

Leslie Smith



Rank: - Ordinary Coder

Number: - P/JX 199451

Service: - Royal Navy H.M.S. Victory III (Lost in S.S. Britannia)

Died: - Missing, presumed Killed in Action 25/03/1941 Age: 23 years,

Memorial: - Portsmouth Naval Memorial Panel 53, Column 1.

Leslie was born on 22 November 1917 in Wakefield the son of Alfred and Florence Smith nee Fisk who had married on 4 July 1917 at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, Westgate End, Wakefield. Florence Barbara was born in September 1922 and attended Batley Girls' Grammar School. Alfred was a manager of the Batley Branch of the Prudential Assurance Company. The family in 1939 lived at "Lynfield" 177, Soothill Lane, Batley.

Leslie matriculated at Thornes House Secondary School, Wakefield and he was the opening batsman and goalkeeper at the school. His first post after leaving school was at the Batley Branch of the Midland Bank where after four years he was transferred to the Selby Branch in 1939. Leslie was an opening batsman for Hanging Heaton and in Selby was the goalkeeper for Selby Town Football Club.

He also played cricket with Selby Londsborough in the West Riding League. In October 1940 Leslie married Margaret Mary Ibbitson of "The Holmes" Selby at Selby Abbey.

Leslie joined the Navy in early 1940, and after 48 hours leave returning on 10th March 1941 he sailed on the S.S. "Britannia" from Liverpool for Freetown. Durban, and Bombay. On the 25th March 1941, SS *Britannia* was carrying service personnel, passengers and crew when she was attacked by the German surface raider *Thor* and sunk. There were 492 people on board; 243 of them survived the attack.

Some of the survivors told their stories in newspapers: - The Times 5 April.

Some of the 76 survivors of a British ship who were rescued by the Spanish ship Cabo de Hornos and have arrived in Tenerife, gave harrowing accounts of their experiences.

Last month the ship was in mid-Atlantic when an enemy raider appeared and opened fire. The British ship was apparently badly hit, and her crew took to the boats and rafts. Five days later the Cabo de Hornos, which was at then some 700 miles from Sierra Leone espied three British seamen on a raft. They explained that others were also adrift, and the Spanish ship searched for them. Altogether 76 were picked up after having spent five days and nights in open boats or on rafts. A shark bit off the leg of one man when he was about to be rescued.

Life Magazine 19 May 1941: -

23 DAYS AT SEA IN A LIFEBOAT

One of the great sea odysseys of the war recently ended when 38 survivors of the British liner *Britannia*, shelled and sunk by a German raider in the South Atlantic on March 25, staggered ashore on the Brazilian island of Curupu after 23 days in a lifeboat. The survivors were 13 English officers and men, eleven Hindu passengers and 14 lascar members of the *Britannia's* crew. This picture, which arrived in the U.S. last week, shows the Englishmen shortly after they were brought to the mainland. Their glassy eyes reflect the ordeal. Some are wearing makeshift bandages over their injured hands and feet. Most of them have not yet had a shave. Following is a composite story of several of the British survivors as told last week to a LIFE reporter in Brazil.

THE SURVIVORS' STORY

Our lifeboat, built to hold 50, had 82 men. We took turns squatting and standing up. The wounded were placed at the bottom of the boat, but two inches of

water leaked into the bottom and some of the wounded drowned when their faces were pressed into the bilge by the crowd.

During the first week we saw eight ships. We shouted and burned oil so that might see the smoke. None did. When it rained one day, we filled three buckets with drinking water.

For the next 16 days we sailed the South Atlantic. The heat nearly crazed us and the glare closed our eyes until they were slits. Our skin festered with sores from the sun and salt water. Each morning we dumped overboard the men who had died the night before. At first, we buried them with a short religious service, but later we were too weak to do even this.

By the third week men began losing their minds. An Englishman named Smith screamed deliriously for his wife until he died. Those with strength left tried to bail out the boat and clean up the vomit of the seasick men. For food we had a daily ration of one cracker and a spoonful of condensed milk mixed with water. The lascars fought for the leftover cracker scraps. Our mouths cracked from dryness and the English chewed their pipe stems to create saliva. The other men sucked the buttons of their clothes.

After two weeks of sunshine, it rained again. We spread sails out to catch the rain and we opened our mouths to let the rain fall in. In desperation, however two Hindus drank salt water and later jumped overboard. We were too weak to rescue them.

On the 19th day the colour of the water changed and strands of seaweed floated by. Land could not be far away, but three more men died that day. By now there was much more room in which to sprawl out, but the legs of some of the men had become so numb from sitting that they could not move over.

On the 23rd day we sighted land! When our navigator saw it, he mumbled: "I have done my duty. You are all safe." Then he collapsed and died.

Later that day we landed at low tide. Many of the men could no longer walk or talk. They simply collapsed in the mud. The others stumbled further ashore,

MISSING AT SEA.

Soothill Parents Anxious for Son's Safety.

Wireless Telegraphist Leslie Smith, R.N., only son of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Smith, "Lynfield," Soothill Lane, Batley, is reported missing since April 26th. He is 23 years of age.

Six weeks ago he had 48 hours leave. He sailed the day after his return and no news of him has since been received.

At Thornes House Secondary School, where he matriculated, he was opening batsman and goalkeeper. His first post was in Batley Branch of the Midland Bank and after four years there he was transferred to the Selby branch two years since.

Mr. Smith was opening batsman for Hanging Heaton and in Selby he was goalkeeper for Selby Town Football Club. He also played cricket with Selby Londesborough, in the West Riding League.

He had been in the Navy just over a year and last October he married at Selby Abbey Miss Margaret Ibbotson, "The Holmes," Selby.

His father, Mr. Alfred Smith, is manager of Batley office of the Prudential Assurance Company.

He has one sister, Miss Barbara Smith, an "old girl" of Batley Grammar School.



Batley News, 3 May 1941

bowing their heads to thank God for deliverance. If these men had not awakened in time that night, the weaker men, lying in the mud, would have drowned beneath the incoming high tide. Shortly after the weaker men had been dragged to safety, we heard human voices. At the sight of the Brazilian fishermen who found us, some of us fainted with happiness.

Was Leslie the man named Smith who died before he could reach Curupu? Leslie is remembered with Honour at Hanging Heaton War Memorial (St Paul's) and Batley War Memorial. He was awarded the 1939-45 Star and the 1939-1945 War Medal.



Researched by members of
Batley History Group