

Plate 4



Plate 4: Sydney Cunningham when a Staff Officer in 1918.

**The Retreat from Me**

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to John Cunningham  
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"The Retreat from Mor

*August 10*

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*August 11*

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enthusiasm  
pitched camp

*August 12-21*

Havre.  
and cleaning



Officer in 1918.

### ***The Retreat from Mons***

John Sydney Cunningham was born in Australia in about 1875 to John Cunningham and Kate (nee Hitchcock). When Kate was widowed, she travelled to England with her two children - her diary of the voyage is summarised in a previous chapter of this book.

We have a leather bound book presented to Sydney as a school prize by the headmaster of the Abbey School in Beckenham in Kent in 1885.

We do not have any further record, but when he was adult, he joined the regular army. By 1914 he had risen to the rank of Captain, and was commanding C Company in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Middlesex regiment. We have a small notebook written in faded pencil, and with "The Retreat from Mons" on the cover.

#### *August 10*

Left Woolwich at 5 am arrived Southampton 11.30 am. C & D embarked on Princess Ena and lay alongside all night. C Coy officers occupied Ladies Lounge.

#### *August 11*

Left Southampton 4 am escorted by destroyers - disembarked Havre 3 pm. Much enthusiasm displayed. Arrived (?) Sanvic pitched camp 10 pm.

#### *August 12-21*

Havre. In billets fed at Café - pitching and cleaning camp.

*August 22*

Btn. Left Havre, destination unknown.

*August 23*

Arrived Valenciennes 8 am marched and took up positions on Mons-Conde Canal. C Coy on extreme left of Btn. Cameronians on my left. My Coy in sight of Conde - entrenched positions with obstacles on paths. Heavy rifle and machine gun fire to my right about 8 pm. B Coy attacked Blakeney wounded.

*August 24*

Received order to retire at 1.40 am .2 hr and 40 minutes in coming. Retired Company to (?) Quevrain joined remainder of Btn; sent Gould to say I had taken this route. We chased by Germans for 7 miles and fired at. Continued retirement to (?) Jenlan - entrenched.

*August 25*

Bodies blown up. Continued retirement early - rested at (?) Hanssy at noon. Carabiniers and other cavalry badly shelled - losses apparently not heavy - left bivouac in time as enemy began shelling just as we left. Shelled through village (name unknown).

Arrived Le Cateau in evening very long march. 4<sup>th</sup> Divn. Entrenched covered our retirement. Slept at Le Cateau in a shed.

*August 26*

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*August 27*

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paragraph is written "Battle of Le Cateau"].  
Paraded 4 am to continue retirement. Btn  
rearguard to Brigade. C & D Company's rear  
party lively exit from town had to barricade  
roads attacked all along by Uhlans - 3 men in  
Coy hit before clear of town. Continued  
rearguard action when told by Col Cameron  
(5 Divn) that we were going to stand and  
fight. Told to take Company behind a wood  
and join remainder of Btn. Did so. Battery in  
position. A & S higher and ourselves moved  
onto hill near Le Cateau. Took up position  
about 10 am. Heavily shelled - good many  
casualties - Spence wounded. Retired to  
second trench. Cavalry retired from our flank,  
total of about 800 on our hill - Mddx, Scots  
Fus & Argylls. Masses of enemy appeared  
front and both flanks - must have been some  
thousands. At 3.30 ordered to retire towards  
(?) D'Estiers. Retirement successfully carried  
out - men wanted very little steadying and no  
panic. Ought to have all been scuppered,  
shelled through village, but enemy evidently  
cautious after losses.

Continued retirement late into the  
night, went into bivouac near D'Estiers. Very  
wet uncomfortable night. Slept in wet straw  
next to Ross.

#### *August 27*

Fell in 2 am and continued retirement  
west of St. Quentin to Ham (40 miles in 24  
hours). Spies shot. First wash for days.  
Outposts.

*August 28*

Outposts 6 am. Left Ham 11.30 am. Marched through Noyons. Col Ward Brigadier. Major Ross Bde. Major. Brigadier met with accident - Bde. Major killed at Le Cateau. Arrived Pontoise midnight.

*August 29*

Good night. Outposts later - counter orders frequent - bivouaced outposts. Hudleston nearly shot by own sentry.

*August 30*

Up early. Hurried move - arrived (?) Attichy. Bridges blown up.

*August 31*

Left 6 am. A delightful march for hours through Forest of Compiègne. Men tired out. Outposts. Weird night. Bad position had (?) town section. Enemy reported all over the place.

*September 1*

Left very early, not attacked. A Coy fired at some Uhlans - got in touch with enemy (all arms) during morning. C & D took up position on hill to cover retirement of 1<sup>st</sup> cavalry Bde. who had had a bad time. Took up position then got orders from Rowley to get in touch with D Coy and go for village of Nery. Went on with No 9 Platoon - Gould following with remainder of Company. Went through village to right. G followed to left. Place had been badly shelled. Battery and (?) Bays horses. Horses and men dead and

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*September 2*

Left 5.30  
had not been  
intense. Bivouac

*September 3*

Left for I  
sur Marne 1.30  
night.

*September 4*

Slack day

*September 5*

Moved  
Pontcarre.

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wounded all over the place. Made way through village joined by C.O. continued to crest found D Coy who had assisted in capture of 8 guns and about 40 prisoners. Smashed blocks of 9 guns. Escort told off for prisoners. Remainder of Company turned up having taken some prisoners. [written sideways on this page - Battle of Nery].

Paul got German horse which I rode for a time when mine was killed. Jeffers wounded and think in hands of the enemy as had to retire from Nery because of very superior numbers coming on. Retired to (?) Frinous outposts. Had position hold off in dark and got them somewhat mixed up in dark Was telescoped with D Coy during night - too many woods and dead ground about - available area for troops too great.

#### *September 2*

Left 5.30 am for (?) Dammartin glad we had not been attacked. Many halts. Heat intense. Bivouaced.

#### *September 3*

Left for Langy 1.30 am: arrived Langy sur Marne 1.30 pm. Rest camp 4 pm. Good night.

#### *September 4*

Slack day. Good news.

#### *September 5*

Moved 1.30 am. Passed through Pontcarre.

*September 6*

4.30 am moved - joined by (?) and 1<sup>st</sup> reinforcement. Started advance and evening passed through Jonssigny - Villeneuve.

*September 7*

Up at 6 am (quite late for a change). Horrocks and draft arrived - continued advance v enemy through (?) Senis & (?) Coulhammes and came to Le Chateau where met small party of enemy. Driven off by Essex regt.

*September 8*

[written sideways on this page Battle of the Marne]. Up at 3 am. Expected order to move v enemy - fine weather. XIX Bde Fusiliers on extreme left - no enemy in sight. Trekked on to (?) Prevelence to a bivouac where we bathed. Town looted. Marched on until enemy's rearguard located at Signy Signets River Marne. A & C Coy sent on in advance. Advanced Coy. Over hill to take up position - immediately shelled dropping however in rear of Coy but onto B Coy which was badly handled. Shelled for one and a half hours. My horse killed and groom wounded. Serious losses among the horses. Remained on outposts and dug in. Remained there all night.

*September 9*

Relieved at 7 am by Cameronians, shelled. - no casualties. Halted Company in rear. Later joined by A & D who had also been relieved. Enemy apparently then retired

after very heavy

*September 10*

Up at 3. route - crossed bridge, other b Marched through badly handled flank guard considerable disformation - de Many evidence and broken down shells thrown clothing etc.

*September 11*

Continued of captured (?). Continual heavy weather heavy well soaked. B rest and good Major 11<sup>th</sup> Bde.

*September 12*

Up at 5. Tigny - rained. retiring. Arrive barn with the m

*September 13*

Up at 4 departure del Voluntary out Paploe with G Moved off thro

after very heavy shelling from us - bivouaced.

*September 10*

Up at 3.30 - advanced; breakfasted en route - crossed River Marne by pontoon bridge, other bridges blown up by Germans. Marched through La Ferte which had been badly handled by Germans. Bde. Acted as flank guard to III A Corps. Moved considerable distance in preliminary artillery formation - dead horses (German) plentiful. Many evidences of hurried retreat of enemy and broken down vehicles, cars, wagons. Live shells thrown away (3000 in one place), clothing etc.

*September 11*

Continued pursuit C Coy leading. News of captured prisoners (1000). (?) (?) Continual halts as (?). Much done boiling weather heavy thunderstorm. All got pretty well soaked. Billeted at Marigny. Had a good rest and good meal. Major Ross apptd. Bde Major 11<sup>th</sup> Bde.

*September 12*

Up at 5.30 am and moved off through Tigny - rained. Canonading all day. Germans retiring. Arrived at (?) Buzancy. Billeted in a barn with the men - no lights.

*September 13*

Up at 4.45 prepared to move on - departure delayed owing to situation. Voluntary outdoor service by Revd. Webb Paploe with God Save the King afterwards. Moved off through Pozieres.



The diary ends at this point, though there are many blank pages left.

From the Mons-Conde Canal to the Marne is about 103 miles as the crow flies. The Encyclopedia of World History (Edited by William Langer, Houghton Mifflin, 1956) summarises these events as follows:

August 4. In the night the Germans crossed the frontier of Belgium.

August 20. Von Kluck entered Brussels.. The British Expeditionary Force (four infantry and one cavalry divisions, about 90,000 men) under the command of Sir John French (till Dec 1915), had begun to land at Le Havre (Aug 7-17) and to concentrate on the left of the French Army, at Le Cateau and Maubeuge.

August 23. Battle of Mons. First contact between Germans and English. The latter were obliged to fall back with the French 5<sup>th</sup> Army. Further delaying action fought by the British (Gen. Smith-Dorrien) at Le Cateau (Aug 26<sup>th</sup>).

Spectacular German advance, as the French and British fell back to the Marne River. The French government moved to Bordeaux (Sept 3-Dec). Joffre hastily formed a 6<sup>th</sup> Army (Gen. Maunoury) on his left, to outflank the German 5<sup>th</sup> Army. In the meantime Moltke, believing a decision had already been reached by Aug 25<sup>th</sup>, detailed six corps from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> armies to serve on the Russian front. Two of these were actually dispatched, later being sadly needed on the German flank, and arriving too late in the

east to be of n

August 30. Von the west of F with Von Bul Kluck realise from Manour Paris. On the and Bulow to danger. In the was allowed t German armie

September 5 Manoury and other (battle o Gen Gallieni Joffre decide offensive (Sep on the right : Sept 6-9 no outflank Man the German 1<sup>st</sup> and French fa Sept 9 Von K fall back (or from German

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August 30. Von Kluck gave up his advance to the west of Paris, in order to keep contact with Von Bulow's 2<sup>nd</sup> Army. By Sept 4<sup>th</sup>, Von Kluck realised the danger threatening him from Manoury's 6<sup>th</sup> French Army before Paris. On the same day Moltke ordered Kluck and Bulow to turn southwest to meet this danger. In the course of the operation a gap was allowed to open between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> German armies.

September 5-12. Battle of the Marne. Manoury and Kluck tried to outflank each other (battle of the Ourcq). Strongly urged by Gen Gallieni (military governor of Paris) Joffre decided to order a general counter offensive (Sept 5) in the hope of breaking in on the right and rear of Bulow's 2<sup>nd</sup> Army. Sept 6-9 no decision. Kluck's efforts to outflank Manoury increased the gap between the German 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> armies, but the British and French failed to take advantage of this. Sept 9 Von Kluck and Von Bulow began to fall back (oral instructions of Col Hentsch from German Headquarters in Luxembourg).

The whole German line began to withdraw west of Verdun. Cautious advance of the British and French.

September 13. The Germans stood, north of the Aisne River.

Reading these accounts, one is impressed with how different things were before the development of air power. The real achievement of the British and French Armies was to keep their troops in such good

shape after a march of 100 miles with continual harrassment, that they could launch a counterattack when the opportunity was presented.

We have a typed legend to a lost photograph detailing the Officers of the Battalion (1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex) and noting Capt. S. Cunningham as being wounded in November 1914. In this picture of 31 officers, 12 were listed as killed; and 14 as wounded. Four were decorated for the Retreat from Mons and Battle of the Marne.

Sydney Cunningham later won the DSO in Salonika, and became a Senior Staff Officer (AQMG) in the Middle East. We have letters to his mother in England between 1917 and 1923. When he retired from the Army, he bought a cottage in Melrose in the border country of Scotland. Here he founded the Curling Club, and trained spaniel dogs as gun dogs, winning a number of trophies which I can remember seeing in the gun room there in 1936. He died during the war, and my father and I went up by night train to attend his funeral.