WILLIS Horace James (Jim)



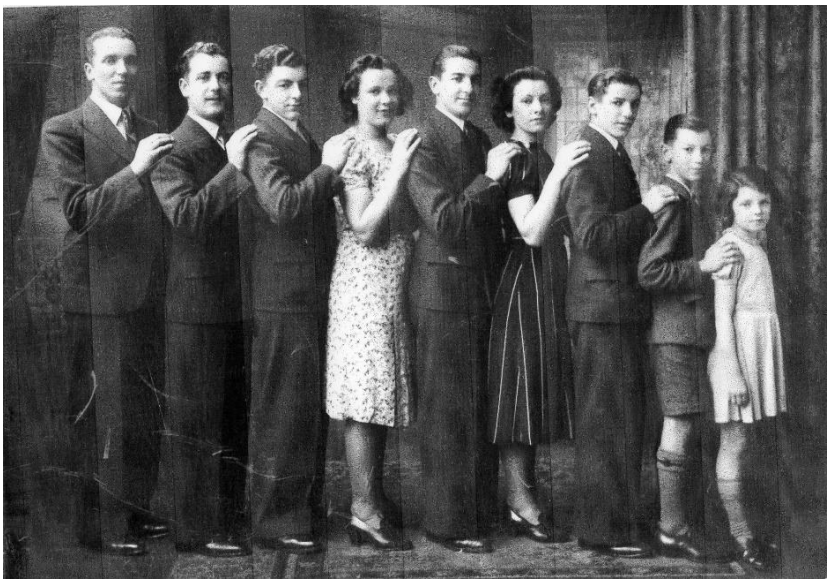
Private, S/133969
Royal Army Service Corps
Place of Birth: Kent
Date of death: Sunday, 27th April 1941
Died at sea near Greece
Commemorated: The Athens Memorial
Aged 28 years

Horace James Willis (Jim) was born 3rd May 1916, in Islington, London. He was the son of William Ewart Willis and Barbara May Truelove.

William Ewart Willis came from a family that had links with Haverhill dating back to the 1700s and there are many local names to be found amongst their ancestors. Nunn, Claydon and Radford are just a few examples. Although William Ewart was born in Haverhill, the 1911 census shows him, aged 23, living in South Kensington and employed as a Confectioner and Baker. While he was in London he met his future wife, Barbara May, the daughter of James Truelove and his wife, also named Barbara. Barbara May's mother died in 1894 when she was just 1 year old. At the time of the 1911 census Barbara May was living in Gravesend, Kent with her father James, his second wife Minnie and two half-brothers. James was a lighterman, as was his father before him. He worked on the Thames as a Pilot between London and Gravesend.

William Willis and Barbara May Truelove were married on 1 April 1914 in St Paul's Church, Haringey and went on to have nine children, Nigel, Horace (Jim), Stanley, Edna, Henry, Reggie, Eileen, Eric and Joyce, the first seven being born in London, Eric and Joyce being born in Haverhill.

Horace 1st left





In the mid-1920s the family had moved to Haverhill and were living in Duddery Road later moving to Recreation Road. In 1930 Horace (Jim), aged about 14 was champion at the Council School Sports.

The photo left shows Jim with Beatrice Archer the girls champion. Beatrice was the sister of another casualty, Harold Claude Archer.

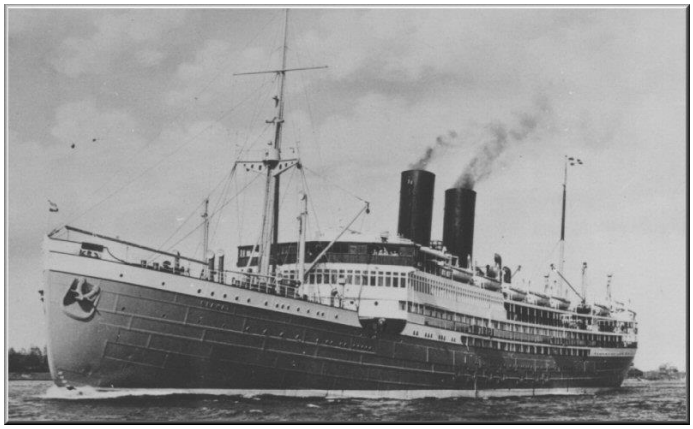
Growing up, Jim's best friend was a lad called Edward Christopher Broughton (Ted), who was also a neighbour in Duddery Road. They both worked at the International Store in Haverhill and later both went to work in a store in London. The extract from the 1939 Register shows them both living at an address in Tokyngton Avenue, Wembley and their occupations recorded as shop assistant (provisions).



206 – ditto –	84	1	Dudley	Ernest H	–	M	23 Apl	88	M	Riveters Labourer
		2	Dudley	May J L	–	F	15 May	89	M	Canvasser (Drapery)
M.		3	Duddery	Hilda R	–	F	27 Feb	21	S	Assembly Engineer (Mun
		4	Willis	Horace J	–	M	3 May	16	S	Shop Assistant (Provisio
		5	Broughton	Edward C	–	M	19 June	16	S	Shop Assistant (Provisio
		6	Manning	Walter J	–	M	23 Mch	17	S	Capstan Seller Operator

In January 1940 they enlisted together in the RASC (Their army numbers are concurrent) and being on the continent at the time of the collapse of France, they were amongst those evacuated from Le Havre as part of Operation Cycle. The evacuation of Allied troops from Le Havre, in Upper Normandy, took place from 10–13 June 1940, just after Dunkirk.

The friends were sent to the Middle East in November 1940 and were working with troops in Northern Greece.



In April 1941 Allied soldiers were evacuated from Greece in order to escape from German troops.

At 4am on 27th April 1941, the Dutch liner SS Slamat, with 211 crew and 500 Allied troops, including Jim, Ted and other soldiers of the Royal Army Service Corps, left Nauplia Harbour. They

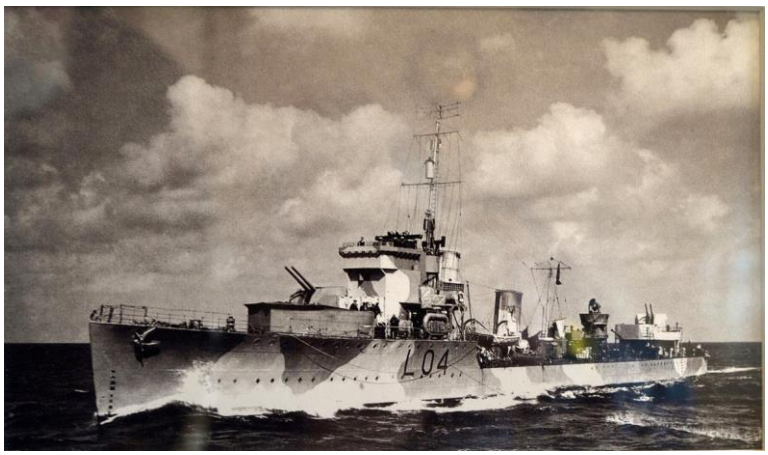
were too late to escape an attack by German JG-77 (Stukas) aircraft from the Luftwaffe.

The Slamat sank with the loss of 193 men. Of the troops on board, around 700 were rescued by the destroyers HMS Diamond and HMS Wryneck, both of which were later bombed and sunk, drowning most of the survivors of the Slamat. In all, there was just one officer, 41 seamen and 8 soldiers saved from this triple disaster, leaving a total death toll of 843 men.



Both Horace James (Jim) Willis and his best friend Edward Christopher (Ted) Broughton were reported as being lost at sea. They are commemorated on the Athens Memorial.

On 12 September 1942, over a year after the sinking of SS Slamat, the Echo reported that *'Official intimation has been received this week that Edward (Ted) Christopher Broughton, only son of the late Mr Alfred Broughton of 25 Duddery Road, Haverhill, and Horace James (Jim), second son of Mr and Mrs W E Willis of 49 Recreation Road, Haverhill, must be "presumed killed in action at sea between 26th-27th April 1941." They had previously been reported missing…. In a letter to Mr Willis, the Commanding Officer wrote that the two vessels assisting in the evacuation of Allied Troops were sunk by enemy bombing and added "The unit had come safely through some very exciting experiences on its journey down from the North of Greece, and it was only that part of the unit aboard the Wryneck (36 Officers and men) which was lost"*



HMS Wryneck

Five of the six sons of William and Barbara Willis were serving in the Forces during WW2. The youngest of the five to enlist was Reggie who also lost his life.