



DEAD-EYE DORIE MILLER

*He'd Never Handled a Machine Gun,
Yet He Shot Down Four Planes in
Twenty Minutes, Rescued the Captain
of the USS WEST VIRGINIA and Saved
a Dozen from Drowning...*

by Ollie Stewart

FOR DORIE MILLER, Mess Attendant Second Class aboard the *USS WEST VIRGINIA*, it was a day that started out like all the others. He was up at six to collect the laundry, to set up the tables and to get fresh coffee ready for a host of sleepy-eyed sailors.

From long practice, he did his work automatically, leaving his mind free to dwell on more pleasant things. Only 18 more days to Christmas, he thought, then liberty ashore in Pearl Harbor.

The date was December 7, 1941.

Dorie was having a cup of scalding coffee himself at 0755, when he heard what sounded like a rumble of thunder. Then the ship's loudspeaker began to squawk.

"Away fire and rescue party!" it grated.

Then about thirty seconds later, "General quarters!"

And before he could get the cup settled in the saucer, a Marine stuck his head into the messhall and yelled, "The Japs are attacking us!"

Dorie Miller was only a mess attendant—a colored farm boy from Waco, Texas. He wasn't trained to fight. His job was to keep the messhall clean and wait on hungry sailors. But before this fateful day was over, the husky, 22-year-old messman was to write his name in U. S. Naval history. He was about to earn the Navy's highest decoration—the Navy Cross!

He left the messhall at a trot, heading for a battle station he'd never expected to use. He'd taken only a few strides when he was staggered by two heavy shocks on the hull of the *WEST VIRGINIA*. They were forward on the port side—and almost immediately the ship began to list rapidly

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to port. And as Dorie grabbed hold of a stanchion to remain erect, a third heavy jolt rocked the ship.

The crackle of flames and exploding ammunition could be heard all over the ship. The din was added to by the *WEST VIRGINIA*'s guns, and an explosion nearby (which later proved to be a crippling blow to the *USS ARIZONA*, only a few yards away). Stumbling along the corridor, Dorie could hear the rain of red-hot metal on the *WEST VIRGINIA*'s deck and starboard side.

He was about to plunge into the topside inferno, when he ran into the Communications Officer, Lt. Commander D. C. Johnson. The officer gave the powerfully built Dorie a quick, appraising glance through the billowing smoke, and shouted above the noise, "Miller, you're just the man I need! The Captain has been wounded on the Signal Bridge—and we'll need somebody husky enough to help get him down below. Come with me."

"Yes, sir," said Dorie. And as he followed Johnson up to the quarter deck, he had a sudden, sobering thought. *Maybe I won't live to see Christmas, after all!* And then on the run, he uttered a half-prayer and a half pep talk to himself. "Jesus, I've got to be a real sailor now!"

On deck, most of the *WEST VIRGINIA*'s planes were scrambled in a pile and burning furiously. A flight of Japanese bombers whizzed overhead in Vee formation. They were apparently out of bombs, because nothing was dropped; but the starboard anti-aircraft battery cut loose despite the listing of the ship. Oil and water covered the deck, there was a tremendous fire amidship, and wounded were being helped into the few boats still undamaged.

Sliding and grabbing in order to move along the listing ship, Dorie and the officer climbed up to the Signal Bridge. They had an almost impossible task for not only was Captain Bennion wounded, his abdomen had been ripped open by flying metal leaving his intestines exposed.

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Dorie stood sweating, and silent, while Leak, the Chief Pharmacists' Mate, dressed the Captain's wound. They decided to use a cot as an improvised stretcher, and after they had placed the Captain upon it, Johnson turned to Dorie. "Think you can carry him down on that, Miller?"

"I can try," said Dorie. He picked up cot and Captain—and before he'd taken more than a couple of steps toward the ladder leading down, the cot sagged and almost broke. Dorie lowered his burden gently, and saw that the Captain was gritting his teeth in pain. *It's no good, thought Dorie. Moving the Captain around will kill him.*

And then they all heard a *whoosh*—and the heat suddenly became intense. A raging oil fire from the galley had flamed up to the mast structure and black smoke was billowing all over the bridge. To attempt to lower the Captain now, especially forward of the conning tower, would be suicide.

Captain Bennion spoke up then. "It's no use, gentlemen," he said. "Just put me in a sheltered corner and leave me. Try to save the ship."

The Captain was still giving orders. He was still in command. So Dorie moved him to a spot abaft the conning tower—and as he straightened up, the Japanese attacked again. And that's when the praying messenger became a man of vengeance!

There were two machine guns forward of the conning tower—the hottest spot on the bridge. Lieutenant (jg) F. H. White ran to one gun, and Dorie hustled over to the other. The planes peeled off into screaming dives. Like a crouching dark shadow, Dorie settled his bulk and elevated the barrel of his gun. In an instant, he had a Japanese fighter in his sights, and squeezed the trigger.

It was an erratic burst, but as Dorie eased off he saw that the plane was smoking. Then it fell off on one wing and crashed into the water. "That's for the Captain," Dorie grated—and brought his gun back up. A few moments later he'd shot a second one out of the sky. "That's

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for the ship," he said—and wiping sweat and smoke from his eyes, he began to reload the gun.

He was interrupted by a shout. The Signal Bridge had become a flaming inferno. The Captain's stretcher had slid aft, with the Captain's head down and the lashings loosened. Dorie ran over, and he and two others carried the white-faced Captain Bennion up to the Navigation Bridge. They laid him on deck, sheltered by the anti-aircraft detector, and well away from the flames. Then Dorie hurried back to his gun—and just in time.

The air was full of enemy fighters. Dorie squeezed off a burst, and saw a plane buckle in mid-air. Another burst of gunfire and a fourth plane lost a wing and flipped over. He kept firing until the gun was empty, and at that moment he heard the terrible words to abandon ship.

"Things were pretty mixed up," Dorie was later to tell a group of reporters, "but I think I got four planes for sure."

How did an untrained mess attendant become so handy with a machine gun?

"Well," said Dorie, "I had watched the gun crews practice, so I did what I'd seen them do—and she worked real good. But I remembered not to lay on the trigger. Give it a burst, then let it cool."

When asked how long he was firing, he said, "I don't rightly know. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. The planes kept diving close to us, and I kept firing away!"

Six months later on May 27, 1942, Dorie Miller stood proudly at attention while Fleet Admiral (then Admiral) Chester W. Nimitz personally pinned the Navy Cross to his blouse. The citation read:

"For distinguished devotion to duty, extraordinary courage and disregard for his personal safety during the attack on the fleet in Pearl Harbor, territory of Hawaii, by Japanese forces on December 7, 1941. While at the side of his Captain on the bridge, Miller, despite enemy

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strafing and bombing and in the face of a serious fire, assisted in moving his Captain, who had been mortally wounded, to a place of greater safety, and later manned and operated a machine gun directed at enemy Japanese attacking aircraft until ordered to leave the bridge."

But there were many aspects of that hellish, heroic and never-to-be-forgotten day not covered or even touched on in the citation. And there were hundreds of others at Pearl Harbor that disastrous day who distinguished themselves while the cream of the American Navy was being smashed and battered—with men perishing from bombs, explosions, drowning and by being roasted alive in burning oil as they tried to swim to safety after jumping overboard.

And Dorie Miller's ship, the *WEST VIRGINIA*, was only one of a group of battleships jammed in the harbor and anchored so close together that you could practically step from one to the other. There was the *PHOENIX*, which upped anchors and tried to escape; the *ARIZONA*, which became a flaming coffin; the *TENNESSEE*, which had fires from stem to stern, and the *OKLAHOMA*, which capsized.

Statements from survivors paint a gripping picture of America's biggest naval setback. Commander R. H. Hillenkoetter, senior surviving officer of the *WEST VIRGINIA*, tells a graphic story. He was dressing in his cabin when his ship was first hit, and by the time he had reached the deck, there had been two other explosions. He states:

"Immediately following the latest explosion, I saw a flash of flame about fifteen feet high somewhere forward on the *ARIZONA* (which was close by) and had just gotten to my feet again when there was a terrific flash of flame from the *ARIZONA*, this second flash being higher than the foretop. Burning debris of sizes from a fraction of an inch up

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to five inches in diameter rained on the quarterdeck of the *WEST VIRGINIA*.”

After mentioning that the ship had gradually started to right herself after listing to port, Commander Hillenkoetter continues: “There was another heavy shock, distinguishable from the shock of the ship’s own guns firing, and it was reported that a large fire had broken out amidships. I went into the deck-house and found the repair parties already working against a fire, but without much success, as the fire increased by leaps and bounds. At this time, a telephone talker said, ‘Central Station says abandon ship.’

“As it was evident the fire fighting party had no chance to extinguish the fire, they were ordered to leave the ship. The fire had, by then, isolated the after and forward parts of the ship. I went out on the port side of the quarterdeck, and seeing no boats on that side went over to the starboard side. By this time the stern of the *TENNESSEE* was burning, and a wall of flame was advancing toward the *WEST VIRGINIA* and the *TENNESSEE*, from oil on the water from the *ARIZONA*. I looked around and saw no one else aft on deck, and then I dove overboard and swam to the *TENNESSEE*.

“On getting on deck of the *TENNESSEE*, I found about ten *WEST VIRGINIA* people gathered under the overhang of the ship’s number three turret. As the *TENNESSEE* people were busily engaged in fire fighting but in no need of extra help, I took the *WEST VIRGINIA* people over to the starboard side onto the pipeline to help in extinguishing the fire that had started in the rubbish and trash and oil-covered water between the *TENNESSEE* and Ford Island.

“Several of our people that were hurt were loaded into a truck and taken to the dispensary. I then brought the truck back to that part of Ford Island opposite the *TENNESSEE* and kept on with efforts to extinguish the fires among the

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trash and oil on the water. More and more *WEST VIRGINIA* personnel kept arriving at this point—some by swimming, some by hanging on to wreckage, and, I think, one whale-boat load.”

After the fires on the water were out, the Commander went back aboard the *TENNESSEE*, reported to the commanding officer and then says, “I then returned ashore, visited the survivors of the *WEST VIRGINIA*, who were lodged in the bachelor officers’ quarters on Ford Island, and in a bomb shelter. While there, I learned that the navigator, Lt. Comdr. T. T. Beattie, and a working party had returned aboard ship to assist in extinguishing the fire; so I gathered up a working party from among the personnel who were able and unhurt and went back aboard the *WEST VIRGINIA*. Fire fighting parties, in relays, continued efforts against the flames, *which finally were extinguished Monday afternoon.*

“Throughout the entire action, and through all the arduous labors which followed, there was never the slightest sign of faltering or of cowardice.” And among the examples of outstanding performance of duty was this one: “*Lieutenant White and Dorie Miller were instrumental in hauling people along through oil and water to the quarterdeck—thereby unquestionably saving the lives of a number of people who might otherwise have been lost.*”

Lieutenant White’s statement adds to the picture of horror and heroics. “At 0756,” he says, “I was in the wardroom when the fire and rescue party was called away by bugle. I ran to the quarterdeck. The first thing I saw on reaching topside was a Japanese plane over the ship ahead of the *WEST VIRGINIA*, and a column of water and smoke rising. As I ran forward, I stopped at the deck office and sounded the general alarm—just as the first torpedo struck the ship . . . The ship received three or four torpedo hits which threw oil and water all over the decks, which, combined with the list, made footing

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very precarious. Due to the list of the ship, the port gun crews were brought to starboard as their guns would not elevate sufficiently. The air to the guns had gone out, which necessitated depression for hand loading. While the guns were in action, several bombs dropped on or near the ship, but the discipline on the guns were excellent”

Lt. Comdr. Johnson, who took Dorie Miller to the bridge to try to save the Captain, describes how some of the wounded men were gotten off the ship. Says Johnson, “I had Ensign Lawrence embarked in a boat. He had been stunned by a blow on the side of the head—and was out on his feet and mumbling as if in a stupor. Pay Clerk Westfall was also carried up and placed in a boat. Shortly after this, Lt. Comdr. Berthold, Lt. Comdr. Killeen, Lt. W. White and Lt. Knight appeared on the forecastle in civilian clothes, having come out in a hurry from their Honolulu homes, and out to the ship in a boat.

“Within a very few minutes a wall of smoke and flame came along the port side of the ship and enveloped the forecastle. This fire was caused by oil on the water on the portside. All hands on the forecastle abandoned ship, either in a boat from the port rail, or by jumping in the water on the starboard side. I stripped off all my clothes and eased myself down from the starboard anchor and jumped in the water and swam to Ford Island.

“When I came out of the water I reported to Comdr. Hillenkoetter, who was standing on the bank at the water’s edge After having been ashore for about an hour, I returned aboard by crawling up a jacob’s ladder on the starboard side of the *TENNESSEE*, across the *TENNESSEE*, and crawling along one of the *TENNESSEE*’s broadside guns, then dropping down on the gallery deck of the *WEST VIRGINIA*! I spent the rest of the day on the main deck aft—the forward part of the ship was burning. Shortly after dark I went over to Ford Island with several other

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officers and about 40 men, to spend the night in an empty building returning to the *WEST VIRGINIA* shortly after dawn.”

Dorie Miller also swam to Ford Island, dragged several of his mates out of the water, and spent the night of December 7 in an abandoned building. The *WEST VIRGINIA* was fire-gutted but remained afloat. Dorie was transferred to the *INDIANAPOLIS* and promoted to Mess Attendant First Class. He served the next 17 months on that cruiser and was returned to the States on May 15, 1943.

Because of the publicity given him, he was sent on a morale-building tour of the country and was interviewed and acclaimed everywhere he went. A Congressional Bill to give him the Congressional Medal of Honor was sponsored by Senators James Meade (D., N. Y.) and Alben Barkley (D., Ky)—but he received the Navy’s second highest award, the Navy Cross.”

When his coast-to-coast tour was finished, Dorie went back to sea—and he was never to see his native land again! Assigned to the *LISCOME BAY*, he was lost when the ship was torpedoed by an enemy submarine in the Gilbert Islands on November 24, 1943—just two weeks short of two years from the day Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Lieutenant Commander Oliver Ames, senior surviving officer, wrote in his official report: “On November 24, 1943, at 0510, the *LISCOME BAY* was struck by at least one torpedo on the starboard side aft of the engine room. Other explosions followed immediately, blowing off the after half of the flight deck and gutting the remainder of the ship, except for some portions forward of the island. Approximately 25 minutes later the ship sank.”

Dorie was one of the 683 persons lost—and there were only 265 survivors out of 948 persons aboard. Along with the rest who had no chance, Dorie was at first listed as missing in action. Then one year and

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a day later, November 25, 1944, he was officially presumed to be dead.

He was the third of Mr. and Mrs. Conery Miller's four sons. Born on October 12, 1912, near Waco, Texas, he attended Moore High School in Waco before enlisting in the Navy. Following training at the Norfolk (Va.) Training station, he was assigned on January 2, 1940, to the *WEST VIRGINIA*—the ship that made him a hero. ●



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