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**LDF Celebrates the Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 and Recalls
Thurgood Marshall's Instrumental Advocacy on Their Behalf**

In 1944 an explosion at Port Chicago, California killed 202 Black soldiers loading armed munitions. When the dangerous and inhumane work resumed at a nearby depot weeks later, a group of 50 Black soldiers, fearing for their safety, refused the work. The refusal was characterized as mutinous by the US Navy and the 50 were subsequently found guilty in the largest court martial in US history.

Today on the 80th anniversary of that devastating disaster, U.S. Navy secretary Carlos Del Toro exonerated the sailors. LDF President and Director-Counsel Janai Nelson issued the following statement:

“The story of the Port Chicago 50 remains one of the most egregious examples of the racism and discrimination faced by Black soldiers in the history of the American military. LDF recognizes this exoneration as long overdue acknowledgement of the bravery of these men who challenged a system that did not honor their humanity.

The Navy Fact Finding Board took a mere 45 minutes to find the men guilty of mutiny, and it underscored the systemic injustice faced by Black servicemembers. Despite the initial guilty verdict, LDF Founder Thurgood Marshall tirelessly championed the cause of the soldiers. His unwavering advocacy led him to directly engage with the Navy to secure reduced sentences, put the soldier back service and ensure honorable discharges.

Black Americans have been on the front lines of every war fought by this country since the Civil War. They have endured discrimination, lynching, court marshals, capital punishment and other forms of violence while serving the country they to committed to protect. The Chicago 50 played a pivotal role in highlighting the challenges faced by Black Americans in the armed forces during the mid-20th century. Thurgood Marshall's efforts shed light on the injustices and hardships faced by Black soldiers and contributed to President Truman signing Executive Order 9981 in 1948, which aimed to end segregation in the armed services.

This exoneration provides resolution, but it is part of American history that should not be forgotten. It is imperative that our nation recognize the story of the Chicago 50's struggle and triumphs. Their fortitude and Thurgood Marshall's unrelenting advocacy paved the way for better opportunities and treatment for Black Americans in the military and marked a significant milestone in the fight for civil rights.”

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Founded in 1940, the [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is the nation's first civil rights law organization. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Please note that LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights.