

## [How Doris Miller Changed the Movies](#)

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### **The Untold Story of Waco's “Distinguished Sailor” and Hollywood**

by *Robert Darden*

The world was not a pretty place on December 7, 1941. Hitler's armies had already wrested control of most of Europe. Only Great Britain and the Soviet Union stood in the way. Inside Nazi-controlled territory, the wholesale slaughter of Jews, Poles, gypsies and other “undesirables” had already begun.

Things were not much better in Africa. While Italian troops had finally defeated the brave Ethiopians, Gen. Erwin Rommel was making plans to have his Afrika Korps aid the bumbling Mussolini.

German U-boats all but controlled the North Atlantic, further isolating Britain.

In Asia, Japanese armies swept over most of northern China and were marching south.

And in America, African-Americans, a tenth of the population, faced the worst ravages of the Jim Crow laws that made them second class citizens in the North and virtual slaves in the South. Virulent discrimination meant that there were precious few black doctors or lawyers or congressmen in the United States, particularly in the South. Even the films were lily-white — the few blacks in the movies played either menial roles (cooks, maids or waiters) or shiftless, dangerous criminals.

In the military, black soldiers and sailors held the worst jobs and received the lowest pay. They faced daily prejudice and outright violence with little legal recourse.

Of the Navy's 170,000 sailors in December 1941, only 5,026 were black. And all of them were stewards or messmen.

The stewards were considered the lowest of the low. They were derisively called the “mess boys” or “steward’s mates” or — as the black press dubbed them — “seagoing bellhops.” Navy slang at the time referred to messmen as “the chambermaids of the Braid.” Stewards manned the officers’ mess and maintained the officers’ billets on ship.

Mess hall attendant Doris Miller (sometimes called Dorie by later newspapers) was a steward aboard the U.S.S. West Virginia. He peeled potatoes, shined shoes, mopped decks, made beds, washed dishes and served as a waiter for the officers of the West Virginia. He was not trained in the operation of the ship and its weaponry. In fact, by unspoken tradition, he was forbidden to even touch the machine guns on deck.

But the world changed on December 7, 1941. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor awakened the sleeping giant.

And in that moment, it changed in a heartbeat for the 22-year-old from the sleepy town of Waco, Texas.

## **The Naval Hero**

For long-time Wacoans, the story of Doris Miller is as familiar as the face of an old friend. He was born October 12, 1919 on the family farm outside rural Speegleville to Connery and Henrietta Miller — the third of four sons. He was an avid hunter and was reputed to be a crack shot. He starred at fullback at A.J. Moore High School while augmenting his family’s meager income as a short-order cook at an unnamed downtown diner. Against his parents’ wishes, Miller left high school to enlist in the Navy in September 1939.

Miller was assigned to several ships before ending up on the West Virginia. By now he was 6 feet 3 inches tall and a muscular 250 pounds. He quickly became the heavyweight boxing champion of the powerful ship. By February 1941, his rank was Mess Attendant, Second Class.

On the morning of Sunday, December 7 at 7:55 a.m., Miller had probably been awake for several hours. He was allegedly collecting soiled laundry on the great battleship when the first of eight Japanese torpedoes knocked him to his knees. Within minutes, the entire ship was in flames. Japanese Zeros repeatedly strafed the deck and additional bombs caused fires throughout the West Virginia.

Between walls of burning oil, Miller heroically dragged several wounded seamen to safety even as machine gun fire repeatedly raked the deck. One of his attempted rescues included the mortally wounded Capt. Mervyn Bennion, who refused to leave his post. Seeing an abandoned anti-aircraft gun, Miller grabbed it and instinctively began firing at the low-flying Zeros. Even as the deck splintered around him, Miller continued to fire, expertly leading the planes and pumping rounds into their bellies.

Years later, Miller's brother Selvia said he wasn't surprised. Miller's hunting ability, after all, was "eye" well known in the area: "Doris rarely did miss his target. He was quite skilled. He was no amateur."

Miller, who had only observed other sailors operating the Browning .50-caliber machine guns, was credited with two confirmed planes downed and four more "probables." He peppered several additional Japanese fighters with bullets.

"It wasn't hard," he recalled later with characteristic modesty. "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. I think I got one of those Jap planes. They were diving pretty close to us."

As the great ship began to list dangerously, Miller was ordered to abandon the bridge. He dove into the water and swam for shore, even as the West Virginia's ammunition magazine exploded. The attack ended at 9:45 a.m.

Word of Miller's exploits circulated quickly via the sailor grapevine, but the Navy officials withheld official word, eventually only acknowledging the actions of "an unnamed Negro cook." The military preferred instead to tout the actions of a white man, Capt. Colin P. Kelly, a pilot and West Point grad, as the "first hero of World War II," even though his actions took place three days later on December 10.

It took an exposé in the influential African-American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* to pressure the Navy to admit Miller's role. After still another white hero of Pearl Harbor received a commission, *The Courier* ran an editorial with the headline bemoaning Miller's lack of recognition: "He fought ... keeps mop."

The CBS Radio series "They Live Forever" broadcast a stirring docudrama based on Miller's life and actions on March 29, 1942. The widespread popularity of the broadcast put additional pressure on the Roosevelt administration to recognize Miller.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt eventually sent Miller a Letter of Commendation. But it was only when other civil rights groups took up his cause that Miller received the much-deserved Navy Cross. On May 7, 1942, Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz pinned the Navy's highest award to Miller's chest. Doris Miller was just 22 at the time.

The event was front-page news in the African-American press, but the *Waco Times-Herald* only briefly mentioned the award in a single paragraph three weeks later under the headline, "Doris Miller's Medal Pinned."

Even though, as a black man, he was not eligible to receive training, Miller addressed the graduating class of the Navy's Great Lakes Training School later that spring. He also made a cross-country tour with other celebrities, promoting U.S. War Bonds. Incidentally, also touring the United States for War Bonds at the time was another well-

known African-American from Waco — baritone Jules Bledsoe of “Old Man River” fame.

That June, New York City was the site of ceremonies honoring “Negro Achievement Day,” designed to recognize “Distinguished Service to America.” The honorees included George Washington Carver, Mary McLeod Bethune, Joe Louis, Adam Clayton Powell ... and Doris Miller. When the Navy couldn’t spare Miller from his public relations duties, his mother Henrietta was invited in his stead.

Four months to the day after Pearl Harbor, the Navy — long called “the most undemocratic and un-American aspect of our Government” by various civil rights organizations — finally abolished its 20-year ban on African-Americans holding any rank save steward or messman.

## **The Civil Rights Hero**

One of Miller’s few known letters was addressed to The Pittsburgh Courier. It appeared on September 26, 1942:

*I am writing you and your correspondent in the behalf of the things that you have done for me in the past, and also for my fellow men, of my standing. For it has opened up things a little for us, at least for the ones who are following me, and I hope it will be better in the future.*

In January 1943, Miller returned briefly to Texas. The Dallas Morning News carried a short news item about Miller, mentioning that he would speak at the Moorland Branch of the YMCA on January 5. On January 14 The Pittsburgh Courier reported that Miller, along with Matt Eugene Fowler, another black sailor from Waco who was recovering from wounds received at Pearl Harbor, spoke briefly at the Waco YMCA.

Of his brother’s return to Waco, Miller’s brother Arthur said, “The whole town was in chaos; everyone wanted to see the hero.”

But according to writer Thomas Turner Sr., when Miller left Waco that day, he cautioned his family that he might not return home again.

For his brother Selvia, the Navy’s treatment of Miller smacked of the racism that still permeated the U.S. military at the time:

It was a code of silence in the Navy. That’s why Doris didn’t talk about the war. Mainly because of what he did as a black man, he was getting too much publicity.

Miller’s mother Henrietta even wrote a poem about the occasion of his visit. The final lines read:

*Uncle Sam, my son belongs to you,*

*Now proudly clad in uniform of blue.*

*When victory is won, and men again are free,*

*God willing, you will give him back to me.*

The Navy had other plans. Miller was eventually promoted to Cook, Third Class and assigned to several more ships in the Pacific, including a short stint on the ill-fated U.S.S. Indianapolis.

In November 1943 he was assigned to the newly commissioned U.S.S. Liscome Bay (CVE-56), which was sent in support of the invasion of the Gilbert Islands.

At 5:13 a.m. on November 24, 1943, during the Battle of Tarawa, the Liscome Bay was struck by a single torpedo and sank within minutes. Nearly 650 crewmen died, including Doris Miller.

## **The Hollywood Hero**

But this is where the story of Doris Miller takes an unexpected turn. Black sailors kept his story alive and the African-American press continued to champion him. Within weeks of his original feat, Miller was all but “canonized” (to quote Amiri Baraka) by black Americans.

Across the United States in the summer and fall of 1942, vendors (both black and white) offered various items for sale, all featuring Miller’s likeness. African-American newspapers sold color prints of his photograph. The U.S. Navy recruiting poster “Above and Beyond the Call of Duty” also featured his portrait that year. And after his death, a number of entrepreneurs sold memorial buttons with Miller’s face on them.

“Indeed, he may now have become the most identifiable enlisted sailor in the Battle of Pearl Harbor, if not the entire Pacific War,” wrote Richard E. Miller, author of “The Messman Chronicles: African-Americans in the United States Navy, 1932-1943.”

In “No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II,” acclaimed historian Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote, “The example of Miller’s heroism became a principal weapon in the battle to end discrimination in the Navy.”

By now, the inspiring story of the quiet, shy giant from Waco had attracted Hollywood’s attention. Pressed by progressive politicians (including Eleanor Roosevelt), the NAACP, African-American newspapers and other groups, the movie industry’s most forward-thinking producers, directors and actors began to look for ways to break Hollywood’s unwritten code against stories prominently featuring African-Americans in positive roles. Southern theaters simply refused to show such movies, despite the success of all-black productions like “The Green Pastures” (1936) and “Cabin in the Sky” (1943).

For instance, films like “The Sailor Takes a Wife” (1945) were banned throughout much of the South because a white man (actor Robert Walker) tips his hat in a neighborly fashion to an African-American (actor Eddie “Rochester” Anderson)!

In desperation, the head of the NAACP held a meeting with a number of prominent Hollywood figures and many did, indeed, promise to address the inequities of casting and plots. Initially, producers like Jack Warner and Samuel Goldwyn pledged to incorporate more African-Americans into their films, but claimed a “paucity of material” as an excuse for not producing movies, according to Thomas Cripps, author of “Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War I to the Civil Rights Era.”

But the story of Doris Miller was simply too compelling to ignore.

By late 1942, a “Dorie Miller biopic” was rumored to be in negotiations. One of the first films to feature an African-American was “Action in the North Atlantic” (1943), which included a black deck officer. A few months later, Howard Hawks’ “Air Force” included African-American crew members. Cripps quoted producer Hal Wallis instructing the screen writer to make the crew “a cross section of Allies” — including African-Americans.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s “The Ox-Bow Incident” (1943) was even more daring — a black man with a significant role. Both the films “Sahara” and “Bataan,” two more war movies from 1943, also featured African-Americans as part of larger ensembles.

In 1943, 20th Century Fox rewrote a scene in “Crash Dive” to incorporate elements of Miller’s heroics. He was played by Ben Carter who had appeared in a number of films in the usual stereotypical roles, including “Gone with the Wind” (1939). Carter made a strong impression in this submarine thriller with Tyrone Power and Dana Andrews.

The most ground-breaking element of “Crash Dive” was a virtual recreation of Miller’s Navy Cross ceremony, complete with the white officer shaking the character Miller’s hand as he receives his medal. (Given a second chance to play a sympathetic realistic character, Carter also shined in “Bowery to Broadway” in 1944 with Donald O’Connor.)

Another breakthrough came with the War Department’s propaganda film, “The Negro Soldier” (1944), which showed black soldiers throughout American history, training and fighting (led by black officers) and even singing in church. The film ends with a “March of Time” newsreel-styled reenactment of Doris Miller’s actions at Pearl Harbor. Movie historian Cripps called it the Army’s “... wished-for black dedication to the war and a repudiation of Japanese racial propaganda.”

The most compelling moment of “The Negro Soldier” is a shot of a stone cairn in France that testifies to black heroism during World War II. The cairn suddenly explodes and is trampled by jack-booted Nazi stormtroopers. According to Cripps, “Together with the image of Miller, it offered blacks a motive to fight.”

The Army brass originally made the 45-minute film to show to new recruits, and by the spring of 1944 it was screened for all soldiers. “The Negro Soldier” would not receive general release.

Also from 1944, one of the heroes of Alfred Hitchcock’s stunning “Lifeboat” is the ship’s steward Joe (powerfully played by Canada Lee). In the film (with an excellent script by John Steinbeck) the mixed cast of survivors treats Joe with dignity and respect. Only the Nazi U-boat commander displays any overt racism.

The idea of a film based on Miller’s life, however, did not die, resurfacing periodically even as Hollywood slowly incorporated African-Americans in greater numbers of films and in larger roles in the immediate post-war years. Likewise, films attacking racism and anti-Semitism (most notably “Angel on My Shoulder” and “Till the End of Time” in 1946, and the two dramas — “Crossfire” and “Gentleman’s Agreement” — in 1947) began to emerge. Cripps called subsequent films like “Home of the Brave” (1949), “Lost Boundaries” (1949), “Pinky” (1949), “The Jackie Robinson Story” (1950) and “No Way Out” (1950) part of the movie industry’s long overdue evolution in race relations:

*Thus the metaphor of the lone black warrior thrust among a white platoon, which had been put forth as an icon of a multiethnic war effort, and blossomed into legends such as those of Colin Kelly, Meyer Levin, and Dorie Miller, was revived on the nation’s screen.*

In time, stars like Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte would establish, once and for all, that the American public wanted quality acting and stories above all other considerations — including the race of its actors.

“The Doris Miller Story,” alas, has yet to be made. On July 25, 1990, Waco Tribune-Herald Entertainment Editor Carl Hoover reported that ABC-TV and the Chrysler Corporation had commissioned a movie “treatment” on the life of Doris Miller as part of “The Chrysler Showcase.” The film was to be aired in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor and titled “The First American Hero.”

A year later, on September 20, 1991, Hoover reported that the proposed film was still a go, though it had no director or stars attached to it.

Nearly two decades later, in early January 2010, Hoover said that, to his knowledge, the film was never made.

Still, the best thing about the otherwise often forgettable film “Pearl Harbor” (2001) is Cuba Gooding Jr.’s dynamic (and mostly historically accurate) portrayal of Miller in action.

## **The First Hero**

Doris Miller's father suffered a stroke and died soon after his son's heroics. His brothers all served in World War II and eventually left Waco. The home where Doris was born was flooded and covered by the creation of Lake Waco, and his mother moved to a home on 1213 Southey Street (between Highway 77 and Interstate 35, close to Greenwood Cemetery). The house — and all of Miller's medals, correspondence, photographs and commendations — were consumed by fire in 1957. U.S. Rep. Bob Poage led the fight to secure duplicates for the family.

Miller's mother Henrietta was present to commission a destroyer escort named in her son's honor in June 1973, The U.S.S. Miller (DE-1091). Also present was U.S. Rep. Barbara Jordan, who said:

*Dorie Millers of the future will be captains as well as cooks and the USS Miller will be a strong symbol of the country's rejection of inequity. Black people struggle to win equal or full rights as American citizens, whereas people like Doris fought hard just to protect the rights of all people ... The Navy is shaking past prejudices and making equality a reality in America.*

Today there are dozens, if not hundreds of VFW Posts, schools, hospitals, housing projects, parks, and memorials in his name, including Doris Miller Elementary School and the Doris Miller Family YMCA here in Waco. There are plaques at A.J. Moore Academy Magnet School, the Waco Veteran's Administration Medical Center and at Pearl Harbor itself (located on the north end of Doris Miller Loop). Also in Waco, a group of veterans and citizens continues to raise funds for a statue of Miller in Bledsoe-Miller Park.

But there is still no Medal of Honor for Doris Miller, despite the best efforts of numerous organizations and political leaders, most recently U.S. Reps. Eddie Bernice Johnson (Dallas) and Chet Edwards (Waco). As State Rep. Jim Dunnam recently told a local newspaper, "His honor of the Navy Cross is a big deal, and we don't want to belittle that award. It is a huge honor. But, in addition, his entitlement to the Medal of Honor is well-founded."

Finally, as part of Black History Month, the U.S. Postal Service chose Miller as one of the Navy heroes to be honored in its "Distinguished Sailors" series in February 2010.

Doubtless, the stamp would have embarrassed the shy, taciturn Miller. Even in a society that didn't value him, he served — and paid the ultimate price.

There is a great scene in Edward Dmytryk's "Till the End of Time" (1946). Robert Mitchum and Guy Madison are Marines returning from the war. They are recruited by members of a quasi-fascist organization called the American Patriots' Association.

Finally, Mitchum asks the leader, "What kind of people do you have in your organization?"



The leader replies, "We take all Americans, that is everybody except Negroes, Catholics and Jews."

Mitchum grabs the man by the collar and hisses:

*My best friend, a Jew, is lying back in a fox hole at Guadalcanal. I'm going to spit in your eye for him; we don't want to have people like you in the U.S.A. There is no place for racial discrimination here now!*

After a rousing brawl, the soldiers throw the American Patriots from the pool hall.

Doris Miller's unmarked grave is somewhere off the waters of the Gilbert Islands. His sacrifice may have helped change the motion picture industry. And a first-class film about his heroism would be nice.

But perhaps a more fitting tribute would be to pick up the torch and insist that America's first hero from World War II finally receive the recognition that he so richly deserves — the Medal of Honor.

### **Sources:**

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American Legion Post #914, Chicago, Illinois

<http://www.doriemiller915.org/doriemiller.htm>

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