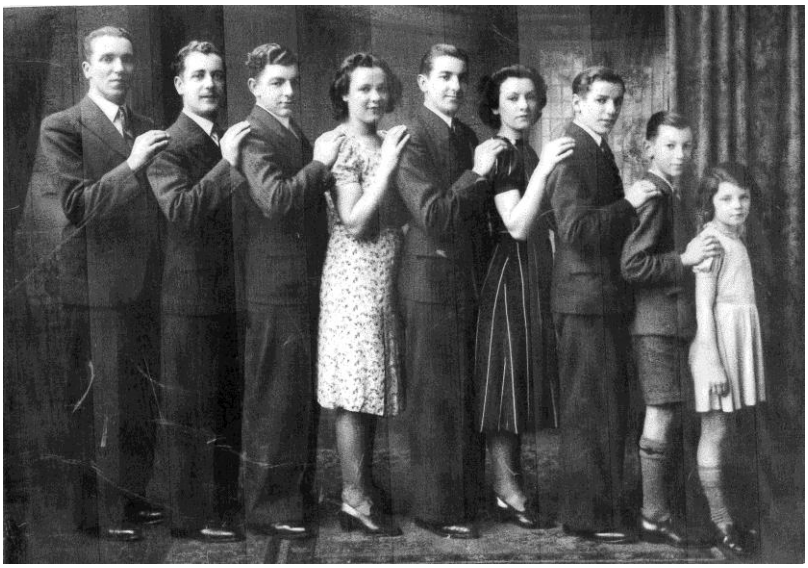
WILLIS Reggie Arthur



Flight Lieutenant 124642
265 Sqn Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
Place of Birth: Islington
Killed in Action: 20th August 1944
Memorial: Alamein Memorial
Aged: 22 years

Reggie Arthur Willis in 1922, in Islington, London. They were the sons 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 Willis 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, working on the Thames as a Pilot between London and Gravesend.



William Willis and Barbara May Truelove were married on 1st 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.

Reggie 3rd from right

In the mid-1920s the family had moved to Haverhill and were living in Duddery Road later moving to Recreation Road. Five of the six sons of William and Barbara Willis were serving in the Forces during WW2. Horace (Jim) lost his life in April 1941. The youngest of the five to enlist was Reggie.

Reggie Arthur Willis joined 265 Squadron, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve as a Flight Lieutenant.



On 11th March 1943, the troopship 'Lancashire' arrived in Mombasa with personnel for the re-formation of 265 Squadron, which was active in an anti-submarine role. The squadron used the Consolidated Catalina to patrol the Indian Ocean from its base at Diego Suarez in northern Madagascar. Although the squadron headquarters remained at Diego Suarez, aircraft were also based in Kenya, Aden, Mauritius and South Africa.



On 20th August 1944 Flight Lieutenant William Lough's Catalina H, with Reggie on board as his 1st Navigator, encountered the German submarine U-862 in the Mozambique Channel and was shot down while trying to attack her.

U-862 escaped unharmed to join the Monsun Gruppe based at Penang.

Reports from the U-Boat crew suggested that, after being severely damaged by AA fire, the Catalina was deliberately steered by its crew onto a crash course with the U-Boat but it fell short by 10 metres.

U-862's log gives a detailed description of the attack:

> *“13th day in Mozambique Channel, proceeding on departure course. Suddenly! a Catalina flying boat is sighted too late to submerge. Only one of the two deck guns is working. The little Matrose Mumms is firing very good and has hit the airplane. Suddenly a command from the tower is heard to say, repeatedly, "Hard Starboard! Hard Starboard"! There is a heavy detonation, the boat vibrates then rolls severely to one side causing water to come into the control room!*
>
> *On deck are shouts, "A hit! A hit"! It is recognized that the plane's pilot wouldn't get out of it in one piece and that he might hit the U-boat.*

The 'Cat' is flying only 10 metres above us then crashes into the sea 10 metres in front of us. Because of the plane's explosion there is a fountain of water through which we travel seconds after.
Debris of the flying boat is burning for a long time. Then following the jubilation that "Mumms" saved our lives by hitting the flying boat before it released its depth charges, a dinghy was sent among the debris. The flying-boat's log-book, a lot of navigation cards, some uniforms and silk scarves were salvaged; were interesting and provided useful information. Where the Cat started and was based! All the crew are killed with no bodies seen. Also from the plane's log-book, it was learned that they were looking for another ship which had previously been sunk.
It was getting dark so we departed the scene at high speed. The Grand Commores could be seen in distance. This was the first land sighting in three months."

They had been looking for a missing ship either the "Empire City" or "Empire Day" which had been sunk by U-198 on 5th August.

From "Wings of the Dawning" by Arthur Banks those on board the Cat are given as:

128494 F/Lt William Stewart Lough Capt
143668 F/O Henry Lawson Watkins 2nd Pilot
124642 F/O Reggie Arthur Willis 1st Nav age 21
135923 F/O George Richard Chaffee 2nd Nav 21
566707 F/Sgt Surtees Elliott AFM F/E 26
1313689 F/Sgt Ronald Reuben Baines W/Ag 23
1332155 F/Sgt William Albert Bickmore W/Ag 23
1071501 F/Sgt Francis Charles Anderson Dow W/Ag 23
1435171 F/Sgt Cuthbert Glynn W/Ag 22
1213871 Sgt Maurice William Popple 23
791109 Cpl Paul Raymond Marie Hodoul
1508931 LAC Arthur Halstead 35
1008387 LAC Joseph Albert Willoughby Statham 28

Four of those on-board the Catalina were ground crew on their way to Pamanzi, Comoro Islands as reinforcements and it is suggested that they were to be taken there after the aircraft had completed an anti-submarine mission over the Mozambique Channel. Unfortunately they encountered the submarine and perished with the crew.



The regular crew who appear in this photo are:
Back from left;
F/Sgt Glynn, F/Sgt Baines, Sgt Dow, F/Sgt Elliott. F/Sgt Popple
Front from left
F/O Willis, F/O Lough (captain), F/O Watkins, F/Sgt Bickmore

There were no survivors. All those who perished are commemorated along with Reggie Arthur Willis on the Alamein Memorial.

