

Gov. Tony Knowles Remarks
Pardon for James Willis
11/26/97

This is not an exact transcript

Many people have waited a long time for this day, but no one has waited longer than James Franklin Willis.

For several reasons, Mr. Willis could not be here today to witness the signing of this Clemency Order. He lives in Manhattan, New York. He's 72 years old. He's extremely hard of hearing. And he is ill.

Mr. Willis' physical condition today, stems partially from events that occurred more than fifty years ago. Events that, literally, scarred him for life. Mr. Willis was 20 years old when a judge sentenced him to five years in federal prison for manslaughter. The circumstances surrounding the killing are what bring us here today.

The incident that led to Mr. Willis' conviction began in a Wrangell nightclub in October of 1945. Mr. Willis was a Coast Guard engineer stationed aboard the U.S. Naval destroyer Sellstrom. Following a tour of duty in the Aleutians, the Sellstrom was docked in Wrangell to celebrate the end of World War II. On liberty for the first time in months, some of the crewmen went into town to dance.

Mr. Willis, an African American, made the mistake of dancing with a woman who witnesses say was either Native or white. Some of his shipmates took offense and a scuffle ensued. Later, aboard the Sellstrom, one of those men, Leonard Phillip Supernaw, came looking for Mr. Willis. Here's how one eyewitness describes what happened next:

"I was in my berthing compartment a short time after returning to the ship when I observed Willis running into the compartment immediately followed by Supernaw, who was chasing him," said Norman Smook, in a recently sworn affidavit. "Willis retreated to the rear of the compartment and there was nowhere else for him to go. Supernaw was pounding Willis with his fists and was savagely beating him. Willis was no match for Supernaw. I feared for Willis' life."

Somehow Mr. Willis broke away long enough to retrieve a knife from his locker. When Mr. Supernaw came at him again, Mr. Willis reportedly stabbed and killed him.

Before armed officers could intervene, other sailors had beaten Mr. Willis severely. There was talk of lynching, according to witnesses. The ship's officers quickly moved all four of the Sellstrom's African-American crewmen to the federal brig for safekeeping, while armed sentries were stationed on ship and shore to restore order.

Eyewitness testimony and the ship's own log suggest that a mob mentality prevailed after the killing and that a racially charged atmosphere was a factor in this case. Under

the circumstances, Mr. Willis' appointed lawyer may have served him well by encouraging his client to accept a manslaughter plea.

The Clemency Board, in recommending that I sign this pardon, did not find that Mr. Willis lacked effective council at the time, and this gathering is in no way intended to malign the lawyers and court officials involved in this case.

Nonetheless, today, new attitudes prevail and new evidence indicates that an injustice occurred. A dozen Sellstrom veterans, contacted by law students working for Mr. Willis, have recently signed sworn statements that Mr. Willis acted in self-defense.

The shame of a felony conviction is not the only legacy of Mr. Willis' short time in Alaska. While awaiting trial in a Juneau jail, he contracted a spinal infection. Antibiotics used to treat the infection left him nearly deaf. In addition, he has endured several spinal operations and a lifetime of lingering pain as a result of the attack aboard the Sellstrom.

Like most tragedies, this one has more than one face. It's important not to forget the man who died aboard the Sellstrom. At my request Attorney General Bruce Bothelo contacted Leonard Supernaw's brother in Texas to notify him of my intention to grant this pardon. Undoubtedly, that call opened old wounds and for that I am truly sorry.

Mr. Willis' quest is not yet at an end. He has spent most of his adult life trying to convince the Coast Guard he doesn't deserve the undesirable discharge that resulted from his felony conviction. It is my hope that this pardon will serve as a means to that end.

The nature of Mr. Willis' military discharge deprived him of — not only his reputation — but his medical benefits. In signing my first pardon since taking office three years ago, I would encourage Coast Guard officials to take another look at this unusual case in the light of a new era and new evidence.

Since his release from prison, Mr. Willis has lived a law-abiding life while bearing the stigma of a felony conviction. Today, it's time to relieve him of that burden.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge three respected leaders in Alaska's African-American community: Rev. Alonzo Patterson, of the Shiloh Baptist Church in Anchorage; Celeste Graham Hodge, president of the Anchorage NAACP, and former legislator Bettye Davis, who helped bring Mr. Willis' case to my attention.