



## A Room Full of Heroes

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were utterly outclassed by everyone in the room? I have. As large and healthy as my ego is, life has conspired to put me in that very position on more than one occasion. It happened to me again a few weeks ago. I probably don't need to tell you that it was a humbling experience.

Several months ago, I wrote a column about Lanier Phillips, the first African American Sonar Technician in the U.S. Navy. In the process of doing my research, I had the opportunity to do a phone interview with Lanier. The story of that man's life is nothing short of incredible. When Lanier enlisted in 1941, the Navy was still segregated by race. The only rating open to African American Sailors was Messman or Steward's Mate. Messmen were little more than servants. They cleaned, shined the shoes of the officers, and generally did any job considered too menial for white Sailors.

Lanier set his sights on becoming a technician. That decision put him squarely at odds with Navy policy, and the climate of race relations at that point in history. In the minds of many people, Lanier's ambitions were a violation of the natural order of things. *White* Sailors performed the technical jobs, and *Black* Sailors scrubbed decks and toilets. Lanier wasn't willing to settle for that. Despite a seemingly-endless stream of obstacles and the threats of his fellow Sailors, he achieved his goal and went on to prove that an African American man could excel in a technical rating. In the process of pursuing his own dreams, he opened the door for every minority Sailor that came after.

Lanier and I have stayed in contact since the interview. We're both old retired Sonar Technicians, and we share a love of the sea, and of our country. We've talked on the phone many times, and exchanged a few favorite books and videos, but we didn't get an opportunity to meet in person until he flew out to San Diego for the 2005 reunion of Units K-West and B-East.

Don't be discouraged if you're not familiar with K-West and B-East. I'd never heard of them until the night I interviewed Lanier.

### About Jeff Edwards:



Jeff Edwards is a retired U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer, a Naval Warfare Specialist, and an award-winning novelist. He is currently working as a civilian expert consultant to the Naval Mine and Anti-Submarine Warfare Command, the Navy's think tank for high-tech undersea warfare.

His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

His first novel, *[TORPEDO](#)* won the 2005 Admiral Nimitz Award for Outstanding Naval Fiction, and the 2005 American Author Medal.

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In the nineteen-thirties and forties, African American Sailors and Sailors of Asian-Pacific Island heritage received their training at Navy Mess Attendant School (KV-16), in Norfolk, Virginia. From 1933 to 1942, the Sailors attending the school were housed in barracks designated as Units K-West and B-East. In 1942, Navy Mess Attendant School moved to Unit 'X,' located in Bainbridge, Maryland. By that time, the Navy had dropped the formal race restriction policy, and re-opened all ratings to all qualified personnel. In theory, the door of opportunity had been thrown open for Sailors of every race. In reality, very little had changed. A policy roadblock had been removed, but the institutional racism at the heart of Navy culture hadn't budged an inch.

Fast-forward forty years... The Navy I joined in 1981 was a lot different than the one Lanier Phillips had joined almost exactly four decades earlier. My very first Work Center Supervisor was an African American Sonar Technician with one of the sharpest tactical and technical minds I've ever encountered. He ruled the dozen or so men in our work center with the proverbial iron hand. When he gave orders, people jumped, partly because he was in charge, but mostly because he was smarter than the rest of us and we knew it. I don't believe any of us ever thought it was strange to be working for a black man. I know I certainly didn't. He was senior, he was experienced, and it seemed like the natural order of things. It wasn't until I started talking to Lanier that I began to gain any real appreciation for how different the so-called 'natural order' had been a few decades before.

When I heard that Lanier was planning to come to San Diego for the reunion of K-West and B-East, I made plans to meet him. I knew he'd be busy with the reunion, but I was fairly sure that I could tear him away from his old shipmates long enough to sit down for a cup of coffee and a chat. At the very least, I would get a chance to see him face to face, and shake his hand. As it turned out, I didn't have to resort to any drastic measures. Although we had never been members of the Mess Attendant rating, my wife and I received invitations to the reunion.

Lanier was scheduled to be the keynote speaker, and we heard rumors that I might be asked to speak as well. Just to be safe, I organized a few ideas that I could whip into a short speech without too much work. I was planning to talk about Lanier. How could I go wrong? He's a fascinating man, and his life experiences are the stuff of legend. I couldn't ask for a better topic.

The reunion was held in the banquet hall of a downtown hotel. My wife and I were met at the door by James Lee, National President of the Units K-West and B-East Reunion Booster Club. He led us to the head table, where I was delighted to see that my place card had me seated right next to Lanier.

Within seconds of entering the room, I realized that I was underdressed. I've been to several reunions in California, and they're nearly always casual attire. But everyone in the room was dressed to the nines. Everyone except me, that is. My wife's flouncy silk blouse and black slacks were quite up to the occasion. My polo shirt was well shy of the dress code.

No one seemed to notice, but I was understandably self-conscious right up until I spotted Lanier. Although it was the first time I'd ever actually laid eyes on the man, it was like running into an old friend. Before I knew it, we were gabbing away, largely oblivious to the other people in the room.



Part way through dinner, Lanier reminded me that I was expected to say a few words. I nodded, and told him I was prepared. And I was, or so I thought. But then something happened. I began listening to some of the conversations from the surrounding tables. I didn't really intend to eavesdrop, but storytelling is part of the reunion experience, and old Sailors can tell some pretty wild stories.

At first I was only half-listening. It's pretty difficult not to give Lanier Phillips your undivided attention. But I had never heard stories like these before: tales of the old segregated Navy, from men who had served from the wrong side of the color barrier. Or rather, I *had* heard such stories, but only from Lanier.

As I listened to story after story of racism and degradation, I was surprised by how little anger came through in the voices of those men. *I* was angry just listening to much of it. The men of K-West and B-East had *lived* those stories, but their predominant emotion seemed to be *pride*. They were proud of their strength and endurance. They were proud of their service, given in time of war to a country that showed little or no appreciation. They were proud of their sacrifices, and of the blood they had shed in defense of freedoms that they had rarely been allowed to taste. And I believe that each of those men was proud of the role he had played in transforming the culture of a military, and an entire nation.

When I was called to the podium to speak, I had no idea what to say. Perhaps half of the people in the room were ladies: wives - daughters - grand daughters. Even so, I was surrounded by dozens of men who had overcome challenges beyond the scope of my experience and imagination. I had come to meet and honor a remarkable man. But I was sitting in a room *full* of remarkable men. I was so utterly humbled that I almost couldn't speak.

Looking back, I don't really recall what I said. I remember making a joke about being underdressed, but beyond that, I have no idea what words came out of my mouth. I'm not at all certain that I brought anything of value to the men and families of K-West and B-East. All I know for certain is that I came away a little wiser.

As a career Sailor and a lover of military lore, I should have known all about Units K-West and B-East, but I can't recall seeing them mentioned in any history book I ever read. Members of the Steward/Mess Attendant rating fought in virtually every major naval engagement of World War II. More than 1,100 Messmen were killed, and thousands more were wounded in the line of duty. Only Doris (Dorie) Miller, Leonard Harmon, and William Pinckney made it into the pages of history. The others have either been ignored or overlooked by most naval historians. Consequently, the contributions of the Stewards and Messmen are neither as well known, or as well documented as they should be.

Retired Navy Chief Hospital Corpsman Richard E. Miller is working to change that. His book, 'The Messman Chronicles: African Americans in the U.S. Navy, 1932-1943,' is an excellent first step in preserving the extraordinary accomplishments of a group of men who responded to discrimination with heroism. I met Richard at the reunion that night. Although he is an African American Sailor himself, I could see that he was also awed by the collective experiences of the men in that room.



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The View From the Deck Plate...

An old maxim tells us that we cannot know where we are going if we don't know where we've been. After crossing paths with the alumni of K-West and B-East, I'd like to offer a corollary to that thought. We cannot know who we *are* until we understand who we *were*.

I urge you to find out everything you can about these exceptional men. Their stories deserve to be heard. If you can, track down the nearest chapter of the K-West and B-East and make contact. Talk to these men. Listen to them. Honor them. But be prepared for the impact they're going to have on your mind and your heart. It's impossible to stand in a room full of heroes and not be changed by the experience.

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