

Legislative Hearing on the “Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial Enhancement Act of 2007” (H.R. 3111)

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Testimony on Behalf of Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial
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Introduction

The Port Chicago explosion was the worst war-related disaster in the United States during World War II. On July 17, 1944, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine, a major Navy ammunition loading base in the San Francisco Bay Area, was destroyed by a devastating explosion that killed hundreds and heavily damaged the nearby town of the same name. Most of those who died were young African American sailors serving in segregated work units and without benefit of proper training for this dangerous work. After the disaster, when some of the surviving sailors stopped work to protest the unsafe working conditions and racial discrimination 50 of them were charged and convicted of mutiny in the largest mutiny trial in U.S. Navy history. The convictions sparked public protests and drew the attention and concern of Thurgood Marshall and Eleanor Roosevelt. Although the black sailors were imprisoned, their protest and the subsequent public outcry prompted historic steps toward racial integration in the Navy, steps that in 1948 President Harry Truman ordered be taken by all the armed forces.

The events at Port Chicago are of national significance and should not be forgotten. The Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial, a California nonprofit public benefit corporation, strongly supports H.R. 3111 as an important step toward insuring that the story and legacy of Port Chicago will be understood and remembered by the Nation.

There are important reasons to remember Port Chicago, including the following:

Importance of Port Chicago to the War Effort

Built in 1942 following the attack on Pearl Harbor the base was named after the nearby town of Port Chicago. It quickly grew to become the Navy’s largest ammunition transshipment facility on the West Coast. Port Chicago was absolutely essential to the success of U.S. armed forces in the Pacific Theatre. Hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs, artillery shells, depth charges, infantry ammunition, and other urgently needed munitions were loaded onto cargo vessels and shipped to U.S. forces in the Pacific. Most of the munitions required by our troops passed through Port Chicago. Some 1,400 ammunition loaders worked around the clock, along with several hundred officers, marines, and civilian workers. In our racially segregated military at that time, all the officers were white, and all the ammunition loaders were young African American sailors, most of them still in their teens. It was these youths, many of them volunteers,

whose hard labor at a backbreaking and dangerous job helped the United States to win the war. We need to remember the importance of Port Chicago to the war effort, and we need to remember all the sailors who served there, and the critical importance of their labor in securing a victory for the U.S.

The Explosion and its Aftermath

On the night of July 17, 1944, two ships were at the loading dock. One, the *E.A. Bryan*, was almost fully loaded with nearly 5,000 tons of explosives. The other, the *Quinalt Victory*, was scheduled to begin loading that night. Suddenly, shortly after 10:18 pm, disaster struck. Two explosions occurred within seconds of each other. The first and smaller explosion took place on the pier. This was followed by an incredibly powerful blast as the *E.A. Bryan* exploded like one gigantic bomb. The blast registered with the force of a small earthquake on seismographs at UC Berkeley. It rattled windows more than 30 miles away in San Francisco. Some 320 people – all the men working on the pier -- were killed instantly, 202 of them young black sailors who were working on the ships. Others who died included Navy officers, crew members, Navy Armed Guards, civilian workers, as well as Marine and Coast Guard personnel. All of these men were sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, and friends whose loss could never be replaced. Almost 400 people were injured, including many in the town of Port Chicago. The town was heavily damaged, virtually every building in the town was hit by flying debris and wreckage from the base. It was a hard blow, from which the town never fully recovered. Matters did not get better when the Navy started a campaign to have the town torn down to make room for a buffer zone around base. Despite protest from residents – many of whom had lived there most of their lives -- the town was eventually leveled. In 1968 all that remained of the town was a ghostly outline of streets that could be seen in the fields where the town once stood.

The magnitude of the Port Chicago explosion, and its cost in lives and destruction, were front-page news around the nation. But, in the midst of war, of course, new dramatic headlines quickly replace yesterday's stories. Port Chicago soon faded from the news, and was in danger of being lost to memory. We need a national memorial so that the tragic story of Port Chicago is not forgotten, so that all those who served and died at Port Chicago are remembered and honored for their service to the nation.

After the explosion the surviving sailors were in shock. Yet many worked in the cleanup the next day, collecting body parts and debris. Almost everyone lost friends in the disaster. More than 230 of the survivors were injured; yet none was granted any leave time, although some white officers were given home leaves. Traumatized by the disaster many sailors feared that it might happen again. Others were angry and blamed the explosion on unsafe working conditions at the base. Three weeks later, when loading of ammunition was scheduled to resume, 258 of the sailors engaged in a work stoppage protesting unsafe working conditions and racial discrimination at the base. A peaceful strike, the men remained orderly at all times. But in the military a strike is not recognized and 50 of the sailors were charged with mutiny.

The Mutiny Trial and Outcome of the Sailors' Protest

Put on trial in September, 1944, all 50 black sailors were quickly found guilty by a military court and sentenced to long prison terms. Thurgood Marshall, then an attorney for the NAACP, attended the trial which he described as a miscarriage of justice. He accused the Navy of making the sailors scapegoats for the conditions that existed at the base. He later filed an appeal brief on behalf of the convicted sailors, arguing that while some of the sailors may have refused to obey an order, that did not constitute mutiny. Eleanor Roosevelt also asked for leniency toward the sailors. After the war ended some 1,700 servicemen who had been convicted by military courts were granted clemency and released, including the 50 Port Chicago sailors. However, the sailors had to serve an additional year of "probationary" duty, and the mutiny convictions remained on their records.

The explosion and mutiny trial brought public attention to racial discrimination in the military. In my research I found hundreds of letters and names on petitions from people of all races and many different civic organizations, all denouncing the mutiny convictions and calling for an end to racial discrimination in the military.

The sailors who took part in the work stoppage, and who were imprisoned as a result, also served their country. By their action they called attention to a great injustice – the practice of racial segregation and discrimination in the U.S. Navy. As a result of their protest and public pressure the Navy reviewed its racial policies and began a process of desegregation, first at training facilities, then at shore facilities, and finally on the ships themselves. In 1948 President Harry Truman extended the process to all armed forces when he ordered general desegregation of the military. Ironically, when the convicted sailors were released from prison they served for a year on Navy ships in racially integrated crews, but they had no idea that integration of the crews was in part an outcome of their protest in 1944.

Port Chicago contributed to the transformation of racial policies of the U.S. military, and ultimately affected the entire nation. The desegregation of the military proved that desegregation could, in fact, be brought about, and this helped to inspire the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. We must remember Port Chicago because it reminds us of the historical roots of the struggle for racial justice, a struggle that is a continuing theme in our nation's history.

Remembrance and Justice

Increasing numbers of people today are learning of the Port Chicago events and how they have indirectly impacted the lives of Americans. As for the survivors the memory of the terrible explosion cannot be erased. The families of men who died suffered the irreplaceable loss of a son, husband, father, or brother. The convicted sailors were

stigmatized as troublemakers, cowards, and mutineers. For the Navy and the nation a reluctant step toward racial equality was compelled. If we are to learn from the past, it is necessary to recover and remember this important part of the nation's history.

With publication of a book, newspaper and magazine articles, and the release of several documentaries and films, interest in the Port Chicago story has grown. In 1999 President Clinton issued a pardon to one of the only surviving convicted sailors.

Most recently, a campaign for remembrance and justice has gained widespread public support. Congressman George Miller has taken the lead in this campaign. Mr. Miller secured passage in 1992 of legislation for an initial memorial at Port Chicago. Miller led the effort to gain a presidential pardon for Freddie Meeks, and he has called for exoneration of the convicted sailors. He is now taking the lead to establish a permanent Port Chicago National Memorial to be administered by the National Park Service. We in the Friends of Port Chicago are deeply grateful to Congressman Miller for his leadership of efforts to keep the story of Port Chicago alive.

Proposed Port Chicago National Memorial

We envision a national memorial with a Visitor & Interpretive Center that would include the following elements:

- Exhibits of maps, original artifacts, photographs, and memorabilia from Port Chicago survivors.
- A space for audiovisual presentations, as well as other interpretive exhibits on the history and significance of the Port Chicago explosion and its impact on our nation's civil rights history.
- Classrooms for presentations, lectures and learning.
- A small space for quiet remembrance and meditation, which could be used to display the commemorative stained-glass windows from the Port Chicago Memorial Chapel.
- A staging area for shuttle bus service to the existing Memorial site, as well as to recreational trails and other nearby amenities serving the community.

In 1942 the African American press declared that for African Americans World War II was a fight on two fronts: a fight for victory over fascism abroad, and a fight against racial discrimination at home. We believe that for the nation as a whole World War II was a fight on those two fronts. Port Chicago played an important role in both fights. As Americans, we would do well to remember Port Chicago.

Thank you.

