

2/LT(T. CAPT.) J. B. MCCUDDEN. D.S.O. MC. MM.
GEN. LIST & N°58, 50DN. R.F.C.

Major James Thomas Byford
McCudden VC, DSO & Bar,
MC & Bar, MM



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Major James McCudden VC
CHRONICLE/ALAMY



An RAF-commissioned painting by Harold Wyllie showing SE.5s in action with German Albatross Scouts, typical of the actions in which McCudden was involved OFFICIAL ARTWORK

Major James McCudden was one of the most dedicated and decorated pilots of World War One. Like so many of our bravest airmen, he combined a ruthlessness in the sky with modesty once back on the ground. He took an unusual career path, initially following his father into the Royal Engineers before transferring to the Royal Flying Corps, the forerunner of the RAF.

McCudden, the third of six children, was born on March 28, 1895, in the Female Hospital, Brompton, Kent. His father, William, was a career soldier and his mother was Amelia (née Byford). As a result of his father's career, 'Jimmy' attended the Royal Engineers Garrison School at Brompton Barracks, Kent.

His elder brother, Bill, joined the Royal Engineers as a bugler in 1905, aged 14. Five years later, James too enlisted – also aged 14 – and was given the rank of bugler six months later. His father kept a watchful eye on his young son and, realising he was being bullied by an NCO, arranged for James to be transferred to serve in Gibraltar from February 1911 to September 1912. On his return to Britain, James was stationed at Weymouth, Dorset, with No.6 Company, Royal Engineers.

Jimmy McCudden's interest in flying originated in 1909 when, close to where he lived with his family, John Moore-Brabazon became the first Englishman to fly for a circular mile in a British-built aircraft. This event, which resulted in Moore-Brabazon being described as the "first British pilot", took place less than six years after the Wright brothers recorded the world's first powered flight in the United States.

A poor start

McCudden applied to the Royal Flying Corps, which had been created by Royal Warrant in April 1912. He was accepted in April 1913 as an air mechanic 2nd class, but just as his early career in the Royal Engineers had not gone smoothly, nor did it in the Royal Flying Corps. The young engineer caused a crash between two stationery aeroplanes when he was instructed to practice propeller starts on a Caudron aircraft, having not realised the ignition was in the 'on' position. This meant the Caudron's momentum forward was only halted when it collided with another aircraft, badly damaging both machines. To add insult to injury, the out-of-control aircraft also hit the car of McCudden's CO.

Great embarrassment and five days in the guard room followed before he was released under "open arrest".

It was while McCudden awaited trial for his carelessness that he made his first flight as a passenger in a BE.2a. Shortly after, he received seven days detention and 14 days loss of pay for the earlier accident. Putting aside the incident, McCudden was soon an established member of 3 Squadron and, by the end of 1913, had 30 hours of flying experience. The following year, he was able to make several more flights, some with his elder brother. By August 1914, McCudden was an air mechanic 1st class and the world was at war. He transferred to France with his squadron and took part in both the Battle of Mons and Battle of the Aisne.

The predicted swift victory for Britain and its allies failed to materialise and in his newly promoted role as corporal-in-charge of engines, McCudden had to start and run the engines of all his squadron's aircraft before dawn each day. In November 1914, 3 Squadron moved to Gonnehem, north of Béthune in France, and in April 1915 McCudden was promoted to sergeant, after which he sometimes flew as an observer, before being chosen for pilot training. However, McCudden's



McCudden's modified SE.5A in 1918 CROWN COPYRIGHT

*“Mac” McCudden was
a natural pilot”*

engineering responsibilities meant that his first training flight did not take place until February 1916, by which point his brother, Bill, had been killed in a crash in his Bleriot monoplane while trying to land when his engine developed a fault after take-off.

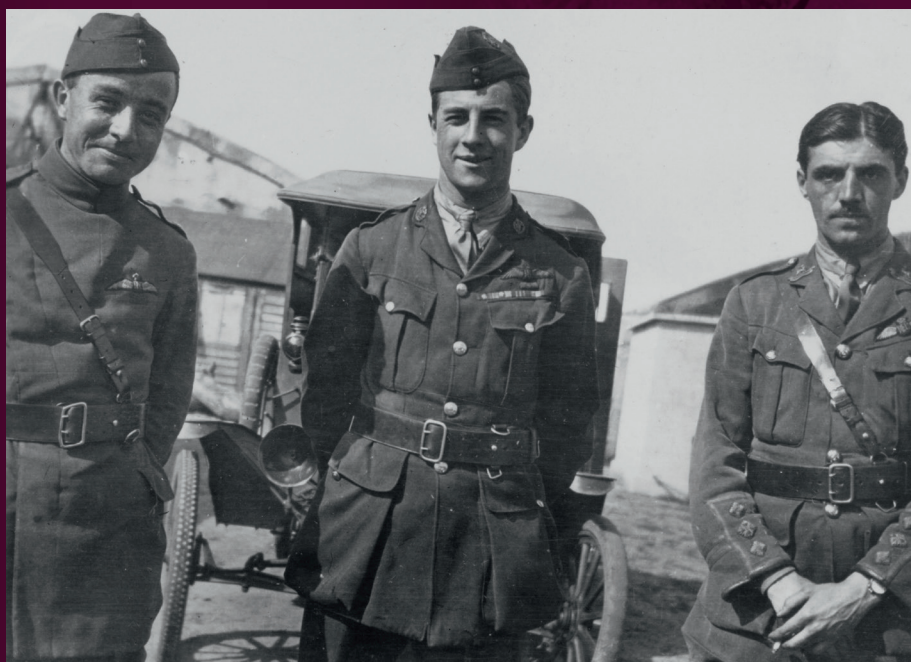
McCudden, who was usually known as ‘Mac’, was a natural pilot and was awarded his 1st class pilot’s certificate at the end of May before being posted to 20 Squadron. He achieved his first combat victory north of Messines in Belgium on September 6. The following month he was awarded the Military Medal, as his citation stated, “for gallantry, courage and dash.”

On January 1, 1917, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant and, after some leave, returned to 29 Squadron. Later that month, he was shot down for the first and only time in his career. A Fokker biplane blasted off three-quarters of his propeller, forcing him to land but in Allied-held territory near Arras. In February, he secured his fifth victory, becoming an ace.

Relentless bravery

As his career went from strength to strength, McCudden accepted an invitation to join 56 Squadron, which was in France flying the new SE.5 scouts. He formally took command of ‘B’ Flight on August 14, 1917. McCudden’s SE.5 was fitted with a four-bladed prop and he mounted a red German spinner taken from a downed aircraft, reputedly to increase the performance of his fighter and enhance his visibility to his comrades.

McCudden had great respect for the talents of the German pilots he flew against and sometimes killed. None more so than Werner Voss, who he and his pilots from 56 Squadron met in combat on September 23. Their fight began at 8,000ft but soon dropped to 2,000ft with the German managing to hit most of his attackers before being outnumbered, shot down and killed. McCudden shared



McCudden (centre) with fellow comrades in 56 Squadron HULTON/GETTY

the belief of a comrade that Voss was “the bravest and most skilful Hun I have ever seen”, vowing to visit the parents of German pilots he had killed after the war to congratulate them on rearing such fine sons.

On January 3, 1918, the *Daily Mail* ran a major story under the headline *Our Unknown Air Heroes*, which focused primarily on McCudden. However, he disliked his newfound fame, preferring to quietly concentrate on the job in hand. By this time, McCudden has also been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross for separate acts of gallantry. Then, on April 2, 1918, it was announced in *The London Gazette* that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross for his relentless bravery in the skies. His lengthy citation stated he had accounted for 54 enemy aircraft of which 42 had been “definitely destroyed”.

The citation stated: “On two occasions he has totally destroyed four two-seater enemy aeroplanes on the same day, and on the last occasion all four machines were destroyed in the space of 1 hour and 30 minutes. While in his present squadron he has participated in 78 offensive patrols, and in nearly every case has been the leader. On at least 30 occasions, while with the same squadron, he has crossed the lines [frontline] alone, either in pursuit or in quest of enemy aeroplanes. As a patrol leader he has at all times shown the utmost gallantry and skill, not only in the manner in which he has attacked and destroyed the enemy, but in the way he has during several aerial fights protected the newer members of the flight, thus keeping down their casualties to a minimum. This officer is considered, by the record he has



McCudden in the cockpit of his SE.5A ALAMY



The death of McCudden made the front pages, with the *Daily Sketch* dubbing him the “ace of aces” JOHN FROST NEWSPAPERS/ALAMY

made, by his fearlessness, and by the very great service he has rendered to his country, deserving of the very highest honour.”

Some sources claimed that McCudden had shot down multiple enemies on the same day on no less than 11 occasions. Bars to his DSO and his MM had earlier followed for further bravery, meaning he was awarded an incredible six gallantry awards in well under two years. His VC along with four other decorations were presented to him by George V at an investiture in Buckingham Palace on April 6, 1918, just four days after his VC was announced.

True gentleman

McCudden, who was a single man, had an English bulldog called Bruiser and when the pilot was told he had to fly from London to France he elected to take his pet with him in the rear seat. That plan had to be abandoned when he was given a single-seater aircraft.

Flying from Hounslow airport in daylight but a heavy mist, he landed at what he thought was his intended destination, only to discover that it was Auxi-le-Château airfield, the home of 8 Squadron. After getting directions to a nearby airfield, McCudden took off again after 6pm on July 9, 1918. Within a short time, and with his SE.5 C1126 at no more than 70ft, the engine appeared to stall according to eyewitnesses. Realising something serious was amiss, McCudden turned to land again, but could not get down and instead crashed into woodland. McCudden was found alive in the wreckage, suffering from a fractured skull. He was taken to 21 Casualty Clearing Station, where he died about three hours later. He was 23 and held the rank of major. He was buried in the Waverns Military Cemetery, France, the next day.

“No British airman received more decorations than McCudden – quite an achievement for someone who had started the war as an air mechanic”



The shattered windscreen from McCudden's SE.5A is preserved at the Imperial War Museum in London MAURICE SAVAGE/ALAMY

McCudden had not lived long enough to receive the Freedom of Gillingham, which he had been offered and accepted. However, on the morning of July 9, he had given his medal collection to one of his sisters, telling her: “I’m going off to France again. I’ve come to hand over my medals” His mother later received his posthumous Freedom of Gillingham on behalf of her son. It had been placed in a silver casket and she also received war bonds and cash.

There were many tributes to McCudden after his death and in the following years. Major (Sir) Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt, later Air Chief Marshal, who had once been his CO, described him as quiet and unassuming: “He was a gentleman in the true and real meaning of the word. High principled, tolerant and very generous in his judgment of others, he had a natural modesty which I am sure remained untouched by his subsequent fame and success.”

At the time of his death, he had achieved 57 victories, making him the seventh most successful fighter ace of the war. No British airman received more decorations than McCudden during World War One – quite an achievement for someone who had started the war as an air mechanic. His edited memoirs, *Five Years in the Flying Corps*, were published in 1919, then republished in 1930 under the name *Flying Fury*.

McCudden's medal group can be seen at the Royal Engineers Museum in Gillingham, Kent. His name is on a family memorial in Chatham, Kent, and on the RAF memorial at St Clement Danes, London. He is the subject of a portrait by Sir William Orpen, which is on display in the Imperial War Museum, London. There is a plaque in his honour at Sheerness Parish Church and at the War Memorial, Gillingham. [BVI](#)

HEROES OF THE SKIES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Heroes of the Skies*, was first published in 2012. For more information, visit heroesoftheskies.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 and details about his VC collection may be found at lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X and Facebook: @LordAshcroft

