

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Statement on Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro's Exoneration of Courts-Martial Defendants From the 1944 Explosion at Port Chicago Naval Magazine, California

July 17, 2024

Today the U.S. Navy is righting an historic wrong by announcing the exoneration of 258 Black sailors who were unjustly tried and convicted of mutiny and disobeying orders following the tragic explosion at Port Chicago, California, nearly 80 years ago. At the time, future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall represented the "Port Chicago 50" in their appeal of their courts-martial convictions, writing that, "justice can only be done in this case by a complete reversal of findings." With this action, we are answering that call.

On July 17, 1944, two U.S. Navy ships were destroyed when the SS *E.A. Bryan* cargo ship exploded at Port Chicago while being loaded with ammunition. This explosion, the deadliest homefront disaster in the U.S. during World War II, led to the tragic deaths of 320 sailors and civilians, with hundreds more injured. In the wake of that tragedy, Black sailors were required to clean up the carnage and return to the dangerous work of handling munitions without adequate training and protective equipment while White sailors were granted leave. In the face of this injustice, 258 Black sailors refused orders to load ammunition and soon after were convicted at courts-martials for disobeying orders and mutiny.

After conducting a careful and deliberative review, the U.S. Navy has determined that the courts-martials for all 258 Black sailors were fundamentally unfair, plagued by legal errors, and tainted by racial discrimination. Today's announcement marks the end of a long and arduous journey for these Black sailors and their families, who fought for a nation that denied them equal justice under law. May we all remember their courage, sacrifice, and service to our Nation.

Categories: Statements by the President : 1944 explosion at Port Chicago Naval Magazine, CA, Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro's exoneration of courts-martial defendants.

Names: Del Toro, Carlos.

Subjects: California, 1944 explosion at Port Chicago Naval Magazine, Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro's exoneration of courts-martial defendants; Navy, Department of the, Secretary Del Toro's exoneration of courts-martial defendants from 1944 explosion at Port Chicago Naval Magazine, CA; Racial equality, improvement efforts; Secretary of the Navy; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication.

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