



web: PortChicagoAlliance.org
email: PortChicagoAlliance@gmail.com
address: 15934 Hesperian Blvd. Ste 313
San Lorenzo, CA 94580

Port Chicago Upper Elementary School Teacher's Guide & Lesson Plan

Grade Level

Upper Elementary (4th and 5th Grades)

Introduction

In 1944, a massive explosion at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine killed 320 men and injured hundreds more, making it the deadliest homefront disaster of World War II. The tragedy exposed the dangerous and unequal conditions faced by Black Sailors, who were often assigned the most hazardous work without proper training or equipment.

In the aftermath, 50 Black Sailors refused to return to those same unsafe conditions. Their courageous stand drew national attention and helped spark change within the Navy, contributing to its decision to end segregation. Today, their actions remain one of the Bay Area's most important contributions to the nation, showing how standing up for what's right can help shape a more just future.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe what happened at Port Chicago and why it was important.
- Understand the risks the Sailors faced and their reasons for refusing unsafe orders.
- Discuss the ideas of fairness, safety, and courage.
- Explore how the actions of the Sailors helped make the Navy a fairer place.
- Connect the story to situations where they or others might stand up for what is right.

Teacher Background

- **Port Chicago Disaster (July 17, 1944):** A large explosion at a Naval Magazine in Port Chicago, California, killed 320 men and injured hundreds.
- **Sailors' Brave Choice:** After the explosion, 50 Sailors refused to return to the same dangerous job until it was safer.
- **Historical Impact:** Their courage drew national attention and led to improvements in safety and fairness in the Navy.
- **Lesson For Students:** Standing up for safety and fairness is important, even when it feels risky.

Materials Needed

- Copies of the reading passage (included below)
- Worksheet: "Choices and Consequences" (included)
- Chart paper or whiteboard
- Markers or pencils
- Optional: images of Port Chicago, maps of the Bay Area, timeline visuals



web: PortChicagoAlliance.org
email: PortChicagoAlliance@gmail.com
address: 15934 Hesperian Blvd. Ste 313
San Lorenzo, CA 94580

Lesson Plan: 1 Class Period (45–60 minutes)

1. Warm-Up / Activating Prior Knowledge (5–10 min)

Ask students: “Have you ever been asked to do something that felt unsafe or unfair? What did you do?”

Brief discussion to get students thinking about courage and fairness.

2. Reading Passage (10–15 min)

Port Chicago: Courage in the Face of Danger

In 1944, during World War II, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine in California stored thousands of tons of munitions. Many Sailors who worked there were asked to do a very dangerous job without enough training or safety equipment.

On July 17, 1944, a huge explosion killed 320 men and injured hundreds more. After the disaster, 50 Sailors refused to go back to the same unsafe work until it was safer. They were arrested and put on trial, but their brave choice helped draw attention to safety and fairness.

The actions of the Sailors remind us that standing up for what is safe and fair can make a big difference.

3. Discussion Questions (10 min)

Why do you think the Sailors refused to return to work?

What risks did they face by saying no?

How did their actions help make the Navy a safer and fairer place?

What does this story teach us about courage and fairness?

4. Worksheet Activity: “Choices and Consequences” (15–20 min)

Instructions:

Students read the scenario in the below worksheet.

They identify the choices the Sailors had and the consequences of each choice.

Students answer reflection questions:

If you were in the Sailors’ shoes, what would you have done? Why?

How can small actions today make a difference in your school or community?

Choice	Possible Consequences	Reflection
Return to loading munitions	Safety risks, possible injury or death, obey orders	Would you do the same? Why or why not?
Refuse to return	Arrest, court-martial, national attention	How did this choice make a difference?
Talk to a leader about safety	May be ignored or punished	What other ways can people advocate for fairness today?

5. Closing / Reflection (5 min)

Ask students to share one thing they learned about courage or standing up for what’s right.

Optional: Have students write a short journal entry imagining themselves as one of the Sailors.

Optional Extensions

- Create a timeline of events leading up to and following the Port Chicago disaster.
- Research other moments in U.S. history where courage or speaking up led to change.
- Compare Port Chicago to other local Bay Area stories about fairness and justice.