

If My Blood Stains the Flag, Let It Be Seen

Participant ID: 17MO45245

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*Before you read this, I ask that you approach it not merely as a story, but as a voice---one nearly lost to history. In my creative reimagining of the life and inner workings of Doris “Dorie” Miller, I ventured into the silence left behind by records that overlooked the fullness of his life. Through extensive research, I was confronted with how easily heroism can be buried under uniforms not meant to carry it. It made me question what we choose to remember--- and why?*

*Dorie Miller was never destined for remembrance---at least not beyond the narrow box history carved for him. Yet, when the moment came, he stepped outside that box with nothing but instinct and resolve. His legacy endures for modern society today: Bravery doesn't await recognition, and dignity doesn't depend on permission. In honoring voices like Miller's, we are reminded that history isn't only written by those in power---but also by those who rise, even when they're told to stay seated.*

Sun crept up slow that mornin', as it always did. I was up early, watchin' it spill gold over the hills behind Pearl, castin' a warm glow over the harbor. Light peekin' through, warmin' my face, dancin' on the water real soft---peaceful, like the world ain't got a clue what's beyond that sky. I remember the quiet---the kind of hush before the world shatters. I got dressed slow, straightened my collar like Mama taught me, then shuffled to the galley for breakfast duty---eggs, toast, maybe some grits if we had any left---same old chores they gave a black sailor. Not complainin', just how it is.

They say my job don't matter much in the big picture---just a mess attendant. But what folks forget is: a ship ain't just officers and orders. It's men. It's hands that scrub, lift, carry, serve. I ain't wearin' no officer's stripes, but every tray I carried kept a fighter fed. Every bunk I straightened gave a tired man a place to rest. That was my cog in the machine. I wasn't meant to be seen, but I was there, and I mattered.

Didn't expect nothin' outta the ordinary, just keepin' things in order like a good messman. Folks like me ain't meant for more than slingin' chow and keepin' it tidy for the fellas with stripes. That's what the uniform said I was worth.

But war don't read uniforms, and it damn sure don't ask who is allowed to fight---it just tears outta the sky, blind to skin, and quick to take the ones never meant to be remembered.

First sound I remember was like thunder, but wrong---closer, meaner, like the sky itself tore open. Then came the second wave, the ship buckled hard beneath me, groaning from its gut like a dyin' beast. I didn't need no bugle, no officer hollerin'---I knew right then we was under attack. That's when the whole harbor lit up---fire climbin' the sky, black smoke spillin' thick over the water, smotherin' the sun like the sky itself was mournin'---and the world twisted into nothin' but

steel, screams, and the sour, heavy smell of burnin' flesh. Everywhere I looked, men I just served breakfast to were torn apart before I even understood what was happenin'

Planes overhead, bullets rainin' down, torpedos rippin' through her side. I wasn't trained for battle. Navy didn't train men like me to fight. But when death shows up, it don't care what rank's stitched on your sleeve. It just takes.

I didn't wait for orders---I didn't have none. But I did have fire in my lungs, and instinct in my hands, and that was enough. Lord knows, it had to be enough. See, in the navy, we got protocol: if you ain't trained for combat, you stand back and keep to your station. But the thing is... I didn't see no station---I saw men fallin', and all I could think about was Mama back in Waco. Thought I might die right there. I didn't feel like no hero. Just didn't want to go down doin' nothin'. Fire was spillin' from the sky, brothers screamin' through the smoke, and my feet just moved. Didn't think. Couldn't. There wasn't time for nothin' but doin'---'cause standin' there meant joinin' the dead. And I knew damn sure---I couldn't leave Mama behind, weepin' for a son who just stood still and let the world end around him

So I ran. Ran straight through hell---fire, blood, wreckage, not stoppin' 'til I hit the bridge. There was Captain Bennion, lyin' there, chest torn open by shrapnel, blood soakin' his uniform. He was still drawin' breath---wet, ragged gasps---still tryin' to bark out orders with a voice hoarse from smoke and grit. I reached for him, grabbin' at his torn uniform, tried haulin' him out, but he shoved me off hard, eyes burnin' like molten steel, spittin' through clenched teeth. 'Help the others, damn it', he growled. That's the kind of man he was. And so I did.

Next thing I knew, I was at an anti-aircraft gun---one of them big .50 cal's. No one on it. Smoke risin', planes swoopin' low. I didn't ask. I didn't wait. I climbed up, wrapped my hands 'round

those grips and let loose. Never fired one before. Never even touched one before that day. But my hands just... moved. I aimed at the sky like it'd spat on mercy---and dared me to do the same. Fired at the planes droppin' fire on my brothers. Fired like it was the only thing keepin' my heart beatin'. Fired 'til the heat near blistered my skin, and even then, I didn't stop. Men all around me---white, black, it didn't matter---were falling. I don't know if I hit anythin'. Maybe I did. Maybe I didn't. But I wasn't about to stand there doin' nothin'.

See, I wasn't s'posed to be up there. Not by Navy rules. But in that moment, all that protocol, all that segregation---melted away in the fire. We was all just men, tryin' to stay alive. I wasn't thinkin' 'bout medals or history books. I was thinkin' 'bout Mama's prayers back home, 'bout how I didn't wanna die slingin' eggs to men who never knew my name. Not that day. Not without fightin' back. I don't know when I stopped shootin'. My mind's too muddled to piece it together---maybe I kept shootin' while pullin' bodies from the wreckage, or maybe I didn't. The lines blurred. All I remember is the weight---those bodies, slick with oil and blood, one after another, sinkin' in my hands. Faces I couldn't recognize, men I couldn't focus on, men I couldn't save. Some still warm, some already cold. The heat was unbearable, but it was the silence between the shots, the hollow gasps between screams, that pressed hardest on me. I didn't know where the fight ended and the savin' began, or if it even mattered---I just kept movin'. There was no time to think, no time to decide. Just action, and even that felt like it wasn't enough.

When it ended, the harbor was black with smoke. Oil on the water burnin'. Ships gutted. Bodies floatin'. Over 2,400 gone. And Pearl.. Pearl was on fire, sinkin' like the earth's maw split open, swallowin' a piece of me with it. I made it off, but I don't reckon the same man walked away.

After the smoke cleared, word was the radar had pinged those planes early, but nobody took it serious. Thought it was just a handful of strays flyin' in from the mainland. That's the thing 'bout

war---it don't wait for permission. It comes fast and vicious, and by the time folks catch on, it's already too late. Protocols failed that day. Wires got crossed. Communication lines jammed. Ammunition locked away, like we had all the time in the world. Ships moored too close together, couldn't move, couldn't breath. We weren't ready---though deep down, I reckon our bones told us we shoulda been. Like the day was mourning' its own end, and we just didn't hear the eulogy yet. I reckon I wasn't supposed to die that day. But I sure thought I might. And what haunted me most weren't the bullets or the fire---it was the feelin' that I haven't lived yet. Twenty-two years old, and what had I done? Never owned a thing that was mine, never had a young man call me "sir," never kissed a woman without glancin' over my shoulder, never walked through a door marked "welcome" with a wife and kids waitin' on the other side.

I'd spent my whole damn life just tryin' to survive, never thinkin' bout what it meant to truly live. Bust my ass servin' others, followin' rules made by folks who never knew a thing 'bout me, never cared to. But I wanted more. I wanted a chance to be somethin'. To be known for more than cleanin' trays and carryin' plates. In that fire, I realized maybe this moment, this fight, was what I was meant for.

Still...I wasn't ready to go. Not without seein' home' again. Not without seein' change.

They gave me a metal for what I did---a *Navy Cross*, first black man to get one. I smiled polite, shook hands with people, let 'em call me a hero in the papers. But the truth is, I wasn't tryin' to be no hero. I was tryin' to survive. Tryin' to make sure someone else could. Deep down, it didn't feel like no victory. It felt like a bandage on a wound that never stopped bleedin'. It felt like a crack in somethin' too big to break---a system that told me what I couldn't do, right until the moment I did it. For a moment, maybe they saw me that day. Really saw me. Not just as a steward, but as a sailor.

As a man.

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Part of me is still in those waters. The part that thought if I kept my head down, stayed in my place, maybe I'd get through this war without makin' history. Instead, history found me, with smoke in my lungs, fire in my chest, and a gun in hands that were never meant to carry one. Sometimes, I wonder if I'll live long enough to see the world crack open a little wider. Maybe one day, they'd let folks like me train on them guns. Maybe a black man could stand on the bridge, not just follow orders with our eyes down and backs bent. Maybe we'd be seen for more than the color of our hands.

*But I didn't die that day. Not yet.*

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