antiaircraft ammunition, aerial bombs, high explosives, and smokeless powder; and

WHEREAS, 320 individuals, of which African Americans comprised nearly two-thirds, in the immediate proximity of the blasts were killed instantly; and

WHEREAS, The United States Navy's personnel policies at the time barring African American sailors from nearly all seagoing branches resulted in most of the Navy ordnance battalions assigned to Port Chicago Naval Magazine and similar facilities to be comprised of African American enlisted personnel; and

WHEREAS, The assignment of sailors to the ordnance battalions was based on results of the standard Navy classification test in use at the time that was skewed against recruits who had little access to formal education, especially African Americans; and

WHEREAS, Many of the White officers stationed at Port Chicago were older reservists recalled to active duty or junior officers with wartime commissions who had little or no training in handling munitions and minimal leadership experience; and

WHEREAS, The Naval Court of Inquiry's report on the explosion at Port Chicago strongly evoked racist stereotypes of the time to imply that the African American enlisted personnel had been difficult to train and slower in their day-to-day operations, but raised no questions concerning the white officers' leadership responsibilities; and

WHEREAS, Following the disaster, surviving personnel were transferred from Port Chicago to Mare Island Naval Shipyard. There, sailors were again assigned to ordnance-loading duties, under similar conditions encountered at Port Chicago; and

WHEREAS, On August 9, 1944, 328 ordnance battalion sailors at Mare Island refused to carry out their duties unless safety conditions were improved, shortly thereafter 70 of these sailors commenced their duties following appeals by officers; and

WHEREAS, On August 10, 1944, Rear Admiral Carleton H. Wright, commander of the 12th Naval District, addressed the remaining 258 sailors and warned them that their actions would be construed as mutiny; and

WHEREAS, Two hundred eight sailors who returned to duty received summary courts-martial for refusal to obey orders and were sentenced to forfeiture of three months' pay; and

WHEREAS, Fifty sailors, known as the "Port Chicago 50," continued to protest their duties and were charged with disobedience of a lawful order and mutiny; and

WHEREAS, On October 24, 1944, the general court-martial found the Port Chicago 50 guilty of conspiracy to commit mutiny, and they received sentences ranging from 8 to 15 years of confinement and dishonorable discharges; and

WHEREAS, Into the 1990s, the Port Chicago 50 and their descendants repeatedly appealed to Congress and the Navy to have their names and records cleared; and

WHEREAS, On July 17, 1994, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial was dedicated to those lost in the disaster; and

WHEREAS, Freddie Meeks, at the time thought to be the last-surviving known member of the Port Chicago 50, received a presidential pardon in December 1999; and

WHEREAS, On July 17, 2024, the 80th anniversary of the Port Chicago explosion, Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro exonerated the court-martial verdicts for all sailors convicted for their participation in the "mutiny"; and

WHEREAS, Secretary Del Toro noted that this action was "simply the right thing to do based on the evidence we discovered. The Port Chicago 50, and the hundreds who stood with them, may not be with us today, but their story lives on, a testament to the enduring power of courage and the unwavering pursuit of justice"; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate of the State of California, That the Senate hereby recognizes July 17, 2024, as the 80-year anniversary of the Port Chicago Naval Magazine disaster; and be it further

Resolved, That the Senate recognizes the gross injustices faced by the sailors unjustly blamed for the disaster and wrongly convicted of mutiny for refusing to work in unsafe conditions; and be it further

Resolved, That the Senate commends Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro for exonerating the sailors wrongly convicted of mutiny and taking action to restore honor and justice to the sailors and their families; and be it further

Resolved, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of this resolution to the author for appropriate distribution.