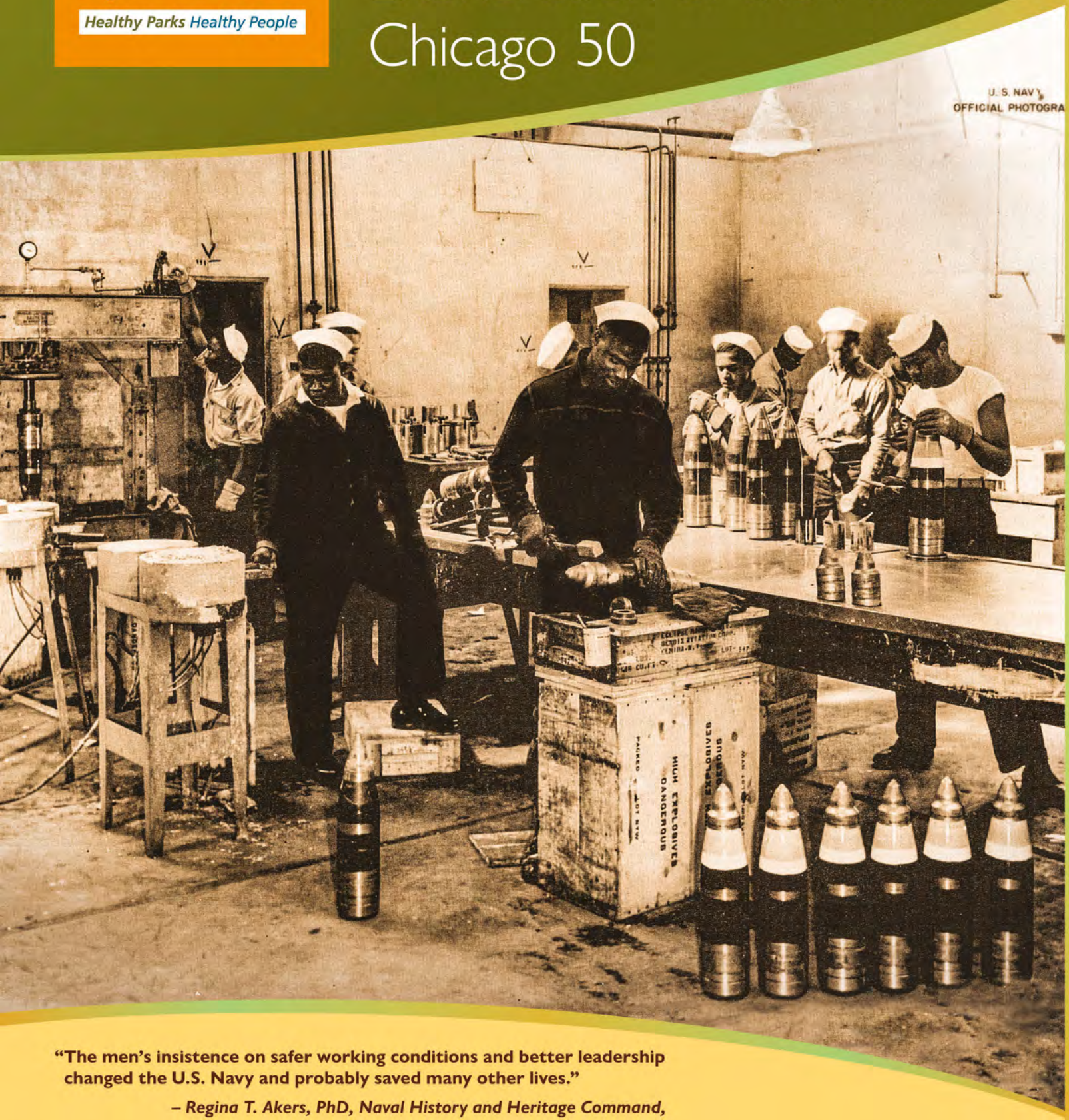
East Bay Regional Park District

*Healthy Parks Healthy People*

**EAST BAY REGIONAL PARK DISTRICT SUPPORT FOR**

# Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50




**"The men's insistence on safer working conditions and better leadership changed the U.S. Navy and probably saved many other lives."**

***– Regina T. Akers, PhD, Naval History and Heritage Command, Histories and Archives Division, June 2019***

# East Bay Regional Park District Support for Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50

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## Background/Context

*Sailors loading munitions*

**On July 17, 1944,** there was a large waterfront munitions explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord, California which 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 which translates to over $200 million in today's dollars, 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.

**"It was an unlawful order. Unfortunately, these sailors didn't have the ability to question that order and they were condemned for it. They never should have been charged. They were innocent."**

***– U.S. Representative Mark DeSaulnier***

When ordered to return to loading ammunitions, over two hundred sailors refused to return to work due to the unsafe working conditions which 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 leadership 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.

***Port Chicago sailors***

***NAACP Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall***

As an outcome of the trial, the Port Chicago 50 were wrongly convicted 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. Disrespectfully, 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. Contemptuously, 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 2,500 acres. The regional park will honor the courage and legacy of the Port Chicago 50, as well as 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 continues to force 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.

**"I do not take up cases unless I am convinced the men are innocent. I was never so convinced that the evidence was insufficient in a case as I was listening to that case... There is no sufficient evidence of mutiny or conspiracy. These men are being tried for mutiny solely because of their race."**

***– Thurgood Marshall***
***c. 1945***

## Park District Elected Board Actions

The East Bay Regional Park District is governed by a seven-member Board of Directors. Each Director represents a specific geographic area of the two-county Park District's jurisdiction known as a Ward. Each Ward represents around 400,000 individuals with a total East Bay population of nearly three million. The District itself comprises all of Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Directors are publicly elected to serve four-year terms with elections staggered every two years in November; three terms expire in one even-numbered year and four terms expire the following even-numbered year.

The Park District's efforts to support exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 are ongoing. The agency recently called on Senator Dianne Feinstein, Senator Alex Padilla, Armed Services Committee Chairperson Senator Jack Reed and Armed Services Committee Chairperson Representative Adam Smith to support including exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2024. The 2021 House NDAA bill included an exoneration provision for the Port Chicago 50. The provision expressly states the Port Chicago 50 should be exonerated of any charges brought against them in the aftermath of the deadliest home front explosion during World War II. ***The Park District is asking the U.S. Senate to include the same provision in their version of the NDAA bill or support the House provision in conference.***

In addition, the Park District Board of Directors has formally adopted two resolutions in support of exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 ▶

**"If [the Port Chicago 50] had complied [with orders], they would have violated federal law and by using the same unsafe procedures they were likely to cause additional accidents. The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) clearly requires orders to be lawfully given before a subordinate's compliance is required."**

**"The Port Chicago 50 were justified in disobeying the order to conduct ammunition loading operations at Mare Island."**

**"The Navy should complete the final step in this case — and issue full exoneration of the Port Chicago 50."**

***– Commander Todd Moe, U.S. Coast Guard***
***August 2021***

### H.Con.Res. 40 (DeSaulnier D-CA)
### Port Chicago 50 Exoneration

This legislation supported by the East Bay Regional Park District Board of Directors, on November 16, 2021, seeks formal exoneration of the Port Chicago 50. Specifically, in 2021, Representative DeSaulnier reintroduced his resolution to express the sense that Congress:

- Recognizes the service and sacrifice of those who served and perished at Port Chicago during World War II;
- Forever exonerates 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;
- Upgrades the general and summary discharges issued to each of the Port Chicago sailors to honorable discharges; and
- Directs the Secretary of the Navy to place a letter attesting to these actions in the file of each of the Port Chicago sailors and to notify any surviving family members of these actions.

Representative DeSaulnier was able to include exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which passed the House on September 23, 2021 by a vote of 316-113. The provision was later removed during negotiations with the Senate. The District supported the stand-alone resolution. The full Board considered a resolution for restorative justice for the U.S. Navy Sailors, their legacies, families and community of Port Chicago at the June 7, 2016 meeting. The Park District supports Rep. DeSaulnier's reintroduction of this resolution in the 117th Congress.

### SJR 15 (Glazer D-Orinda)
### Port Chicago 50 Exoneration

This resolution supported by the East Bay Regional Park District Board of Directors, on June 21, 2022, calls on the President and Congress of the United States to restore honor to the sailors unjustly blamed for instigating the explosion and those subsequently convicted of mutiny following the disaster at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine during World War II. The resolution also calls on the President and Congress to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those sailors, including the full exoneration of all who were court-martialed, whether alive or deceased. It also calls for having the military records of these men cleared of any court judgment or less-than-honorable discharge. The resolution passed the California Senate 33-0 on May 9, 2022. It passed the Assembly 72-0 on June 20, 2022.

*1944 mutiny trial of the Port Chicago 50*

## Legislative Solution

The Park District supports language in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) aimed at exonerating all 50 Black sailors who were charged with mutiny after 320 sailors were killed by a munition's explosion at Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord, California. The 2021 House NDAA bill included the exoneration provision expressing the sense of Congress that the Port Chicago 50 should be exonerated of any charges brought against them in the aftermath of the deadliest home front explosion during World War II. The Senate should include the same provision in their version of the NDAA bill or support the House provision in conference.

**SEC. 1092. SENSE OF CONGRESS REGARDING THE PORT CHICAGO 50.**

It is the sense of Congress that –

(1) the American people should recognize the role of racial bias in the prosecution and convictions of the Port Chicago 50 following the deadliest home front disaster in World War II;

(2) the military records of each of the Port Chicago 50 should reflect such exoneration of any and all charges brought against them in the aftermath of the explosion; and

(3) the Secretary of the Navy should upgrade the general and summary discharges of each of the Port Chicago 50 sailors to honorable discharges.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Why is exoneration needed now?**

The restitution of the Port Chicago 50 is necessary to amend the wrongful trial and conviction of fifty African American sailors for mutiny in connection with their service at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord, California during World War II. The Port Chicago 50 were demanding their unsafe working conditions be addressed before returning to work. An action throughout labor history many employees have taken, particularly when lives are at risk. Being subjected to military law, the men, now known as the Port Chicago 50, were prejudicially and wrongfully denied that right. Exoneration is needed to rectify and acknowledge the actions committed by the fifty men were not wrong, rather they were necessary.

**"After all these years, the world should know what happened at Port Chicago. It should be cleared up that we did not commit mutiny, and we were charged with that because of our race."**

***– Sailor Freddie Meeks***
***A Member of the Port Chicago 50***

**What is the Park District's relationship to this issue?**

"Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50" is the new East Bay Regional Park at the site of the former Concord Naval Weapons Station. The naming was approved unanimously by the Park District Board of Directors at its meeting on June 1, 2021. NAACP civil rights lawyer and former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall elevated the significance of the fifty black sailors accused of mutiny after the devastating Port Chicago Naval Magazine blast on July 17, 1944. The explosion killed 320 men, mostly African American, and injured 390 more. It was the largest home front disaster of World War II. The military trial took place on Treasure Island in nearby San Francisco Bay from September 14 to October 24, 1944. The fifty sailors were subject to military trial rules, procedures and outcomes prejudiced by the Navy. This park will serve as a place for sharing this tragic and heroic nationally significant and important history.

**What other organizations stand in support of the exoneration?**

The Park District has received numerous letters from community organizations in support of the exoneration of the Port Chicago 50.

To learn more on how you can support, please email Yulie Padmore at ypadmore@ebparks.org or call 510-544-2002.

**"Port Chicago serves as a stark reminder of both the sacrifice of the brave service members who served there and of the painful legacy of a segregated military... We urge you to take executive action to restore honor to these 50 sailors who signed up to serve our country in World War II but were instead victims of racism and unjust convictions. Their exoneration would demonstrate our continued commitment to a just and equal society for all Americans."**

***– Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer***
***September 29, 2015***

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**Questions:**

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