

Admiral Sir Martin  
Eric Dunbar-Nasmith  
VC, KCB, KCMG



The VC awarded to  
Dunbar-Nasmith VIA  
ALEXANDRA GEARY/NMRN



Dunbar-Nasmith as  
Flag Officer-In-Charge,  
London, 1942 NMRN

# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Admiral Sir Martin Dunbar-Nasmith was widely regarded as the most daring and skilled submariner of World War One. When he was invited by Roger Keyes (later Lord Keyes), then Chief of Staff to the commander of the Royal Navy squadron off the Dardanelles, to “go and run amok in the Marmora”, Nasmith did not need a second invitation.

Martin Eric Nasmith was born on April 1, 1883 – April Fool’s Day – in East Barnes, then in the county of Surrey. He was the eldest son of Martin Nasmith, a wealthy stockbroker, and his wife Caroline. The couple’s two other sons also served during World War One and, like their eldest brother, both were decorated for their courage.

Nasmith was educated at Eastman’s College, Winchester. His distinguished naval career began in May 1898 when, aged just 15, he entered HMS *Britannia*. In September 1899, he was promoted to naval cadet serving in HMS *Renown* before another promotion in February 1900 saw him elevated to the rank of midshipman. Three years later, in February 1903, Nasmith was promoted to sub-lieutenant.

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His submarine training began in July 1904 when he was sent to the depot ship HMS *Thames* in Portsmouth. In May 1905, Nasmith was promoted to lieutenant, and, within less than two months, he received his first command, HMS *A4*. The first blip to his career – and it was a major one too – came in October 1905 when the wash from a passing steamer spilled through the submarine’s open ventilators. She only surfaced just in time to save the boat and her crew. Nasmith was court martialled but escaped with a reprimand.

### Royal run around

In 1912, Nasmith was in command of the submarine HMS *D4* when King George V and his second son, the future King George VI, and the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill arrived in the royal yacht to observe naval manoeuvres. The group, at the king’s request, embarked on *D4*, which, in the words of *The Times* newspaper, “made a lengthy run in her when she was submerged”.

In the run-up to war, he continued to impress, serving exclusively in submarines with the exception of a 15-month-stint in

HMS *Indomitable*, an armoured cruiser. Perhaps his most important role during this time was in August 1912 when he was based in Fort Blockhouse, the Royal Navy’s submarine depot in Gosport, Hampshire, where he was involved in the training of submarine officers. It was during this year’s service that he was credited with making British submarines and those serving in them more innovative. In May 1913, in recognition of his excellent work, he was promoted to lieutenant-commander. In August 1914, he moved to Harwich, Essex, to command the new *E11*, which was commissioned the next month.

The start to Nasmith’s World War One was slower than he would have liked. In October 1914, *E11*, along with two other E-class submarines, went to the Baltic. However, Nasmith and his crew had to abort their operation due to mechanical problems. In December of the same year, he suffered another setback when the torpedo he fired at an enemy battleship passed directly underneath without hitting. Blaming himself for the near-miss, Nasmith, who was known to his crew as ‘Nazims’, vowed not to touch either alcohol or cigarettes until he had sunk an enemy ship.

The Sea of Marmora (sometimes spelled ‘Marmara’) is an inland sea located entirely within the borders of modern-day Turkey. It connects the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. Nasmith’s run of bad luck ended when he was dispatched there and given relatively free rein on when and where to strike.

His first sinking took place on May 23, 1915, when he destroyed the torpedo gunboat *Pelenk-i-Dria* in shallow water off Constantinople, in the process learning another lesson. There was such delight among the crew that the periscope was left up for too long to view the sinking. This enabled a gunner in the sinking ship to fire a shot that damaged the periscope.

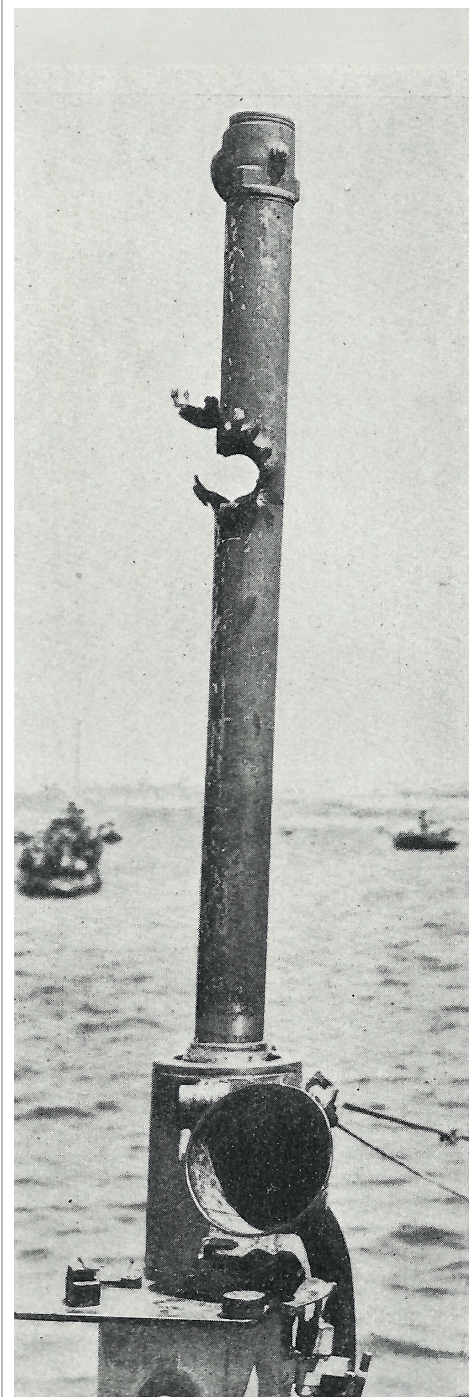
### Youngest captain

Nasmith’s VC action took place from May 20 to June 8 and his citation, published in *The London Gazette* on June 25, 1915, stated: “For most conspicuous gallantry in command of one of His Majesty’s Submarines while operating in the Sea of Marmora. In the face of great danger, he succeeded in destroying one large Turkish gunboat, two transports, one ammunition ship and three storeships, in addition to driving one storeship ashore. When he had safely passed the most difficult part of his homeward journey, he returned again to torpedo a Turkish transport.”

Nasmith’s two officers were awarded the Distinguished Service Order for their part in the first patrol to Marmora

and his crew were each awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

The final sinking related to a coal-carrying ship that, when it came into sight of the docks at Constantinople (now Istanbul), drew an enthusiastic “welcoming committee” because water, electricity and rail transport had all suffered due to a lack of coal. The ship had barely berthed when it blew up before the eyes of the astounded crowd. Nasmith and his crew successfully slipped out of the area again having achieved an incredible and daring strike. In fact, as it left the area, *E11* snagged a Turkish mine which it towed for several miles before freeing itself.



HMS *E11*'s shell-damaged periscope NIDAY/ALAMY

The second of Nasmith's three patrols to the Sea of Marmora took place from August 5 to September 3, 1915. During this four-week period, he damaged the cruiser *Peyk-i Şevket* and destroyed the elderly pre-dreadnought battleship *Barbaros Hayreddin*, a gunboat, six transports, a steam ship and 23 sailing vessels. His final patrol was, without question, his most daring because it lasted for 47 days during November and December 1915 – the longest operation by a single submarine in Marmora. During this patrol, Nasmith and his crew sank or disabled five large and three small sailing vessels, along with the Ottoman destroyer *Yar Hissar*. In addition, he launched a second attack on Constantinople harbour, sinking a large Black Sea steamer.

Nasmith received his VC from George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on January 15, 1916. Of course, he had met the King before in May 1912 as the sovereign inspected fleet manoeuvres off Weymouth. However, there was a feeling that Nasmith's bravery in his second and third patrols was not fully recognised. Some thought he deserved a Bar to his VC, others at the very least the DSO and Bar. Instead, in April, he was made a Knight of the Légion d'honneur and, two months later, he was promoted to become the youngest captain in the Royal Navy, aged just 33.

By any standards, Nasmith and his crew had enjoyed an incredibly successful eight months up to the end of 1915, but it was then time for him to spend time in the United Kingdom. He took part in several North Sea patrols before, in February 1917, taking command of the 3rd Flotilla's six boats in the Firth of Forth. He had further submarine commands before the end of the war.

### Brave and accomplished

Nasmith's immediate post-war role, to which he was appointed in September 1918, was to lead the 7th Flotilla, including time spent in the Baltics in 1919. He was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath in March 1920 and the following month married Beatrix Dunbar-Dunbar-Rivers, daughter of Royal Navy Commander Harry Dunbar-Dunbar-Rivers. It was at this point that Nasmith decided to change his own surname to Dunbar-Nasmith. The couple went on to have a daughter and two sons.

From 1921-23, he was given the command of the battleship *HMS Iron Duke* and he was flag captain to the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean.



Ambrose McEvoy's half-length portrait of Dunbar-Nasmith circa 1918, depicting the submariner as a captain

From 1926-29, he was captain of Royal Navy College, Dartmouth, during part of this time also acting as Aide-de-camp to the King. He was promoted to Rear-Admiral in 1928 – again one of the youngest to achieve such high rank. Between 1929 and 1931, Dunbar-Nasmith commanded the Submarine Service.

In October 1932, Dunbar-Nasmith was promoted to Vice-Admiral and from 1932 he was Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station. He was also knighted in 1934. From 1935-38, he served as the Second Sea Lord, being promoted to

Admiral in January 1936. His service continued into World War Two in the role of Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth, and as C-in-C, Western Approaches until 1941. He officially retired in 1942 but was employed in the Officers Active List for four more years in the role of Flag Officer-in-Charge, London.

Holding the rank of admiral in retirement, Dunbar-Nasmith had more time for his hobbies – sailing, skiing and forestry – but he also took on the role of vice-chairman of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. He was also Deputy

*“Dunbar-Nasmith is still revered by the Submarine Service, and many of the innovations he designed are still used to this day”*

The crew of the destroyer HMS *Grampus* welcome HMS *E11* as she returns from the Sea of Marmora  
TOPFOTO



Lieutenant and, later, Vice-Lieutenant of Morayshire, Scotland, where he lived with his wife in his later years. He was created a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George in 1955, while his wife served as Deputy Superintendent-in-Chief of the St John Ambulance Brigade.

Sir Martin Dunbar-Nasmith died at Dr Gray's Hospital, in Elgin, on June 19, 1965, aged 82. His death came almost 50 years to the day after his actions in the Dardanelles. He was buried at Holy Trinity Churchyard, Elgin. A road, Nasmith Close, is named in his honour in Gosport and there is a plaque in his honour at Trincomalee Naval Base (now the SLM Dockyard) in Sri Lanka. His medal group remains in the care of his family today.

In April 2015, a blue plaque was unveiled at his birthplace in Barnes, London. That June, a paving stone was laid in his hometown of Rothes to mark the centenary of his VC. Sir Martin's grandson, Duncan Dunbar-Nasmith, who was just seven when his grandfather died, said: "It has become clear to me how interested people are in my grandfather's

achievements. He is still revered by the Submarine Service. It only began in 1901, so everyone was still finding their way during World War One – and many of the innovations he designed are still used to this day. Every year I give a talk to recruits at Faslane who still see him as an inspiration. Moray became his home, and he was very involved in the local community. The commemoration event will be a proud day for the family."

Dunbar-Nasmith's two brothers were Major Reginald Nasmith DSO, MC, who survived World War One, and Captain Arthur Nasmith DSO, who was killed at the Battle of Arras in April 1917. Furthermore, one of Martin Dunbar-Nasmith's two sons served with distinction in the Royal Navy from 1939 to 1972, retiring as Rear-Admiral David Dunbar-Nasmith, CB, DSC, RN.

During World War One, submarines were still in their infancy and there is no doubt that Sir Martin Eric Dunbar-Nasmith, VC, KCB, KCMG, was one of the bravest and most accomplished first-generation submariners not just in the Royal Navy, but in the world. **BW**

## VICTORIA CROSS HEROES VOL.II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II*, was first published in 2016. For more information, visit

[victoriacrossheroes2.com](http://victoriacrossheroes2.com). Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit [iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://iwm.org.uk/heroes)

and details about his VC collection may be found at [lordashcroftmedals.com](http://lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Follow him on X and Facebook: @LordAshcroft

