

AMENDED IN ASSEMBLY MAY 5, 2016

CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE—2015–16 REGULAR SESSION

**Assembly Joint Resolution**

**No. 33**

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**Introduced by Assembly Members Bonilla and Thurmond**

*(Coauthors: Assembly Members Achadjian, Alejo, Travis Allen, Arambula, Atkins, Baker, Bigelow, Bloom, Bonta, Brough, Brown, Burke, Calderon, Campos, Chang, Chau, Chávez, Chiu, Chu, Cooley, Cooper, Dababneh, Dahle, Daly, Dodd, Eggman, Frazier, Cristina Garcia, Eduardo Garcia, Gatto, Gipson, Gomez, Gonzalez, Gordon, Gray, Grove, Hadley, Harper, Roger Hernández, Holden, Irwin, Jones, Kim, Lackey, Levine, Linder, Lopez, Low, Maienschein, Mathis, Mayes, McCarty, Medina, Melendez, Mullin, Nazarian, Obernolte, O'Donnell, Olsen, Patterson, Quirk, Rendon, Ridley-Thomas, Rodriguez, Salas, Santiago, Steinorth, Mark Stone, Ting, Wagner, Waldron, Weber, Wilk, Williams, and Wood)*

March 7, 2016

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Assembly Joint Resolution No. 33—Relative to the Port Chicago 50.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AJR 33, as amended, Bonilla. Port Chicago disaster: African American Sailors of the United States Navy.

This measure would respectfully urge the recognition that the trial and conviction of the 50 African American sailors of the United States Navy for mutiny in connection with their service at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord, California, during World War II were wrongfully pursued because of racial prejudice and respectfully urge the Congress of the United States to publicly exonerate those 50 African American sailors of the United States Navy in order to further aid in healing the racial divide that continues to exist in the United States.

Fiscal committee: no.

1 WHEREAS, The deadliest home-front disaster of World War  
2 II occurred at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord,  
3 California, on July 17, 1944, when an explosion at the naval facility  
4 killed or wounded 710 people, 435 of whom were African  
5 American; and

6 WHEREAS, This single disaster accounted for more than 15  
7 percent of all African American naval casualties during World  
8 War II; and

9 WHEREAS, After the disaster, 258 African American survivors  
10 of the explosion refused to resume the loading and unloading of  
11 ammunition at the naval facility, citing inadequate training and  
12 the use of unsafe practices; and

13 WHEREAS, According to a United States Navy report, “the  
14 actual work of loading ammunition and explosives aboard the ships  
15 was performed exclusively by Afro-Americans under the  
16 supervision of white officers and Afro-American petty officers”  
17 and “the routine assignment of Afro-American enlisted personnel  
18 to manual labor was clearly motivated by race and premised upon  
19 the mistaken notion that they were intellectually inferior and thus  
20 incapable of meeting the same standards as their white  
21 counterparts”; and

22 WHEREAS, One of the ships was loaded with around 4,600  
23 tons of ammunition and high explosives, some of which weighed  
24 650 pounds with activating mechanisms or fuses installed; and

25 WHEREAS, At that time there was no formal training in safe  
26 methods of ammunition handling given to enlisted men, and the  
27 United States Navy failed to adequately provide these men with  
28 the tools necessary to operate under safe working conditions, even  
29 after the explosion occurred; and

30 WHEREAS, Weeks before the explosion, the longshoremen’s  
31 union warned the United States Navy that there would be a disaster  
32 if the Navy continued to use untrained seamen to load ammunition  
33 and offered to send experienced longshoremen to train Navy  
34 recruits in safe handling of ammunition, but this offer from the  
35 union was ignored by the United States Navy; and

36 WHEREAS, Subsequent research has confirmed the use of  
37 unsafe ammunition loading methods at the naval facility at the

1 time and has recognized the existence of pervasive racial prejudice  
2 in the United States Navy during World War II; and

3 WHEREAS, As documented in the book “The Port Chicago  
4 Mutiny” by Dr. Robert L. Allen, a worker described Port Chicago  
5 as a “slave outfit,” adding that “we were considered a cheap labor  
6 force from the beginning”; and

7 WHEREAS, White officers would encourage African American  
8 sailors to compete while loading ammunition and explosives while  
9 those officers placed bets among themselves; and

10 WHEREAS, Following the explosion, many of the African  
11 American survivors expected to be granted survivors’ leave before  
12 being reassigned to regular duty, but that leave was not granted,  
13 even for those who had been hospitalized, and all African American  
14 men were sent back to work loading ammunition under the same  
15 officers as before; and

16 WHEREAS, White officers were permitted to go home for  
17 30-day leaves; and

18 WHEREAS, Fifty sailors of the United States Navy, all African  
19 American men, ultimately were tried and convicted of mutiny for  
20 failing to obey orders to resume loading activities; and

21 WHEREAS, A mutiny is active revolt with the intent of taking  
22 charge, but a refusal to work is a passive act of resistance without  
23 intent to seize power; and

24 WHEREAS, Thurgood Marshall, then a chief counsel for the  
25 NAACP, was reported to state he saw no reason why the men  
26 should be tried for mutiny, which implies a mass conspiracy, rather  
27 than on lesser charges of individual subordination and blasted the  
28 trial by stating that the defendants were being tried for mutiny  
29 “solely because of their race and color”; and

30 WHEREAS, The United States Navy has concluded that there  
31 can be “no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible for the  
32 posting of Afro-American enlisted personnel to the loading  
33 divisions at Port Chicago,” and similar racial prejudicial bias has  
34 been documented in the conduct of the trial that resulted in the  
35 court-martial of the sailors at Port Chicago; and

36 WHEREAS, Virtually all of the convicted sailors were released  
37 from prison early in 1946 and were given a general discharge from  
38 the Navy “under honorable conditions,” and the United States  
39 Navy announced at the time that race would no longer be a factor  
40 in filling its jobs; and

1 WHEREAS, In 1999, Freddie Meeks was pardoned by President  
2 Bill Clinton in recognition of the injustice he suffered as one of  
3 the convicted sailors, and at the time of his pardon, Mr. Meeks  
4 said, “After all these years, the world should know what happened  
5 at Port Chicago. It should be cleared up that we did not commit  
6 mutiny, and we were charged with that because of our race”; and

7 WHEREAS, In 2003, the National Park Service dedicated the  
8 Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial at the disaster  
9 site, which serves not only as a tribute to the 320 men who died  
10 in that World War II explosion, but also as an acknowledgment  
11 of that event as the touchstone for desegregation in the military  
12 and the beginning of civil rights for all Americans; and

13 WHEREAS, In a July 17, 2014, letter recognizing the 70th  
14 anniversary of the tragedy, President Barack Obama acknowledged  
15 the African American sailors at Port Chicago, stating, “Faced with  
16 tremendous obstacles, they fought on two fronts – for freedom  
17 abroad and equality at home”; and

18 WHEREAS, All of the sailors involved in the Port Chicago  
19 cases have passed away, but their family members and friends  
20 continue to request that the sailors be cleared of all charges; now,  
21 therefore, be it

22 *Resolved by the Assembly and the Senate of the State of*  
23 *California, jointly,* That the Legislature respectfully urges the  
24 recognition that the trial and conviction of the 50 African American  
25 sailors of the United States Navy for mutiny in connection with  
26 their service at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in Concord,  
27 California, during World War II were wrongfully pursued because  
28 of racial prejudice, as evidenced by the racial bias in the United  
29 States Navy’s original findings in their cases and the different  
30 treatment afforded to the convicted sailors’ white counterparts and  
31 officers; and be it further

32 *Resolved,* That the Legislature respectfully urges the Congress  
33 of the United States to publicly exonerate the 50 African American  
34 sailors of the United States Navy who were convicted of mutiny  
35 in connection with their service at the Port Chicago Naval  
36 Magazine in Concord, California, during World War II in order  
37 to further aid in healing the racial divide that continues to exist in  
38 the United States; and be it further

39 *Resolved,* That the Legislature respectfully urges the Congress  
40 of the United States to take action to retroactively convert the

1 general discharge granted to each of the 50 African American  
2 sailors to an honorable discharge; and be it further  
3 *Resolved*, That the Chief Clerk of the Assembly transmit copies  
4 of this resolution to the President and the Vice President of the  
5 United States, to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, to  
6 the Majority Leader of the Senate, to each Senator and  
7 Representative from California in the Congress of the United  
8 States.

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