

James McCudden VC: His Last Flight

by Alex Revell

Tuesday 9 July 1918. McCudden was in London in the morning. At 10.30 he called at Whitehall Court to say goodbye to a friend, Mrs Alec-Tweedie, a prominent socialite and hostess of the day, with sons of her own in the RAF. She had been aware of his earlier tussle with the Air Ministry for a posting to an operational squadron and had asked him then why he was so anxious to get back to France, pointing out that he had already done so much; that he deserved a real rest from the fighting. McCudden had explained that he had only brought down fifty-seven enemy aircraft, plus perhaps another twenty or thirty that had not been officially awarded, and that he must get back to outstrip Manfred von Richthofen's record.¹

That morning, he assured her that he did not intend to take any unnecessary risks that he would fight at his own pace, with no 'dashing stunts', and would do nothing foolish like his brother Anthony, who had been killed in March. Saying goodbye, McCudden then excused himself, saying that he had lots still to do before he left for France but that he would be back in three months and promising her a letter from France the next day.

McCudden's next stop was to say goodbye to his sister Mary, who was working in an annex of the War Office in the National Liberal Club at No.1 Whitehall Place, a short step from Whitehall Court.

The fact that he visited Mary suggests that he had not stayed the night at Kingston, where he would have seen her earlier that morning, but had previously said goodbye to his family, possibly the previous evening. Although he made light of them, these partings were always painful. Writing to his long-term girlfriend, Teddie O'Neill, telling her that he was going back to France, he had said. *Look in on my mater and my sisters. You know a fellow can't say all he feels, and I always want to cry inwardly when I leave them, because they look such a lot of things. Cheer them up when you can and put a good face on things.*

Busy in the office, Mary was told she had a visitor. She looked up to see McCudden at the door. Because of the newspaper publicity he was by now well-known, recognisable to the general public, and his arrival caused quite a stir amongst the young, mainly female staff. McCudden explained to Mary that he was returning to France that morning and had called both to say goodbye and to give her his medals for safe keeping,



Leaving for France, McCudden gave this portrait to Mrs Alec-Tweedie on the morning of 9 July.

feeling that she was the best person to look after them.

Mary placed the case containing the medals on her desk and left with McCudden to say goodbye in private. They walked together to the corner of Whitehall Place and Whitehall, where McCudden hailed a taxi. It was a beautiful sunny day. They said their goodbyes; McCudden hugged her, then stepped back and gave her a smart salute before getting into his taxi. Mary watched it until it was lost to sight in the London traffic.

Back at her desk, Mary opened the case, and proudly showed her brother's medals to her colleagues: his VC, DSO, MC, MM and Croix de Guerre, plus his campaign stars. The head of the office, a colonel, joining the admirers, pointed to his own medal ribbons, commenting *I would give all these for that one*, his finger on McCudden's Victoria Cross.²

McCudden arrived at Hounslow sometime after midday. His SE5a C1126 was ready. After he had made a final, walk-round inspection, finding everything to his satisfaction, he climbed into

the cockpit, made a few last-minute checks, and took off for France.³

On the aerodrome of Auxi-le-Chateau, the home of 8 and 52 Squadrons, the afternoon had been pleasantly warm and work for the day was coming to a close.⁴ A few airmen, still with one or two duties, looked up at the sound of an approaching aeroplane. Their own squadrons' aeroplanes had been bedded down for the night and the arrival of a visiting aeroplane was not unusual, but seeing it was an SE5a, they paused in their activities to watch its landing. Both their own pilots and those who visited often complained that landing at Auxi-Le-Chateau could be tricky, the aerodrome's narrowness being exacerbated by the woods on two sides of the field, and the airmen watched with interest as the pilot of the little scout made his approach, finally touching down in a neat, precise landing, bursts of power bringing it to a stop in front of the tents.

Two airmen, Corporals W.H. Burdett⁵ of 8 Squadron and L.E. Vallins⁶ of 52 Squadron, were standing by the tents and the pilot of the SE beckoned to them. They went over. The pilot asked them where he was. He then asked if they knew the position of Boffles aerodrome. They told him that it was to the north-east, only three or four miles away, just over the rising ground. He thanked them and asked them to help him turn. This done, he acknowledged their help with a wave to stand