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Port Chicago Middle School Teacher's Guide & Lesson Plan

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.

This lesson invites students to explore the events at Port Chicago through the lens of **power, fairness, and justice**. Students will examine how hazardous and discriminatory conditions shaped the decisions of the Sailors, and how their actions contributed to meaningful change. Through reading, discussion, and activities, students will be encouraged to think critically about difficult choices and the role individuals can play in shaping history.

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the events of Port Chicago and why they were significant
- Explain what made the working conditions both hazardous and unfair
- Analyze the choices the Sailors faced and the risks involved
- Evaluate questions of fairness, justice, and responsibility
- Connect the story to broader themes of civil rights and social change

Teacher Background

- **Port Chicago Disaster (July 17, 1944):** A massive explosion killed 320 men and injured hundreds
- **Working Conditions:** Many Black Sailors were assigned dangerous labor, given less training, and treated unfairly
- **Aftermath:** Sailors were ordered back to work without meaningful changes
- **The Protest:** 50 Sailors refused to return under the same conditions
- **The Trial:** The Sailors were arrested and charged with mutiny
- **Impact:** The case drew national attention and contributed to changes in the Navy

Reading: Port Chicago – A Story of Power, Courage, and Justice

In 1944, during World War II, hundreds of Sailors were stationed at Port Chicago in California. Their job was to load ships with munitions—powerful explosives that would be sent overseas to support the war.

The work was dangerous. Sailors lifted heavy bombs and worked quickly under pressure, often without proper training.

But the danger was only part of the story.

Many of the Sailors assigned to this work were Black, and they were treated differently from White Sailors. They were more likely to be given the most dangerous jobs, received less training, and were not allowed to use the same facilities. Some had to walk long distances just to use designated restrooms. Even after the disaster, many were denied leave to recover or visit their families.

On the night of July 17, 1944, disaster struck.

A massive explosion tore through the ships and the pier, killing 320 men and injuring hundreds more. It was one of the deadliest home-front disasters of World War II.

In the days that followed, the surviving Sailors were ordered to return to the same work. Nothing had changed. There was no additional training. No new safety measures. And no changes to how the Sailors were being treated.

The Sailors faced a difficult decision.

In the Navy, following orders was expected. Refusing an order could lead to serious punishment. But returning to work meant risking their lives again — under the same hazardous and discriminatory conditions.

Fifty Sailors made a choice that would change history. They refused to return to loading munitions until conditions were made safer and more fair.

The Navy responded quickly. The Sailors were arrested and charged with mutiny, a serious crime. But many people across the country saw the situation differently. They began asking important questions:

- Was it fair to send Sailors back into danger without changes?
- Why were some Sailors treated differently than others?

- Did the Sailors have the right to protect their own safety?
- Should following orders always come before doing what is right?

The story of Port Chicago drew national attention and helped push the Navy to examine its own policies. In the weeks following their protest, changes were made to improve safety and create a more fair system.

Their story reminds us that history is shaped not only by leaders, but by ordinary people who make difficult choices.

Even when the risks are high.

Even when the outcome is uncertain.

When something is unjust, what should we do?



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Middle School Lesson Plan (45–60 Minutes)

1. Warm-Up (5–10 minutes)

Ask students:

- Have you ever seen or experienced something that felt unfair?
- What did you do? What could you have done?

Briefly discuss the idea of **fairness vs. following rules**.

2. Reading Activity (10–15 minutes)

- Read the Port Chicago narrative as a class or independently
- Ask students to underline or highlight:
 - Examples of danger
 - Examples of unfair treatment

3. Discussion (10–15 minutes)

Use the following questions:

- What made the conditions at Port Chicago dangerous?
- What made them unfair?
- Why was it a difficult decision for the Sailors?
- Do you think their actions were justified? Why or why not?

Encourage students to support answers with evidence from the text.



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Activity: Choices and Consequences

Instructions

Students will analyze the choices the Sailors faced and the possible outcomes of each decision.

Worksheet

Choice	Possible Consequences	What Do You Think?
Return to work	Continued danger, possible injury or death	Would you have done this? Why or why not?
Refuse to return	Arrest, trial, punishment	Was this the right choice? Why?
Speak up or ask for change	May be ignored or punished	What other options could they have had?

Extension Question

- Which choice do you think took the most courage? Why?



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Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

Ask students:

- What does this story teach us about courage?
- When is it important to stand up for what is right?
- Can standing up for fairness lead to change? How?

Optional:

- Have students write a short paragraph responding to:
“What would you have done, and why?”

Optional Extension Activities

- Research how the Navy changed after Port Chicago
- Read excerpts from *The Port Chicago 50* by Steve Sheinkin
- Write a journal entry from the perspective of a Sailor
- Hold a class debate: Should the Sailors have followed orders?