

# Captain James McCudden

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Captain James McCudden  
two days after receiving the  
Victoria Cross

Exactly twenty-eight years ago this month, in April, 1913, a certain lad of eighteen joined the Royal Flying Corps as an Air Mechanic, or to be accurate, transferred from the Royal Engineers, in which for three years he had served as a bugler. Five years later, on April 6th, exactly twenty-three years ago this month, he attended, as a Captain RFC, an investiture at Buckingham Palace. He was by then a few days past his twenty-third birthday – quite elderly as RFC pilots went – but he hadn't been wasting his time, for he was there to receive from the King not only the Victoria Cross, but also the DSO, a bar to it, and a bar to his Military Cross.

That young Captain was James McCudden, probably the most famous of all British Great War pilots. His total of victories at his death was fifty-seven, and not only had he been the first pilot to bring down four Germans in one day, but on one occasion he had managed to destroy three enemy aircraft in twenty minutes. This last feat, remember, was in the days when anything over 100 mph was fast and when fighter-planes were only armed with two guns, so it must be considered pretty good going. Here is his own story of that triumph, taken from his published memoirs. Even at this distance of years there are still one or two fighting tips to be picked up, still one or two lessons to be learned.

'January 13 turned out to be a morning after my own heart, so I left the ground at about 9.30 am to fly with the red spinner for the first time. (McCudden had just had a spinner, taken from a German plane he had shot down, fitted to his own SE5 to increase his speed, and painted red so that his patrol could keep him in view). I gained height towards the lines, at which I arrived at 16,000 feet, and not seeing any Huns near the lines, as the visibility was not too good, I crossed over the find Huns getting height over their aerodromes. I was about ten miles east of the lines at 17,000 feet when I saw a two-seater below, and west of me, flying over the canal towards Le Catelet.

'Knowing that I was too high for him to see me I thought I would try to surprise him. I closed my radiator-blind and throttle, and, gliding in between the sun and the Hun, got down to his level at 9,000 feet and saw that the machine was an LVG, gliding down, with his engine just ticking round. I flew up to him and knew he hadn't seen me, for his rear gun was pointing vertically upwards, showing that the gunner was not holding it, so when I got within good close range, about 100 yards, I pressed both triggers; my two guns responded well, and I saw pieces of three-ply wood fall off the side of the Hun's fuselage. Then the LVG went into a flat right-hand spiral glide until it hit the ground a mass of flying wreckage, just north of Lehancourt, where it was also seen to crash by our Archie gunners.

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'I then saw three V-strutters on my right. I preferred to fight them nearer our own ground, so after they had followed me towards the lines, I suddenly turned round and pointed my red nose at them, and they were off like a shot, and away miles east of the lines in no time.



An LVG of the German  
Army Air Service

'I now flew north, and saw two DFWs at a height of 5,000 feet being shelled over our lines by our AA batteries. I went down at once and got into position behind the nearest, into whom I fired a burst at 300 yards range, when he at once burst into flames and went down vertically and hit the ground like a blazing comet, west of Honnecourt. This DFW was my fortieth victory.

'I now paid attention to the remaining DFW who was determined not to share a like fate to his comrade, and so we fought for nearly five minutes, but he knew every trick and worked the fight very skilfully over his lines, as a two-seater can, for he is usually defending while the scout is attacking most of the time. We were now east of the trenches and as there were plenty of enemy machines about I returned west, for I was fairly low down.

## I was so interested in noting details of the machine that I forgot all about his front gun until he opened fire . . .

'As soon as I crossed the lines I saw our Archies banging off above me, and, on looking carefully, saw two LVGs flying west at about 9,000 feet. I climbed and whilst getting up to their level I was hit in many places by a British shell that burst near me. This, however, did not deter me, and I very soon got up to their level while they continued to circle round over our lines. They saw me coming up, and no doubt said, 'Ach! Only a miserable SE; we need not worry!'

'I flew behind the one who was closest to me; so they drew in together to get both their rear guns to bear on me. Apparently they thought I was still out of effective range when I opened fire at fully 400 yards. The first one at which I fired burst into flames and then fell to pieces, the wreckage falling in our lines near Lempire.

'This was a third two-seater that I had destroyed in a space of twenty minutes, and so naturally I was convinced that my red spinner was bringing me luck . . .'

Even after his 'hat-trick' McCudden was not satisfied. Indeed he nearly got a fourth. For we learn that 'the second LVG had now cleared off to the east, so I went north and saw a DFW crossing our lines over Gouzacourt at about 13,000 feet, but I wanted him to come farther over our lines, so that I could get him in our territory. I turned west and he followed me, and came up so close behind me that I could see the faces of the pilot and gunner, who was looking over the side of his fuselage at me. I was so interested in noting details of the machine that I forgot all about his front gun until he opened fire . . . However, I soon pulled myself together, did a climbing turn, and got behind the DFW who now turned east, and I attacked him all the way back to the lines and well over, but that DFW crew knew how to handle a two-seater in defence, and so they got home to dinner, and they deserved it too . . .'

It was for these and many similar exploits that Captain James McCudden received his Victoria Cross, his DSO and bar, and his MC bar at the hands of the King that April 6th, 1918.

Three months later he was killed – after his many fights – in a trivial accident. He was flying out from England to take command of No 60 Squadron and landed at an intermediate aerodrome in France. On leaving the ground again on the last stage of his journey, his engine stopped, and, in trying to turn in order to get back into the aerodrome, he side-slipped into the ground, a type of accident that even today costs England the lives of so many pilots.

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