

Have you, or any of your family members or friends served in the Navy, and if so were any of them Black? Well, up until the year 1942, the answer would almost always be no. Until then, the Navy only recruited a few Black people as messmen on ships because of centuries of prejudice against Black people. One of these Black messmen was Doris Miller, who was stationed on the battleship *USS West Virginia* on December Seventh, 1941 during the attack on Pearl Harbor from the Japanese. During the attack, Miller went beyond being a mere messman by helping carry the Captain of the ship to safety, and shooting down enemy planes with an on-board machine gun. Although it took effort and time for him to get acknowledged for his heroic actions, his legacy was a significant step forward in the nascent Civil Rights Movement and tells us a lesson about how due recognition is needed from country, superiors, and the press.

On that fateful morning of December Seventh, 1941, Messman Doris Miller woke up early to do his chores around the battleship, no Americans knowing what was going to happen in just a few hours. At 7:55, the port where Dorris was stationed, Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, was surprise-attacked by the Japanese. During the attack, the *USS West Virginia* was hit with two bombs and at least seven torpedoes, causing the Captain of the ship, Mervin Sharp Bennion, to receive a large wound in his abdomen. While on his way to rescue the Captain, Lieutenant Commander Doir C. Johnson saw Doris and commanded him to assist. When they arrived on the bridge, they began a search for materials to build a stretcher for the Captain. It was then that Lieutenant White, who had accompanied Doris to the bridge, saw a pair of 50 caliber antiaircraft machine guns and asked that Doris assist him while shooting at the invading Japanese planes. Despite only being told to load the guns, Doris started shooting one of the weapons himself and shot down multiple Japanese planes. According to Johnson, Doris had handled his gun very well,

“blazing away as though he had fired one all his life” (Van Der Vat, 2001, p. 22). His heroic actions were acknowledged by the shipmen witnessing his actions but it took much longer for him to receive proper recognition for his acts of bravery at Pearl Harbor.

Two weeks after the attack, the US Navy released a list of sailors who showed heroism during the attack, including an unnamed Black sailor. For all of his heroism, he was not even acknowledged by name! Speculation and rumors started as to who this hero could be, and it quickly became clear that the sailor was Doris. When this was well established, but not acknowledged by the Navy, the Black community in the United States quickly accepted Doris as a symbol of pride and heroism. Pressure from multiple sources began to put pressure on President Roosevelt to give Doris proper recognition. The Black press started widespread campaigns to have Doris acknowledged for his heroism, like when the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a very large newspaper, wrote in one of their articles on March 21, 1942, “To President Franklin D. Roosevelt, as commander in chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, as a token of national appreciation, colored America urges you to send Dorie Miller, messman hero of Pearl Harbor, to the Naval Academy for training” (Van Der Vat, 2001, p. 28). In addition to the press, New York Senator James Michael Mead introduced a bill to award Doris with the Congressional Medal of Honor. This pressure campaign led the President, on May 11th, 1942 to award the Navy Cross to Doris, a high honor and very well deserved.

Doris’s achievement was widely celebrated as a major victory against Jim Crow, which were customs and practices which enforced racial segregation, and inspired others to take action against discrimination in the Army and Navy. For example, on February Seventh, 1942, the

*Pittsburgh Courier* started a “Double V” campaign (Victory at home and abroad ) to encourage the idea that Black people should be able to serve in the armed forces along with other races. The paper featured many heroic stories of Black servicemen, including Doris Miller’s actions at Pearl Harbor. After receiving his Navy Cross, Doris also came back to the mainland, where he gave talks promoting war bond sales and accepting tokens of admiration from Black communities in cities such as Waco, Dallas, Oakland, Montgomery, and others.

I began this essay asking if you knew any Black sailors in the Navy and surely in today’s integrated Navy you know there are sailors of every background. This change in the composition of our Armed Forces is because of both Doris’s bravery and the recognition that was given to him. I have seen battle monuments for American soldiers who fought in Normandy, France and also visited Arlington National Cemetery. These places serve as reminders of our national sacrifice and I am proud that Doris is included in this legacy. My school is full of Americans of all colors and I feel it is vital that they feel they have every opportunity and know they will be recognized for their contributions. If Doris had not been acknowledged for his bravery, it is hard to imagine how America would look today.

### **Citations**

Cutrer, T. W., & Parrish, T. M. (2018). *Doris Miller, Pearl Harbor, and the birth of the Civil Rights Movement*. Texas A & M University Press.

Van der Vat, D. (2001). *Pearl Harbor: An illustrated history*. Basic Books.