



BIOGRAPHY



UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

MAJOR GENERAL RALPH S. SAUNDERS

Retired Oct. 1, 1979. Died Dec. 6, 2002.

Major General Ralph S. Saunders is commander of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, with headquarters at Scott Air Force Base, Ill. He is responsible to the commander in chief, Military Airlift Command for the operational control of Rescue and Recovery Service and Aerial Weather Reconnaissance Forces located throughout the free world, providing for joint rescue coordination centers operated by component commanders and operation of the Air Force consolidated transition and combat crew helicopter school. His assets for mission accomplishment are more than 215 aircraft in 65 different locations in support of operational forces.



General Saunders was born in Roanoke, Va., in 1922, where he graduated from Jefferson High School in 1939. He attended the University of Maryland, completed the Air Command and Staff College course in 1959, and graduated from the National War College in 1967. He enlisted in the Virginia National Guard in October 1939 and was ordered to active duty in September 1940 with the Coast Artillery at Fort Story, Va. In June 1942, General Saunders transferred to the Army Air Corps at Langley Field, Va. He completed aviation cadet training in November 1943, and was assigned as a B-24 flight officer to the 491st Bombardment Group, Norwich, England, from where he flew 35 combat missions in the B-24. In August 1944, during his combat tour in England, he was commissioned a second lieutenant.

General Saunders was a T-6 instructor pilot at Aloe, Foster and Perrin fields, Texas, from January 1945 to August 1946, and then entered the Transportation Corps at Fort Eustis, Va. In March 1947, General Saunders was transferred to Japan and assigned to the Transportation Corps at the Port of Yokohama. In July 1948 he returned to the Air Force and become adjutant of the 528th Aircraft Control and Warning Group at Shiroy, Japan.

General Saunders returned to the United States in November 1949 and joined the 37th Troop Carrier Squadron at Sewart Air Force Base, Tenn. In August 1950, while assigned at Sewart, General Saunders went on temporary duty to Japan and flew 70 combat transport missions in C-119 aircraft in support of the Korean War. From January 1952 to November 1955, he served successively as assistant operations and training officer, executive officer and squadron commander in the 314th Troop Carrier Wing at Sewart.

His next assignment was to the 322d Air Division, U.S. Air Forces in Europe, to be chief, training branch. He later become director of Standardization and Training Division. He participated in the Lebanon Crisis Airlift in 1958. In July 1959 General Saunders was assigned as standardization officer for transport aircraft in a branch office of the Pentagon at Suitland, Md. In February 1960, he was transferred to the Flight Management Branch, Flight Division, Directorate of Operations, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C., as an operations staff officer.

General Saunders moved to Naha Air Base Okinawa, in August 1962 as director of combat operations, Detachment 1, 315th Air Division. In February 1964, he was named commander, 817th Troop Carrier Squadron. In August 1964, he became assistant deputy for operations, 6002d Standardization and Evaluation Group, Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, and later served as deputy commander and commander of the 6002d. During his four years in Okinawa, General Saunders flew 278 combat support missions in Southeast Asia in C-123 and C-130 aircraft.

After graduation from the National War College in August 1967, he was assigned to the 436th Military Airlift Wing, Dover Air Force Base, Del., as deputy commander for operations. While in this position, General Saunders was airlift control element commander for "Eagle Thrust," a 400 C-141 mission deployment of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division from Fort Campbell, Ky., to Bien Hoa, Republic of Vietnam. In June 1968 he became assistant deputy chief of staff for operations, Headquarters Military Airlift Command, Scott Air Force Base, Ill. In July 1970, he was named commander of the 9th Weather Reconnaissance Wing, McClellan Air Force Base, Calif. While commander of the 9th, he qualified in the B-57F at a flight altitude of more than 50,000 feet.

In May 1971 General Saunders was transferred to Travis Air Force Base, Calif., where he served as commander, 60th Military Airlift Wing until May 1973, when he became vice commander, Twenty-Second Air Force. He assumed command of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., in July 1974.

General Saunders has aided in a "combat pickup," the first time a rescue commander has done so. The "combat" was on the tactical fighter range at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., during a Red Flag exercise, but the rescue was real -- he picked up the pilot of a crashed F-100 and, in so doing, was credited with saving the pilot's life. He actively participates with his rescue crews in contingencies and exercises. Recently he flew the lead H-53 Jolly Green helicopter on a ferry flight from Loring Air Force Base, Maine, to Woodbridge Royal Air Force Station in England.

On May 6, 1977, General Saunders was inducted into the Military Airlift Command Order of the Sword. The Order of the Sword is the highest honor enlisted men can bestow. He was the twenty-second officer to receive this very coveted award.

General Saunders is a command pilot with more than 11,000 flying hours. His military decorations and awards include the Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster, Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star Medal, Air Medal with 12 oak leaf clusters, Air Force Commendation Medal with two oak leaf clusters, Army Commendation Medal with oak leaf cluster, Distinguished Unit Citation, Air Force Outstanding Unit Award with two oak leaf clusters, and the Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citation.

General Saunders was promoted to the grade of major general April 24, 1974, with date of rank July 1, 1971.

(Current as of August 1978)