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Surgeon LCDR Jack Rupert Law Willis, RAN 1888-1971 MB BS Melb

These biographical notes on LCDR Jack Willis who served in HMS Prince of Wales during World War 1 were provided by Surgeon LCDR Tony Swain RAN Rtd.

Jack Willis was born in Daylesford, Victoria on the 17th October 1888, the eldest of 3 sons of T. Rupert H. Willis, a general practitioner, and Mary Willis. He attended school at Wesley College in Melbourne and studied medicine at the University of Melbourne, graduating in January 1912. This was followed by a further 12 months of what is now called a rotating internship at the Alfred Hospital and the Infectious Diseases Hospital in Melbourne. A short period at Bendigo Hospital followed and he then commenced practice with his father at Glenferrie Rd, Malvern. Victoria.

He enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) as a Medical Officer, initially with the rank of Surgeon Lieutenant, and Seniority of 3rd August 1914. He served for a period of 6 years in the RAN and the Royal Navy (RN). His first posting was to The Union Steamship Company vessel SS *Aorangi* that was chartered by the RAN in August 1914 to act as a supply ship for the fleet, which was part of the AN&MEF. This Force was successful in eliminating the growing German influences in the near Pacific and it became the Occupying Force until 1921.



During his 6 years of service he served over 3 years with the RN onboard HMS *Prince of Wales*, which was transferred to the Adriatic Sea to form the 2nd Detached Squadron, organized to reinforce the Italian Navy against the Austro-Hungarian Navy after Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, based at Taranto, becoming flagship of the squadron in March 1916. In 1919, he retired from active service with the rank of Surgeon Lieutenant Commander, and Seniority of 22nd August 1920. He was appointed to the Emergency list in 1921.

He did not serve during WW2 despite his enthusiasm to do so. In March 1942, Dr. J. R. L. Willis was appointed Surgeon Lieutenant Commander RAN from the Retired List to the Emergency List in the Permanent Naval Forces of the Commonwealth (Sea-Going Forces). This appointment meant that in the event of emergency the Navy could call upon his services. He was moved to the Retired list in 1948.

During Dr Willis's active service with the RN, he met and subsequently married in Rome, Thea Anuilli in 1919, a young girl of Italian and French heritage. They both returned to Australia in 1921/22 to live in Learmonth in country Victoria where Jack established a general practice. There were 2 sons from this marriage, Guido James and Alan Anthony Willis. Both subsequently became senior Admirals in the RAN with James becoming Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) with the rank of Vice-Admiral, and the last in that position to be appointed KBE (1981) also an AO (1976).

In 1927, the family moved from Learmonth to Mt Gambier in South Australia where Jack continued in General Practice for a period of about 30 years. Jack was a well known and respected physician who was also a good sportsman, excelling at cricket and tennis up till his mid 60s. After a long struggle with cancer, Thea died in Mt Gambier in 1939 at the age of 40.

Jack re-married Zelma Mackie who was a nurse at the Mt Gambier Hospital. Their only child, Richard John, was born in 1944. Like his father, Richard graduated in medicine, however in Adelaide, and was a Surgeon Lieutenant Commander HMAS *Sydney*, Vietnam in the RAN; anesthetist at the RAH and past President of the ANZCA. Jack retired in the late 50s from active practice and remained in Mt Gambier until his death on the 22nd April 1971.

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Sources:

Photo and family history, Dr Richard Willis, Adelaide

NAA Navy Service Card.

NLA Trove examination of the Border Watch, Mt Gambier, 6th October 1914, 19th November 1940, Daylesford Advocate, 31st March 1942.

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/78105374?searchTerm=DR%20WILLIS&searchLimits=-state=South+Australia&title=276>