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## ABOARD THE WRONG SHIP IN THE RIGHT BOOKS: DORIS MILLER AND HISTORICAL ACCURACY

by Neil Sapper

Doris Miller, a young black man from Waco, enlisted in the United States Navy at the Recruiting Station in Dallas, Texas on September 19, 1939.<sup>1</sup> Within four years, his actions—as well as the official reaction—revealed the harsh extent of racial discrimination both in the Navy and in the civilian society that it mirrored. And as the case of Doris Miller reveals, racial discrimination can cloud a record of valor.

When he entered the Navy as a Mess Attendant, third class, Doris Miller became one of slightly more than 4,000 black sailors who served exclusively in the Steward's Branch. Recruitment of black messmen to work in the galleys and laundries of the U.S. Navy resumed in 1932, after an interruption of nearly thirteen years. Prior to that time, the Navy virtually excluded blacks in favor of Filipinos for these duties.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, the black newspaper in Miller's home town took umbrage at the treatment accorded a Navy recruiting announcement aimed at black Wacoans in the white daily in that city:

Our local daily puts it, presumably . . . in forced humor, as giving colored men the opportunity of "totin' plates instead of cotton sacks . . ." Just think of it! The only way Negroes can die in Uncle Sam's democratic Navy is—slinging hash.<sup>3</sup>

Heightening this irony, within four months a black Wacoan "slinging hash" aboard the U.S.S. *West Virginia* in Pearl Harbor became the first United States hero of World War II.

According to accounts of events at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Doris Miller was collecting laundry when the alarm for General Quarters sounded.<sup>4</sup> Enroute to his battle station during the Japanese air attack, he risked the bombing, strafing, and flame-swept decks to assist the mortally wounded commanding officer, Captain Mervyn Bennion, to a place of greater safety. Another officer on the bridge of the *West Virginia* ordered Miller to supply ammunition to a pair of inactive machine guns on deck. When that officer, Ensign Victor Delano, next checked the machine guns, he saw Miller firing one of them. It was Miller's first experience with such a weapon because messmen were not given the gunnery training received by white

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sailors. He was quoted later in a self-deprecatory account of his valor:

It wasn't hard. I just pulled the trigger and she worked fine. I had watched the others with these guns. I guess I fired her for about fifteen minutes . . . They were diving pretty close to us.<sup>5</sup>

Before the heat of the flames on the *West Virginia* forced its crew to leap into the sea, Miller had directed his machine gun so effectively that possibly four Japanese aircraft were shot down as they passed over his station.

The inexact number of planes shot down by Miller is but one of the blurred areas on the historical record of his heroism. According to Navy Department records, Messman Miller shot down one enemy airplane, but according to Miller and some witnesses, the number of hits was at least four and perhaps as high as six.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, no immediate account of the action at Pearl Harbor was given because Frank Knox, the Secretary of the Navy, imposed a news blackout which lasted for ten days.<sup>7</sup> In the incredible confusion following the attack, Secretary Knox reported his findings following a personal inspection tour in Hawaii. Seeking to assuage a battered national morale, Knox made vague reference to a "seaman aboard a battleship" who "single-handedly manned a machine gun and blasted an attacking torpedo plane as it leveled against his ship . . ."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the Navy Secretary failed to identify the heroic sailor.

As more news was released from Pearl Harbor, an anonymous officer who supposedly served on the U.S.S. *Arizona* (the hardest-hit warship at Pearl Harbor) was quoted in this eyewitness account:

. . . A Negro mess attendant who never before had fired a gun manned a machine gun on the bridge until the ammunition was exhausted . . .<sup>9</sup>

At this point, the number of Japanese aircraft shot down by the heroic unidentified sailor was designated vaguely and the ship being defended was identified mistakenly as the *Arizona*. In the same time-span, the armed forces of the United States were already recognizing and validating the valor of other heroes. For example, Captain Colin P. Kelly, Jr. was posthumously praised as the first U.S. hero in World War II. Kelly, a white aviator, was acclaimed for sinking a Japanese battleship three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, it was later learned that the "battleship" was, in reality, a much smaller cruiser and that it was not even sunk as first believed.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the War Department publicly cited six white aviators for air action during

the attack on Pearl Harbor. But the "Negro mess attendant" remained unidentified for three months.

During those months, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) grew restive over the discrepancy in the ability of the Navy to identify white heroes while it seemed unable to identify the "Negro mess attendant" who had performed so gallantly at Pearl Harbor. Joining the NAACP on this issue was the outspoken black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which was edited by Robert L. Vann.<sup>12</sup> In response to this pressure, the Navy Department, in February 1942, announced

that the colored messman . . . and two Negro workmen, along with four white men who labored heroically under fire during the vicious Japanese attack . . . , may receive Naval awards . . .<sup>13</sup>

Finally, after concerted effort by civil rights organizations (e.g., the NAACP), the black press (e.g., the *Pittsburgh Courier*), and public figures (e.g., Congressman Vito Marcantonio of New York and Republican presidential-aspirant Wendell Willkie), the Navy revealed in March 1942, that the "Negro mess attendant" was Doris Miller of Waco, Texas.<sup>14</sup> This revelation was accompanied by a standard letter of citation from Navy Secretary Frank Knox which recognized Miller's actions.

However, the mere letter of citation seemed to stir the various organizations and individuals to seek an award more commensurate with the valor exhibited by the first U.S. hero of the war. By comparison, the Navy awarded the second highest award available to its personnel, the Navy Cross, to a white sailor who had aided in the rescue of nine aviators who were adrift on life rafts after their plane was shot down off Oahu during the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>15</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* editorialized: "We would like to know why it required so long to identify Mr. Miller, and why to date he has received no reward for his heroism."<sup>16</sup> The black press took the lead in the movement which sought to have the Navy confer a suitably higher award upon Miller. To that end, Congressman John D. Dingell (D.-Michigan) and Senator James M. Mead (D.-New York) introduced concurrent legislation to authorize President Franklin Roosevelt to award the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award, to Doris Miller.<sup>17</sup>

The movement to gain more suitable recognition of the heroic messman included such groups as the Fraternal Council of Churches, the Southern Negro Youth Council, The National Negro Congress, leading black fraternities and sororities, and the

national black press, as well as thousands of individuals.<sup>18</sup> However, the Navy proved immediately unresponsive. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that Navy Secretary Knox had indicated opposition to the legislation pending in Congress to award the Medal of Honor to Miller. In reply to an inquiry made by Edgar G. Browne, president of the National Negro Congress, Knox wrote that he already had provided a letter of commendation to Miller and that

. . . in view of the recommendations of the Pacific Coast Fleet Board of Awards and CINCPAC [Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet], the recognition already awarded is deemed sufficient and appropriate . . .<sup>19</sup>

Despite the adamant stance adopted by the Navy Secretary, the force of black public opinion had some impact. Earlier, in 1941, black leaders of national stature had threatened to organize a march on Washington, D.C. The leaders of the March on Washington Movement, envisioned a massive demonstration by 100,000 black people in protest over white resistance to black employment in the rapidly-growing defense industries stimulated by federal contracts. To avert the damaging image of black protest over undemocratic hiring practices in the arsenal of democracy, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 8802 which opened many defense industries to black job-seekers. Now that the United States was at war seeking to defend democracy, the implications of the protest over the Navy's treatment of Doris Miller had great potential to damage morale among black people. At that time, some black leaders began calling for a double victory in the war; a victory for democracy both abroad and at home.

In an obvious attempt to circumvent this growing protest, the Navy Department announced that the heroic messman from Waco would receive the Navy Cross in an appropriate award ceremony on May 27, 1942. Because of unrelenting pressure, in one week's time Secretary Knox moved from his original sentiment that a mere letter of citation was "sufficient and appropriate," to reconsider Miller's valor as deserving of the second highest award available to Navy personnel.<sup>20</sup> By his action rescinding the original letter of commendation and ordering the conferral of the Navy Cross, Knox made Doris Miller the first black recipient of the Navy Cross.<sup>21</sup>

On May 27, 1942, aboard an unidentified ship in Pearl Harbor, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet—Admiral Chester Nimitz of Fredricksburg, Texas—conferred the Navy Cross upon his fellow Texan, Doris Miller. As the only black sailor among the nine honorees at the ceremony, Miller was

singled out by the crusty admiral, who remarked:

This marks the first time in the present conflict that such high tribute has been made in the Pacific Fleet to a member of his race, and I am sure that the future will see others similarly honored . . .<sup>22</sup>

And certainly he was not the last, as a significant number of black sailors matched Miller's heroism, but Miller did not live to see their deeds.

Following a Christmas leave in 1942, when he saw his home and family in Waco for the last time, Doris Miller reported to duty aboard the aircraft carrier *Liscome Bay* as a Mess Attendant, first class. During the battle of the Gilbert Islands in November 1943, his ship was torpedoed and sunk in the Pacific Ocean. All 655 men aboard the stricken vessel were lost. At that time, Doris Miller had been promoted to Cook, third class, and probably worked in the ship's galley at the time of his death.<sup>23</sup>

On June 3, 1972, the U.S.S. *Miller* was launched at Avondale Shipyards in Louisiana. Named in honor of Doris Miller, the new destroyer escort commemorated the black sailor's heroism during World War II. The launching was reported by the nation's press and most newspaper accounts included a reprise of Miller's brave deeds on December 7, 1941. While those news stories correctly placed Miller aboard the U.S.S. *West Virginia* at Pearl Harbor, most historical accounts inexplicably have described Miller's activities as having taken place nearby aboard the U.S.S. *Arizona* during the surprise attack.

Because of a combination of incredible confusion both at Pearl Harbor and in Washington, and a curious reticence about a black naval hero by his own white superiors, some of the most respected secondary works dealing with black history during World War II have echoed inaccuracies which confuse the record of the first U.S. hero of the war. In 1944, *The Negro Handbook*, a reference work published annually, proclaimed Miller's heroism and erroneously designated his ship as the *Arizona*.<sup>24</sup> This error was compounded in April 1947, when the *Journal of Negro History* published an essay by Lawrence D. Reddick which discussed the heroism of Doris Miller. Reddick's account was faithful to Miller's testimony in the aftermath of the attack, but the messman was described as collecting laundry aboard the *Arizona* at the time of the attack.<sup>25</sup> This postwar essay, which makes a strong case for Miller as this country's first hero in the war, greatly influenced other writers.

Another important study which also appeared in 1947 and gave evidence of the influence of Reddick's essay was John Hope Franklin's survey of the history of black people in the United

States, *From Slavery to Freedom*. Not only did Franklin credit Reddick's assistance in his preface and in his bibliographic notes, but his study also repeated the erroneous statement that Doris Miller was aboard the *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, this influential work has gone through four editions and the erroneous information concerning Doris Miller remains uncorrected.<sup>27</sup> Even more unfortunately, this historiographical error has not been confined to these important scholarly publications.

In 1951, a monograph which surveyed the integration of blacks into the United States Navy also repeated the error.<sup>28</sup> Based upon his master's thesis written at Howard University in 1947—the same year as the publication of the work of both Reddick and Franklin—Dennis D. Nelson's study gained credibility from the fact that the author was both black and a commissioned officer in the United States Navy.<sup>29</sup> By 1954 the inaccuracy was repeated in another historical work, William Z. Foster's study of the black experience in the United States.<sup>30</sup> From that point, the erroneous designation of Doris Miller's ship at Pearl Harbor has appeared in numerous reference books dealing with black history.<sup>31</sup> A more recent repetition of the error came to light, ironically enough, in Miller's home town. *The Ethnic Cultural Studies Handbook*, published by the Waco (Texas) Independent School District, places the black Wacoan on the deck of the *Arizona*.<sup>32</sup>

The historical facts of Doris Miller's bravery have been published in correct form in only four instances. The earliest of the four books, written by the Langston Hughes for juvenile readers, was entitled *Famous Negro Heroes of America*.<sup>33</sup> An unofficial Naval biographical dictionary sets the facts accurately.<sup>34</sup> The third correct account was provided by Phillip T. Drotning in a book also aimed at juvenile readers.<sup>35</sup> And finally, Jack D. Foner has written accurately of Miller in his recent study of the black military experience in the United States.<sup>36</sup> Despite these four exceptions to the erroneous treatment of Miller's exploits at Pearl Harbor, the greater mass of literature dealing with his heroism also reinforces the original error.

Long before the Navy named a ship for Miller, a black newspaper in Houston commented upon the meaning of his sacrifice and the most effective homage that the Navy might pay a dead hero:

Now that Doris Miller's dead, our Navy might very well, instead of naming a ship for him and nothing more, set up as a testimonial to him a new era of justice and fair play to Negroes . . . in the . . . U.S. Navy.<sup>37</sup>

The Navy has made progress in race relations and equal opportunity since Doris Miller's brave actions at Pearl Harbor.

The keepers of the historical record have done less well for this country's first hero of World War II. There is an old adage that history does not repeat itself, only historians do that. Unfortunately for Miller, too many historians have not only repeated themselves but they have repeated the same error by placing the Texan hero of Pearl Harbor aboard the *Arizona*. Just as the Navy was charged to give Doris Miller a fitting memorial, historians should honor his valor with historical accuracy.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henrietta Miller, private interview, with the author, Waco, Texas, October 12, 1973; U.S., Department of the Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel, Transcript of Service of Doris Miller, September 16, 1939 - November 25, 1944.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis D. Nelson, "The Integration of the Negro Into the U.S. Navy, 1776-1947" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Howard University, 1947), 1-2; *Informer* (Houston), April 11, 1942, 1.

<sup>3</sup>Editorial, *Waco Messenger*, September 26, 1941, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Account provided by Vice Admiral (Ret.) Edwin B. Hooper in a letter to the author, June 29, 1972. Hooper was the Director of Naval History in the Department of the Navy at that time.

<sup>5</sup>*Waco Messenger*, January 1, 1943, 1, 6; *Dallas Express*, January 2, 1943, 1.

<sup>6</sup>*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 2, 1943, 1.

<sup>7</sup>*New York Times*, December 16, 1941, 1.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 1, 7.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, December 22, 1941, 1, 4; *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 3, 1942, 1.

<sup>10</sup>*New York Times*, December 13, 1941, 6.

<sup>11</sup>Lawrence D. Reddick, "The Negro In The United States Navy During World War II," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXII, 205; *New York Times*, October 27, 1946, 46.

<sup>12</sup>*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 3, 1942, 2, 6.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, February 14, 1942, 1.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, March 13, 1942, 7; *Waco Messenger*, December 10, 1943, 1.

<sup>15</sup>*New York Times*, January 6, 1942, 2.

<sup>16</sup>*Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1942, 6.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 1, 4.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, May 9, 1942, 1: "Doris Miller: First U.S. Hero of World War II," *Ebony*, December 1969, 133; Miller, private interview, October 12, 1973.

<sup>19</sup>*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 11, 1942, 3.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, May 16, 1942, 1: M.H. Barns, letter to the author, September 19, 1973. Barns was the Head of the Decorations and Medals Branch in the Department of the Navy at that time.

<sup>21</sup>*Dallas Morning News*, February 12, 1970, AA-5; *Waco News-Tribune*, November 6, 1971, 1; Thomas Turner, "A Man Named Doris." *Texas Star*, May 21, 1972, 4.



<sup>22</sup>*New York Times*, May 28, 1942, 8; *Ibid.*, June 10, 1942, 3; *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 6, 1942, 1.

<sup>23</sup>Transcript of Service of Doris Miller, September 16, 1939-November 25, 1944.

<sup>24</sup>Florence Murray, ed., *The Negro Handbook*, 1944 (New York, 1944), 5.

<sup>25</sup>Reddick, "Negro In The Navy," 204. Reddick's essay contained no citations of sources consulted.

<sup>26</sup>John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1947), 573.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.* (New York, Second Edition, 1956), 576; *Ibid.* (New York, Third Edition, 1967), 591; *Ibid.* (New York, Fourth Edition, 1974), 449.

<sup>28</sup>Dennis D. Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro Into the U.S. Navy* (New York, 1951), 24-25.

<sup>29</sup>See n. 2 above.

<sup>30</sup>William Z. Foster, *The Negro People in American History* (New York, 1954), 511.

<sup>31</sup>John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), 632; Peter M. Bergman, *The Chronological History of the Negro in America* (New York, 1969), 494; *Ebony Pictorial History of Black America* (Chicago, 3 vols, 1971), *Reconstruction to Court Decision, 1954*, II, 252; Harry A. Polski and Ernest Kaiser, eds., *The Negro Almanac* (New York, 1971), 610-611.

<sup>32</sup>Walter A. Meeks, "The Black American in Texas After the Civil War," *Negro History Bulletin*, XXXVII, 242. This essay was excerpted from a chapter in the *Ethnic Cultural Studies Handbook*, published by the Waco Independent School District.

<sup>33</sup>Langston Hughes, *Famous Negro Heroes of America* (New York, 1958), 183-186.

<sup>34</sup>Karl Schuon, *U.S. Navy Biographical Dictionary* (New York, 1964), 172.

<sup>35</sup>Phillip T. Drotning, *Black Heroes In Our Nation's History* (New York, 1969), 177-180. Drotning makes brief note of the inaccuracy in the contention that Miller served on the *Arizona*.

<sup>36</sup>Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History* (New York, 1974), 172. Foner cites both Franklin and Nelson in his bibliographic essay, but he inexplicably refrained from repeating their error in this case.

<sup>37</sup>Editorial, *Informer* (Houston), January 1, 1944, 15.



Doris Miller, World War II Hero