

The Legacy of Doris Miller

Inhibited by his race, Doris Miller enlisted as a Navy cook where he bravely responded to the chaos ensued on December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor. Historian Dr. Michael Parrish, spoke to Baylor journalism students Tuesday about Miller's bravery, his lasting impact on the African American community and the challenge ahead to honor Miller properly.

Although Miller was prohibited from operating machinery, when Japanese aircraft flew overhead, Miller took hold of a .50-caliber gun to defend his country. Miller is not to be remembered by how many aircraft he hit on the day that lives in infamy. Rather, Parrish said that he is remembered for going above the call of duty and ultimately changing the racial dynamics within the military forever.

Conjoined efforts from politicians who depended on the African American vote, the African American Press, and eventually the White House persuaded the Navy to award Miller for his bravery, Parrish said. Reluctantly, the Navy conceded, and Miller was honored with the Navy Cross on May 22, 1942.

Miller was a paramount catalyst in the Civil Rights Movement, Parrish said. "Promotions, awards, and recognition among African Americans were given far more likely following the story of Miller's heroism." Miller inspired people to make donations to the military and

encouraged more African Americans to serve in the war efforts. According to Parrish, “Military service deserves respect and with respect, comes full equality.”

Following his speaking engagements, Miller continued his Naval service. In the military, he was not worried about the foreign enemies. “He was worried that he would die at the hands of his fellow white servicemen,” Parrish said. The severity of racial tension ran high, but Miller pressed onward. Ultimately, he sacrificed his life on November 24, 1943 aboard an escort carrier struck by Japanese torpedoes.

The effects of World War II still resonate with Americans. Racial progress has been made, but America is still in the shadows of racial injustices. Baylor journalism professor Robert Darden said, “Racism in America is still America’s original sin.”

Although Miller is nationally recognized, the reverence of his service falls short in his hometown of Waco, Texas. According to the Waco Tribune-Herald, the plans to create a memorial for Miller have been slowed due to insufficient funding.

Parrish said he was compelled to promote the rectification of the memorial. Through his inspiration, Parrish co-wrote a book titled, “Doris Miller, Pearl Harbor, and the Birth of the Civil Rights Movement.”

“In a town that has memorials to confederate soldiers and sports athletes, not a single one goes to an African American,” Darden said.

Just as Miller responded to his call to action, Waco residents are called to commemorate the valor of Doris Miller.