SECNAV Exonerates 256 Defendants from 1944 Port Chicago General and Summary Courts-Martial



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WASHINGTON, DC – The Secretary of the Navy announced on July 17 the full exoneration of the remaining 256 defendants of the 1944 Port Chicago general and summary courts-martial.

The Honorable Carlos Del Toro, Secretary of the Navy, made the announcement on the 80th anniversary of an explosion that occurred at Port Chicago Naval Magazine in California. The explosion killed 320 people, injured 400 others, destroyed two ships and a train, and caused damage to the nearby town of Port Chicago.

Secretary Del Toro expressed his deepest condolences for the Sailors, civilians, Coast Guardsmen, members of the U.S. Maritime Service, and one Marine who lost their lives and for their family members.

Following the 1944 explosion, white supervising officers at Port Chicago were given hardship leave while the surviving African-American Sailors were ordered back to work. The circumstances surrounding the disaster were reflective of the Navy's personnel policies at the time, which barred African-American Sailors from nearly all seagoing jobs. Most of the Navy ordnance battalions assigned to Port Chicago Naval Magazine and similar facilities were comprised of African-American enlisted personnel and white officers.

In the absence of clarity on the explosions or further safety training, 258 African-American Sailors refused to resume ammunition handling. After threats of disciplinary action, 208 of the Sailors returned to work; however, the Navy still subsequently convicted all 208 Sailors at a summary court-martial for disobeying orders.

The Navy sentenced each of the summary court-martial defendants to a Bad Conduct Discharge and forfeiture of three month's pay. During subsequent reviews of the summary court-martial, the Bad Conduct Discharges were suspended, the forfeitures reduced, and one conviction was set aside for insufficient evidence.

The remaining 50 Sailors continued to refuse to return to work and were charged with mutiny. The Navy later convicted all 50 Sailors (who came to be called the "Port Chicago 50") of mutiny at a mass general court-martial. Each of these defendants was sentenced to a Dishonorable Discharge, fifteen years confinement at hard labor, reduction in rate to E-1, and total forfeitures of their pay.

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Dishonorable Discharges were suspended and the period of confinement was reduced from 15 years to 17-29 months. One conviction was also set aside for mental incompetency. By January 1946, nearly all the Sailors were released and given the opportunity to finish their contracts.

“The Port Chicago 50, and the hundreds who stood with them, may not be with us today, but their story lives on, a testament to the enduring power of courage and the unwavering pursuit of justice,” said Secretary Del Toro. “They stand as a beacon of hope, forever reminding us that even in the face of overwhelming odds, the fight for what’s right can and will prevail.”

After a thorough review of the case and related materials, the General Counsel of the Navy concluded that there were significant legal errors during the courts-martial. The defendants were improperly tried together despite conflicting interests and denied a meaningful right to counsel.

The courts-martial also occurred before the Navy’s Court of Inquiry report on the Port Chicago explosion was finalized, which certainly would have informed their defense and contained nineteen substantive recommendations to improve ammunition loading practices.

Following the Navy’s most recent review, Secretary Del Toro fully exonerated the remaining 256 defendants of the 1944 Port Chicago general and summary courts-martial.

If any family members of the defendants of the 1944 Port Chicago general and summary courts-martial would like to reach out to the Department of the Navy for future notifications on the topic or more information, please reach out to PortChicago@us.navy.mil or 703-697-5342.