

AN UNLIKELY HERO AT PEARL HARBOR

Doris Miller, known as “Dorie,” was born in Waco, Texas, in 1919 to Connery and Henrietta Miller. He was the third of four sons and grew up helping around the house, cooking meals and doing laundry, as well as working on the family farm. He played fullback on the football team at Waco’s A.J. Moore High School.

He worked on his father’s farm until 1938 when he enlisted in the Navy as mess attendant (kitchen worker) to earn money for his family. At that time, the Navy was segregated so combat positions were not open to African-Americans.

After training in Norfolk, Virginia, and serving a stint on the ammunition ship Pyro, Miller was assigned to the battleship West Virginia in 1940. The ship was in port at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.



Dorie rose that morning at 6 a.m. to begin work and was doing laundry when the siren went off warning of an attack. He immediately reported to his assigned battle station when word came that the ship’s captain was injured on the bridge. Dorie rushed up and picked up the captain and brought him down to the first aid station.

He returned to deck and saw that the Japanese planes were dive-bombing the U.S. Naval Fleet and they had little defense. He picked up a 50-caliber antiaircraft machine gun (which he had never been trained on) and managed to shoot down three to four enemy aircraft. (In the chaos of the attack, reports varied, and not even Miller was sure how many he hit.) He fired until he ran out of ammunition and by then the men were being ordered to abandon ship. The ship had been severely damaged and was sinking. Of the 1,541 men on board during the attack, 130 were killed and 52 wounded.



“It wasn’t hard,” said Miller after the battle. “I just pulled the trigger and she worked fine. I had watched the others with these guns. I guess I fired her for about 15 minutes.”

On April 1, 1942 Miller was commended by the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, and on May 27, 1942, he received the Navy Cross for his extraordinary courage in battle. His rank was raised to Mess Attendant First Class on June 1, 1942.

As happened with other war heroes, Dorie Miller was sent on a tour across the US to raise money for the war. However, Miller he was soon called back to serve on a new escort carrier the USS Liscome Bay. The ship was operating in the Pacific near the Gilbert Islands in the Fall 1943. On the morning of November 24th, the ship was hit by a Japanese submarine’s torpedo. The torpedo detonated the bomb magazine on the carrier and sank the ship within minutes. Of the 918 sailors on board, Miller and 645 others were killed.

In 1973, the Navy commissioned a ship called the USS Miller in his honor. There is also a Dorie Miller Park in Hawaii as well as schools and buildings throughout the U.S. named in his honor.

