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Port Chicago High School Teacher's Guide & Lesson Plan

Grade Level

High School (Grades 9–12)

Time Needed

- 1 class period (45–60 minutes) – Core lesson
- Optional extension: +1–2 class periods

Subjects

- U.S. History
- Ethnic Studies
- Civics / Government

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the events of the Port Chicago disaster and its aftermath.
- Analyze why the 50 Sailors refused orders and evaluate the concept of “mutiny.”
- Explain how systemic inequality affected Black Sailors during World War II.
- Understand the role of advocacy, including the involvement of Thurgood Marshall.
- Evaluate how individual and collective actions can influence institutional change.

Essential Questions

- What conditions led the Port Chicago 50 to refuse orders?
- Was their action an act of mutiny, or something else?
- What responsibilities do leaders have to those under their command?
- How does public attention and advocacy lead to change?
- What does this story teach us about justice and accountability?

Materials

- Printed or digital copy of the reading passage
- Whiteboard or projector
- Student worksheet (optional – can be discussion-based)

The Port Chicago 50: A Question of Mutiny

July 17, 1944.

The day had been long, hot, and exhausting at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine near Concord, California. As the sun went down, the work did not stop. By 10:00 PM, the docks were lit by harsh floodlights. Cranes creaked in the darkness. Metal clanged against metal. Sailors moved in steady lines, loading bombs and ammunition onto ships bound for war.

Most of these Sailors were young and African American. Many had little training. They were expected to work quickly, under pressure, with explosives they did not fully understand. Officers urged speed. Competition between crews was encouraged. Safety was not the priority.

Then, without warning, the night exploded.

A massive blast tore through the pier. Fire shot into the sky, lighting up the Bay Area for miles. The shockwave shattered buildings and knocked people to the ground. In seconds, 320 Sailors and civilians were killed. Hundreds more were injured. What had been an ordinary night shift became the deadliest home front disaster of World War II.

In the days that followed, the surviving Sailors were denied the 30 days of survivor's leave normally granted after such disasters. Instead, while their commanding officers were on leave, the Sailors were ordered to clean up the debris and then return to loading munitions under the same dangerous conditions.

But something had changed.

The explosion had exposed what many already knew: the work was dangerous, and the system behind it was deeply unequal. Black Sailors were systematically assigned to these hazardous tasks, often with little training, while other Sailors at Port Chicago performed duties that carried less immediate risk and were less physically demanding. This reflected the Navy's policy of racial segregation at the time, a system that kept people of different races separate and treated them unequally.

Fifty Sailors made a decision. They refused to continue loading munitions under those hazardous and unequal conditions. This was not a sudden or careless act. Many had requested transfers. Many had raised concerns. Their refusal reflected a deeper problem — trust in leadership had broken down.

The Navy charged them with mutiny, a serious military offense implying a coordinated attempt to defy authority — more severe than ordinary insubordination, which is the refusal to follow an order.

The trial became the largest mass mutiny case in American history, capturing attention across the nation. Civil rights advocates, journalists, and legal observers began to question what had happened at Port Chicago. Among those watching closely was Thurgood Marshall, a lawyer for the NAACP who would later become the first Black Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. He attended the trial and criticized the proceedings, arguing that the charges and conditions raised serious questions about fairness and justice.

The case became a symbol of how race shaped opportunity, risk, and treatment in the Navy. Advocates and civil rights leaders amplified the story of the Port Chicago 50, fueling public pressure to confront segregation.

At the height of this pressure, the Navy began dismantling its segregation policies, becoming the first branch of the U.S. armed forces to integrate. By the end of the decade, desegregation extended across all branches, marking a major step toward equality in the military and the nation.

The Port Chicago 50 did not set out to change history. They were Sailors asked to do a dangerous job under unequal conditions. But their decision — and the national response that followed — helped expose injustice and push the military toward greater equality.

Their story is not only about a single moment, or a single act. It is about what happens when people question authority, demand accountability, and insist on being treated with dignity.

Port Chicago Lesson Plan

1. Warm-Up (5–10 minutes)

Write on the board:

“When is it acceptable to refuse an order?”

Students respond in journals or discuss briefly with a partner.

Optional prompts:

- Does the situation matter?
- Does safety matter?
- Does authority always have to be followed?

2. Reading Activity (10–15 minutes)

Students read the passage independently OR

Teacher reads aloud for emphasis and tone

Optional Instruction:

Ask students to underline:

- Evidence of unsafe conditions
- Evidence of unequal treatment
- Moments where decisions are being made

3. Guided Discussion (15–20 minutes)

Comprehension Questions

- What happened on July 17, 1944?
- Why were the working conditions dangerous?
- What decision did the 50 Sailors make?

Critical Thinking Questions

- Why might the Sailors have refused orders?
- Do you think the charge of mutiny was justified? Why or why not?
- What does this story suggest about leadership and responsibility?
- How did national attention change the impact of this event?

Deeper Analysis

- What is the difference between disobedience and protest?
- How does trust in leadership affect decision-making?
- In what ways did this event expose systemic inequality?

4. Activity Options (Choose One)

Option A: Structured Debate

Prompt:

“The Port Chicago 50 committed mutiny.”

Assign students to Agree / Disagree sides

Require evidence from the text

Encourage respectful rebuttals

Option B: Perspective Writing

Students write a 1-page response from one perspective:

- A Sailor at Port Chicago
- A Navy officer
- A journalist covering the trial
- A civil rights advocate

Option C: Leadership Analysis

Students answer:

- What responsibilities did Navy leadership have?
- Where did leadership succeed or fail?
- What would better leadership have looked like?

5. Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Choose one:

- Was this mutiny? Why or why not?
- What is one lesson about leadership you learned?
- How can individuals influence larger systems?

The Port Chicago 50: A Question of Mutiny

Name: _____

Date: _____

Class: _____

Part 1: Reading Reflection

1. What happened on July 17, 1944?
2. Describe the working conditions the Sailors faced before the explosion.
3. What decision did the 50 Sailors make after the disaster?
4. Why was their decision not impulsive?

Part 2: Evidence & Analysis

Unsafe Conditions:

Unequal Treatment:

Breakdown in Leadership:

Part 3: Critical Thinking

1. Should their actions be considered mutiny? Why or why not?

2. What responsibilities do leaders have?
3. How did this event reveal larger problems?
4. How can actions lead to societal change?

Part 4: Perspective Writing

Write from one perspective (Sailor, officer, journalist, advocate):

Part 5: Leadership Reflection

1. What does this story suggest about leadership?
2. What could leadership have done differently?
3. Why is trust important?

Part 6: Exit Reflection

Choose one: mutiny, leadership lesson, or justice.