

Tyler Christian Brogan

H01265036

brogantc@hbu.edu

Southern/Decorative Museum

Junior

World War II Propaganda Poster, 1943 (Reproduction)

Words: 1,188

An Unprecedented Honor: “Above and Beyond the Call of Duty”

David Stone Martin's *Above and Beyond the Call of Duty* depicts the first African American sailor to receive the Navy Cross award, now the second highest award in the Navy for heroism in armed combat. When day broke on December 7th, 1941, Doris "Dorie" Miller was but a third class cook aboard the *West Virginia* anchored at the Pearl Harbor navy base. Inevitably his responsibilities for the day would have included simply serving breakfast and collecting dirty laundry, but the Lord had so much more in store for Miller. Just after dawn the Japanese air force flew overhead with torpedoes, the first hitting the *West Virginia* at 7:57am. Miller's regular duties, now relatively pointless, were abandoned as he reported for duty on the main deck to offer what help he could. After securing his captain Mervyn Bennion, who remained with him on deck while dying of his wounds, Doris carried wounded soldiers to what shelter was left aboard the ship. In their retreat, a lieutenant instructed Miller to gather ammunition for an anti-aircraft gun. He was surprised to find that Miller had not only done this, but had begun firing at enemy planes despite having no training on how to use such heavy artillery. Doris was officially credited with the downing of at least two planes before the *West Virginia's* rescue (Chamberlain).

Perhaps in the year and three months that followed, only Doris knew what he had truly accomplished that day. Even when the U.S. government recognized acts of heroism from Pearl Harbor over a year later, the only detail that might have alluded to Miller was an unnamed Negro man. Three months after, the *Pittsburgh Courier* dramatized Miller's story, and The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People set the ball in motion for the push to

recognize the sailor officially for his actions (Newspapers.com) Their call was answered over abundantly when Franklin Roosevelt himself approved Miller to receive a Navy Cross.

The artist of this poster, David Martin, had illustrated album covers in the past for musicians such as Fred Astaire and Billie Holiday, but his farthest reaching influence came from his position as an Art Director for the U.S. Office of War Information during the Second World War, which is when he produced his illustration of Dorie Miller. In his poster, Martin depicted Miller on the day of May 27th, 1942 as he stood at attention receiving the Navy Cross aboard aircraft carrier *Enterprise*. Upon bestowing this award, Admiral Nimitz announced that this was the first time “such high tribute ha[d] been made in the Pacific Fleet to a member of his race, and I’m sure that the future will see others similarly honored for brave acts” (*Chicago Tribune*). Aboard the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, Miller stands at attention an American hero, a man who saw neither rank nor ethnicity, but fellow manhood on that frightful day. Dorie solidified his slowly spreading reputation with his Cross, and wearing it proudly among his fellow sailors. His uniform gleams in the sun against the blue waters of the Pacific, having returned over a year later to Pearl Harbor once again. In Martin’s illustration, the beautiful water behind him from his picture is instead a large wave, soon to swallow the remnants of a navy ship in dire trouble behind him. The poster preserved the piece of Miller’s past in which he was blessed to survive, doing so with bravery and honor. The bold white words inscribed the phrase first popularized in America in the late 1500s, “above and beyond the call of duty”. This is the higher calling of those who choose to serve America in the military. When men fall and the battle rages, there are those who put their lives on the line in every sense of the phrase. No amount of training sessions are enough to instill the courage needed when in the face of such danger and the fear of imminent death.

The tragic attack on Pearl Harbor proved opportunity for a man serving as a mess attendant to save lives. Anyone could have excused his backing down if he had chosen to, a man who could have been protected by the soldiers with more experience than he. In that moment a man of low rank, training, and even ethnically hindered in his time saw none of those things as obstacles to aid his fellow men. His picture, illustrated as a World War II propaganda poster, spread the praise for the attitude Miller had in those dangerous moments. During the year after the poster's release, Miller spent time on a war bonds tour, a speaker with an amazing story to complement his patriotic poster. He finished his tour with presentations in California and Texas, and even spoke before the first all-black class of graduating sailors in his hometown of Waco. This undoubtedly spurred on young men to join the military, new recruits swelling with pride knowing that no matter where they stood in the ranks, they too might be called to such duty as Miller had.

Doris Miller was later called back to Pearl Harbor in February, 1943 as part of the crew for the *Liscome Bay*. The day after the successful Battle of Makin, a Japanese submarine sent a torpedo which detonated the ship's explosive hold, assuring a swift descent into the open ocean. Of the crew of over 900, only 272 sailors survived. Doris Miller did not survive his second shipwreck, but we know what kind of man it was who was lost to the enemy that day, November 24th, 1943. We can be sure of the then unprecedented patriotism that overcame any active ethnic biases at the time as Miller paid the ultimate price for duty and his fellow men. After his death, his "above and beyond the call of duty" poster became the leading piece for the war propaganda produced with the African American population in mind as a target audience (Imperial War Museums). The piece lead propaganda easing tensions as the Jim Crow laws were abolished and the country unified in its cause during World War II (African American Odyssey). In his heroism

as well as his recognition served as further encouragement to the unification of blacks and whites in the U.S. military, and the piece remains one of the most influential of its kind.

As Texans and Southerners, this piece holds greater significance as an important local historical piece of art. Its influence would have likely have been greatest close to home, both where Miller was born and raised as well as an area of radical change during the often difficult years to unify the South ethnically. In this sense, the piece retains the emotion of the Americans who first encountered the piece in context years ago, its message still inspiring to this day. In fact, since this first instance of recognition, Miller has been honored many times over, with memorials in Texas as well as Pearl Harbor itself. Most recently announced was the future Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier model the *USS Doris Miller*, the first ship of its kind named after an African American Sailor (USNI News).

Works Cited

- “Above and beyond the Call of Duty' (Dorie Miller, Navy Cross 1942).” *Imperial War Museums*, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/17468>.
- Chamberlain, Gaius. “Doris Miller.” *Great Black Heroes*, Gaius Chamberlain
<https://Greatblackheroes.com/Wp-Content/Uploads/2018/04/Gbh-logo152x65.Png>, 10 Dec. 2020, <https://greatblackheroes.com/government/doris-miller/>.
- “Negro Revealed as ‘Messman Hero’ at Pearl Harbor.” *Newspapers.com*, 12 Mar. 1942, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/7598595/oakland-tribune/>.
- “Report to Congress on Gerald R. Ford Carrier Program.” *USNI News*, 25 Feb. 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/02/25/report-to-congress-on-gerald-r-ford-carrier-program-5>.
- “The Depression, the New Deal, and World War II.” *African American Odyssey*, <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/aopart8.html>.