

LaVerne G. "Blondie" Saunders was born in Stratford, South Dakota, on March 21, 1903. Saunders graduated from the University of South Dakota in 1924. He attended the U.S. Military Academy and was commissioned a second lieutenant, Infantry, Regular Army, on June 9, 1928. He then completed the Air Corps Primary Flying School and the Advance Flying School. In September 1930 he was assigned to the 96th Bombardment Squadron at Langley Field, Virginia. In addition to his duty at Langley, Saunders also acted as assistant football coach of the Army teams at West Point. After serving briefly as a pilot in the Army Air Mail Operations in 1934, he returned to duty as assistant football coach at West Point and remained in that capacity until May 1939 when he enrolled in the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field, Alabama. It was during his years as an All-American tackle at West Point that his coal black hair earned him the nickname "Blondie".

General Saunders began fighting as a pilot in World War II and Hickam Field in Hawaii the day Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese in 1941. At Hickam Field on December 7, 1941, Saunders, then a major commanding the 12th bombardment squadron, was one of the few to get a bomber in the air after the devastating surprise attack. In the months that followed, he fought at Midway, over the Solomon Islands, and Guadalcanal. In 1942, while doubling as combat commander and base commander of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, Saunders led his group in destroying 60 enemy planes, damaging 33 others, and seriously crippling an aircraft carrier and other vessels. In 1944 he led the first land-based air attack on Japan - the beginning of the B-29 campaign that helped pave the way to the Japanese surrender.

While leading a 10-plane strike force at Tonolei Harbor on November 18, 1942, his group was attacked head-on by a swarm of Japanese zeros as they made a second run on the target. The pilot and co-pilot of Saunders plane were both critically wounded. Colonel Saunders lifted the wounded pilot from his seat and took control of the plane. With two engines out and a wing on fire, he ditched the damaged plane in the ocean deep within enemy territory area. Saunders removed the wounded navigator to safety, then climb back into the sinking plane to rescue the co-pilot. Colonel Saunders and the survivors paddled two rafts to a nearby island where natives found them and took them to a village where they were rescued the following day.

In March 1943, Army Air Forces Chief General H. H. (Hap) Arnold ordered Saunders to Washington to become deputy chief of Air Staff. The 40-year-old brigadier general had earned the Navy's highest decoration (the Navy Cross), the Distinguished Service Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Silver Star, and a Purple Heart with cluster. He had been commanding general of the VII Bomber Command and Chief of Staff of Seventh Air Force.

But General Saunders had more combat duty ahead of him. In July 1943 he began organizing and training the first B-29 wing - the 58th Bomb Wing (Very Heavy), being assembled under the overall leadership of the XX Bomber Command. The XB-29 first flew in September 1942; Saunders flew against the iron and steel works at Yawata, Japan on June 15, 1944.

In September 1944, General Saunders' B-29 crashed while taking off from an air base in India. When it was reported Blondie's plane didn't reach its destination, General Curtis LeMay, who was there to replace Blondie, ordered a search of the area. While flying over the jungle, General LeMay discovered the wreckage about 3 miles from the base. After directing the ground search

party to the crash site, LeMay and his pilot landed their plane and walked the 3 miles through the jungle where they found Blondie barely alive and suffering from a crushed ankle from one of the B-25's engines. Blondie spent the next 2 and-a-half years recuperating in a hospital. He was retired in 1947 after losing a portion of his leg to the accident. General Saunders died November 16, 1968

General Saunders' dedication to duty and professionalism lives on in the 11th Wing. We dedicate this room in his honor.