

## Original Paper

# Military Politics, the U.S. Jim Crow Navy, and the Heroic Legacy of Doris (“Dorie”) Miller

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is about the famous Black Navy man, Doris (“Dorie”) Miller, a World War II hero who also fought the forces of evil in the United States Navy and abroad. This is to say that Miller had to confront a military that was discriminatory, unequal, and segregated — that is, in terms of race. However, Miller became a pioneering member of the U.S. Navy who encouraged other Black sailors to be everything that they could be, even though he and others like him were at the bottom of the Navy’s hierarchy, as enlisted men.*

*Furthermore, “Dorie” Miller held his head high, as he chose his own path to make changes in a segregated world and racist, military institution. Of course, racial changes never came easy for him during his short naval career.*

*Nevertheless, working below deck on warships, in a menial, supportive role (Messman Second Class), Miller rose to the occasion and became a fierce fighting man, by taking control of big Navy guns on the respective warship he was assigned — without specialized training — which was predominantly in the hands, so to speak, of only white seamen at that time. But Miller still became a naval combatant and military hero.*

### **Keywords**

*warship, Jim Crow Navy, poverty, naval service, military inequality, racism, segregation, discrimination*

### **1. Introduction: The Trials and Tribulations of “Dorie” Miller**

It should be noted that the first person to die for the American Revolution (during the Boston Massacre) was a Black patriot and former slave named Crispus Attucks. In this regard, Black patriots have always been supporters of our democracy. Indeed, like Crispus Attucks, Black men and women have fought and died to honor our constitution and country, distinguishing themselves during times of war (Johnson,

2020) (Note 1), to uphold the values and underlying principles of the United States. Take for example the exploits of “Dorie” Miller, a Black man and Navy messman, who was essentially the first hero of World War II (Hughes, Meltzer, Lincoln, & Spencer, 1973). But the discriminatory U.S. Navy “tried to conceal the fact that “Dorie” Miller was World War II’s first American hero” (Wright, 2002, p. 154). In so many words, the Navy emphatically disagreed with making Miller the “show-person” for *American heroism* at the beginning of World War II. And to say the least, the topic itself in the Jim Crow Navy was considered *taboo*, because Black men were not really thought of as *warfighters* or military heroes. Journalist Brent Staples (2020) was right when he succinctly wrote that, “The segregation-era military equated heroism [only] with whiteness” (p. 8). Of course, this notion was completely ridiculous. Unfortunately, white supremacists in the U.S. Navy were making award decisions based on their (wrong) perceptions and/or the assumptions they had about the worth of Black people, in general. To say the least, white men still “ruled the roost,” to use the saying, when it came to the U.S. Navy. Perhaps white officers were really just hateful or estranged to Black enlisted men, like with “Dorie” Miller, during this time. About Miller’s lack of recognition, investigative reporter Olivia B. Waxman (2020) writes:

The Navy credited his heroism to an “unidentified Negro [or Black] messman,” but Black newspapers and [civil] rights groups found Miller and made him the face of a campaign to end the policy that limited African Americans to kitchen and maintenance duty in the segregated armed forces (p. 13).



**Figure 1. Doris Miller Showing Navy Cross Received in Ceremony at Pearl Harbor.**

Source: Photograph in public domain.

It should strike all Americans as odd, and particularly *egregious* that Black Navy men were viewed (and treated) differently — and not always awarded for their military deeds or *readily* promoted to the commissioned officer ranks. For example, it wasn’t until 1971 that the Navy promoted the first Black or

African American commissioned officer to the rank of Admiral, namely Vice Admiral Samuel L. Gravely, Jr. (Gravely & Stillwell, 2010) (Note 2) This is all to say that their wasn't even a *modicum* of equality in the Navy at the outset of (and mostly during) World War II because of our "segregated armed forces units" (Fields, Barber, & Riggs, 1998, p. 996). Moreover:

Despite their contribution, the [Jim Crow] military establishment was skeptical of a Black soldier's [or seaman's] ability to perform in combat or to discharge the duties of officer rank. Those Black Americans who obtained officer rank could not command White soldiers — only other Blacks (Andrews, Joseph, & Dunbar, 2023, p. 62).

But assigned Navy ships, because of the human proximity aboard, couldn't be totally segregated. To be sure, Black men were separated on their respective naval vessels, and judged on their skin color, rather than by their abilities or capabilities — and despite their heroic deeds. For example, "during the attack on Pearl Harbor, ["Dorie"] Miller manned [an anti-aircraft] machine gun on the *USS West Virginia* and shot down four enemy planes" (Allen, 1989, p. 54). Although Miller was "not trained to fight" with such a weapon, he "proved himself capable" (Allen, 1989, p. 54) in the heat of battle. Indeed, "Dorie" Miller's instincts probably told him that he was doing the appropriate thing in manning the warship's big, antiaircraft machine gun, when almost no one else (in the vicinity) would, particularly as he looked upon the devastating fires from the *bombing* and *carnage*. In this respect, "Dorie" Miller was able to answer the "call of duty."

Before the militaristic Japanese attacked, there wasn't even a warning. Perhaps Miller made the decision early on to do *something*, even if things got tricky and dangerous. Historian Kai Wright (2002) describes the sequence of events this way: "It was 7:55 A.M. on December 7, 1941, and... Miller was collecting laundry...," which was "just another morning in the life of a Black Navy man — forced to work below decks in a support role" (p. 154). So, when Second Class "Dorie" Miller came to the rescue, it was probably like the *cavalry* had arrived because of his brave and valorous actions, while saving the day and lives of many of his predominantly white shipmates, particularly when the situation seemed *dire* with the Japanese *torpedo planes* and barrage of aircraft gunfire by Japanese fighter pilots. Perhaps it was no more than a heartbeat before Miller sprang into action. If Miller had dawdled, and did *nothing*, more Navy men would have certainly died that day. In this regard, Miller was willing to put his own "life on the line" when he took over the firing of the *anti-aircraft* machine gun — with a vengeance. It was as if Miller had to learn a whole new thing in the matter of seconds. Fortunately, he had watched the white sailors perform their duties of firing the cumbersome *antiaircraft* machine guns during practice and naval (training) exercises. Ultimately, Miller did what he thought was best in *manning* the deadly machine gun on his designated ship, the *USS West Virginia*.

Of course, the arrogant white Navy men never tried to show Black *messmen* how to operate the "on board" machine guns, as a *back-up* or contingency plan, because many of these prejudiced individuals only had *contempt* for Black Navy men. Or they seemed to be *repulsed* by the Black sailor's skin color. To say the least, white Navy men fancied themselves superior in *all things*, compared to Black men, including their

ability to swim; but this wasn't always the case, because Black sailors could *swim*, despite words to the contrary. White Navy officers were also indifferent to the *grievances* of Black sailors, and could be thoughtlessly *unpleasant* toward them, no matter the circumstances — or situation, as if they were invisible. We must long remember that the mistreatment of Black servicemen was not an *aberration*, as it was rampant throughout the U.S. Navy and other military services. And it shouldn't be ignored because of the *Mutability of the Past*. Considering his immediate options, Miller fought with all his might, as he channeled all his energies that day in 1941, while trusting his judgment and natural talents. To say the least, Miller's heroic deeds that day challenged the *veracity* of Black service members being considered *cowardly* or inferior. No doubt, Miller was underestimated by his white shipmates and superiors.

## 2. Rumors of War: Divergences and Parallels

Ironically, it was Miller who showed "courage under fire," while some white sailors *cowed* under combat pressures. Why? Meanwhile, Miller was trying to save lives for all he was worth, to use the *metaphor*. In normal circumstances, Miller would not have been able to even touch or fire the big, Navy guns, because he lacked the training, as mentioned. But Miller went with the proverbial flow. As Wright (2002) tells us:

Miller, as with all black sailors, had never trained to use [the] fifty-caliber antiaircraft machine gun — or any ship guns, for that matter. Nevertheless, he [Miller] shot down between two and four Japanese aircraft (the number is [still] in dispute), unflinchingly working the gun until he ran out of ammunition and was [later] ordered to abandon ship [of the *USS West Virginia*] (p. 155) (Note 3).

The wail of the *claxon*, of course, that sounded battle stations had alerted Miller to do *something*, to take action as "the aerial assault began at 7:55 a.m." (McAvoy, 2020, p. 64) with the rattle of the attacking *Japanese Zeros* machine guns *strafing* the deck of the *USS West Virginia*. Miller, however, didn't let his uncertainty hold him back, as he took control of the *antiaircraft* machine gun and daringly fired back. Indeed, his reactions and keen, military actions were *spot on*, as his very presence made a difference. And for an excruciatingly long moment in time, Miller was clicking on all cylinders that day, so to speak, as the *Japanese Zeros* wreak havoc *everywhere*. Then, it was all over. But the worst was yet to come for the *USS West Virginia* battleship and other American battleships moored at Pearl Harbor, like the famous *USS Arizona*. Apart from *everything* else, the *USS West Virginia* started to awkwardly list and finally it sunk, "as Japanese (fighter) planes" were successful in raining down "bombs on the U.S. Pacific Fleet" (McAvoy, 2020, p. 64), causing catastrophic damage. Miller wasn't seriously hurt, but there was "collateral damage" to the other seamen still on board in the *USS West Virginia* as it slowly sank; and Miller attended and aided the dying, "morally wounded" Captain Mervyn Sharp Bennion. Although "Bennion [a white man] was incapacitated during the attack," he was surprisingly awarded (posthumously) "the Medal of Honor because he "strongly protested" being removed from his post" (Staples, 2020, p. 8). For some Americans, giving Bennion the highest military award was unbelievable

— (and a slap in the face to Miller) — and perhaps *unwarranted*, because Navy captains are supposed to go down with their ships, right? Therefore, we must ask: Was it enough or the right thing for Bennion to receive the Medal of Honor? Probably not.

In the 2001 blockbuster movie, *Pearl Harbor*, “Dorie” Miller is played by Cuba Gooding, but the writers and the producers played loose with the facts. For example, Gooding/Miller is portrayed as a boxer, who brutally fought and defeated an enormous white seaman with a punishing blow. Of course, Black men have always been portrayed in films as violent *brutes* and dangerous human beings. What rubbish. Nevertheless, Miller is/was hurt after the boxing match, requiring minor, medical treatment. Later in this film, Miller is seen alone with a white nurse, Lieutenant Evelyn Johson, played by Kate Beckinsale, which was an absurd and unheard of thing because of white Americans fear of *interracial* connections or relationships of *any* kind. As Johson (in this *Pearl Harbor* movie) carefully touched and stitched the cut on the forehead of Miller, played by Cuba Gooding, Jr., he complained to her that after serving in the Navy for two years, he was never able to even fire a weapon. Beckinsale, or Lieutenant Evelyn Johson really had nothing to say about this injustice. Of course, being alone with a white woman (or nurse), with no one else around, is a *fabrication* and totally made-up, because this never would have happened in the Jim Crow Navy at that time. Which is to say that white women at that time were put on a *pedestal* by white men; and white supremacists, no doubt, might have lynched “Dorie” Miller, if they had the chance, all things considering — that is, if something like that actually occurred. What is true in the film is: Miller did *aid* the dying Navy Captain Bennion; and he *did* manned and fired the heavy *antiaircraft* guns aboard the *USS West Virginia*, almost immediately shooting down several Japanese fighter planes in the process, as discussed (Bay, 2001) (Note 4). Andrews, Joseph, and Dunbar (2023) describe the specific actions this way: Doris Miller “aboard the stricken battleship *USS West Virginia*, moved his mortally wounded captain to safety and then manned a 50-caliber machine gun, firing back boldly at the Japanese attackers” (p. 62), who were determined to destroy the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor. Nevertheless, the *Pearl Harbor* film is not really about “Dorie” Miller, who was second to none as a military man — that is, he was a brave, black, Navy seaman; but this particular movie is mostly about the contributions made by white naval men.

### **3. The Military Patriot and American Citizen**

“Dorie” Miller was “born in late 1919, amid the psychic rubble of the summer’s race riots” at that time in the United States. To be sure, he was “a barrel-chested farm boy from Waco Texas” (Wright, 2002, p. 154), who was “the son of a sharecropper and descendant of [Black American] slaves” (Lam, 2020, p. 4A), who would make a name for himself, as mentioned, by doing something that he wasn’t even trained to do — which was almost impossible or improbable. To be sure, Miller had higher military ambition, and what he did was a remarkable achievement.

Miller had “enlisted [in the U.S. Navy] in September of 1939, a peacetime recruit who was in search of nothing more spectacular than earning extra money for his family and an opportunity to do some

traveling,” as he was inspired to travel and see the world (Wright, 2002, p. 155). Nonetheless, serving in the military for Black men (at that time) was a *double-edged* sword, in that many felt that they didn’t have *any* other *viable* alternatives — to survive white supremacy, and make a life for themselves. Moreover, many saw the military as a means to an end, or a way of escaping poverty or their miserable existence in depressed, Black neighborhoods and so-called *ghettos* across America. Therefore, the *patriotism* of Black enlisted Navy men was unique and unquestioned during World War II; and no one can refute this claim. However, Black seamen or enlisted men voiced their considerable “dissatisfaction with the Navy’s earlier common practice of assigning Black men to the Steward’s branch” (Allen, 1989, p. 54), which in itself was racist and discriminatory. According to University of California sociology professor, Robert Allen (1989), “the enlisted men’s attitude toward the war effort ranged from patriotism [which] was often tied to their hopes of improving the situation of Blacks in the United States” (p. 54). This is to say that Black Navy men “felt that many [of them] were disappointed at [not having] the “privilege” of combat duty” (Allen, 1989, p. 54). And for “many of the [Black] men the war was remote, both physically and psychologically,” because they firmly wanted to be *battle-ready*, not “fighting with pots and pans” (Allen, 1989, p. 55). More importantly, as journalist Samuel F. Yette (1971) cogently writes:

Few aspects of the black poor experience are more cruelly ironic than the fact that young black men [were] required — by their poverty and blackness — to give [their] lives ostensibly in pursuit of freedom, while actually denying it to themselves and to their military [and civilian] victims elsewhere around the [larger] world (p. 155).

Ironically, “Dorie” Miller joined the U.S. Navy to make America a better place for people of color, like him. Therefore, he was excited at the possibility of being a Navy man of the first *caliber*. Unfortunately, he mistakenly believed that his *patriotism* by joining the Navy or military would bring *equality of opportunity* for his kind, despite everything else. Miller was wrong, however, to think that *recalcitrant* white supremacists in the Navy would give Black seamen a *leg-up*, so to speak. Of course, this specific courtesy was *not-to-be* during World War II, even though some white Navy officers clearly recognized that Black seamen were just as capable and proficient as white seamen. Or did they have an exceptional *contempt* for Black Navy men? Black enlisted men deserved so much more respect, given the facts and circumstances of the (cursed) war. Black sailors, of course, could not rub shoulders with their white shipmates, as there wasn’t a lot of *camaraderie* (sadly) between the black and white sailors during World War II. This is especially important to understand because Black military men were treated like *second-class* citizens throughout their time on active duty service. This is all to say that there wasn’t a lot of *racial equality* in the Jim Crow Navy at the outset of World War II. To be sure, Black men were (unfortunately) judged by their skin color rather than their abilities or capabilities, and despite their great heroics, as already mentioned.

But “Dorie” Miller was patient and had tried to actually work with the white seamen on the battleship *USS West Virginia*, who didn’t really respect him or share his world view or beliefs. In other words,

Miller made the most of a particularly *bad* situation. After all, the consequences of white supremacists (and their despicable actions) in the U.S. Navy hurt Black seamen mentally or psychologically. Hence, denying Black seamen *combat duty* and certain military awards for their heroics was a tragic symptom of the larger, race problems in the United States at that time. Racial inequality, of course, was widespread in the U.S. Jim Crow Navy. Indeed, the racist ideas from white military men, especially from the *Deep South*, was concrete and almost *impenetrable* in their warped, “racist minds” and morbid (delusional) psyches. Miller, however, didn’t let the white Navy men’s negativity, particularly aboard ship, get him down. Furthermore, Miller didn’t want to become contemptuous, *cynical*, or hateful, all things considered. And despite the indignities, Miller had been captivated by the notion of sailing the blue oceans as a proud, active-duty military seaman. Was it because Miller had an *off-center* view of life from other Black enlisted men who were basically angry? Perhaps he thought that the U.S. Navy was a gateway to his success, as he tried to position himself in the military. In this respect, Miller had a knack for learning new things, as he was the *epitome* of what a sailor was supposed to be, even though he was only a mess attendant. Equally important, Miller was never afraid, because he didn’t hesitate in the *fog of war*, when things escalated and he was able to fire an *antiaircraft* machine gun on the battleship *USS West Virginia* with unyielding, military grit. Nevertheless, Miller was still underappreciated.

#### 4. Some Aspects of the Jim Crow Navy

Unfortunately, the U.S. Navy leadership (at that time) was especially against giving Black men their *just due* or military/national recognition during times of war. And for a time, *nothing* was known about “Dorie” Miller’s exploits. And when he was recommended for the Medal of Honor, it was rejected outright. Why? In fact, “the campaign to win him [Miller] the Medal of Honor foundered, partly because” Navy Secretary Frank Knox, a white supremacist, “steadfastly opposed it” (Staples, 2020, p. 8). It should also be remembered that:

The Navy didn’t want a black poster boy [seen as a national Medal of Honor winner] and instead heavily publicized the death of a white [military] pilot who crashed into a Japanese vessel after a December 9 bombing mission (Wright, 2002, p. 155) (Note 5).

This evasive and discriminatory action by the U.S. Navy reeked of deliberate and naked *racism*, because “Dorie” Miller’s heroics on board of the *USS West Virginia* took place (two days earlier), or long before the white pilot’s fateful mission. Miller was more than courageous, but he was summarily ignored by the military powers-that-be (without a strong justification), mainly because of his race, and because the U.S. Navy revolved around white men and their leadership of the different military branches of service during World War II. However, *initially* ignoring Miller’s fearless deeds at Pearl Harbor was notably bad or particularly unfair, but not exactly surprising, given the *systemic racism* and discrimination in the Jim Crow U.S. Navy at that time. To be sure, the Medal of Honor was mostly reserved for white men; and as mentioned, it was “unacceptable to white supremacists in the ranks to recognize blacks at all,” like with former Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, who ultimately allowed Miller to be awarded “a Navy cross

for his actions at Pearl Harbor" (Wright, 2002, p. 155) (Note 6). According to journalist Brent Staples (2020), "The messman [Miller] would probably not have been decorated at all had not the black press and the civil rights community hammered down the door of the White House" (p. 8), to use the metaphor (Note 7). Also, it has long been speculated that Miller would have automatically received the Medal of Honor had he been a white man. On the other hand, "Dorie" Miller didn't want to "toot his own horn," so to speak, because he believed that it was all about "fighting the (recognized/acknowledged) enemy." It is sadly ironic that Audie (Leon) Murphy, a white enlisted soldier, was awarded the Medal of Honor for single-handedly killing hundreds of Germans on a battlefield in Europe. In this regard, Miller should also be a *household* name, just like Audie Murphy, who later became a recognized army hero and movie actor before his untimely death. Unfortunately, Miller wasn't given the same opportunities and acknowledgment as Murphy.

It is also hard not to draw similarities, or an equivalence, between what Miller did at Pearl Harbor, and "the 15 white men who received Medals of Honor for their conduct on that day" (Staples, 2020, p. 8). Denying "Dorie" Miller his appropriate *due* cannot be excused or defended. This is to say that Miller is still mostly *overlooked*, unlike some white seamen who received the Medal of Honor and did considerably less to receive this important accolade. From a military standpoint, and "by contrast," Miller "acted well outside his role as a shipboard servant." However, his heroic actions were consistent with "the Medal of Honor definition of conduct above and beyond the call of duty" (Staples, 2020, p. 8) (Note 8). Indeed, Miller's loyalty, *steadfastness* and *boldness* are things that should be admired and respected, not ridiculed, as he disregarded his own personal safety (and life) to help his shipmates. With this in mind, Miller's life as a seaman was a tale of bravery and sacrifice, which was not *speculative*, because what he did at Pearl Harbor (unexpectedly) happened. In the wake of the surprise attack from the *Empire of Japan*, Miller successfully defended the surviving Navy men. And on the strength of what he was able to do aboard the *USS West Virginia*, Miller made (military) history. Nonetheless, he probably had a heavy heart because of the controversy surrounding him not receiving the Medal of Honor. Above all else, Miller did *everything* that the Navy asked him to do — and more. It should also be noted that, "the attack on the [USS] *West Virginia* marked the beginning of U.S. direct involvement in World War II and the permanent end to the nation's steadfastly *parochial* worldview" (Wright, 2002, p. 155) (Note 9). Put another way:

The Japanese attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor (1941) led to U.S. entry into World War II, in which, in addition to antisubmarine and troop transport duties, the navy [would eventually conduct] amphibious assaults in the Pacific theater and along the European coast ("United States Navy," 2000, p. 1673) (Note 10).

But Miller did not concern himself with such *heady matters*, as the conduct and strategies of the war was above his *pay grade*, so to speak, even though he relished the challenge of making a name for himself and continuing to serve in the Jim Crow Navy. But Miller probably didn't just concentrate on being a Navy cook moving forward in his career. Furthermore, it should be noted here that, "There were many charges of negligence against those responsible for Pearl Harbor's defense." Indeed, "A special

investigatory commission appointed by President [Franklin] D. Roosevelt accused the [white] army and navy commanders at Hawaii of dereliction of duty in a report on January 24, 1942. Later army and navy investigations [however] concluded that no valid grounds existed for court-martial" ("Pearl Harbor," 1975, p. 2089) (Note 11). This was probably just as well, but "Dorie" Miller hardly worried about such Navy decisions; and he was perhaps glad that he wasn't caught up in some kind of *court martial*. Moreover, Miller died before Black seamen at *Port Chicago* munitions depot in California were charged with *mutiny* for refusing "to resume loading [dangerous] munitions" after a tremendous blast (on the night of 17 July 1944) killed 320 people, mostly Black sailors, who were designated *stevedores*, but "served in [separate, or segregated] units," handling and transferring "munitions onto [Navy] ships... bound for the Pacific theater" during World War II, and without the necessary formal or "proper training... in unsafe conditions" (Paddock, 1994, p. B1) (Note 12). Unfortunately, 258 surviving Black seamen were later *court-martialed* for "seeking safer working condition and *leave* to visit their families as white sailors had received" (Paddock, 1994, p. B1) (Note 13). Of course, Black Navy men were more likely to be disciplined and discriminated against by their white commanders and military superiors, which is not an *understatement*. Fortunately, in 2024, African American "families of World War II veterans celebrated the long-awaited exonerations of 256 [or 258] black sailors who were wrongfully convicted after the 1944 Port Chicago explosion, a disaster that shined a light on racial disparities in the [U.S.] military" (Arshad, 2024, p. 4A).

Miller probably also knew that a *court-martial* could even happen to him if he had stood up to the Top Navy brass. Hence, Miller never took *anything* for granted. At that time, the U.S. Navy seemed to be oblivious to the truth and facts when it concerned Black seamen. Or they didn't understand the *discomforts* of Black enlisted men. Or did the U.S. Navy really care? This *smug* and/or dismissive attitude was possibly the biggest challenge that Black Navy men had to face. But it should be noted that they were the same as white seamen. And this reality brings us back to the question of whether Black military men (like "Dorie" Miller) received adequate justice and protection from the Jim Crow Navy *hierarchy*. To be sure, Blacks stationed on some military installations were even persecuted and often told to *shut-up* and keep out of trouble and not allowed to do the same things as white seamen. What happened to Black seamen at *Port Chicago* is a primary example, and not so subtle a *critique*, because the accused and convicted Black seamen ultimately "served about 16 months in prison," but were later discharged, not honorably, and "under [so-called] honorable conditions..." (Paddock, 1994, p. B8) (Note 14). The outcome of this controversial case, many believed, was because of *systemic racism* in the U.S. Jim Crow Navy. Racism, of course, in the United States military has never been a temporary *aberration* or deviation from good, "military conduct;" nor will it ever be, particularly in the U.S. Navy, where everyone (today) is supposed to be equal and treated the same. Indeed, racial discrimination, sadly, will never vanish from our earth and military, even though President Harry Truman in 1948 signed an executive order (9981) integrating the armed forces or in all major branches of the military. Unfortunately, *racism* in the U.S. Navy meant "the predication of [military] decisions and policies on considerations of [so-called] race for

the purpose of *subordinating* a racial group and maintaining control over that group” (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 3), like with white Navy leaders exercising control and power over Black seamen in the Jim Crow Navy in the United States.

Additionally, as journalist Robert D. Hershey Jr. (2020) writes: “President Harry S. Truman’s 1948 executive order banning discrimination in the armed forces [did] nothing to prevent black soldiers [and seamen] from being assigned the most menial jobs” (p. 26) (Note 15). Or they were still not treated fairly, with dignity and respect, because white officers firmly believed that Black men were *inferior* and best suited for menial tasks. As mentioned earlier, Black sailors were often infuriated by the way they were treated in the U.S. Navy. So, were some of the white naval officers racist or *pedantic* fools? Perhaps. “Dorie” Miller, however, would never live to see the day that the U.S. Navy would fully integrate, as he had, perhaps, envisioned a more equal, military world. Serving in the U.S. Navy, on active duty, Miller just wanted “to stand up and be counted” and make things for Black seamen/sailors and himself better. Nevertheless, the harsh way Black seamen were being treated was probably a sore point for him (Miller), but he kept doing his Navy job until the very end. This was the awful reality during World War II, which was even *cringe-worthy*, given the demands from white racists and other white, naval officers from the Deep South in the *midst*. Perhaps it was hard for some white Americans to even accept that Black seamen were *human beings* and worthy of anything. Moreover, as the late syndicated columnist Carl Rowan (1991) explained: “Black people know that sometimes their greatest enemy is... white people of power who would never utter a racist sentence in public, yet who quietly and privately [did] everything they [could] to keep Black people as the slave class in [our] society” (p. 317) (Note 16). This irrefutable truth also occurred in the U.S. Jim Crow Navy. Today, white supremacists hate to be reminded that Black servicemen fought *hard* and died fighting our enemies during World War II. Or so it seems. Indeed, it has been reported that some Black military men returning home from Germany and the Pacific were *lynched* in the Deep South by racist, white men. And “Fewer than 1 percent of white people involved in [over 4,000 Black] lynchings were ever convicted of a criminal offense” (Ginsberg et al., 2023, p. 154). Why?

## 5. Conclusions: A Navy Sailor Extraordinary

Although “Dorie” Miller tried to stay above the racial integration *fray*, he wasn’t immune in the Jim Crow Navy in the United States. But Miller also took his responsibilities as a mess attendant seriously, as he wanted to be the very best. He certainly didn’t *skirt* around the subject of being more than just a *mess cook*; and even though he wasn’t given the same or other military (job) opportunities. Miller, of course, was enticed by the U.S. Navy and he wanted to be an *upstanding* military man, no matter what. And his *enthusiasm* and desire to be more — was commendable; and he (Miller) should be praised during *Memorial Day* holidays. However, because he was a Black man, Miller was held back in many prejudicial ways. In a different world, perhaps, Miller might have been given a battlefield commission to *ensign* in the U.S. Navy. But this honor was not to be. As it happened, “Dorie” Miller remained a ship’s cook

who later died in 1943 “aboard the USS *Liscome Bay* when the ship was hit by a torpedo and sank off Butaritari atoll” (Lam, 2020, p. 4A) (Note 17). Although “Dorie” Miller was the first Black sailor “to receive the Navy Cross for his courage during the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941” (Lam, 2020, p. 4A), he was deserving of the Medal of Honor. Perhaps the powers that be in the Jim Crow U.S. Navy leadership believed that Miller warranted no merit *whatsoever*; or maybe they simply thought that he wasn’t worth the fuss or attention. Who can say exactly? But Miller was the military hero of his time and generation. To be blunt, Miller was a true, military or navy hero, because he “helped evacuate the *USS West Virginia* battleship,” as already discussed, “before it sank and fired a [antiaircraft] machine gun at Japanese attackers until he ran out of ammunition” (Lam, 2020, p. 4A) (Note 18). By any measure or standard, Miller should have been given the same consideration as the white sailors who were awarded the Medal of Honor in 1941, because he really deserved it. Obviously, given these *glorified* circumstances, the U.S. Navy (today) should do what is right and award him (Miller) the medal *posthumously* for conspicuous gallantry. The question for those who continue to downplay Miller’s military accomplishments is: Did the Navy do the *right thing* by denying Miller this *prestigious* honor, when he rightly merited praise? Without being *hyperbolic*, Miller was a patriot of the first magnitude; and his amazing *spirit* and *tenacity* was or should have been a turning point for the U.S. Navy, given the *Jim Crow* era. Also, Miller’s *heroism* in the face of adversity is something *all* Americans should be proud of; and we should celebrate his fearless exploits aboard the *USS West Virginia* during World War II. Never mind that he (Miller) was presented with the Navy Cross by Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, a white man, who was responsible for winning “the battles of Midway and the Coral Sea.” Nimitz, of course, later led “naval operations in the Pacific that ended with the Japanese [written] surrender, signed aboard his flagship, the *USS Missouri*” (Nimitz, Chester W., 2000, p. 1158). The Navy Cross was awarded/received by “Dorie” Miller for heroism, as mentioned, and bravery. But it was/is “the Navy’s second-highest decoration for valor, and he [Miller] may well have been denied the Medal of Honor simply because of his race” (Andrews, Joseph, & Dunbar, 2023, p. 62), or because of *Jim Crow* politics. Additionally, it should be noted that even Black military men who were later awarded the Medal of Honor were still being treated with disrespect by some white Americans and military personnel, like with what happened to Vernon Baker, who at one time was the *only* Black American Medal of Honor winner from World War II. Later, seven Black military men, who were treated unfavorably and initially denied the Medal of Honor during World War II, finally received the award after fifty years. Baker had battled the *Nazis* in Europe and became a legitimate war hero; but for a long time before his death, Baker couldn’t get medical coverage “to remove a baseball-sized malignant tumor from his brain” (“Medal of Honor,” 2005, p. 7B) (Note 19). Why? Was Baker treated in such a disrespectful manner because he was a Black man? We may never know. But the point is that, even if “Dorie” Miller was awarded the Medal of Honor, he probably wouldn’t have been given the respect that a lot of military men, perhaps, crave? Or is this just *Wishful Thinking* on their part? To date, Miller hasn’t been awarded the Medal of Honor, even though (in death) his name has slowly grown “only more prominent.” For example, “the Navy announced” on

January 20, 2020, “a new aircraft carrier, the first named after an African American: the U.S.S. Doris Miller” (Waxman, 20020, p. 13) (Note 20). Also, according to journalist Kristin Lam (2020), “One other ship bears Miller’s name: the USS Miller (FF-1091), a Knox-class frigate” (p. 4A) (Note 21). But does naming these Navy vessels make up for him (“Dorie” Miller) not being awarded the Medal of Honor? Question: Was it because of the *racism* of that day and even today? Most critically, why is the U.S. Navy still grappling with whether to award the first hero of World War II, “Dorie” Miller, the *Medal of Honor*? This controversial matter should *open-up* the eyes of all Americans, because it is high time to recognize and honor this *iconic*, military Black man. Finally, “Dorie” Miller, a true hero *extraordinaire*, never responded with anger, regret, or bitterness, because he was a fearless Black man for *all* seasons. Meaning, he had an amazing quality within himself, a strength of will and purpose. In the end, we must ask: Was “Dorie” Miller ever given his *due* while he lived for his outstanding naval service? Probably not. But no doubt, the greater world should know or learn more about this brave Navy man.

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## Notes

Note 1. According to journalist Theodore R. Johnson, “Black patriotism does not hold that America is irredeemably racist — it asks if America is interested in redemption.” See the same reference and page number. It should be noted here that Crispus Attucks was “a man of African and Native background who had escaped from slavery, [and] was the first person killed in the American Revolution.” It should also be pointed out that, “The active involvement of Black soldiers [and seamen] fighting alongside the colonists, weakened [supposedly] support for slavery.” See Ginsberg et al. (2023). *We the People: An Introduction to American Politics*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. pp. 48 & 50.

Note 2. At that time, white Navy leaders provided lame excuses not to promote Blacks to the commissioned officer ranks. Indeed, Black men couldn’t “serve in occupational specialties other than those of cooks and servants for the senior white [naval] officers.” See the same reference, p. xii.

Note 3. The big *antiaircraft* guns were probably a sight to behold. “Dorie” Miller, perhaps, fired the big, Navy guns with a fierce concentration, like there was no-tomorrow, so to speak.

Note 4. Perhaps the producers or creators thought that it was okay to re-write the history of *Pearl Harbor* in their movie, especially as it relates to “Dorie” Miller — that is, they created a lie about the Jim Crow

U.S. Navy having *diversity*, fairness, and *equality* during World War II. What nonsense. This embellishment, of course, is racist, outrageous, and not truthful.

Note 5. Also, acknowledging that Miller was the first hero of WW II, and awarding him the *Medal of Honor* would have been a problem with the white Navy leadership, because it didn't fix their demoralizing narrative about Black men. Or, it might have been problematic given the racial discrimination in the U.S. Navy under Jim Crow laws.

Note 6. Even though "Dorie" Miller has been acclaimed in the Black community as a true American hero, many are upset that he wasn't awarded the *Medal of Honor* to this day.

Note 7. Fortunately, the Black press focused unceasingly on Miller's exploits, while civil rights organizations demanded that he be awarded a Medal of Honor. See Wright, K. (2002). *Soldiers of Freedom: An Illustration of African Americans in the Armed Forces*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers.

Note 8. Awarding "Dorie" Miller the Medal of Honor at that time, perhaps, would have sent a negative message that ran counter to how Blacks were perceived by white Americans. Therefore, such a dismissive action was *unapologetically* intentional on the part of the U.S. Jim Crow Navy, white naval officers, and senior military leaders, in particular.

Note 9. "Of the 1,541 sailors on board" the *USS West Virginia*, "130 were killed and 52 were wounded. Miller's remarkable effort to minimize this carnage [was heroically] provided." See the same reference and page number.

Note 10. "Although the damage was considerable, the Japanese military failed to destroy the prized US aircraft carriers, which were out on maneuvers." See Pearl Harbor. (2000). In *Encyclopedia of World History* (p. 113). New York: Facts on File, Inc.

Note 11. So, it should be pointed out that, "A joint congressional committee, formed in September 1945, absolved the army and navy commanders in a formal report to Congress on July 16, 1946, but censured the War Department and the Department of the Navy." See the same reference and page number.

Note 12. It should be noted that, "During World War II, the [now defunct] *Port Chicago* Naval Magazine was the biggest munitions depot on the West coast." See the same reference and page number.

Note 13. Bear in mind that, "crews of African American seamen supervised by white officers, served as [untrained] stevedores loading... explosives." See the same reference and page number. Paradoxically, white sailors at that time never wanted to follow orders from a Black man or Black officer. Put another way, white men didn't like Black men telling them what to do because of their white supremacy and superiority complex.

Note 14. Truth be told, Black sailors during World War II had never really been respected by the U.S. Navy to the point that they should have been. For instance, Black military personnel were completely ignored when it came to receiving higher promotions, or other military awards that they deserved.

Note 15. Disinformation about Black men, or *Negroes* as they were derogatorily called, was rampant. Whites controlled the military (and the U.S. Navy) and used their power to inflict racial discrimination

upon minorities and took “extraordinary measures” to dismiss them in the greater, military *scheme of things*. And more surreptitiously, Blacks in the military were being mistreated on a massive scale. Unfortunately, this racist *juxtaposition* was more than acceptable at that time.

Note 16. And no matter how you view it, some Black seamen, like “Dorie” Miller, were treated unjustly by the U.S. Navy *hierarchy*. Indeed, there was a great deal of hostility toward Black sailors. Why? It was an *existential crisis* or problem for Blacks in all branches of the military.

Note 17. Miller tried to consider what was possible as he set attainable goals as a navy *messman*, and even though he was being discriminated against at almost every turn by white supremacists in the U.S. Jim Crow Navy.

Note 18. Fighting back probably gave Miller a sense of satisfaction, as he might have thought that firing the *antiaircraft* machine gun was his rendezvous with death.

Note 19. Perhaps upon a subject review, we will find that Doris Miller was denied the Medal of Honor, after being recommended for the award because only white men were involved in making the decision to give it to him. As was often the case, Miller was given a lesser or lower award. Perhaps these white naval officers didn’t believe that Black seamen/sailors were deserving of the Medal of Honor; and they were unmovable on this matter at that time. But “On January 13, 1997, seven [Black] American soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for actions performed during WW2.” Toward this end, “These seven honored soldiers have come to symbolize the remarkable contributions of all [Black] Americans who served our country, in all our wars.” See *African Americans in World War 2: A Legacy of Patriotism and Valor* [DVD]. (1997). International Historic Films, Inc.

Note 20. The aircraft carrier, *USS Doris Miller*, is scheduled to be “launched in October 2029, and commissioned around 2032.”

Note 21. Miller died, but he is not forgotten. In the final analysis, “Dorie” Miller’s heroism must never be ignored or dismissed by the U.S. government, or the Navy, because he deserves this prestigious military accolade.

### **Biographical Sketch**

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