

OAKLAND CITY COUNCIL

RESOLUTION NO. _____ C.M.S.

INTRODUCED BY COUNCILMEMBER TREVA REID

RESOLUTION ACKNOWLEDGING AND HONORING THE LEGACY OF THE PORT CHICAGO SAILORS AND THE FIFTY SAILORS WHO FOUGHT FOR JUSTICE AND DESEGREGATION

WHEREAS, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine, situated about 30 miles northeast of Oakland, served as a major facility for supplying ammunition to the Pacific Theater during World War II; and

WHEREAS, enlisted African American sailors were exclusively assigned to the hazardous job of loading high explosives onto cargo vessels; and

WHEREAS, on the night of July 17, 1944, two Liberty ships being loaded with munitions at Port Chicago Naval Magazine exploded, resulting in the largest home front disaster of World War II, killing 320 people – 200 of whom were African American – and injuring 390 military and civilian personnel – 226 of whom were African American – obliterating the naval base, and causing extensive damage to the town of Port Chicago, California; and

WHEREAS, 258 surviving African American sailors spontaneously protested, drawing national attention to the injustices of Jim Crow segregation and unjust working conditions in the military; and

WHEREAS, The Port Chicago Mutiny Trial took place from September 14 to October 24, 1944, and on October 24, 1944, fifty Sailors, known as the Port Chicago 50, were wrongfully charged and convicted of mutiny and sentenced to 15 years of hard labor and dishonorable discharge. The trial was contentious, with the court refusing to allow the sailors to testify in their defense or to admit evidence of unsafe working conditions. The all-white court-martial board largely ignored the arguments of Thurgood Marshall, NAACP's Chief Counsel and lawyer who represented the sailors; and

WHEREAS, the men were imprisoned at Terminal Island Disciplinary Barracks in San Pedro, California. This sparked a national advocacy campaign endorsed by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and led by Thurgood Marshall; and

WHEREAS, the town of Port Chicago, California, was rebuilt following the deadly explosion, only for the federal government to seize and demolish all property in the town to establish a safety zone around the naval base, displacing thousands and effectively erasing the town of Port Chicago from existence; and

WHEREAS, on July 17, 2024, following decades of congressional advocacy from Congresswoman Barbara Lee, in cooperation with Congressman Mark DeSaulnier, Congressman George Miller, and Congressman John Garamendi, the Port Chicago 50 were fully exonerated by U.S. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro; and

WHEREAS, Del Toro was quoted: “This decision clears their names, restores their honor, and acknowledges the courage they displayed in the face of immense danger. But this action is about more than just correcting a historical record; it is a resounding affirmation of the values we, as Americans, hold dear: justice, equality, and the right to a safe workplace.”; and

WHEREAS, Today, the Port Chicago Sailors are honored as civil rights heroes for protesting the injustices of Jim Crow segregation. The bravery of these men directly led to the desegregation of the armed services and is now viewed as an impetus for the civil rights movement. Vice President Kamala Harris credited them with "pushing for change," noting that "their sacrifice was a catalyst for strides toward racial equity within the United States military.”; and

WHEREAS, the City of Oakland is recognized for being one of the few places that welcomed the Port Chicago Sailors during World War II, offering African American enlisted personnel a place to relax, recreate, and enjoy their time off; and

WHEREAS, with community partners such as the Port Chicago Alliance, and events like the Port Chicago Weekend, this history will continue to be recognized and honored at the City of Oakland locations like the African American Museum and Library at Oakland and the Oakland Museum of California exhibit to raise community awareness about the history at Port Chicago, California; and

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED; as we approach Veterans Day on November 11, 2024, the Oakland City Council, formally supports the exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 and acknowledges the significance of these sailors and the efforts to rectify the injustices they faced; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: that the City of Oakland proclaims July 17th "Port Chicago Remembrance Day" to serve as an annual observance dedicated to honoring the individuals who lost their lives or were injured in the Port Chicago disaster, recognizing their selfless sacrifices for their country and the profound impact the disaster had both locally and nationally, including the pioneering civil rights protest of the Port Chicago Sailors, the unwavering courage and determination of the Port Chicago 50, the integration of the U.S. Navy, the destruction and eventual dissolution of the town of Port Chicago, California, and successful efforts to exonerate the Port Chicago Sailors.

IN COUNCIL, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA,

PASSED BY THE FOLLOWING VOTE:

AYES - FIFE, GALLO, JENKINS, KALB, KAPLAN, RAMACHANDRAN, REID, AND
PRESIDENT FORTUNATO BAS

NOES –
ABSENT –
ABSTENTION –

ATTEST: _____

ASHA REED
City Clerk and Clerk of the Council of the
City of Oakland, California