

NEWS

# A Congressman's Life-Long Fight to Bring Racial Justice to the US Military Awards of the Medal of Honor



By Faton Tony Bislimi, PhD  
 Nationwide — November 11 was Veterans Day in the United States. There is no higher award or honor that military heroes can receive than the Medal of Honor. Yet, it is striking that until April 24, 1991, out of a total of 3,417 Medals of Honor awarded to American service members, only 77 were given to African Americans, but none of these were given to African Americans who had served in World Wars I and II. This dire statistic changed on April 24, 1991, when the first Medal of Honor was bestowed, posthumously, upon a black American hero of World War I, Sgt. Freddie Stowers of South Carolina, who heroically sacrificed his life in France on September 28, 1918, at the age of 21. At that White House ceremony in 1991, President George H. W. Bush praised the heroism of Sgt. Stowers and twice thanked former Congressman Joe DioGuardi of New York for his efforts to make it happen.

Apparently, President Bush knew of DioGuardi's tireless efforts to bring justice to the U.S. military by fighting relentlessly to right a historical wrong. Soon after he became a Congressman (the first-ever Certified Public Accountant elected to Congress in 1984), DioGuardi took on the fight of making sure that deserving African American heroes of World Wars I and II were given the Medals of Honor they had earned by showing acts of heroism that went well beyond the call of duty.

It was in the spring of 1987 that then-Congressman DioGuardi was approached by an African American historian, Dr. Leroy Ramsey in Mt. Vernon, New York, to seek his support in obtaining a well-deserved, but never awarded, Medal of Honor for Sgt. Henry Johnson of Albany, New York. Johnson, who served in World War I, had won France's highest military award, the Croix de Guerre with a Palm Leaf inscribed. When Dr. Ramsey informed DioGuardi of the fact that no African American soldier from World Wars I and II had ever been awarded the Medal of Honor, it became clear to the Congressman that there was only one way forward: justice had to be served, albeit belatedly.

DioGuardi, a junior Republican Congressman, immediately sought the support of then-Congressman Mickey Leland of Houston, Texas, a Democrat and Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. Leland responded favorably and asked that DioGuardi support his fight to get the Medal of Honor for his childhood hero, Seaman Dorie Miller of Waco, Texas. Jointly, on October 21, 1987, they introduced legislation "to correct a gross inequity that exists in the history of the Medal of Honor. Out of a total of 1.5 million blacks who served in World Wars I and II, not one received the Medal of Honor..." This was best exemplified by the cases of Sgt. Henry Johnson of Albany, New York, and Seaman Dorie Miller of Waco, Texas. Miller fought heroical-

ly during the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. By June 1988, DioGuardi and Leland had collected well over 100 signatures from other Members of Congress and addressed a letter to then-Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci urging him to "fix this oversight."

Seeing increasing support among Members of Congress for DioGuardi and Leland's legislation, Secretary Carlucci agreed to meet with them. As a result of this contentious meeting, Carlucci agreed that the Department of Defense would provide a grant to an independent historically black university to do the research on those African American heroes who were "overlooked" during World Wars I and II and never received the Medal of Honor. Unfortunately, in the summer of 1989, Mickey Leland died on a tragic plane crash delivering humanitarian aid to Ethiopia with a congressional delegation.

Nevertheless, in honor of his good friend and congressional colleague, Mickey Leland, DioGuardi continued the fight to correct the injustice to both Sgt. Johnson and Seaman Miller.

As a result of the research done by Shaw University, another seven African American heroes of World War II were awarded the Medal of Honor by President Clinton in 1997. However, the Department of Defense grant, to the disappointment of DioGuardi, was used to research cases in the Army alone and also only during World War II. Consequently, Sgt. Henry Johnson and Seaman Dorie Miller's cases remained dormant, but not for DioGuardi.

Ever since he started this uneasy and very complex battle, DioGuardi continuously spoke up about the need for America to right this wrong. He used the examples of Sgt. Johnson and Seaman Miller to educate the American public on the importance of correcting an egregious injustice in our nation's racist history. And, it was not until June 2, 2015, that DioGuardi's work came to fruition, at least partially, when President Barack Obama awarded the Medal of Honor to Sgt. Henry Johnson at a White House ceremony to which DioGuardi was invited.

But, for him, the work was not done. Not yet, at least. DioGuardi focused all his time and energy on Dorie Miller. He spoke at numerous events organized by veteran associations, the US Association of Former Members of Congress, and others, about this very unique history of how two congressmen—one Republican and one Democrat, one white and one black, one from the north and one from the south—had

joined together to remove a blatant stain from the US military history and to ensure that justice prevailed.

DioGuardi has brought the case of Dorie Miller before three presidents in the past — George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. And, on the day that President Biden was inaugurated, DioGuardi travelled to DC to participate in Biden's inauguration and to personally hand in a letter about Dorie Miller to President Biden's Chief of Staff. Most recently, DioGuardi became a co-chairman of the National Committee for Dorie Miller's Medal of Honor and believes strongly that in 2022 Miller will finally be awarded the honor he rightly earned on that horrific "day of infamy" at Pearl Harbor.

It takes courage and commitment, deeply rooted beliefs in justice and heartfelt passion for human rights, to do what former Congressman Joseph J. DioGuardi has done for African American war heroes. Moreover, it takes perseverance. Therefore, on this Veterans Day, it is only befitting that Americans in general and African Americans, in particular, learn about this unique story of an unbreakable and passionate warrior for racial justice in the US military. Dedicating your life to honoring those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of America is an honor in and of itself. Joe DioGuardi symbolizes this in the best possible way as a true American patriot.



**POWER 101** THE HARVARD REPORT, SOUL MUSIC AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

DR. LOGAN H. WESTBROOKS

SCHUYLER "SKY" TRAUGHBER

**POWER 101**

THE HARVARD REPORT, SOUL MUSIC AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

written by Dr. Logan H. Westbrook and Schuyler "Sky" Traughber

ASCENT

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In 1972 CBS Records commissioned Harvard Business School and CBS Black Music Marketing Director, Logan Westbrook, to develop and for CBS to implement, a "Study of the Soul Music Environment." It was intended to be a simple, productive "blueprint" for Soul music. The result was CBS Records receiving decades of praise for its contributions to an era of strong music, along with employment in positions previously denied to Blacks in the music industry, all the way to astonishing charges of corporate collusion, racism, payoffs, and greed for the enrichment of White corporate America at the expense of powerful, Black-owned, self-distributed record labels like Stax and Motown. Dr. Westbrook and Schuyler "Sky" Traughber take us on an historical music business roller coaster ride of personal and public domain stories. It covers decades of controversial revelations of how "The Harvard Report" may or may not have lived up to its reputation of being both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—the Savior and the Demon—of what Black Music became during this tumultuous period culminating in the uncertain state of Black Music today. Questions...did CBS Records set the wheels in motion for the demise of smaller Black-owned record labels? Or was it an inevitability? POWER 101 offers answers and food for thought.

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