

CUMBY, E.



Seaman Erastus Cumby (also found as *Comby*), Number 1777x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having relinquished his occupation as a fisherman and having travelled from Green's Harbour or Hopeall, Trinity Bay South, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on May 15 of 1915 Erastus Cumby reported...*to duty*...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same mid-May day of 1915, he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's* war-time service and likely underwent the required medical assessment at the same moment. He also possibly attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for the Senior Service.* – The photograph of the King attired in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from *the Royal Collection Trust* web-site and taken in or about 1935.)

His brother Edward Cumby (see further below) and he enlisted on the same date.



**At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist. Later recruits – as of or about May of 1916 - signed on for the ‘Duration’ at the time of their original enlistment.*



(Right above: The White Ensign has been flown by the Royal Navy in its present form since about the year 1800 although other naval ensigns had existed for at least two centuries. It consists of a red St. George's Cross – the national flag of England - on a white field with the Union Flag in the upper canton.*

**The Union Flag is commonly referred to as the ‘Union Jack’; this is, in fact, a misnomer since a flag is referred to as a ‘Jack’ only when flown from the bow of a ship.*

Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion in 1870 before the Reserve came into being in 1902.

Just fewer than four-hundred men were sought to enroll as seamen – apparently automatically at the rank of Able Seaman - and to present themselves annually in St. John's for five years in order to train for a period of twenty-eight days per annum. Allowed to report at a time of their own choosing, it is perhaps not surprising that these volunteers – mostly fishermen – were to opt to train during the winter months when fishing work was minimal.

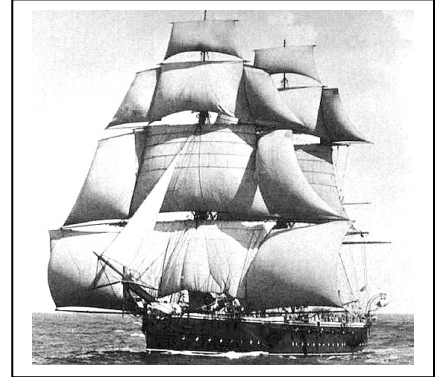
Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the onset of hostilities some twelve years later.

Of course, the purpose of having a reserve force at any time is to provide a trained force ready at any time to serve at a time of need or crisis. Thus in August of 1914, upon the Declaration of War by the government in London, hundreds of those men of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) were to make their way to St. John's, from there to take passage overseas to bolster the ranks of the Royal Navy.

An elderly vessel, HMS ‘Calypso’, having become surplus to the Admiralty's needs, had been provided to the Dominion of Newfoundland by the Royal Navy in 1902 for training purposes. After some debate it was eventually decided that she would be permanently moored in the harbour of the capital, her superstructure reduced, and a wooden shelter built on her upper deck to provide training facilities and living quarters for the prospective naval recruits.

(continued)

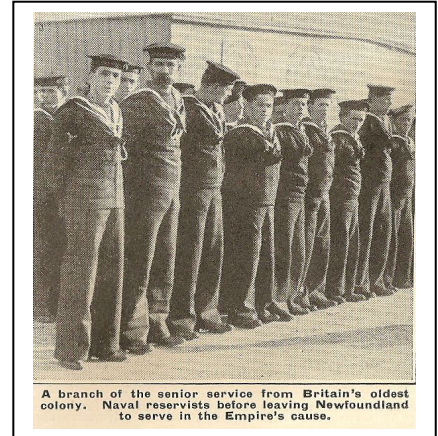
(Right: HMS 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – The Royal Navy photograph dated 1898 is by courtesy of the Admiralty House Museum)



Only two weeks* after having been...taken on strength...at 'Calypso', his sparse Service Records suggest that it was on May 29, having by that time been promoted from the rank of Seaman Recruit, that the now-Seaman Cumby was on his way to the United Kingdom.

**It appears that in many cases, even if the recruit in question had not already previously been with the Royal Naval Reserve, the required twenty-eight day training period, all or partially, was waived by 'Royal Proclamation'.*

However, the Discharge Register of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) records that Seaman Erastus Cumby was to board the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Calgarian* in St. John's Harbour as one of a draft of some eighty-five reservists, on the twentieth day of that June* - it was the seventeenth - and in the company of the two-hundred forty-two men and officers of 'F' Company of the Newfoundland above on their way to Scotland.



(Right above: Naval reservists from Newfoundland, during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from *The War Illustrated*)

(Right: The photograph of Newfoundland military personnel in tenders on their way to board 'Calgarian' is from the Provincial Archives. 'Calgarian' was not a requisitioned troop transport but in September of 1914 had been taken over by the British government to serve as an armed merchant-cruiser. She did, however, as on this occasion, at times carry troops and civilian passengers across the Atlantic. She was later torpedoed and sunk by U-19 off the north of Ireland on March 1, 1918.)



**Apparently the ship took nineteen days to make what was usually the journey of about a week. Not only was 'Calgarian' escorting four submarines, but she sailed by way of the Portuguese Azores and then Gibraltar – some of the Newfoundlanders apparently even having the time to cross the straits to spend a few hours in North Africa. She did not reach Liverpool until July 9 (See immediately below.).*

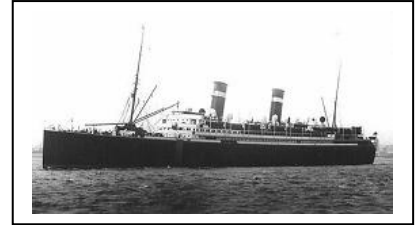


(continued)

(Preceding page: *The British Crown Colony of Gibraltar in pre-Great War days: The Spanish mainland is in the background beyond the harbour and Royal Navy dockyard. – from a vintage postcard*)

There follows here the account of HMS *Calgarian* and her trans-Atlantic crossing of June 20 to July 9, 1915...

The armed merchant cruiser HMS ‘Calgarian’ arrived in St. John’s Harbour from Halifax at about six o’clock in the morning of June 17, anchored and almost immediately began coaling. Her log suggests that she had sailed alone rather than in the company of the submarines (see below) since at times ‘Calgarian’ had been doing sixteen knots and the submarines’ top speed was only thirteen.



(Right above: *The photograph of the SS ‘Calgarian’ is from the naval-history.net web-site.*)

At about five-fifteen of that same evening of June 17 the personnel of ‘F’ Company of the Newfoundland Regiment came on board as well as eighty-seven naval reservists and a single petty officer.

June 18 was to be spent transferring stores to HMS ‘Calgarian’ and completing the coaling of the ship. On this day is first mentioned the SS ‘Glenalmond’, a smaller cargo ship which was to accompany ‘Calgarian’ across the Atlantic to Gibraltar, the vessel from which some of the above-mentioned stores were to be drawn, and on which a small detachment of eight naval reservists and some few more senior ranks were to travel.

Also noted for the first time in the log of that June 18 was one – the vessel H2 - of the apparently four submarines – ‘H1’, ‘H2’, ‘H3’ and ‘H4’ - which were to be escorted across the ocean. They had presumably already made the journey from Montreal where they had been built to St. John’s where they had been awaiting ‘Calgarian’. Where exactly the SS ‘Glenalmond’ fits into the picture is not clear unless she was the submarines’ depot ship or acting as an ocean-going tug.

‘Calgarian’ sailed out of St. John’s Harbour at ten minutes past ten on the morning of June 20, 1915, at a speed of ten – then lowered to eight – knots. This had surely been to allow the submarines, otherwise un-mentioned, to keep pace with the larger vessel.

Proceeding at a reduced rate of speed, often about eight and a half knots, it was not until the afternoon of June 26 that the small convoy of HMS ‘Calgarian’, SS ‘Glenalmond’ and the four small submarines reached ‘Flores Island’ in the Portuguese Azores. During those days ‘Calgarian’ had been towing Submarine ‘H3’, at times its crew being required to repair a broken towline.

The remainder of the afternoon and early evening was spent anchored off ‘Flores Island’ with the submarines in turn drawing alongside to take on fuel (diesel oil) and supplies. It was a task soon accomplished and – after ‘H3’s towing-line had once more been repaired – the ships were on their way again at a speed of nine knots just after ten o’clock on that same evening of June 26.

(Right below: ‘Delgado Point’ on ‘Flores Island’, close to where the convoy anchored, and then past which it sailed on June 26, 1915 – photograph the cruisemapper.com)

It was not to be until the late morning of July 3 that they arrived at the British possession of Gibraltar situated at the narrow entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. This was to be where HMS ‘Calgarian’ would part ways with ‘Glenalmond’ – her eight naval reservists and five higher ranks to transfer immediately to ‘Calgarian’*.



***The four submarines were now to enter the Mediterranean Sea and proceed to the island of Malta from where they were to operate for the remainder of the Great War – except for H3 which would strike a mine a year later, on July 15, 1916, and be lost with all on board.**



(Right: The photograph of ‘H4’ in Brindisi Harbour in August of 1916 is from Wikipedia.)

Two days only were spent in Gibraltar although a number of those on board were able to leave the ship for ‘liberty’ on July 4. On July 5, having taken on board coal, supplies and a number of German prisoners-of-war, the ship sailed at eight o’clock in the evening and for the first time in some two weeks was able to proceed at a speed greater than ten knots. She was now en route to Liverpool.

There she arrived without incident of July 9 and at ten minutes past eight of the following morning, HMS ‘Calgarian’s’ record-keeper documented... “Clypso” (sic) Boys left ship.

(The above has been adapted from the log-book of the armed merchant cruiser HMS ‘Calgarian’ for the period of June 13, 1915, to July 9, 1915.)

On July 10 of that 1916, Calgarian having docked in Liverpool, the Naval Reserve personnel would thereupon have been either posted directly to a ship or ordered to undergo further training – or to simply await a posting to one of His Majesty’s ships - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part operating around the coast of England.

In the case of Seaman Cumby, not having immediately been attached to a vessel, HMS Victory I (see below) was the establishment to which he was directed and where he was to remain until January 18 of the New Year, 1916 – although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned HMS Victory is not clear.

HMS ‘Victory’, like most of the so-called stone-frigates (naval establishments on shore), was three entities: it was a training establishment originally, and also a holding-barracks for seamen not only in training but awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty’s ships, its facilities initially set in the naval city and port of Portsmouth*; thirdly, it was also the ship

to which the majority of the land-based personnel would have been, at least officially and bureaucratically – if not physically - attached.**

At Portsmouth this vessel was HMS ‘Victory’, the warship from which Admiral Nelson had directed the Battle of Trafalgar – although her illustrious history is not limited to that one single incident.



***The large influx of personnel due to the War necessitated further Divisions and functions being transferred to other areas of the United Kingdom.**

(Right: HMS ‘Victory’ in dry dock in the southern English port-city of Portsmouth where she has been for a century – photograph from Wikipedia)

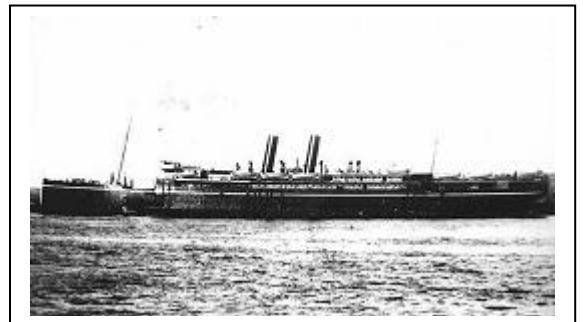
****Naval discipline differed in some ways from civil and even Army law, and those in naval uniform, even though based on land and perhaps never to go to sea, had to be on the books of a real ship for that discipline to be applied. Thus a normally small, obsolescent and obscure vessel – HMS ‘Victory’ was the exception - was used for this purely bureaucratic purpose.**

On the morrow of the above-mentioned January 18, 1916, Seaman Cumby was officially transferred to HMS *Moldavia*, an armed merchant cruiser where he was now to serve for some eleven months.

HMS *Moldavia* was to be attached to the 10th Cruiser Squadron, also known as the *Northern Patrol*, a force originally having comprised out-of-date warships which, by that January of 1915, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger–liners fitted with guns, some as elderly as a number of the venerable ships on which they were mounted.

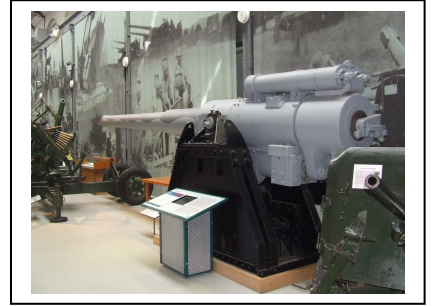
The ships of the 10th Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling for a fight. Their job was to form a part of the naval blockade designed to prevent ships carrying goods to Germany from reaching their destination; to accomplish this these vessels had to patrol the area of stormy waters encompassed by Ireland, northern Scotland, the Shetlands and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

(Right: The image of ‘*Moldavia*’ is from the navalhistory.net web-site. Of just less than ten-thousand tons and built in 1903 she was to be bought by the Admiralty in 1915 for war-time service. Converted and armed with eight six-inch naval guns and two smaller six-pounder anti-aircraft weapons, she was put into service on November 27, 1915*, for patrol work and, later, for convoy protection. She was torpedoed and sunk by U-boat 57 off the south coast of England on May 23 of 1918.)



****Although her log book does not record her as having been commissioned until February 1 of 1916, at a time when Seaman Cumby had already been nominally attached to her and was possibly already on board (but also see below).***

(Right: A six-inch gun such as those mounted on 'Bayano', although this one has been fitted for coastal defence – photograph from 2010(?) and taken at the Royal Artillery Museum at Woolwich)



Moldavia's log-book comes into being on that February 1 at a time when the ship was in the Port of London completing her re-fitting work. On February 5 she began to move downstream towards the open sea, pausing twice on the way for three days before undergoing gun trials off Sheerness. Having then sailed through the Dover Straits she continued around the southern coast of England as far as the port-city of Portsmouth where she was to remain for a week – was it at *this* time that Seaman Cumby joined the vessel's complement?

The very short passage to Southampton took place on February where even more time – seventeen days - were to be spent, almost all in dry-dock re-fitting and installing wireless equipment.

On March Seaman Cumby and *Moldavia* were on their way to their first patrol and were to sail around the remainder of England's south coast and the west coast of Ireland to arrive in position. En route, however, any shipping encountered was inspected as a matter of course.

Having reached its patrol position, HMS *Moldavia* was to stay at work until April 25 when she sailed into the Scottish port of Glasgow, there to re-supply and re-arm for the next patrol. In the meantime Seaman Cumby had seen land on only two occasions: from March 22 to 25 the ship had put into the *Olna Firth* in the Shetland Islands and from April 6 until April 8 when she had stopped at *Busta Voe*, also in the Shetlands.

Both halts had been to take on coal. During the period of the *Great War*, the majority of ships, including those of the Royal Navy, still were using coal even though oil was being introduced. Since leaving London at the end of the first week in March and up until the first coaling stop at *Olna Firth*, HMS *Moldavia* had sailed 3,687 miles (almost six-thousand kilometres) and burned 1,329 tons of coal.

During the entire patrol of seven weeks duration she had encountered twenty-one ships of the Royal Navy, some fifteen commercial ships flying the British flag and twenty-two foreign vessels some of which had been boarded – the ships of the Northern Patrol usually carrying a contingent of Royal Marines for this purpose.

Those northern seas of the 10th Cruiser Squadron's patrol area were a busy place - there had also even been a number of icebergs reported.

Four more such routine patrols, each of some seven weeks duration, followed during the remainder of the year of 1916 before HMS *Moldavia* sailed up the River Clyde to Glasgow

on December 20 of that year and Seaman Cumby disembarked and was officially discharged from her crew on December 23.

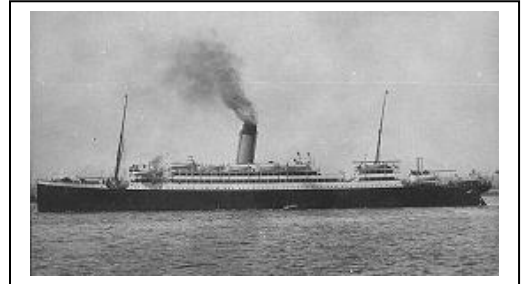
He was then...*taken on strength*...at HMS *Pembroke*, the Royal Navy shore-based establishment at Chatham in the English county of Kent. This may, of course have only been on paper and he may well have served elsewhere on the days that were to follow. But it was during this time that he, and a number of other Newfoundland reservists, being considered deserving of a month's furlough at home, were informed of their upcoming passage towards Newfoundland.



The journey was to be made on board another armed merchant cruiser: HMS *Laurentic*.

(Right above: *Some of the impressive buildings of the large Royal Navy complex which was a part of the HMS 'Pembroke' naval establishment at Chatham for just over one hundred years. Today it has been transformed into a university campus. – photograph from 2010*)

The ship was to sail from Birkenhead, a port adjacent to Liverpool, on that January 23 with a reported four-hundred seventy-five* persons on board as well as some forty tons of gold with which to buy munitions in North America.



(Right: *The photograph of 'Laurentic', likely seen here in peace-time as no guns are visible on her decks, is from the Naval-History.net web-site*)

**While it is recorded that 'Laurentic' was carrying no passengers or troops, it should be remembered that some of those on board were returning home for leave or for repatriation.*

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Buncrana in Lough (pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) Swilly to put ashore several sick crew-members. At five o'clock on that same afternoon *Laurentic* was under way again.

She then passed through the protective boom at the entrance to Lough Swilly (*Lough* pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) and gathered speed – it was apparently for her speed that she had been chosen to carry the gold as she could out-run most ships and any U-boat. She was barely three kilometres from the coast when she struck two German mines in quick succession and rapidly began to sink; nor after the second explosion was there any power and thus no distress signal could be sent.



There was little time to lower the life-boats although apparently all on board *Laurentic*, apart from perhaps some engine-room personnel who were already dead, were able to board them. It was to do them little good.

A snow-storm was blowing and most of the men were not clothed to resist it. Any help had to travel the length of the Lough and then through open seas to reach them. Apparently the nearest land could only be reached in the teeth of the gale that was blowing, a wind reckoned to be at minus twelve degrees, and the boats were filling with water.

And those that eventually managed to land found themselves isolated on the rocky, barren, un-inhabited coast of Donegal.

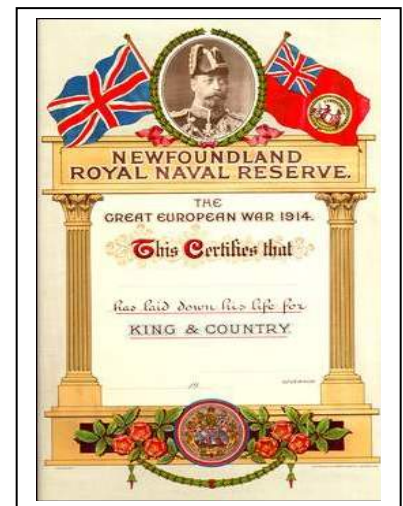
(Preceding page and right: *The Memorial to those who perished on that January 25 of 1916 during the sinking of HMS 'Laurentic'; and the churchyard of St. Mura of the Church of Ireland at Upper Fahan, Ireland, wherein stands the aforesaid Memorial and where many of the dead lie to this day – photographs from 2011*)



Little wonder, perhaps, that of the four-hundred seventy-five on board *Laurentic*, three-hundred fifty-four were to die.

(Right: *A Memorial Scroll, a copy of which was distributed to the families of those who had sacrificed their life while serving in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve*)

The son of George Cumby (found also as *Comby* and *Combey*, fisherman, deceased on January 31 of 1907) and of Hannah (also found as *Anna*) Cumby (née *Penny**, deceased of liver disease on January 16, 1895) of Green's Harbour before Hopeall, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Arthur, Bridget, Willis, Lemuel, Edward**, Joseph, William-John and Leonard*** – this last named as his next-of-kin.



**The couple had been married in the Parish of Harbour Grace on December 9 of 1879.*

NOTE: *Erastus may well have been the 'Orestes' Cumby, recorded in Methodist Parish Records for Green's Harbour as born on August 1, 1891 (but also see immediately below).*

Seaman Erastus Cumby was recorded as having died in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic*...on January 25 of 1917 at the age of twenty-four years: date of birth in Green's Harbour, Newfoundland, August 2, 1893 (this date from only his enlistment papers).

(continued)

Seaman Cumby served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada as is cited in some sources, notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman Erastus Cumby was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



*****Edward Cumby enlisted in the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) on the same May 5 of 1915 as did his brother Erastus, and sailed for overseas service with him from Newfoundland on board the armed merchant cruiser HMS ‘Calgarian’ on June 20 of the same year.***

Once in the United Kingdom the two brothers reported to HMS ‘Victory’, a shore-based naval establishment in the port-city of Portsmouth. There their ways were to part: Erastus eventually to serve on another armed merchant cruiser, HMS ‘Moldavia’ – to be seen above.

On July 18 of 1915 Seaman Edward Cumby was transferred to HMS ‘Excellent’, the Royal Navy Gunnery School, from there to be further posted five weeks less a day later to serve on HMS ‘Cormorant’, apparently to remain there for over eighteen months.

There were two hired fishing vessels named ‘Cormorant’ but they were also numbered: ‘Cormorant III’ and ‘Cormorant IV’, the enumeration made to avoid any problems of identification. This leaves the un-numbered ‘Cormorant’, the harbour service and base ship stationed at the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea at Gibraltar.



(Right above: The image of HMS ‘Cormorant’ is from Wikipedia. She was one of five such vessels built for the Royal Navy and commissioned in and about 1878 for use in the surveillance of Britain’s numerous trade routes. Stationed as far afield as Australia, the Pacific and Canada’s west coast, in 1889 she was ordered to Gibraltar, there to play several roles for some sixty years, until 1949 when she was ultimately scrapped.)

There appears to be no record of Seaman Edward Cumby’s duties on ‘Cormorant’ at Gibraltar and on March 2 of 1917 he was back on the nominal roll at HMS ‘Victory I’, the Division of HMS ‘Victory’ which trained seamen and held them until such time as they were to be posted to one of His Majesty’s ships.

He was to remain attached to ‘Victory I’ for three months and five days before being dispatched to ‘Pembroke I’ – another shore-based establishment and another holding-barracks for seamen. On this occasion he was to be held there for a month until July 9.

His next and final posting was back to Newfoundland, to HMS 'Briton' (ex-'Calypso') to which was transferred officially on July 7 of 1917. However, the St. John's newspaper 'The Evening Telegram', in its issue of July 26, 1917, lists the names of thirty-seven Newfoundland Reservists who were to arrive that evening in the capital on board the trans-Island express train from Port-aux-Basques. They had travelled home from Liverpool, sailing on the SS 'Corsican' as of July 13 to Québec City, having then taken the train to North Sydney to make the crossing to Newfoundland on the ferry.

One of that thirty-seven was a Seaman E. Cumby; and since his brother Erastus, the only other Reservist E. Cumby on record, had already died on board HM Armed Merchant Cruiser 'Laurentic', this was surely Edward.

The exact day on which he was to report back to HMS 'Briton' is not clear but when he eventually did he was to be ordered to perform duties – unspecified in his papers - on land. He is recorded as having been...‘taken off strength’...on February 28 of 1918.

The 1921 Census finds Edward Cumby married and with his family living in the community of Hopeall.

******Leonard Cumby, Number 786, had also enlisted into the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), but apparently prior to the advent of the Great War and before his two brothers, Edward and Erastus.***

Having received a summons from the naval authorities in the summer of 1914, he reported...to duty...on HMS 'Calypso' on August 4. But what those duties were to be has seemingly not been documented – although he was likely signed on for a single year of war-time service and may have had to pledge his allegiance – if he had not already done so - to the King-Emperor, George V.

However, medical problems were now to interfere with any overseas service that the Admiralty may have had in mind and Seaman Cumby was subsequently, on November 10 of 1914, to be declared unfit medically.

His very few military records suggest that he was perhaps deemed suitable for shore duties in Newfoundland but there appears to be no subsequent information except for the 1921 Census which finds him married and living with his family in the Trinity Bay community of Hopeall.

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 22, 2023.