

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Billy C. Sanders

July 21, 1936 – November 6, 2026

Pensacola, FL

Billy C. Sanders, who rose from enlisted airman and aviation electronics technician to become the fifth Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, the service's most senior enlisted sailor, died on November 6, 2026, at the age of 90. The Office of the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy announced his passing on November 9, 2026, remembering him as a strong advocate for sailors and their families.

He was born in Montgomery, Alabama, on July 21, 1936. After high school he joined the United States Air Force in February 1954, serving until 1957, and briefly studied at Huntingdon College in Montgomery before enlisting in the United States Navy on May 9, 1958. Trained as an aviation electronics technician, he first flew as an enlisted aircrewman aboard EC-121 aircraft and later taught anti-submarine warfare systems at Naval Air Station Key West.

Sanders made chief petty officer in 1968 and served with Reconnaissance and Maintenance Squadron One in Japan. While he was detachment chief at Da Nang during the Vietnam War, he earned two Air Medals and the Combat Action Ribbon. He went on to become a master chief, served aboard the aircraft carrier USS Midway with Fighter Squadron 151, and held command master chief posts at Naval Air Station Pensacola and Naval Air Facility Lajes in the Azores.

In July 1982 Admiral James D. Watkins, the Chief of Naval Operations, selected him as the fifth Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, and he was sworn in on October 1, 1982. During his tenure the Navy introduced its first modern physical readiness program, and he championed leadership development for

senior enlisted sailors, education benefits that led to the modern GI Bill, and voting and civic involvement among sailors. Despite reaching the top enlisted post, he was known for his humility, once saying that he always felt he was simply a master chief in the U.S. Navy.

He retired on October 4, 1985, after more than three decades in uniform, and later worked with the Naval Aviation Museum Foundation in Pensacola, Florida. His honors included the Navy Distinguished Service Medal. He was preceded in death by his wife, Mozelle, who died in 1990. The Navy bid him farewell with the traditional words: fair winds and following seas.

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