

“Mother, don’t worry about me and tell all my friends not to shed any tears for me, for when the dark clouds pass over, I’ll be back on the sunny side.”¹ These were the words of Doris “Dori” Miller, an American World War II hero. As the first African-American to receive the Navy Cross for saving countless sailors and downing enemy planes on the fateful day of Pearl Harbor, Doris Miller has let me and America know that being a model citizen goes far beyond skin color, religion, or class.

Doris Miller, born on October 12, 1919, was the third of four sons to Henrietta and Connery Miller. Growing up in Waco, Texas, his childhood consisted of working hard with his siblings to help support the family farm. Eventually, Miller signed up for the Navy to help his already struggling and hungry family survive the Great Depression.² After going through basic training in a racially separated boot camp at Norfolk, Virginia, segregation in the Navy led to Doris becoming the mess attendant of the USS *West Virginia*, which would be one of the one hundred ships President Roosevelt would transport to Pearl Harbor to “deter Japanese aggression” in the Pacific. Eventually, he rose to the rank of the ship’s cook, third class, in Pearl Harbor. Also known as the Steward Branch, messmen in World War II were the segregated men in the Navy, consisting of African-Americans, Filipinos, and Chinese.³ Miller’s job throughout his Navy life was to serve meals, keep the quarters tidy, and work for his white superiors. As one of his coworkers said, messmen were simply “seagoing bellhops, chambermaids, and dishwashers.”⁴ Messmen were one of the lowest “classes” in the Navy since the beginning, being

¹ “How Dorie Miller’s bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times.” Accessed April 15, 2025. <https://www.navytimes.com/military-honor/salute-veterans/2019/11/01/how-dorie-millers-bravery-helped-fight-bigotry-in-the-navy/>.

² “Doris Miller - Waco History.” Accessed April 15, 2025. <https://wacohistory.org/items/show/98#:~:text=Along%20with%20his%20siblings%2C%20Doris.at%20A.%20J.%20Moore%20High%20School>.

³ “U.S. Navy World War II Enlisted Rates: Messman/Steward Branch - Uniform Reference Net.” Accessed April 16, 2025. https://www.uniform-reference.net/insignia/usn/usn_ww2_enl_steward.html.

⁴ “How Dorie Miller’s bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times.”

the only branch Negroes could enlist in. Even serving in the lowest Navy class was better than “sitting around in Waco working as a busboy, going nowhere.”⁵

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. But before the attack, Doris Miller was doing the laundry. He was most likely planning to do more manual labor, such as shining the other sailors’ shoes and serving their meals. At the time of the alarm’s sounding, Doris originally reported to his battle station, but upon arriving, found the magazine already flooded. Looking for reassignment, he encountered Lieutenant Commander Doir C. Johnson, who gave Miller the job of going to the signals deck, where Captain Mervyn Sharp Bennion lay mortally wounded. After carrying his captain to a safe area inside the ship, Dorie was ordered to feed ammo into Browning machine guns that Lieutenant (junior grade) Frederick H. White would be using against Japanese planes. Upon seeing a second gun empty and unused, Miller went “above and beyond the call of duty”⁶ to carry and aid wounded soldiers from the ship’s deck. Then, with no prior training, Miller began shooting down Japanese enemy planes using a .50-calibre anti-aircraft gun.⁷ By then, the ship had been dealt the damage of two bombs and six Japanese torpedoes. Lieutenant Commander Johnson described Miller as “blazing away as though he had fired [a machine gun] all his life.”⁸ When asked about the event, Miller said, “It wasn’t hard, I just pulled the trigger and she worked fine ... when the Japanese bombers attacked my ship at Pearl Harbor I forgot all about the fact that I and other Negroes can be only messmen in the Navy and are not taught how to man an antiaircraft gun.”⁹ It was only until the gun ran out of ammunition and he was given the order to abandon ship that Doris stopped firing and left the ship. Even then, he saved numerous lives by pulling sailors out of the water and onto the boat

⁵ “How Dorie Miller’s bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times.”

⁶ “The Unforeseen Legacy of Doris Miller - National Museum of the Pacific War.” Accessed April 15, 2025. <https://www.pacificwarmuseum.org/about/news/the-unforeseen-legacy-of-doris-miller>.

⁷ “How Dorie Miller’s bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times.”

⁸ “How Dorie Miller’s bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times.”

⁹ “How Dorie Miller’s bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times.”

deck. In 1943, he was promoted to petty officer in the escort carrier of the USS *Liscome Bay*.¹⁰ On November 24, 1943, it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. After around one year of the *Liscome Bay*'s sinking, Doris "Dorie" Miller was declared dead.

Several weeks after Pearl Harbor, the Navy told stories about a black sailor who saved countless Navy lives, but never said the name of this specific someone. However, misinformation also began to spread about this sailor. On December 22, 1941, the *New York Times* published a story of a black sailor who served on the *Arizona* and "stood on the hot decks of his battleship and directed the fighting ... manned a machine gun on the bridge until his ammunition was exhausted."¹¹ When the Navy released the names of commendations for heroism at Pearl Harbor, the unnamed black sailor was on the list. Upon learning about this black sailor, Miller's mother said, "That's got to be Doris they talking about." It was not until March 1942 that the *Pittsburgh Courier* identified this mystery sailor to be Doris "Dori" Miller.¹² There were then arguments in the House of Representatives and Senate over whether Miller deserved the Medal of Honor, a debate among political leaders.

On May 27, 1942, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz gave Doris Miller the Navy Cross for his extraordinary heroism and need to protect his country. After Miller's death, he received the Purple Heart Award, American Defense Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, and World War II Victory Medal.¹³ Doris "Dori" Miller is now known for his immense bravery, patriotism, and determination. "Doris Miller stood for everything that is good about our nation, and his story continues to be remembered and repeated whenever our people continue the watch today."¹⁴ He is a symbol of how his determination and love for his country overcame the struggles and

¹⁰ "Doris Miller - Waco History."

¹¹ "How Dorie Miller's bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times."

¹² "How Dorie Miller's bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times."

¹³ PO3 Doris Miller - Military Hall of Honor." Accessed April 17, 2025.
<https://militaryhallofhonor.com/honoree-record.php?id=2866>.

¹⁴ "How Dorie Miller's bravery helped fight Navy racism - Navy Times."

segregation he faced. He teaches America that no matter the circumstances of the world around you, you can still be the best person you are to both yourself and the people who surround you. He teaches America that even if you do not know everything, you are still capable of supporting your community. He teaches America that no good deed goes unpunished. Additionally, his story has impacted my life in ways I have not considered until now. First of all, Doris Miller has let me know that to be a citizen is to love one another, despite how others may treat you. Learning about him in history informed me that although you can only do what you are told to do, you can also go “above and beyond the call of duty.” I will continue to carry Doris Miller’s lessons with me throughout my life, specifically in civic engagement. Although I am a middle schooler, I love helping my community grow and thrive, whether that be through volunteering or art.

A lot of people think Doris Miller is significant because he was the first African-American to receive the Navy Cross. Although representation and diversity are crucial in this society, I believe that Doris Miller’s story goes far beyond race, religion, or socioeconomic status. I believe that Doris Miller set the expectation of being a model citizen. By that, I mean that when our United States of America is in danger, everyone must step up and have all hands on deck (pun intended), ready to face anything and everything to ensure the safety, freedom, and happiness of future generations. Doris Miller did not let his job title, skin color, or status limit what he was capable of, nor affect his loyalty to America. Miller was a hero who could be described by President John F. Kennedy’s words: “Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.”¹⁵ I have been living by those words for most of my life. As someone who loves to help others learn, I always try my best to work towards my

¹⁵ “Inaugural Address - JFK Library.” Accessed April 18, 2025.
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address>.

goals while also making sure to play my part as a good citizen in civic engagement. Because what Doris Miller has taught me is that freedom is not always free.

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