

This Day in History... November 24, 1943

Death of Dorie Miller

US sailor Dorie Miller died on November 24, 1943, during the Battle of Makin. He had previously survived the attack on Pearl Harbor, for which he'd earned a Navy Cross.

Doris "Dorie" Miller was born on October 12, 1919, in Waco, Texas. The third of four sons, he worked on the family farm, was a good student, and played fullback on his high school's football team. He eventually dropped out of school and joined the Navy on September 16, 1939.

At the time, few positions were open to African Americans, so Miller was made a Mess Attendant. He served aboard several ships early on, including the *Pyro* and the *Nevada*. In January 1940, Miller was part of the crew of the USS *West Virginia*, which was sent to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.



Pearl Harbor stamp from the 1941: World at War stamp sheet

December 7th, 1941, began for Miller with a normal morning's work of collecting laundry. That changed suddenly as Japanese planes attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. When the alarm for general quarters rang, Miller raced to his battle station, but a torpedo had destroyed the anti-aircraft gun there. Miller was a large, strong man – he was the heavyweight-boxing champion on the ship. With his battle station ruined, he put that strength to use helping an officer carry wounded sailors to safety, including the captain of the *West Virginia*.

With no other wounded in sight, Miller then manned a .50-caliber anti-aircraft gun – even though he'd never been trained in its use. That didn't prevent him from shooting down three confirmed Japanese planes, with three more unconfirmed. As torpedoes blew through the deck, the crew was ordered to abandon ship. Miller dove overboard as the *West Virginia* settled to the harbor floor.

In May of the following year, Miller received a Navy Cross for his courage. He was the first African American to be awarded the medal and was called one of the "first US heroes of World War II."

After receiving his award, Miller was promoted to Mess Attendant First Class. He then went on a war bond tour before returning to service in May 1943 to serve aboard the USS *Liscome Bay*. That same year he was also featured on a US Navy recruiting poster titled "Above and beyond the call of duty."

On November 20, 1943, Miller's ship was involved in the Battle of Makin Island. Then on November 24, a Japanese torpedo struck the ship, leading the aircraft bomb magazine to explode a few minutes later. Of the crew of more than 900, only 272 survived. Miller was among the two-thirds of the ship's crew listed as "presumed dead." His family later held a memorial service in Waco. A number of memorials, buildings, and other sites have been named in Miller's honor.



From the Distinguished Sailors issue



The Navy Cross is the second-highest Navy award for military valor in combat.

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