

Resolution No. 2019 -

RESOLUTION OF THE SOLANO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS IN RECOGNITION OF THE 75TH ANNIVERSARIES OF THE PORT CHICAGO MUTINY, THE PORT CHICAGO 50 AND THE JULY 17, 1944 PORT CHICAGO EXPLOSION

WHEREAS, on July 17, 1944, at 10:18 p.m., two massive explosions of munitions being loaded into the Liberty ship SS E.A. Bryan killed 320 sailors, including 202 African-Americans, and devastated Port Chicago, Calif., in the worst home-front disaster of World War II; and

WHEREAS, the African-American sailors, because they loved their country and were willing to die for it, had enlisted to serve on ships and boarded trains bound for the West Coast and for what they believed was embarkation to war zones; and

WHEREAS, instead of warships, these men were assigned as stevedores at Port Chicago, segregated in punishing working conditions, handling dangerous munitions with inadequate training; and

WHEREAS, hazardous loading practices on the Port Chicago munitions docks -- fearful sailors praying for safety while doing back-breaking work, handling bombs that at times banged into other bombs, under pressure from supervisors, including some who made bets on whose crew could load the most munitions the fastest -- led to the explosions that vaporized the E.A. Bryan and destroyed another munitions ship, the Quinault Victory; and

WHEREAS, only 51 of the 320 sailors who died in the explosions could be positively identified, and another 390, including 233 African-Americans, were injured in the explosions that had the force of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima a year later; and

WHEREAS, on Aug. 9, 1944, barely three weeks after the explosions, surviving African-American sailors who had been moved to the Ryder Street Naval Barracks in Vallejo were ordered to load ammunition onto the U.S.S. San Gay at Mare Island, but refused, saying they would follow any order except those that involved such unsafe conditions; and

WHEREAS, Navy officials declared that the sailors' refusal to load munitions was mutiny, and imprisoned 258 black sailors for three days on a barge docked at the Ryder Street pier; and

WHEREAS, 208 men returned to duty, and the remaining 50 sailors, who became known as the "Port Chicago 50," were charged with mutiny, facing even execution, ultimately sentenced from eight to 15 years in prison in the largest mass mutiny trial in U.S. Navy history, defended, prosecuted and judged by white officers who argued that there was a war, and fear was no excuse; and

WHEREAS, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, then NAACP chief counsel, argued Navy officials ignored warnings from waterfront unions that an explosion was inevitable because they were using untrained seamen and that the Navy should be on trial for its vicious policies toward African-American sailors; and

WHEREAS, in 1946, the convicted sailors were given clemency, released from prison and discharged "under honorable conditions" although without a standard honorable discharge, a status which negated their veterans' benefits; and

WHEREAS, the Port Chicago explosion and work stoppage in Vallejo led directly to a 1945 decision by the Navy to desegregate its ranks, changes in ship loading procedures, and the recognition by the Navy that its black sailors performed the vast majority of ammunition ship loading and unloading in segregated units with low morale and often led by bigoted or incompetent officers; and were important factors that resulted in President Harry Truman's issuance of Executive Order 9981 which integrated all branches of the Armed Forces; and

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Solano County Board of Supervisors, do hereby honor and acknowledge those who lost their lives in the Port Chicago explosion; and recognize these historic events by dedicating a plaque on Ryder Street to commemorate the "Port Chicago 50" and other African-American sailors who suffered under egregious conditions at Port Chicago, Vallejo and Mare Island, and whose refusals, protests, suffering and loss of life led to the integration of the Armed Services.

Dated this 5th day of November, 2019

ERIN HANNIGAN, Chairwoman
Solano County Board of Supervisors

ATTEST:
BIRGITTA E. CORSELLO, Clerk
Solano County Board of Supervisors

BY: _____
Jeanette Neiger, Chief Deputy Clerk