

A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR

THE PORT CHICAGO 50

DISASTER, MUTINY, AND THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

BY STEVE SHEINKIN



Grades 5 to 9: Ages 10 to 14
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ABOUT THE BOOK

On July 17, 1944, a massive explosion rocked the California Navy base at Port Chicago, killing more than 300 sailors who were at the docks, critically injuring off-duty men in their bunks, and shattering windows up to a mile away. On August 9, 244 men refused to go back to work until unsafe and unfair conditions at the docks were addressed. When the dust settled, fifty were charged with mutiny, facing decades in jail and even execution. This is a fascinating story of the prejudice that faced black men and women in America's armed forces during World War II, and a nuanced look at those who gave their lives in service of a country where they lacked the most basic rights.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Sheinkin is the award-winning author of several captivating books on American history and the Newbery Honor Winner and National Book Award Finalist for *Bomb*. He lives in Saratoga Springs, New York. Visit Steve at his website stevesheinkin.com

ABOUT THE GUIDE AND COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The pre- and post-reading activities included herein were written to correlate with the Common Core State Standards. Questions and activities develop skills outlined in Reading Standards for Informational Text and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. A diverse list of supplemental reading materials and a key terms vocabulary list are also included. In an effort to support educators, reference is made to specific anchor standards where appropriate.



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VOCABULARY AND KEY TERMS

ammunition (1), shrapnel (2), mess attendant (4), segregated (9), patriotic (12), mutiny (15), incendiary (24), cadence (30), crane (34), winch (34), the hold (34), Thurgood Marshall (40), NAACP (42), 14th Amendment (44), discrimination (50), foreboding (53), cargo ship (53), boxcars (57), barracks (61), tourniquet (63), stern (66), compensate (73), petition (76), court-martial (82), traitor (86), desegregation (88), solitary confinement (92), conspiracy (106), testimony (110), motives (118), mockery (129), usurp (138), subvert (138), verdict (139), dishonorable discharge (140), active sea duty (143), penitentiary (143), hampering (145), appeal (147), inadmissible (147), uphold (148), Executive Order 9981 (153), insubordination (156), integrated (157), branded (160), pardons (164)

INTERNET RESOURCES & SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

- Music that highlights human rights and civil rights violations
<http://musictodiefor.wordpress.com/50-greatest-protest-songs/>
- Background information on World War II <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii>
- History of Labor Movement <http://www.history.com/topics/labor>
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *My Lost Youth* about the loss of innocence in war
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19384>
- How to conduct an oral history unit in your classroom
<http://www.chatham.edu/pti/curriculum/units/2009/Ferraro.pdf>
- Letters from African American soldiers during World War II trying to affect change
http://education.ucsb.edu/webdata/instruction/hss/Generalizations/Wright_Letters.pdf
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s essay *The Ways of Meeting Oppression*
- Audre Lorde's essay *The Fourth of July* highlighting the irony of experiencing racism on Independence Day
- Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy*, using words and language as protest

WHO'S A HERO?

Correlates to CCSS: R.1, R.4, W.4, W.5, W.10, L.1, L.2

Pre-Reading Activity

On an overhead projector, display photographs of historical figures who have contributed to society in some way. Include some controversial figures to add to the discussion. After each photograph is displayed, ask students if they believe this figure is a hero or not and explain why. Based on the discussion, generate a list of qualities they believe heroic figures share.

Now read the first chapter of the book aloud.

Sheinkin begins with the chapter entitled “First Hero” where he describes how Dorie Miller, an African American mess attendant, receives the Navy Cross—the highest honor given by the Navy—for heroically saving men during an attack, only to find that afterward he must return to his duties as a mess attendant. Ask students what inferences they can make about Sheinkin’s definition of a hero. How does that compare with their class generated list? Analyze why Sheinkin chooses to open the book in this way and the impact it has on the reader.

YOU GOTTA HOLLER LOUD!

Correlates to CCSS: R.1, R.7, R.8, R.9, SL.1, SL.2, SL.3, SL.4, RH.6–8.1

Post Reading

After reading *The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights*, introduce your students to further works that approach the subject matter through a different medium. You might wish to listen to the audio recording *The Port Chicago 50: An Oral History* (www.prx.org/pieces/1227-the-port-chicago-50-an-oral-history), watch the documentary film, *Port Chicago Mutiny* for the Learning Channel, and/or watch the movie, *Mutiny*. Engage the students in analyzing each medium’s portrayal of the subject. All three contribute to the “hollering” and each bears witness to those who fought for civil rights, but how do they convey their messages differently? You may wish to have students keep a chart highlighting the messages that stand out in each work, examples of techniques that were used to convey them, and the emotional impact on the reader/listener/viewer. Have the class debate whether one medium stands out as more effective in reaching its audience. You may wish to follow up with a writing assignment that asks students to use specific evidence from the book, recording, documentary, and movie to support their claims.

THE INQUIRY!

Correlates to R.10, W.1, W.2, W.4, W.7, W.8, W.9, W.10, SL.1, SL.2, SL.3, SL.4, L.1, L.2, L.6, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.8, RH.6-8.10

Post Reading

Hold a Civil Rights forum in your class with students acting as the panel of “guest speakers” (see below). Through independent and group research, as well as class discussion, students will prepare to answer questions as their assigned historical figures and discuss their roles in and views of the Port Chicago explosion and subsequent trial.

Suggested historical figures to assign as “guest speakers” are:

Joe Small, Thurgood Marshall, Spencer Sikes, Dorie Miller, Secretary Frank Knox, President Roosevelt, Lieutenant Ernest Delucchi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert Edwards, Corporal Rupert Trimmingham, Commander Joseph Tobin, Admiral Carleton Wright, James Forrestal, Lieutenant Commander James Coakley, Rear Admiral Hugh Osterhaus, Lieutenant Gerald Veltmann, President Truman

Step 1: To build sufficient background knowledge needed to prepare for the panel, have the class view and discuss the Labor Movement as detailed at this site, <http://www.history.com/topics/labor> and do a close reading of pages 29–37 in the book. Students should learn what the sailors on the docks experienced, and how those experiences compare to the struggles workers experienced during the Labor Movement. As a class discuss how this movement might have influenced the Port Chicago 50’s decisions after the explosion.

Step 2: Instruct students to do independent research on their assigned historical figure by using Sheinkin’s book and at least three other sources. They are to gather evidence that helps them understand the motivations of their historical figure.

Step 3: Each student is to write a page of notes detailing their historical figure’s behavior before and after the explosion and what they believe to be the reasons behind it. They should bring these notes to class on the day of the forum.

Step 4: On the day of the forum, ask student audience members to write down at least two questions they would like to ask the guest speakers. Students take on the role of guest speakers and sit in front of the audience. Each introduces him/herself and the class begins by asking questions to the guest speakers. Guest speakers answer and defend their positions as best they can and express their motivations for their words and actions before and after the explosion.

Step 5: As a conclusion to the panel, students choose one “guest speaker” and write a reflection from the point of view of that historical figure explaining whether or not he/she has any regrets.

You may wish to have more than one forum going at once, or use only volunteers, or set up as fish bowls, or allow for tag-teaming—whatever best suits your class.

This guide was written by Erica Rand Silverman and Sharon Kennedy, former high school English teachers and co-founders of Room 228 Educational Consulting www.rm228.com