

Senate Joint Resolution No. 21

RESOLUTION CHAPTER 47

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

[Filed with Secretary of State June 28, 2010.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SJR 21, 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.

WHEREAS, On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago naval base on the Sacramento River in California were suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion, the incredible blast of 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, 200 of whom were African American enlisted men; and 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 one-fifth of all African American naval casualties during the whole of World War II; 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 Vallejo near Mare Island; another division, which was also at Camp Shoemaker until July 31, returned to Port Chicago to help with the cleaning up and rebuilding of 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 leaves 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. Kline, Officer-in-Charge of Port Chicago, issued a statement praising the African American enlisted men and 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 three divisions were ordered out to the loading pier; the great majority of the men balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and confined for three days on a large barge tiered to the pier; and

WHEREAS, Fifty of these men were selected as the ring-leaders and charged with mutiny, and on October 24, 1944, after only 80 minutes of a military court, all 50 men were found guilty of mutiny—10 were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 24 sentenced to 12 years, 11 sentenced to 10 years, and 5 sentenced to 8 years; and all were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy; and this was the largest mass mutiny trial in the United States to this day; 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 that “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 Port Chicago 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, Despite the gross injustice faced by these sailors, only one of the men charged with mutiny was given a pardon by President Clinton in 1998; 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 memorializes the 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; and be it further

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

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

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

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

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

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

(6) The survivors and their families are invited to the White House for a recognition ceremony; 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, and each Senator and Representative from California in the Congress of the United States, and to the author for appropriate distribution.