

Seaman 2nd Class Charles L. "Sonny Boy" Saunders October 16, 1923 - December 7, 1941



## TEXAS BOY K.I.A AT PEARL HARBOR TO FINALLY REST IN TEXAS SOIL

By Marie Hughes

Navy Seaman 2ndClass Charles Louis 'Sonny Boy' Saunders

Almost 80 years after the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced Oct. 8, 2021, that Navy Seaman 2nd Class Charles L. Saunders, (referred to in this article as 'Sonny Boy') 18, of Winnie, Texas, killed during World War II, was

accounted for Feb. 11. The following is his story. I want to thank the Saunders family and their family friend and historian, George Solleder for providing me with the intimate details, information, and photos. I also would like to thank Gene Hughes, Public Affairs Specialist with the US Navy for providing me with some of the statistical information.

Born on Texas Soil

Sonny Boy was born in Texas on October 16, 1923, to Mortimer Alvin and Melina Falke Saunders. He was the sixth child born to them and one of four boys. His oldest brother, Adam, born about 1911, died at only 13 months of age. The eldest living cousin of the Saunders family said she remembers hearing that her grandmother did not know she was pregnant with Adam, and he was born prematurely. She remembers her feeding him with an eyedropper, but no one knows the actual cause of his death.

Sonny Boy's older siblings were Lillie May (Franklin), 1912–1992; Sidney 'Buddy' Edward, 1913–1965; Mary Alice Frankland), 1915– 1986; and Sadie Lee (Dailey), 1917–2006. His younger siblings were Anna Belle (Von Feldt), 1927–2019 and Mortimer Virgil, 1931–1978.

## A Caring Heart

Times were often difficult in the Saunders' household where Sonny Boy grew up. His dad, Mortimer worked in construction and the rice fields to support his and Melina's large family, while Melina tended to the children and the day-to-day chores in the home. With so many mouths to feed on a laborer's salary there was rarely enough for even the simplest of comforts, especially during the "Dirty Thirties" of the Great Depression.

When the Depression began Sonny Boy was only 6-years-old, and his little sister Anna Belle was two. Anna Belle told the family that her brother, Sonny Boy had such a kind and caring heart he could not bear to see his little sister struggle in any way. He would do without so she could have shoes to make the daily walk to school (note the shoe-clad Anna Belle and the bare-footed Sonny Boy in the photo on the right.) His gift of service and compassionate nature probably played a major role in his decision to eventually enlist in the Navy.

## Sonny Boy ~ 7th Grade ~ 1938-39

Sonny Boy, despite the hardships of the time, enjoyed the typical life of a high school boy in the late thirties. George Solleder researched the high school albums and back issues of the weekly newspaper, The Progress, and discovered that during the 1938–39 school year in the Chambers County area there were 20 parties, dances, plays, outings, etc., not including sporting events. There were also dances and house parties given by parents throughout the year. They were blessed to be living in Southeast Texas, where, although, working hours may have been reduced, most still had a job. The area was sustained by their booming industries of oil, shipbuilding, timber, ranching, rich farmlands, and much more. President Roosevelt's "New Deal" employment programs helped as well. Most of the teenagers, including Jimmie Saunders (son of Henry), Ellison Hebert (son of Lucien and Eva), and Charles Saunders (son of Mortimer and Melina), worked summers on the Highway 65 project linking Winnie–Stowell to Anahuac, the county seat. Most of the United States lacking the diverse industry enjoyed by Southeast Texas, suffered much more hardship during the Depression years.

A Double Edged Sword

Looming on the horizon in 1939 was the answer to recovery from the Great Depression, but it was a double-edged sword. The Second World War brought life back to our nation's economy but death to many a household as our young men and women heeded the call to duty.

The boys of the Saunders family would be among those young men who would be compelled to enter the military. At the time the draft had not been instituted for those under 21, but they knew it was coming and the first military branch the draftees would be assigned to was the Army. Jimmie's father and uncle had fought in France during WW I and had probably shared how tough Army life was; the Navy seemed like the best choice. Not only would the living conditions be better, but they would also take you at 17-years of age. The Navy was only taking the cream of the crop and in the beginning required the enlistees to sign up for a 6-year tour of duty. The handwriting on the wall was clear, sign up as soon as possible or risk not getting in the Navy.

James H. E. 'Jimmie' Saunders, only child of Henry A. Saunders of Stowell, joined on September 14, 1940, along with his best friend Ellison Hebert, also of Stowell. Two weeks later, Jimmie's 18-yearold first cousin, Louis Leo Falke also joined the Navy. Louis's younger brother, Lee Roy 'Sonny' Falke joined the Army in 1941.

When Jimmie and Ellison enlisted in the Navy Sonny Boy and Ellison's brother, Emmett wanted to enlist with them, but Charles was one month shy of his 17thbirthday and 17 was the youngest age the Navy would except at that time.

Sonny Boy and Emmett wanted to enlist together, so, on Saturday, November 23, 1940, they traveled to Houston and enlisted in the 3

Navy. (Charles' older brother, Sidney Edward 'Buddy' Saunders, would enter the Army in August 1941.)

Two days earlier on November 21, 1940, Sonny Boy enjoyed the Thanksgiving festivities at his family home in Stowell, Texas. Little did they know at that time that it would be the last time they would share a holiday meal with him. When they bid him goodbye, on the 23rd, they were unaware that they would never hear his sweet voice and infectious laugh again or see his tender smile, for as far as anyone knows, this was the last time they would see Sonny Boy this side of eternity.

As Sonny Boy's mother tenderly looked into the eyes of her son, just barely 17-years-old and gently kissed his cheek as she bid him goodbye did a wave of sadness wash over her, did she want to hold him tightly to her breast to prevent his leaving, did her heart know?

After completion of boot camp, Charles was assigned to the USS Oklahoma (BB-37), a Nevada-class battleship, joining her on January 26, 1941, as a Seaman Apprentice. At the time Charles joined her she was assigned to Battleship Division One of the Pacific Battle Fleet and was captained by Captain Edward J. Foy. The ship was nicknamed "Okie" by her 1,400 member crew, her motto was "For the Good of the Service."

Charles had advanced in rate to Seaman 2ndclass by the time the Oklahoma sailed to the Puget Sound Navy yard for an upgrade to her anti-aircraft gun battery.

March 1941 ~ Oklahoma returns to Pearl Harbor to participate in fleet exercises.

August 1941 ~ Oklahoma sails from Pearl Harbor towards San Pedro, CA. ~ encounters massive storm ~ One crew member washed overboard and lost ~ Oklahoma's starboard propeller shaft damaged ~ Oklahoma diverted to Mare Island repair facilities in San Francisco Bay. October 1941 ~ Oklahoma returns to Pearl Harbor.

October 22, 1941 ~ Oklahoma on maneuvers with battleships Arizona and Nevada southwest of Oahu as a member of the newly organized Task Force II ~ stormy weather, low visibility at sunset ~ Arizona crossed Oklahoma's bow ~ Oklahoma attempts to avoid impact, the two battleships collide ~ Oklahoma's bow slices V-shaped hole in Arizona's port-side torpedo blister ~ ships returned to Pearl Harbor.

November 1, 1941 ~ Captain Foy relieved of command and replaced by Captain Howard D. Bode ~ a week later Captain Bode narrowly avoided a collision with the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise.

November 30, 1941 ~ Oklahoma departed Pearl Harbor to rendezvous with the Nevada and Arizona southwest of Oahu.

December 1, 1941 ~ At night, lookouts spotted submarine where no American submarine was scheduled.

December 5, 1941 ~ Morning, returning to harbor the battleships crossed paths with the Lexington Task Force departing to reinforce Midway Island, Charles' cousin Jimmie was aboard the destroyer Porter escorting the fleet. It would be the last time they encountered each other in this life. ~ battleships moored with bows pointing towards channel leading to open sea in response to possibility of rapid departure.

December 5, 1941 ~ Upon arrival crew members began working immediately to prepare Oklahoma for Dec. 8th material inspection, requiring high level of scrutiny ~ ready-ammunition removed from gun stations and stored in magazines deep in the ship ~ all bulkhead doors and hatches were opened ~ manhole covers on the torpedo blisters were removed. ~ all preparations left the Oklahoma as defenseless as possible for a battleship. ~ Captain Bode denies the gunnery officer's request to keep some of the ships AA guns manned.

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December 7, 1941 ~ 07:55 – Oklahoma's band assembled on fantail as the blue and white "prep" flag was raised signaling the "Stars and Stripes" would be raised in 5 minutes ~ prep flag hits top of flagstaff ~ Nine Japanese "Val" dive bombers sweep in from the North, bank right and drop bombs on seaplane hangar at southern tip of Ford Island.

## "AIR RAID, PEARL HARBOR, THIS IS NOT A DRILL!"

Within Minutes ~ Sixteen "Kate" torpedo bombers sailed in from the west sinking several ships ~ a wave of torpedo bombers appeared from the southeast approaching "Battleship Row" ~ two torpedoes hit the Oklahoma within seconds of each other between the smokestack and mainmast abt. 20 feet below the water line ~ could not defend herself as ammunition was stored in the magazines.

o8:00 ~ Third torpedo hit amidships penetrating the main hull before exploding, destroying the watertight compartments ~ began to list to port, secured to the Maryland the Maryland crew cut mooring ropes lest they be pulled under.

Abt. o8:o2 ~ Fourth torpedo hit Oklahoma, then a fifth ~ she began to roll shearing the last rope hawsers holding her to the Maryland.

 $08:08 \sim$  The Oklahoma has capsized ~ at least three more torpedoes hit the Oklahoma now laying over at  $90^{\circ}$  ~ she rolled over almost upside down with most of her crew trapped inside. Rescue efforts began even before the Japanese attack ended. 09:00 December 11, 1941 ~ Rescue efforts of Oklahoma crew deemed futile were ended.

There were 32 crewmen saved and 429 missing or killed on the Oklahoma, Sonny Boy, just two months past his 18th birthday, was among those unaccounted for. Sonny Boy's cousin, Jimmie, aboard the USS Porter returning to Pearl Harbor on December 13th, sailed past "Battleship Row" and saw the capsized hull of the Oklahoma. They had not been given the details of the demise of the Oklahoma for security reasons, but he had a bad feeling. He was soon to learn that his cousin, Charles 'Sonny Boy', who enlisted because of him, was among the missing.

On December 21, 1941, the Navy informed Sonny Boy's parents, Mortimer and Melina that their son was missing and presumed dead. Although, the news was probably expected no one is truly ever prepared to receive it. What anguish must have flooded their hearts as the thread of hope they had been clinging to slipped away.

In the weeks after the attack the Oklahoma remained in Pearl Harbor resting in 40-feet of water and leaning 151 degrees to port. The project to recover her and the crew entombed within her belly began on, July 12, 1942. It would not be until mid-October of that year that the remains of the crew would be found. An overwhelming sense of somber reverence must have enveloped the recovery crew as the watery tomb was opened.

More than 400 sailors and marines had sought refuge beneath the second deck that morning of December 7th, seeking the protection of the heavy armor. The preservation of their remains was as important as their recovery. The utmost care was given to marking and preserving the remains and they were reverently escorted out while a Marine Honor Guard stood at attention. To date only 48 recovered bodies, remain unidentified and 13 of the crew remain unaccounted for.

Sonny Boy's service and death are memorialized in several locations. His name is on the Walls of the Missing at the Punchbowl

where a rosette will be placed next to his name to indicate he has been identified.

The USS Oklahoma Memorial, dedicated on December 7, 2007, on Ford Island in Pearl Harbor is next to the former birth of the USS Oklahoma. The memorial's black granite walls suggest the once formidable hull of the ship. Each member has a white marble standard engraved with their name that symbolizes an individual in pristine white dress uniform, inspired from the naval tradition of "manning the rails". A granite wall listing the crew on the USS Oklahoma and an anchor from the ship are displayed in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma as a tribute to those who perished when the ship capsized

The Navy presented Sonny Boy's parents with the medals awarded him posthumously for his heroic service to his country. He received a Purple Heart Medal, Combat Action Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, American Defense Service Medal (with Fleet Clasp), Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal (with Bronze Star), World War II Victory Medal, and American Campaign Medal.

My heart weeps as I envision the scene of them receiving these tributes of valor and service. As his mother held the cold hard medals in her hand was she reminded of the sharp contrast they were to the warm embrace of her son as she bid him goodbye? As her tears spilled and washed over them did a fleeting image of his saltwater baptism in the hull of the Oklahoma fill her heart with despair? She gently placed them in a little box and hid them away in her sewing machine drawer and systematically tucked the memory of that awful day in the recesses of her mind.

Did she retrieve either over the years and relive the tragedy? No one knows, they would not find the hidden treasure until after her death in 1974. She died never knowing the whereabouts of her precious boy. As tragic as the death of her first-born child was in 1912, she at least knew where he was, but Sonny Boy was a loss she would carry to her grave.

Sonny Boy's father, Mortimer prepared a burial place for his

boy at the Fairview Cemetery in Winnie in hopes that he would eventually be brought home. He ordered his memorial headstone on September 30, 1964. Up to her dying day, July 19, 2019, Anna Belle, Sonny Boy's sister, never gave up hope that her brother would be found and returned to Texas; she even advocated in her obituary that the search would continue by those who survived her.

In 2015, Neica Franklin Bertrand, a niece of Sonny Boy's, was contacted by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA). They had tracked her down through the death record of her mother, Lillie Mae Saunders Franklin. In 2015 the DPAA was given authorization to exhume the unknown remains of the servicemen associated with the USS Oklahoma and reexamine them using advance forensic technology. Her aunt Anna Belle had worked tirelessly to provide the Navy with DNA of family members to make a positive identity of Sonny Boy's remains. On February 11, 2021, the long-awaited news of the positive identification of his remains reached his family.

On December 2, 2021, Sonny Boy's journey home will be realized at long last. His plane will touch down in Houston, Texas where he will be received with the reverence he so rightly deserves, then a motorcade joined by the Patriot Riders, will escort him to his beloved Winnie, Texas. Seaman 2nd Class Charles L. 'Sonny Boy' Saunders will be laid to rest on Tuesday, December 7th, in Winnie's Fairview Cemetery. The burial place prepared for him so many years ago by his father, Mortimer, will lovingly open its arms to embrace him and he will finally rest beneath the Texas soil. This Texas hero will finally be HOME!

Let us not forget the many brave souls who did not return home from war. Among them was Apprentice Seaman, Sidney Melvin Saunders, first cousin of Sonny Boy, and only son of Benjamin and Myrtle Saunders of Silsbee, TX. He was only 16 when cousins Jimmie and Charles entered the Navy in 1940, and just barely 18 when motivated to join the Navy after hearing the news of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.

On February 15, 1942, he was assigned to the destroyer USS Sims 9

(DD-409). While in Hawaii he saw the overturned battleship Oklahoma and knew he was viewing the tomb of his cousin, Sonny Boy.

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the USS Sims and Destroyer Squadron-2 became part of Task Force-17, formed around the carrier Yorktown (CV-5) at Norfolk, Virginia.

In the Coral Sea on May 7, 1942, while protecting the fleet tanker, USS Neosho (AO-23), the refueling ship for the task force, the Sims and the Neosho were spotted by a Japanese scout plane. The pilot mistook the Sims for a cruiser and the Neosho for an aircraft carrier. The Japanese launched an all-out attack on them and by the third pass the Sims was hit by three-500-pound bombs. She was blown 15-feet out of the water. Fifteen of her crew were rescued, but 237 crew members went down with the ship in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Sidney Melvin Saunders was one of the crew who died that day, and his body has never been recovered. (Information provided by George Solleder.)

The following is a list of the Texas crewmembers whose bodies have been identified from the USS Oklahoma.

Coxswain Layton T Banks of Dallas PVT Waldean Black (USMC Detachment), Perrvton Fireman 3rd Class Clarence Arvin Blavlock, Fort Worth Seaman 2nd Class David Clark, Trinidad Seaman 1st Class George A. Coke, Arlington Seaman 2nd Class William Ed Henson, Brownsfield Fireman 1sr Class Albert U Kane, Fort Worth PVT Vernon Paul 'Buck' Keaton (Marine Detachment), Lubbock Fireman 1st Class James McDonald of Levelland Seaman 1st Class Hale McKissack, Talpa Fireman 1st Class Dan Reagan of Haslen Fireman 3rd Class Jasper L Pue, San Antonio Seaman 2nd Class Charles L Saunders Seaman 1st Class James C Solomon, Forestburg Seaman 2nd Class Richard J Thomson, League City Fire Controlman 3rd Class Victor P Tumlinson, Raymondville Fireman 1st Class Lawrence E Woods and his brother, Machinist's Mate 1st Class Winfred O Woods, of Greenwood who remains unidentified.



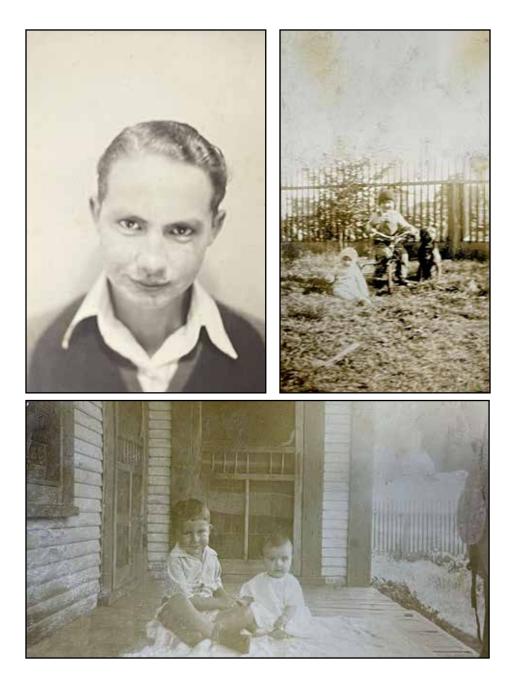






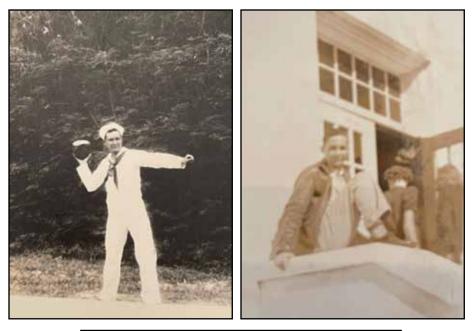














**Graveside Service** Tuesday, December 7, 2021 10:30 a.m. Fairview Cemetery Winnie, Texas Lieutenant Commander LCDR Alexandria Geovanni, CHC, USN

> Military Honors United States Navy

Broussards

Please sign Mr. Saunders' guest book and share your memories at www.broussards1889.com