

Charles and William Lewellyn

U.S. Navy, Seamen First Class
1926 - 1945

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In one of the most famous naval photographs of World War II, smoke billows from kamikaze impacts near the “island” of USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) on 11 May 1945. NARA, 80-G-323712

When it comes to the devastation of war, probably no one suffers as much as mothers. One mother in particular, Laura Maude (Kimble) Lewellyn of Ritchie County, West Virginia, lost two sons May 11, 1945, due to a kamikaze air strike during World War II. Twin brothers Charles Wesley and William Todd Lewellyn died when the ship they were serving on, the aircraft carrier USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), suffered catastrophic damage from a surprise Japanese kamikaze attack. Both men had wives and children they would never see again.

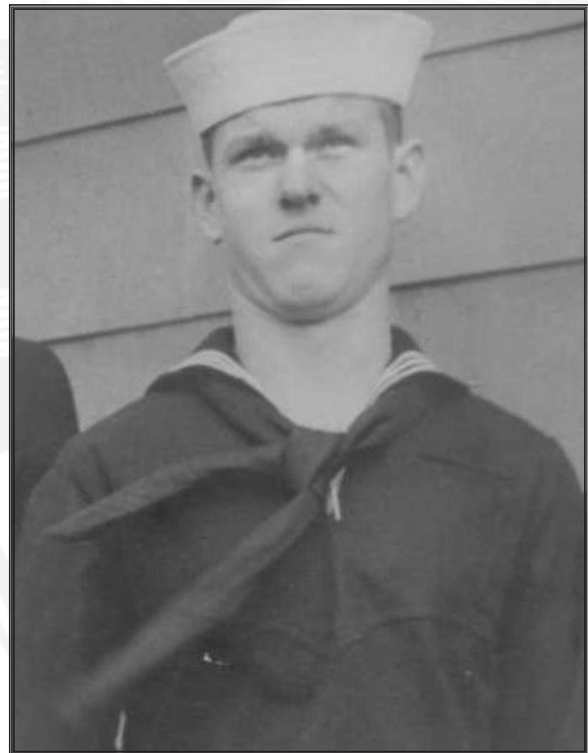
Charles and William were born May 1, 1926, to Asa Clarence and Laura Maude Lewellyn in small-town Harrisville, Ritchie County, West Virginia. They were the middle of eight children. In the 1920s, Asa worked as a tool dresser for a local oil company while Laura was a homemaker. By 1930, Asa had acquired a new job working as a school janitor at Harrisville High School. Since their father was employed throughout the Great Depression, the Lewellyn family was probably able to make ends meet, but with so many people living in the household it would have been a struggle.

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The Lewellyn family owned a small farm which also helped sustain their large family. The twins went to Harrisville High School where Charles participated in boxing and football. Both young men graduated in 1944.

Charles and William got married and started their families at a young age. On November 20, 1943, Charles married Wilda Jacqueline Moody in Washington County, Ohio. Although Wilda lived in Ohio at the time of their marriage, she grew up in West Virginia during the 1930s which is likely how the two met. Their first child, David Wesley, was born April 14, 1944, and their daughter Sandra "Charlee" Charlene, was born 18 months later. At the age of 18, while a senior in high school, William married Mildred Geraldine Matson at the Ritchie County Courthouse August 9, 1944, and their son Anthony Wayne was born March 29, 1945.

The brothers enlisted in the United States Navy Reserve during their senior year of high school and were inducted into the Navy September 29, 1944. The Navy Reserve was created in anticipation of the United States' impending involvement in the First World War. By the end of World War II, the Reserve comprised 84 percent of those in the Navy who fought during the conflict. Like all eligible enlistees in the Reserve, Charles and William completed their boot camp training at the Great Lakes Naval Station in Lake County, Illinois. Among all the training the sailors received there, one of the most important was learning how to swim. Although only around half of those that joined the Navy knew how, approximately 98 percent became competent swimmers before they left the naval station in Illinois. At the time of the twins' basic training, the integration of African American sailors had already begun at the Great Lakes Naval Station, making the Lewellyns some of the first White recruits to receive training alongside Black servicemen.



Charles William (top) and William Todd (bottom) Lewellyn. FindAGrave

Charles and William Lewellyn

After successfully completing their training in Illinois, the brothers were sent to the U.S. Navy Training and Distribution Center at Camp Shoemaker in Pleasanton, California. The Lewellyns were among the tens of thousands of sailors sent to Shoemaker for further training as they awaited their assignments to bases or ships. While at the Shoemaker Naval Base, Charles and William were provided with a variety of facilities and activities including mess halls, theaters, bowling alleys, pool halls, swimming pools, basketball and tennis courts, as well as baseball, football, and softball fields.

The Navy encouraged siblings to serve on separate ships due to the tragic deaths of the five Sullivan brothers, killed together in November 1942 aboard the USS *Juneau*. The Lewellyns, however, were inseparable and requested to serve together. They were assigned to the Essex-class aircraft carrier USS *Bunker Hill* and arrived on the ship for duty on January 10, 1945. At this time, both Charles and William held the rank of Seaman First Class (S1C) and worked together in the bakery of the ship. Tasked with feeding the thousands of men aboard the ship, one sailor recalled “Nobody starved on the ship. There was all you could eat. They had a good bakery on there. The cookies were great.”

After two weeks of rest and refueling in March 1945, the USS *Bunker Hill* joined a task force group supporting the U.S. Marine landings on Okinawa—a large island that was to serve as a final staging ground for future attacks on Japan. *Bunker Hill*'s fighter squadrons shot down Japanese aircraft, engaged enemy ships, and provided air support for the Marines battling across the island. Pacifying Okinawa's Japanese defenders proved to be a long, bloody task—and not only for the marines and army units ashore. The supporting navy fleet was savaged by the largest number of kamikaze attacks witnessed during the Pacific War.



USS *Bunker Hill* burns fiercely off Okinawa after two kamikaze hits. The ship's bakery where the Lewellyn twins worked was located on the port side, near the lighter gray smoke pictured. NARA, 80-G-274266

On the morning of May 11, 1945, the skies above the USS *Bunker Hill* were filled with low clouds that made it difficult to spot enemy attacks. At 10:05 a.m. a Japanese kamikaze plane dove suddenly from the thick cloud cover, crashed into the flight deck, skidded across, and released a 500-pound delayed action bomb that penetrated the flight deck on the port (left) side of the ship. Filled with fuel, the aircraft on the deck of the carrier ignited and killed much of the crew in the immediate area. Moments later, a second kamikaze appeared just as suddenly as the first, releasing another 500-pound bomb before crashing into the flight deck and island of the ship. This second bomb passed through the flight deck and

Charles and William Lewellyn

exploded on the gallery deck and hangar deck below, setting fires on all three levels.

Since the USS *Bunker Hill* had been under constant threat in the days prior, servicemen like the Lewellyns were constantly moving from their regular stations—in the bakery on the third deck, in the twins' case—to rest in the crew berthing areas, or work at battle stations such as anti-aircraft gun batteries on deck. The Lewellyns may also not have been together on the morning of the attack. Without eyewitness accounts attesting to the twins' whereabouts, it is impossible to know exactly where they were amid the chaos.

Both kamikazes and their accompanying bombs wrought dreadful carnage on the USS *Bunker Hill*'s gallery deck, where the Lewellyns were regularly on duty. While their whereabouts are not certain, William was likely in or near the bakery when the ship was hit. Fuel from the wrecked kamikaze plane poured down into the third deck of the ship causing a fire near the bakery. Ventilation was shut down in this part of the ship to confine the fire and keep it from spreading. Men in the area closest to the bakery were trapped and many suffocated on the noxious black smoke that choked the passageways in this area. Such was William's fate. "Smoke inhalation" is listed in the official records as his cause of death.

Charles's precise fate is less certain. In total, the kamikazes killed 393 of the USS *Bunker Hill*'s crew and wounded another 264. After damage control crews contained the fires and other immediate threats to the ship, identification of the dead began. Identification tags and bracelets provided the main source of recognition, as well as a recently adopted measure ordering the men to stencil their names on their belts. Dental records and physical marks such as tattoos or pieces of clothing and jewelry became a last resort to identify the dead. Charles Lewellyn joined his twin brother in death, but exactly how he was killed is unknown.

The twin brothers were merely 19 years old. They had celebrated their birthdays only ten days earlier. On May 12, 1945, the longest burial at sea in U.S. Navy history commenced onboard the USS *Bunker Hill*. Beginning a few minutes past noon and continuing until just before sunset,



The husks of aircraft on *Bunker Hill*'s shattered flight deck. Burning fuel from the kamikaze aircraft dripped down onto lower decks, and the resulting smoke suffocated men in the Lewellyns' duty area. NARA 80-G-259904



A Catholic memorial service held aboard *Bunker Hill* after the tragic attack. NARA, 80-G-323704

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Charles and William Lewellyn, along with the rest of the dead, were buried at sea. In one tragic day, the Lewellyn's parents lost two sons, two wives lost their husbands, and three children lost their fathers.

Charles's wife, Wilda, first received the news back home that her husband was killed in action, leaving his two children, David and Sandra, without a father for the rest of their lives. Sadly, David only met his father once, while Sandra never met him at all. Within a week of Wilda finding out about the catastrophe, William's wife, Mildred, was informed her husband was also killed in the attack. Sadly, William never had the opportunity to meet his son Anthony. Their loss was also felt by their parents and siblings. Grieving the loss of their twin boys, Asa and Laura Lewellyn also feared for the safety of their son, Asa Clarence Jr., who was serving in the United States Army at the time.

In the months following the twins' deaths, Wilda received airmail containing the last letter Charles wrote before he was killed. Charles described the love he felt for his family, then wrote:

Dear Hon, I am sitting here listening to the sounds of rapid gun fire and bombing. I feel this will be the last chance I get to tell you how much I love you and our children. Please explain to them that I died fighting to preserve their rights and freedoms, just as our forefathers did in the wars before this. Explain to them how important it is for them to continue this fight to protect their rights and the freedoms we presently have in the United States. If they don't...we will have all died in vain.

For their courageous service on the USS *Bunker Hill*, Charles and William were awarded the Purple Heart posthumously. They were also memorialized in the Tablets of the Missing in Honolulu, Hawaii. William also has a headstone located at the Harrisville IOOF Cemetery near some of his immediate family. The twins were also provided military headstones at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown. The Lewellyn family paid a huge sacrifice in 1945. Despite this tragedy, the heroic service of men like Charles Wesley and William Todd Lewellyn ensures the legacies of men and women like them live on.

William Todd's marker in the twins' hometown of Harrisville, Ritchie County. *FindAGrave*



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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section MA
Site 91 & 92

Date of Interment: April 1, 2011

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

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