

# GILBERT JOHNIE STANSBERRY

SEAMAN SECOND CLASS  
U.S. NAVY

WORLD WAR II  
1925 - 1944

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*“In no engagement in its entire history has the United States Navy shown more gallantry, guts and gumption than in the two morning hours between 0730 and 0930 off Samar.”*

*-Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison*

**Gilbert Johnnie Stansberry was born on September 28, 1925**, the only child of Gilbert Cecil and Nettie (Snider) Stansberry. He was raised in the small railroad town of Grafton, the county seat of Taylor County, West Virginia. The town of Grafton had boomed, at the turn of the century, with employment centered around the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O) and several factories, but the Great Depression left many struggling and without work by the 1930s. Johnnie’s father Cecil managed to find employment with the Hazel Atlas Glass plant, one of the town’s larger industrial concerns. The plant made inexpensive glass tableware sets and canning jars during the Depression era.

Between 1930 and 1934, Johnnie’s parents divorced. Though Cecil’s family was originally from Grafton, he made a new life in Zanesville, Ohio, where he remarried to Dorothy Ruth McKinney in 1935. Nettie remained in Grafton—though she was born and raised in neighboring Harrison County—and tenaciously raised Johnnie as a single mother through the tough days of the Depression. She was fortunate to obtain work through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) following her divorce.

While the WPA is better known for financing construction and infrastructure projects nationwide through President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program, the federal government recognized that many different types of work would be needed. In Nettie’s case, she was able to make ends meet as a WPA “matron.” Matron Service Projects placed women in local schools to monitor restroom facilities and locker rooms, improve student hygiene, supply first aid, mend clothes, and more. While some cleaning was involved, newspaper articles explaining the matron projects emphasized that janitorial work was not part of their duties, and janitors were not being deprived of their livelihoods. Matrons were also meant strictly for schools. When the city of Pittston, Pennsylvania, applied for matrons to work at city hall in 1940, the WPA turned them down in no uncertain terms.

Johnnie attended Grafton High School through his sophomore year, at which time he was 17 years old. The next year, on September 24, 1943, he enlisted in the Navy Reserves in a world at war. For the previous two years, Johnnie had been too young to aid materially in World War II, which the United States had entered after the Japanese Imperial Navy bombed the U.S. Pacific Fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Basic training at Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Illinois, and more specialized education at Virginia’s Naval Station Norfolk Operating Base, filled most of Johnnie’s time for the next several months. In April, he found himself rumbling across the country by train to Houston, Texas, where he was to join the brand-new crew of the brand-new USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413). Many of the other ordinary seamen were coming straight from Norfolk, as well.

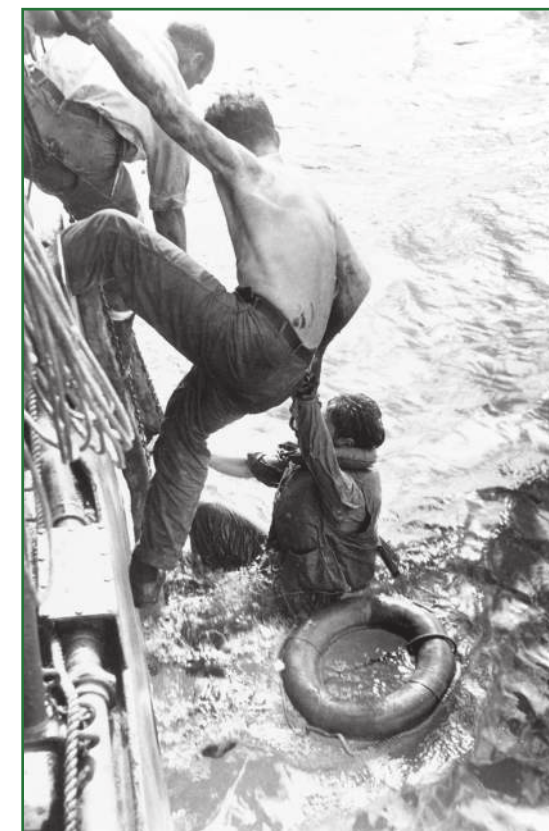
The “*Sammy B*,” as she came to be affectionately called by her crew, was a *John C. Butler*-class destroyer escort and represented the rapid evolution of naval warfare. As navy brass began to realize that submarines and aircraft carriers were often more decisive weapons than the huge battleships of old, it became increasingly important to hunt down the former and protect the latter with small but mobile escorts. While slightly slower than full-fledged destroyers, destroyer escorts were usually quicker-turning, and their reduced armament provided better fuel economy to operate longer at sea.

Once aboard, Seaman 2nd Class (S2c) Stansberry would have many of the drudge-like tasks of maintaining the ship—from cleaning decks to doing laundry. But he would also stand watch, man ropes and cables, and be part of the gunnery crew. *Sammy B* had only two single-gun 5-inch turrets, one each fore and aft, plus four 40mm and ten 20mm antiaircraft “gun tubs.” Torpedo and depth-charge launchers rounded out the armament. Johnnie would have been trained in the operation of all of these.

His primary responsibility in battle, however, was as a loader on the aft turret (called the #2 or #52 turret). Here he found his niche as a loader, quickly and efficiently placing the shells and powder charges into the 5-inch gun breech as they were passed up from the magazines below. As the crew trained together at sea after commissioning on April 28, 1944, the #2 gun turret crew easily became known as the pride of the ship. They were commanded by Gunner’s Mate 3rd Class Paul Henry Carr who kept his station “absolutely spotless,” according to *Sammy B*’s captain, Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) Robert Copeland. “It is not an exaggeration to say you could have eaten off the deck of that gun mount at any time.”

Copeland was unstinting in his praise not only of Carr, but of Stansberry’s entire turret team. “Gun number two had a crew just out of this world. It had been outstanding from the time we shook down,” he wrote. They were “the best I have ever seen and I imagine one of the best that has ever existed. The crew was, in fact, so good that another very good gun crew, namely number one, looked more or less mediocre by comparison.”

Professionalism and the usual quirks of a crew bonded them



Battered survivors of the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* and other destroyers of Taffy 3 are picked up after nearly two days floating at sea.  
NHHC

together in a few short months as they steamed from the Gulf of Mexico through the Panama Canal to the Pacific Ocean. Paul Henry Carr was a burly Oklahoman who loved football. C. J. Wilson, a former Philadelphia boxer, worked out in the mess hall using cans of firefighting foam and a broomstick to concoct a 125-pound dumbbell. The crew even had a mascot, a stray black dog the crew found wandering the streets of Norfolk, whom they outfitted with a lifejacket and dubbed “Sammy.”

Johnnie and the ship’s fresh-faced crew trained all the way out to Hawaii. From there they headed for the Philippines, passing through the Marshall and Admiralty Islands in early October 1944. By the middle of the month, they were settling in as part of Task Unit 77.4.3, nicknamed “Taffy 3,” in Leyte Gulf at a crucial juncture of the war. As far as American naval firepower went, the members of Taffy 3 were lightweights: as part of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, they were just a glorified patrol group with six escort carriers, three destroyers, and four destroyer escorts. Rather than participate in most of the fleet’s big operations, their job was to “screen” by protecting the fleet’s perimeter and provide advance warning of enemy attacks by air, sea, or submarine.

It had been almost exactly a year since Johnnie Stansberry had enlisted, straight out of Grafton High School, when he was caught up in the Battle

of Leyte Gulf—the last gamble by the Imperial Japanese fleet to relieve their Philippine garrisons from the American invasion begun earlier that year. It was to be the largest naval battle of the war to date and one of the largest in history. And it was coming straight for Johnnie.

That Gilbert Johnnie Stansberry stood directly in the path of the Japanese fleet was due in part to a quirk of personality. Admiral William F. “Bull” Halsey, in charge of the fleet in the Philippines, was known to both Americans and Japanese alike as an aggressive commander—sometimes to a fault. Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa planned to use this against Halsey in October 1944, dangling a large decoy group of aircraft carriers as bait to draw the bulk of the American fleet away from Leyte and expose the defenseless troop transports and logistical ships. Ozawa methodically drew Halsey’s own carriers farther and farther away from each other, then sent a powerful surface task force charging through San Bernardino Strait, directly at the American landing forces.

The only thing standing between the landing ships and the Japanese was Taffy 3. And the only thing standing between the Japanese and Taffy 3’s carriers was the “tin cans”—the destroyers and destroyer escorts, seven in all. On the morning of October 25, 1944, these smallest of navy warships suddenly found themselves up against four battleships, six cruisers, two light cruisers, and 11 destroyers of the Imperial fleet, the Japanese Center Force commanded by Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita. The resulting fight is known to history as the Battle off Samar.

As daylight revealed the Center Force spilling from San Bernardino Strait, Taffy 3’s carriers had no choice but to turn around and run. The three true destroyers, USS *Heermann* (DD-532), *Hoel* (DD-533), and *Johnston* (DD-537), attacked the Japanese head-on in the face of almost certain annihilation. Without orders, LCDR Copeland also turned the *Sammy B* around to join the fight. A message blared out to the crew over the loudspeaker: “[We are] going into battle against overwhelming odds, from which survival cannot be expected. We will do what damage we can.”

For over an hour, the destroyers played for time and their lives, first dodging in close to the much larger Japanese ships—so close the Japanese guns could not depress far enough to fire—then darting away into rain squalls. LCDR Copeland later wrote that the four tin cans used their smoke screens to great effect, often dipping in and out of each other’s smoke to fire and disappear again. While the destroyers’ guns were too small to inflict great damage on the Japanese battleships and cruisers, the larger vessels’ fear of destroyer torpedoes was very real. The aggressive destroyers caused the enemy formation to break up and scatter, slowing down their pursuit of the carriers.

*Sammy B*’s gun crews fought like madmen, firing shells quickly enough that gun barrels were not permitted to fully cool. Stansberry and the crew of turret #2 were shooting so fast that they were running low on their immediate pool of ammunition. No ship’s luck could hold out forever against such great odds.

As her crew cheered from a torpedo hit on the cruiser *Chokai*, the *Sammy B* passed by the burning, sinking wreck of the USS *Hoel*, shattered by enemy gunfire. And as the tiny destroyer escort steamed again toward the foe, a sailor on the carrier USS *Fanshaw Bay* (CVE-70) said, “Look at that little DE committing suicide.” Stansberry’s nimble ship engaged the cruiser *Chikuma*, savaged the Japanese vessel’s superstructure with accurate 5-inch gunfire, and found itself dead in the sights of the battleship *Kongo*.

The *Kongo*’s massive 14-inch guns roared. Skipper Copeland backed his engines and stopped the ship short, narrowly averting disaster. But as they slowed, a salvo of 8-inch cruiser shells slammed into the *Sammy B*. Power and instruments went dead. Steam lines were cut in the forward fireroom, venting superheated steam and killing most of the men in the compartment. Hydraulic pressure was lost throughout most of the ship. As naval historian James Hornfischer describes the last stand of gun turret #2 in the smoke and confusion:

**Carr and his superb crew . . . were in their rhythm, grabbing powder cases out of the slot, laying them in the breech, picking the projectiles off the hoist, sliding them in ahead of the powder case, ramming shut the breech, firing the gun, kicking the spent case out the hole down onto the deck, and starting the sequence again. When the power went out, they rammed the tray into the breech by hand. When the air ejection system broke down a few minutes later after that, Carr and his men got off seven or eight more shots before the inevitable happened.**

The loss of hydraulic pressure meant that blasts of air were no longer cooling the gun breech after each shot. Stansberry’s gun crew knew this and kept firing, knowing that each shot might make the difference between life and death. Finally, a powder charge placed in the red-hot breech—probably laid there by Stansberry himself—exploded on contact with the hot steel. The explosion rocked through the turret, killing almost everyone instantly, including Johnnie Stansberry.

Dead in the water, *Sammy B* continued to take a pounding from more Japanese guns. Copeland gave the order to abandon ship. As men found their way to the rafts, someone went down to check on Paul Henry Carr’s turret crew. The only man still breathing in the turret was Carr himself, badly mangled and still holding a final shell in his hands. Beyond help, he begged his fellow sailors to help him load and fire it. They gently laid him outside on the deck. Paul Henry Carr would later be posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Another soul to go down with the ship was Sammy, the ship’s mascot. Having survived the terrible gunfire, the small black dog swam out to a raft but decided a few minutes later that he belonged with the stricken vessel. He jumped back into the water and disappeared from view, dog paddling back to the shattered *Sammy B*.

# GILBERT JOHNIE STANSBERRY

*Sammy B*’s battle was over, but what Hornfischer calls “the last stand of the tin can sailors” had saved Taffy 3. The confused Japanese task force broke off pursuit and retreated, having lost more ships and men than they had claimed. The defenseless American landing ships were safe.

Tragically, the ordeal of *Sammy B*’s sailors was not yet over. As kamikazes flew in and launched a much more devastating attack on Taffy 3’s carriers, rescue operations for the sailors floating in the water were delayed. For two days they floated, braving sharks, dehydration, and exhaustion. Some did not make it back.

Nevertheless, the gallant fight waged by Gilbert Johnnie Stansberry and the men of Taffy 3 has gone down in the annals of naval warfare. In 2022, a deep-sea expedition using submersibles to document naval wrecks discovered the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* on the ocean floor at a depth of 22,621 feet, making it the deepest wreck in history to be rediscovered. There in the placid depths lies Johnnie Stansberry. At Grafton National Cemetery his memory lives on in the form of a stone marker, in the middle of the town where a hero was born.

Survivors of the *Sammy B* attend the christening of a new USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (FFG-58) in 1985. NARA



**SOURCES** FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

# SOURCES

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

**The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project** is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. 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 Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—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. Since 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.

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, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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