

Sapper Ernest Sidney Saunders, Royal Engineers

died 31 May 1940, Belgium, aged 28



Royal Engineers Second World War cap badge

Ernest Sidney Saunders was born on 21 January 1912 in Brynmawr, Breconshire, Wales. Ernest was the eldest son of John Saunders, at the time of Ernest's birth a railwayman, and his wife Mary Jane nee Watkins who were married in 1911. Ernest had a younger brother John Wilfred who was born in 1915, by which time the family had moved to Llanfoist in Monmouthshire and John had joined the army.

John was born in Kentchurch in Herefordshire where his father was a Cowman. At the time of the 1911 census John was already working on the railways in Brynmawr and described as a Railway Pilotman, a railway worker who directed trains along dangerous areas such as single-track railways. Mary Jane was born in Ewyas Harold in Herefordshire where her father was a Quarryman. It appears that she was working as a servant in Brynmawr, according to the 1911 census, which is presumably how she met John.

During the First World War John served in the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry and was killed in August 1917 in Belgium. He is commemorated on the Tyne Cot memorial. In Autumn 1918 Mary Jane married John's younger brother Joseph Saunders who worked as a Hunt Servant looking after the dogs and horses required for fox hunting. They had a daughter Florence born in 1919. At the time of the 1921 census the family, with the three children, were living in Wormelow in Herefordshire and Joseph was employed by Captain Clive, master of fox hounds.

We know little of Ernest's education, but it is recorded that he enlisted in the Royal Engineers in 1934. At the time of the 1939 register Joseph and Mary Jane were living in Llanerch, near Llanfyllin, Montgomeryshire. Joseph was still working as a huntsman and none of the children were living at home.

Little is known of Ernest's service record though at the time of his death he had the rank of Sapper and was part of the 59th Field Company. As a regular soldier he would have been part of the British Expeditionary Force sent to France following the outbreak of war in September 1939.

The following description from the Commonwealth War Graves website gives a vivid account of the circumstances leading up to Ernest's death.

'The British Expeditionary Force was involved in the later stages of the defence of Belgium following the German invasion in May 1940, and suffered many casualties in covering the withdrawal to Dunkirk. De Panne village was the site of the final General Headquarters of the BEF in 1940, and there was a Casualty Clearing Station on the beach, which was an embarkation beach for the evacuation. From 27 May to 1 June 1940, the Germans strove to prevent the embarkation of the troops by incessant bombing, machine-gunning and shelling. The first German troops reached the village between 14.00 and 15.00 hrs on 31 May, and after heavy fighting, the commune was completely occupied by about 9.00 hrs on 1 June. The Commonwealth plot in the communal cemetery was specially constructed by the local authorities in August 1940, so that the Commonwealth graves might all be together. More than 200 of the burials were moved by the Belgians into this plot from other locations in the cemetery and from scattered sites on the beaches and roads of the commune.'

Ernest is buried in the De Panne Communal cemetery, on the coast of Belgium along with over 250 casualties from the Second World War. He is also commemorated on the Church Stretton War Memorial. Ernest does not seem to have left a will. It has not been possible to establish a direct connection with the Church Stretton area to date. His mother, brother and half-sister all seem to have lived in the Newport area of Gwent. His mother died there in 1988.



De Panne Cemetery, Belgium