

The Navy's Short List of Civil Rights Leaders

When Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus announced that a naval vessel currently under construction would be named for “gay rights” activist Harvey Milk, few were surprised.

The Navy had been under immense pressure to name one of its ships for a prominent LGBT figure the moment the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was rescinded. What was surprising was the relatively shallow list of names the Navy’s top civilian leader put together for other ships in the same class.

The *John Lewis*-class of underway replenishment oilers are not front-line fighting ships, but were set to be named after an assortment of American civil rights leaders. U.S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) for whom the first ship in the line is named was one of the leaders of the 1963 March on Washington.

Milk, a former Navy Lieutenant (junior grade) who served during the Korean War, will be the namesake of the second ship in the new line. Four other oilers have been slated for construction, and their namesakes were recently announced, as well:

- *USNS Earl Warren* – named for the former Supreme Court Chief Justice whose court determined the segregation of public schools was unconstitutional.
- *USNS Robert F. Kennedy* – named for the former U.S. Attorney General who was a chief proponent of the 1960s civil rights movement.
- *USNS Lucy Stone* – named for one of the nation’s first feminists who spoke out both against slavery and in support of women’s suffrage.
- *USNS Sojourner Truth* – named for the famed abolitionist

who helped recruit black soldiers for the Union Army during the Civil War.

Milk was born into a family that had served in the Navy, and was commissioned into the service himself in 1951. He was a diving officer aboard the submarine rescue ship *USS Kittiwake* until he sought his honorable discharge in 1955.

Following his service, Milk was elected to the San Francisco County Board of Supervisors and was the first openly gay California politician to be elected to office.

Other “civil rights leaders” who have had naval ships named after them include Medgar Evers, an actual civil rights leader who worked to integrate the University of Mississippi, and Cesar Chavez, a pro-union activist who fought for better pay and working conditions for migrant farm workers.