



Celebrating African American History Month: Honoring the Past, Securing the Future



During the month of February, the National Museum of the American Sailor honors the Navy's past by celebrating the achievements of African American sailors, whose honor, courage, and commitment helped secure and protect America's future. According to former Vice Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Michelle Howard, our nation's first female and African American VCNO, it is in celebrating Black History Month that we "can more fully appreciate the ideals set down by the founders... It's a reminder that our work is to sustain freedom and ensure that rights and liberty belong to all our citizens."

A constant presence in the United States Navy since its founding in 1775, thousands of African American patriots served in the Continental Navy. Though denied their rights and primarily relegated to roles such as stewards and messmen because of their race, African American sailors persevered and played a vital role in shaping the Navy throughout the next two centuries. According to research from the Naval History and Heritage Command, this activity included:

- Participation in the United States' victories in the War of 1812 including the Battle of Lake Erie on September 10, 1813
- The service of 18,000 African Americans on most of the Union Navy's 600 ships; eight of them earned the Congressional Medal of Honor.
- The loss of Black Sailors when the USS *Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor.
- In and out of combat during the two world wars, the Cold War and again in the

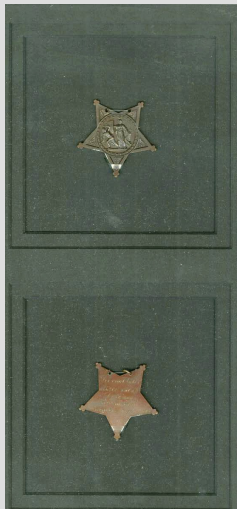


- Seaman Recruit Lakiba Nicole Palmer, one of the two women killed in the October 12, 2000 terrorist strike against the USS *Cole* (DDG 67).
- Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.
- The Global War on Terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Operation Inherent Resolve, Iraq and Syria Operations to against ISIL.

Though the names of many of these sailors are lost to history, their support is not. Keep reading to discover how the National Museum of the American Sailor is commemorating African American sailors during the month of February.

NMAS Exhibits

NMAS's newest exhibit *Sails Unfurled: The Dawn of the U.S. Navy* honors two extraordinary African American sailors and their heroic efforts during the Civil War's Battle of Mobile Bay:



Medals of Honor belonging to Landsman William Brown and Landsman Wilson Brown.

Landsman William Brown: Born in 1836 in Maryland, Landsman William Brown served on board the USS *Brooklyn* during the Civil War. During the 1864 Battle of Mobile Bay, Brown continued delivering vital ammunition powder, despite enemy shellfire that killed and wounded his surrounding fellow sailors. For his conduct, Brown received the Medal of Honor, one of eight African American Civil War service members who received that award.

Landsman Wilson Brown: Wilson Brown was born a slave in Natchez, Mississippi in 1841 and after escaping, he enlisted in the Navy in 1863. During the 1864 Battle of Mobile Bay, Brown transported ammunition powder to the USS *Hartford's* guns.

The explosion of a Confederate shell near Brown killed surrounding sailors, knocked Brown unconscious, and broke several of his ribs. Yet after regaining consciousness, Brown quickly joined fellow sailor John Lawson to resume transporting powder to the firing deck. For his valor during this battle, Brown received the Medal of Honor.

Diving into Navy History

Dennis Nelson and the Golden Thirteen

As a member of the Golden Thirteen, the first African American sailors to undergo officer training at Great Lakes Naval Training Station (now Naval Station Great Lakes), Dennis

Nelson broke down color barriers throughout his Naval career. While other members of the Golden Thirteen made accomplishments for equality in their post-Navy professional lives, Nelson was the only member of his officer class to serve a full career on active duty in the Navy. During his service, he challenged segregation and fought for equality in the Navy. In this blog by NMAS staff, [learn more about Nelson's career and his fight for desegregation in the Navy here](#)

African American Trailblazer, Cook Third Class Doris "Dorie" Miller

Born in Waco, Texas in 1919, Cook Third Class Doris "Dorie" Miller enlisted in the United States Navy as a Mess Attendant Third Class in September 1939. As the Navy restricted African American sailors' access to many occupational rates, Miller later became a Cook. During the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack, Miller served aboard the USS *West Virginia* (BB 48). During the attack, Miller attended to wounded crew and despite a lack of training operated the vessel's .50 caliber Browning anti-aircraft machine gun until he ran out of ammunition.



Speaking during a visit to the Naval Training Station, Great Lakes, Illinois, on 7 January 1943. He is wearing the Navy Cross medal, awarded for heroism during the Pearl Harbor Attack, 7 December 1941. Official U.S. Navy Photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives.

For his distinguished and heroic actions, the Navy awarded him the Navy Cross. Miller continued to serve in World War II and perished when the Japanese torpedoed and sunk the USS *Liscome Bay* (CVE 56) on November 24, 1943. Through the naming of two ships, the USS *Miller* (DEE1901) and the future USS *Doris Miller* (CVN 81), the Navy pays homage to Cook Third Class Dorie Miller and his heroic actions. [To discover more about Miller and his Navy career, visit here](#)

Guest Blog: African Americans and the USS Robalo (SS-273)

This month, NMAS welcomes guest blogger, Abigail Diaz, the Director of Education and Public Programs at the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. In this month's blog, Diaz explores the sinking of the submarine USS *Robalo* (SS 273) during World War II and the diversity of the boat's crew.

NMAS Artifact Spotlight

USS *New Orleans* (CL 22) Scrapbook

Throughout the early twentieth century, the United States Navy limited African American Sailors to Mess Attendant service. As an "unseen" part of the Navy,



Photo of the mixed-race crew on the USS *New Orleans* (CL 22), ca. 1899-1909.

photographic evidence of the role of African American sailors and integrated crews from this era are rare. New this month to NMAS' permanent collection is a photograph album documenting the service of USS *New Orleans* (CL 22).

While the album dates from ca. 1899-1909, the *New Orleans* served from 1898-1922 and took part in the Spanish-American War, the Asiatic Fleet, Mexican Revolution, and World War I. After the Civil War ended, the United States Navy restricted African American enlistment, and this album provides a rare glimpse of African American sailors in service during this era.

This artifact was donated by the National Museum of the American Sailor Foundation (www.nmasf.org)

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Through its collections, exhibits, and educational programming, the National Museum of the American Sailor celebrates and helps people discover the heritage of the United States Navy enlisted Sailor. The museum is located at 2531 Sheridan Road at Naval Station Great Lakes in Great Lakes, Illinois. For more information click the button below.

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