

Distinguished Sailors Background Information



William S. Sims

Commander of U.S. naval forces in European waters during World War I, Sims was an outspoken reformer and innovator who helped shape the Navy into a modern fighting force.

Sims was born in Port Hope, Ontario, Canada, where his father, an American citizen, was a railroad engineer. The family moved to Vermont when Sims was about 12 and soon settled in Pennsylvania.

Sims attended the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD, from 1876 to 1880. He then spent nearly two decades at sea, interrupted by a year (1889) in Paris studying French. From 1897 to 1900, he served as naval attaché to the U.S. Embassy in France and to the ministry in Russia. During this time, he studied and made reports on European naval developments, which he found to be far more advanced than those in America. While in France, he met his future wife, Anne Hitchcock, daughter of the U.S. minister to Russia.

In 1901, at great risk to his career, Sims circumvented his immediate superiors and wrote directly to President Theodore Roosevelt about "the extreme danger of the present very inefficient condition of the Navy," emphasizing the glaring deficiencies of American battleships and the need for more accurate firepower. Roosevelt thanked Sims for the letter and encouraged him to continue offering suggestions. Sims was able to implement some of his ideas for reform, especially in the area of gunnery, while serving as inspector of target practice in the Navy's Bureau of Navigation from 1902 to 1909. He trained officers and gun crews in a new gun control method called "continuous aim firing," adapting the techniques of British officer Percy Scott and achieving significant improvements in firing speed and accuracy. He also served as President Roosevelt's naval aide from 1907 to 1909.

Shortly before the United States entered World War I, Sims, by this time a rear admiral, was sent on a secret mission to gather information on wartime conditions and to confer with the British Royal Navy. Soon after America entered the war, he was appointed commander of U.S. naval forces operating near Europe. To counter the German strategy of unrestricted warfare by U-boats, Sims advocated various anti-submarine measures. He played a critical role in promoting and coordinating a system of convoys — using destroyers and other warships to escort merchant ships and transports through danger zones — that achieved dramatic reductions in Allied shipping losses. To the extent that the defeat of German submarine warfare was "the critical naval campaign of the war, essential to victory over the Central Powers," as historian David Trask has written, Sims's contribution to the Allied victory in World War I was profound.

After the war, Sims returned to the same position he had held previously at the Naval War College, serving as president until his retirement in 1922. He sparked a congressional investigation in 1920 of the wartime conduct of the Navy Department, leading to extensive hearings on the subject. He also wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the war, *Victory at Sea* (1920).

Sims continued to write and lecture about naval reform until his death in 1936, at which time the *New York Herald Tribune* declared that he had “influenced our naval course more than any man who ever wore the uniform.” The Navy has named three destroyers after Sims. The most recent, *USS W.S. Sims* (DE-1059), was commissioned in 1970.



Arleigh A. Burke

After serving as one of the top destroyer squadron commanders of World War II, Burke had an equally distinguished postwar career in which he played a major role in modernizing the Navy and guiding its response to the Cold War.

Born and raised on a farm near Boulder, CO, Burke secured an appointment to the Naval Academy in 1919 and graduated in 1923. After serving five years on the battleship *USS Arizona*, he pursued postgraduate work in ordnance at the United States Naval Postgraduate School and then earned a master's degree in chemical engineering from the University of Michigan in 1931. During the 1930s, Burke served in various capacities in a heavy cruiser and a destroyer before being given command of *USS Mugford*, which under Burke won the Destroyer Gunnery Trophy for 1939-1940.

At the outset of World War II, Burke was an inspector at the Naval Gun Factory in Washington, DC. His repeated requests for sea duty went unheeded until he was given command in early 1943 of a destroyer division in the South Pacific. He soon gained a reputation for brilliance and innovation, especially after taking command that fall of Destroyer Squadron 23. Under Burke the squadron became known as “the Little Beavers” and fought in 22 separate actions in a four-month period, sinking or helping to sink nine Japanese destroyers and downing 30 airplanes. His exploits and his own nickname, “31-Knot Burke,” became widely known, and his performance in battle earned him an appointment in March 1944 as chief of staff to Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher in the famed Fast Carrier Task Force. According to the *Dictionary of American Military Biography*, in this post Burke “coordinated the operations of the largest naval striking force in history in the battles of the Philippine Sea, Leyte Gulf and Okinawa.”

With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Burke was sent to Japan to serve as deputy chief of staff to the commander of U.S. naval forces in the Far East. In 1951, he briefly served as commander of Cruiser Division Five before being designated a member of the United Nations Truce Delegation, which sought to negotiate an armistice in Korea. In late 1951, Burke was summoned to Washington, DC, for a two-year tour as director of the Navy's Strategic Plans Division. In 1955, while still a rear admiral, he reached the pinnacle of his profession when President Eisenhower appointed him Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), promoting him ahead of nearly 100 more senior officers. During an unprecedented three terms as CNO, Burke sped up the construction of nuclear-powered submarines and initiated the Polaris Ballistic Missile Program.

Burke retired from the Navy in 1961 after nearly 40 years of service. He remained an influential figure and was at the forefront of efforts to establish the U.S. Navy Memorial in Washington, DC, which was dedicated in 1987. In 1977, Burke was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The Navy honored him by naming a new class of guided missile destroyers after him. On July 4, 1991, the first of these, the *USS Arleigh Burke* (DDG-51), was commissioned in a ceremony attended by Burke and his wife, Roberta.

When Burke died in 1996, he was hailed as a “sailor’s sailor” who defined what it meant to be a naval officer: “relentless in combat, resourceful in command, and revered by his crews.”



John McCloy

Described by a shipmate as “like a bull” who couldn’t be stopped, McCloy has the distinction of being one of the few men in the nation’s history to earn two Medals of Honor for separate acts of heroism.

Born in Brewster, NY, McCloy went to sea as an adolescent, by some accounts joining the U.S. Merchant Marine when he was 15. In March 1898, at age 22, he enlisted in the Navy on the eve of the Spanish-American War.

During the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, McCloy earned his first Medal of Honor “for distinguished conduct in the presence of the enemy” while participating in a relief expedition to rescue members of the foreign community under siege at 11 ministries in Peking (now Beijing), China. He was wounded in action on June 22, 1900, during the seizure of an arsenal near Tientsin (now Tianjin).

McCloy earned his second Medal of Honor for his heroism in 1914 when American forces landed at Veracruz, Mexico. On April 21, Chief Boatswain McCloy was in charge of three picket boats unloading men and supplies at a pier when his detachment came under fire from the nearby Mexican Naval Academy. To expose enemy positions, he took his boat away from the pier and directed fire at the building. His action drew retaliatory fire that allowed cruisers to locate and shell sniper positions, thus protecting the men on shore. McCloy was shot in the thigh but remained at his post for 48 hours until the brigade surgeon sent him to a hospital ship. His medal citation credited him with “distinguished conduct in battle and extraordinary heroism.”

Described by one naval historian as “an almost legendary figure” by the time of the Veracruz incident, McCloy continued to live up to his reputation for bravery. In 1919, now a lieutenant, he was awarded the Navy Cross for “distinguished service” as commander of *USS Curlew*, which engaged in the “difficult and hazardous duty” of sweeping mines in the North Sea in the aftermath of World War I.

McCloy retired from active duty in 1928 after a 30-year career in the Navy and “a lifetime of service on all the seven seas,” as the *Kansas City Star* put it. His service record notes that in 1942 he was advanced on the retired list to lieutenant commander after being “specially commended by the Secretary of the Navy for performance of duty in actual combat.” McCloy died in 1945. In 1963, the Navy commissioned a destroyer escort named in his honor, the *USS McCloy* (DE-1038).



Doris Miller

The first black American hero of World War II, Miller became an inspiration to generations of Americans for his actions at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

Miller was born into a family of sharecroppers and raised near Waco, TX. Imposing in stature, he played football in high school and later showed skills as a heavyweight boxer. In 1939, at 19, Miller enlisted in the Navy as a mess attendant, the only job rating open to Blacks at the time.

Miller was serving aboard the battleship *West Virginia* when the Japanese attacked while it was moored at Pearl Harbor. When damage to the ship prevented him from reaching his regular battle station, Miller helped with efforts to rescue his shipmates, scores of whom were wounded or trapped in wreckage. He was later ordered to the bridge to assist in moving the ship's captain, who had been mortally wounded.

After helping carry the captain to a more sheltered area, Miller took over an unattended 50-caliber machine gun nearby. Though never trained in its operation, he maintained fire on Japanese aircraft until ordered to abandon the bridge as fires raged out of control.

After the attack, *West Virginia's* senior surviving officer wrote in his report that Miller's contributions as a rescuer were crucial, "unquestionably saving the lives of a number of people who might otherwise have been lost." Thanks to press coverage and the tremendous interest of the Black community, Miller (who was often referred to as "Dorie" in press accounts), became, arguably, the best known enlisted sailor of World War II.

On May 27, 1942, Miller was awarded the Navy Cross "for distinguished devotion to duty, extraordinary courage and disregard for his own personal safety during the attack on the Fleet in Pearl Harbor." While presenting the award, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the Pacific fleet, commented: "This marks the first time in this conflict that such high tribute has 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."

After serving aboard the *Indianapolis* for nearly a year, Miller took overdue leave and made public appearances in California, Texas and Illinois before being advanced in June 1943 to the rating of officer's cook, third class, and assigned to the new escort aircraft carrier *Liscome Bay*. On Nov. 24, 1943, he was killed in action along with more than 600 shipmates when a Japanese submarine torpedoed and sank *Liscome Bay* during Operation Galvanic, the invasion of the Gilbert Islands. His body was lost at sea.

Miller received numerous posthumous honors. A destroyer escort, *USS Miller* (DE-1091), commissioned in 1973, was named for him. A number of elementary schools across the country have been named after Miller. A school, park, cemetery, and YMCA branch in Waco, TX, bear his name.

Although he was only the first of a number of African Americans to be recognized for their heroism in World War II, Miller is singularly remembered for providing inspiration to a campaign for equal recognition and opportunity for Blacks in the military, a campaign that bore fruit in 1948 when President Truman ordered "that there shall be equality and opportunity for all persons in the armed forces."

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