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## Service Story of Cdr Kenneth G Sumnall OBE RN

Kindly donated to the RNIOA by the Wartime Heritage Association ([www.wartimeheritage.com](http://www.wartimeheritage.com)), Canada, entitled: *Kenneth Gordon Sumnall, Radio Theory Instructor, East Camp.*



Kenneth Sumnall was born on 30th May 1914, the son of Frank Edmund and Elizabeth (Marks) Sumnall of Hanley, Staffordshire, England.

Kenneth joined the Schoolmaster Branch of the Royal Navy in December 1939. After a period of training, he joined the light cruiser HMS *Nigeria* in March 1942. During his time aboard *Nigeria* he saw escort service on the Arctic/Russian Convoys up until July 1942. In March 1942 *Nigeria* provided distant cover for the passage of returning Convoy QP8, and she was deployed with the Home Fleet covering force for the passage of Russian Convoy PQ13 and returning convoy QP9.



Crown Colony-class light cruiser HMS *Nigeria* circa 1942. Source: public domain

In April, HMS *Nigeria* escorted the battleship HMS *King George V* from Rosyth to Scapa Flow to join the Fleet, served as part of Home Fleet distant cover for passage of Convoy PQ11 and returning Convoy OP10, and escorted Russian Convoy PQ15. In May, *Nigeria* was an escort for returning convoy QP11, and provided Home Fleet covering force for passage of the damaged cruiser HMS *Trinidad* to the UK for repair (HMS *Nigeria* came under air attacks on the return passage). She also provided cruiser cover for Russian Convoy PQ16 and for returning Convoy QP12.

In June *Nigeria* was deployed for convoy and fleet defence in the North West Approaches. On 30th June she joined Home Fleet distant cover for Russian Convoy PQ17 and cover for the returning Convoy, QP13. After the arrival of Convoy OP13 at Reykjavik, *Nigeria* resumed Home Fleet deployment.

In August HMS *Nigeria* joined as a reinforcement escort for the military supply convoy WS21S to Malta (as part of Operation Pedestal). On 10th August, the ship joined Force X at Gibraltar as escort for a convoy to Malta. On 11th August *Nigeria* came under attack by U-boats followed by torpedo and dive bombing. Aircraft Carrier HMS *Eagle* was sunk during the submarine attacks and on 13th August *Nigeria* was hit by a torpedo from the Italian submarine *Axum* during air attacks when entering Skerki Channel at Tunisia. The ship was stationary with everything out of action while flames were leaping out from one of the funnels.



HMS *Nigeria* after being torpedoed by the Italian ship *Axum*. Source: public domain

Below deck fifty officers and men perished, and others were wounded. The ship was a sitting target for a further attack and Italian aircraft dropped several torpedoes onto the water, but they failed to hit the ship. It was several hours before some power could be restored to the engines.

Escorted by destroyers, *Nigeria* began the long journey back to Gibraltar. Despite another torpedo attack from a submarine, she reached Gibraltar on 15th August. Those who were killed in action were buried with full military honours. *Nigeria* was given temporary repair in Gibraltar and on 7th October 1942 she departed Gibraltar for passage to the US Navy Yard at Charleston, arriving there on 23rd October.

It was with this wartime experience that Kenneth Sumnall, in November 1942, was posted to His Majesty's Canadian Ship (HMCS) *St Hyacinthe* in Canada, which was the Signal School at St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, and instrumental in training thousands of wireless operators during World War II. In January 1943 he was transferred to No 1 Naval Air Gunners' School (East Camp) at RCAF Station *Yarmouth* as a Radio Theory Instructor. He remained at East Camp until August 1944, when he returned to the United Kingdom.

He served during the establishment of Telegraphist Air Gunner (TAG) training in January 1943 with the arrival of the first course of TAG trainees, Course 45A at the Camp.



Royal Navy Officers at East Camp. Schoolmaster Kenneth G. Sumnall (2nd row second from left).  
Courtesy of the Sumnall family



Winter at East Camp. Kenneth Sumnall (fourth from right, wearing sheepskin jacket), Lieutenant Doust on the far left, next to Mr N. Tomlinson, and then Cdr Mudie. Courtesy of the Sumnall family

As Radio Theory Instructor, he was directly involved in the radio theory training of courses 45A through 65A. As an instructor, he was also involved in many aspects of East Camp life. At the time of his departure in August 1944, East Camp had evolved into a well-established training facility. During his time at East Camp in Nova Scotia, he made life-long friends with the local Canadian families he met through the camp connections.



Party at the Officers' Mess, East Camp. Courtesy of the Sumnall family



Officers at East Camp. Kenneth Sumnall (third row from bottom; third officer from the right);  
Courtesy of the Sumnall family

In 1945, while stationed at HMS *Dryad*, Portsmouth, he met his wife, Irene, who was also stationed at HMS *Dryad* as a Wren. After the war, he remained in the Royal Navy until August 1966, reaching the rank of Instructor Commander with his last appointment being at Royal Marines *Deal*. However, he held the rank of Schoolmaster whilst serving on HMS *Nigeria*, and while stationed at East Camp.

Confirmation of his promotion to Instructor Lieutenant in the Royal Navy was confirmed at the end of December 1946 when the Schoolmaster and Naval Instructor branches were amalgamated. His service included periods of duty in Singapore and Malta. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in January 1964 for services to Naval education.

Following retirement from the Navy, 'Ken' Sumnall returned to his original profession of teaching, settling in Cambridgeshire. He eventually retired from teaching in 1979. Instructor Commander Kenneth Sumnall died on 9th March 1986 at Whittlesford, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, England.

### **RNIOA Postscript May 2021.**

We wish to express our sincere thanks to George Egan, Chairman of the Wartime Heritage Association, for kindly donating this highly significant service story and thus assisting the growth of our collection.