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Richard E. Miller. *The Messman Chronicles: African Americans in the U.S. Navy, 1932-1943*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2004. ISBN: 155750539X.

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Until recently naval historians have generally ignored the history of African Americans in the U.S. Navy. For many years, the standard reference work on the subject was Dennis D. Nelson's *Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951)—a book written by a black naval officer in the 1950s as background material for policymakers working to desegregate of the Navy. Nelson never intended for this primer to become the standard history of blacks in the Navy—something it remained up until the 1980s.

During that decade, Morris J. MacGregor, a historian with the U.S. Army Center of Military History, published the *Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981). Although the book covers all the armed services, it's discussion of the Navy's desegregation efforts still remains definitive.

A few years later, Bernard Nalty, an historian with the Air Force history office, published *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1986). Nalty's book, a general history of blacks in all of the nation's armed services, provided some new historical material on blacks in the Navy before

World War II and more importantly, after 1965. The scale and scope of the work, however, did not allow Nalty to offer an authoritative synthesis of the black naval experience.

Beginning in 1990s, monographs began appearing that covered various aspects of the black naval experience in specific wars. These include Gerald Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African Americans and the War of 1812* (Put-in-Bay, OH: The Perry Group, 1996); and Steven Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002). Other authors employed biography as a vehicle for discussing black naval history. Noteworthy are such biographies as William B. Gould, *Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Sailor* (Paolo Alto, CA: Stanford, 2002); Paul Stillwell, *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998); and Robert C. Schneller, *Breaking the Color Barrier: The Naval Academy's First Black Midshipmen and the Struggle for Equality* (New York, NY: New York University Press, forthcoming).

Richard E. Miller's book represents a third wave of monographs on the black naval experience—ones that rely heavily on oral history to address a particular issue or theme. In his case, he examines the story of black messmen who served in the Navy from 1932 to 1943. Although blacks served in the Navy during every one of its wars and were a particularly vital source of manpower for the Union Navy during the American Civil War, black participation in the fleet dropped from a high of 20 percent in 1865 to just 13.1 percent in 1870. Following the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision to legalize segregation, the numbers declined even further such that by World War I, blacks comprised less than 3 percent of enlisted men. Almost all served in the galleys or engineering spaces. The Navy stopped enlisting blacks altogether in 1919 because officers thought Filipinos made better messmen.^[1]

Miller's book begins in 1932 with Captain Abraham Claude's decision to "reopen its doors to Americans of black descent"(3). In 1932, blacks constituted just over one-half of

1 percent of the enlisted force (441 out of a force of 81,120) and one out of ever 4 blacks in the Navy served as messmen (6). Claude, a white officer with the Navy's Bureau of Naval Personnel (BuPers) and the son of a prominent Maryland family, wanted to increase black participation in the messman branch for several reasons. First, he believed that the Navy's reliance on Filipinos for this branch could become untenable in time of war due to the "extremely long line of communication"(7) between the U.S. and the Philippines. Second, in the event that Congress granted the Philippines its independence, America might no longer be able to enlist these foreigners for branch. Many in the Navy, accustomed to being served by Filipinos, opposed Captain Claude's initiative, but the Chief of BuPers, Rear Admiral Frank B. Upham, ultimately gave Claude the support he needed, setting the stage for increased recruitment of blacks in the messman branch.

For most of the period under consideration, the Navy trained new black recruits at a cooks and stewards school in Norfolk, Virginia. When the first class of twenty-four black mess attendants arrived for twelve weeks of recruit training, they were housed in the "K" section of the Norfolk naval base's famous grid. Hence, the segregated unit became known as "Unit K-West. In 1939, the unit was relocated to a larger facility in the "B" sector of the base and therefore changed its nomenclature to "Unit B-East." Miller, a retired black chief hospital corpsman with a master's degree in history from Morgan State University, traces the experience of black stewards who attended this school from their basic training through their various assignments in the fleet.

Part I of the book examines the pre-war training program and the service of its graduates in the fleet during the 1930s. The author does an acceptable job of chronicling the ugly racial climate that existed in the city of Norfolk, known to both black and white sailors at the time as "shit city." He also provides some excellent descriptions of the segregated fleet of the 1930s. While many blacks were thankful for having a job in the midst of the Great Depression, service in the fleet as stewards often reinforced their segregated status. "Against the blue backdrop of sea and sky," explained Miller, "the black sailor's worldview was colored in shades of gray, reflecting the ambiguities of his career choice as well as the physical confines of the ship."(37)

In October 1940, a group of fifteen black sailors from the cruiser *Philadelphia* (CL-41) voiced their discontent with the racial status quo in a letter published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's leading black newspapers. Prior to the publication of the letter, nine of the fifteen had served some brig time in the past six months for offenses ranging from fighting to possession of clothing belonging to others. After they publicized their plight, the Navy issued "dishonorable" discharges to two of the sailors and "undesirable" discharges to the remaining thirteen. These moves outraged many in America's black community, who saw the *Philadelphia* 15 not as troublemakers but as heroes "unjustly penalized for demanding their manhood rights"(130). The Navy, however, became too distracted by Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor to pay too much attention to the issue.

The Pearl Harbor attack not only ushered America into World War II but also created America's first black war hero of the 1940s, a black mess attendant named Doris Miller (no relation to the author). During the attack on Pearl Harbor at 0600, Miller was collecting laundry when he heard call for general quarters. He headed for his battle station, the anti-aircraft battery magazine amidships, only to discover that torpedo damage had wrecked it, so he went on deck, where he was assigned to carry the wounded to places of greater safety. Then an officer ordered him to the bridge to aid the mortally wounded Captain of the ship. He subsequently manned an anti-aircraft machine gun until he ran out of ammunition and was ordered to abandon ship. For his heroism, the Navy awarded Miller the Navy Cross, the nation's second highest award for gallantry.

Miler not only analyzes Doris Miller's actions during 7 December but also discusses some of the controversies surrounding his Navy Cross award. The black press called for Miller to receive a Medal of Honor, but the Navy hierarchy headed by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, a man who generally sided with southern traditionalists on matters of race, did not believe that Miller's actions were particularly exceptional. In a compromise move, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the service to confer Miller with the Navy Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor in the military's galaxy of awards. Doris, along

with 645 other Navy personnel, ultimately died in November 1943 when his ship, the escort carrier *Liscome Bay* (CVE-56), was torpedoed. The controversy, however, did not end there. In the 1980s, Leroy Ramsey, a retired Hofstra University history professor, led a campaign to get Miller's Navy Cross upgraded to a Medal of Honor. Ramsey argued that what made Miller's actions outstanding was the color of his skin. "Here is a man who did what he was not allowed to do," argued Ramsey, "just manning the machine gun was going above and beyond the call of duty"(313). While Ramsey's actions eventually secured medal upgrades for seven African American soldiers, Congress ended up killing the Miller case in committee. Part II of *The Messman Chronicles* focuses on Miller story and the less well-known wartime tales of other black messmen during the early World War II period.

In March 1942, President Roosevelt finally ordered Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to begin accepting more blacks, and Knox responded by enlisting more blacks for general service, but only in segregated units. By 1945, some 166,915 blacks were serving in the Navy (5.5 percent of the total enlisted force). 1943, therefore, is the end point of Miller's book.

Overall, *Messman Chronicles* offers an excellent glimpse into the world of the black navy messman during the 1930s and early 1940s. The author's interviews with former stewards will be of lasting value to naval history. The book, however, is not without faults. It could have benefited from a brief introductory chapter on the history of blacks in the Navy from the War of American Independence to 1930. More contextual material on the Navy's racial policies during the period covered also could have improved the volume. Like many historians who rely heavily on oral history as source material, Miller is often content to let his subjects tell their own story with only minimal interpretation and context. At times, the long block quotations from interviews are intriguing, but in other places, this reader yearned for more discussion and found himself turning to other sources for background.^[2]

Ending the book with the Doris Miller story is in some ways appropriate because his case, more than any other, publicized the plight of black messmen during the period covered. The author, however, does not summarize his overall findings in a separate conclusion, another factor that makes this book more of an oral history than a thesis driven monograph. Finally, there is no mention of the tremendous racial unrest suffered by the Navy in 1944—namely the Port Chicago mutiny and the Guam race riot. Like Pullman porters in the rail industry, the plight of the black stewards highlighted the Navy’s institutional racism to the black community long before Port Chicago. Did the actions of Doris Miller or the story of the *Philadelphia 15* raise the consciousness of those who later rioted at Guam or refused to work at Port Chicago? More research on this important subject is needed.

[1] For an excellent brief overview of the history of African American participation in the Navy from the American Revolution through the Korean War, see Bernard C. Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 2003).

[2] These sources include Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea*; Robert Schneller, *Breaking the Color Barrier: The Naval Academy’s First Black Midshipman and the Struggle for Equality* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005); and John Darrell Sherwood, *Black in Blue: Racial Unrest in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War Era* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, forthcoming).



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