

LETTER OF SUPPORT to Exonerate the Port Chicago 50:

October 10, 2023

Addresses:

Secretary of the Navy 1000 Navy Pentagon, Room 4D652 Washington, DC 20350	Chief of Naval Operations 2000 Navy Pentagon Washington, DC 20350-2000	Department of the Navy Office of the General Counsel Attn: FOIA Appeals 1000 Navy Pentagon, 5A532 Washington, DC 20350-1000
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RE: Support to Exonerate the Port Chicago 50

Dear Secretary Del Toro, Chief Gilday, and Navy General Counsel Coffey,

This letter is to share support for the exoneration of the Port Chicago 50. The City of Brentwood supports US Representative Mark DeSaulnier H.Con.Res. 16 and insists the Navy support the efforts to rectify the mistreatment of the sailors, including the full exoneration of all who were court-martialed. Exoneration is compulsory for the fifty men to restore their legacy, and their families' and communities' honor. The City further stands in support of having the military records of these men cleared of any court judgment no less than honorable discharge.

The City of Brentwood formally requests the support of US Representative DeSaulnier's resolution, H.Con. Res. 16 to express that Congress:

- Recognize the service and sacrifice of the those who served and perished at Port Chicago during World War II;
- Forever exonerate the Port Chicago sailors of the charge of mutiny against the United States and any and all other charges brought against them in the aftermath of the July 17, 1944 explosion;
- Upgrade the general summary discharges issued to each of the Port Chicago sailors to honorable discharges; and
- Direct the Secretary of the Navy to place a letter attesting to these actions in the file of each of the Port Chicago sailors and notify any surviving family members of these actions.

Port Chicago World War II History: On July 17, 1944, there was a large waterfront munitions explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine that killed more than 320 sailors, over 200 of whom were Black. The explosion also injured 390 others, including 226 African American enlisted men. Prior to the explosion, these men were working significant hours with munitions continuously being loaded despite little to no training. This incident represents nearly 15

percent of all African American casualties during the entirety of World War II. It was the worst home front disaster of the war.

Despite the significant loss of life and injury, as well as \$12 million in property damages, the specific cause of the explosion was never officially determined by a court of inquiry. Instead, the blame was placed on the shoulders of the men who died in the explosion. When ordered to return to loading ammunition, over two-hundred sailors refused to return to work due to the unsafe working conditions that had resulted in the explosion. These sailors courageously advocated for safety for themselves and others in requesting adequate training and equipment before returning to work. In response, the Navy identified fifty Black sailors as the leaders of the organized action. The Navy charged these individuals with mutiny. This decision resulted in one of the most significant mutiny trials in U.S. military history.

The fifty sailors were supported by then NAACP Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall who through the press raised the racist nature of the trial and called into question the Navy's segregationist policies. The outcome of the trial wrongly convicted the Port Chicago 50 of mutiny. They were sentenced to years in prison and hard labor. Following the guilty verdict, Thurgood Marshall began a national campaign to spread the word about the event and the fifty sailors who were wrongly convicted. His advocacy gained the support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and brought much needed attention to the injustices of segregation. Regrettably, his appeal of their convictions was officially denied. The following year, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison, the remaining three served additional months. During and after the trial, questions were raised about the fairness and legality of the court-martial proceedings. The United States Navy reconvened the courts-martial board in 1945. Unfortunately, the board failed to reverse the decision.

In 1994, the National Park Service's Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial was dedicated to the lives lost in the tragic event. The memorial serves as the final resting place for the sailors who died. It is located on the waterfront where the explosion occurred. Inland from the memorial, the Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50 covers over 2,500 acres. The regional park will honor the courage and legacy of the Port Chicago 50 and all those who sacrificed their lives in our nation's ongoing struggle for social justice, racial equality and workers' rights. The inland former Naval property was transferred to the East Bay Regional Park District through a Public Benefit Conveyance on July 19, 2019. The bravery of these men directly led to the desegregation of the armed services, and is now viewed as a catalyst for the civil rights movement. As the civil rights movement forced our nation to move toward correcting the errors of the past, it is time to exonerate the fifty men whose bravery led to a more just and inclusive military.

Increasing in importance every day, the fifty men whose bravery led to a more just and inclusive military require exoneration. We look forward to working together in the months ahead to make this a reality.

Sincerely,

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