

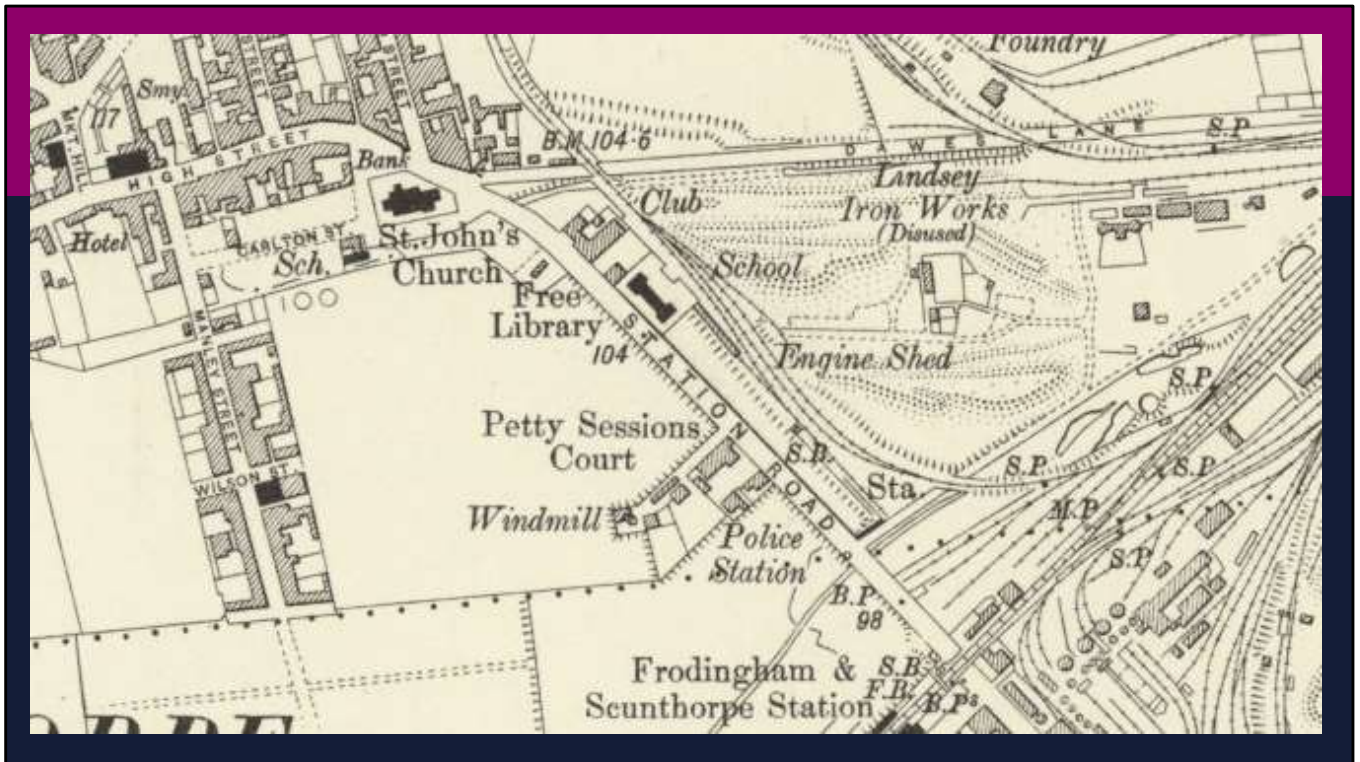


FOR VALOUR

John Cunningham VC



Welcome. Today we're going to be looking at John Cunningham, a VC recipient from Hull who was also a Romany Gypsy and has relatives among the Durham Gypsy Community today. In fact, it was the DCC Gypsy, Roma, Traveller and Community Cohesion Service who first told me about Jack when they asked me if I could do some research on him. I was really intrigued as, despite having researched a fair number of WW1 soldiers, I'd never come across him and hadn't researched many outside of County Durham. So, I'm really glad to have this opportunity.



Jack was born on 28 June 1897 in a caravan at Swain's Yard, Scunthorpe. Swain's Yard is no longer there, but this OS map gives you an idea of the area.

He was the eldest son of Charles, a licensed pot hawker, and Mary Ann Cunningham. He had six brothers and one sister. I've been unable to find them on the census, which is a shame as it's a great resource for investigating families, but unfortunately, Gypsies are less reliably recorded than those in static accommodation.

During John's childhood, the family would travel during the summer, including to County Durham and Darlington, where they had relatives. They would winter in Hull, where they eventually settled more permanently.



DCRO Ref: D/DLI 14/2/62(30) (8)

Hull in the early 20th century was entering a time of relative prosperity. It was granted city status in 1897 and though it was still quite poor compared to cities of a comparable size, its port – around which much of its wealth was centred – was much more productive than in previous decades. The city centre was rebuilt at the turn of the century. In 1904, a memorial to the dead of the Boer War was erected in Paragon Square. The same place would also later honour the fallen of the First World War.

Not all of this wealth made it down to the workers and the poverty was a continual problem, particularly given the uncertain nature of employment in the shipyards and heavy industries that provided most jobs in the city.

Because it was a port city, the population was more diverse than elsewhere, with a high proportion of foreign born people, including German Pork Butchers – who would doubtless encounter difficulties in

the war years – and a sizeable Jewish population who had fled the Russian Pogroms.



Image courtesy of Hull History Centre

Jack's family lived in the Hessle Road area of Hull. This area has changed immensely now, between the Hull Blitz in WW2 and various regeneration efforts by the city council. When Jack knew it, the area was very much a busy, working class community.

Although now based in Hull, the family continued to travel and John went on to become a hawker like his father.



He was described as ‘a good lad’, ‘cheery’ and had a pet whippet named Meg. This picture was taken after he won his VC and the dog pictured here may well be Meg as she was definitely present in his home when a journalist visited to interview his parents not long previously.

At any rate, Jack, who turned 17 in June 1914, was by all accounts a happy young man who certainly couldn’t have anticipated what lay around the corner...



The outbreak of war in August of 1914, changed everything. Around the country, men rushed to enlist in the Armed Forces, encouraged to do so by the plethora of adverts, including Kitchener's famous 'Your country needs you' poster, and influenced by patriotism and social expectations.

A key challenge for the Army in these early days was how to organise these new recruits. For, while men were certainly needed, Britain had never really had a sizeable Army, historically relying on its Navy, supported by a well trained body of professional soldiers.

The new men were grouped in the battalions attached to the existing county regiments. For Hull, this was the East Yorkshire Regiment. Though recruits could choose which unit they served with, at least at the beginning of the war, many were to serve in their local regiment with other local men.



DCRO Ref: D/DLI 2/18/30

In the FWW, this was taken a step further with the creation of pals battalions. The idea behind these was idealistic at heart: men from a given town or city would serve together, meaning that friends and neighbours would train and fight alongside one another, rather than with strangers.

It certainly did this, but there was an unfortunate downside.

As the war progressed, the realities of trench warfare and the resulting tactics meant that battalions could be decimated if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was one thing if these men's grieving families were spread around a county, something else entirely if they were all in a single town.

But, in 1914, with the country riding high on expected glory of war and the confidence that it would be 'over by Christmas', that was a reality that just wasn't foreseen.



Photo courtesy of Bernard Sharp

Four pals battalions were raised in Hull, to be known as the 1st – 4th Hull Battalions. Four battalions from a single city was no mean feat, especially considering that city was a port where many men would more naturally join the Navy or Merchant Navy and was also covered by several existing regiments in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

So successful, in fact, was this idea that on the first day of recruiting, the office ran out of attestation forms. Not wanting to slow things down, they rushed out to copy the form – which was technically illegal, although I doubt anyone in the Army hierarchy lost much sleep over it. Within a week, the 1st Hull Battalion was at full strength, though the men were yet to be equipped and trained, and the 2nd Hull Battalion began recruiting. Before long, they were onto the 3rd.

As they recruited each battalion, officers focused on a particular group or class of men, in the theory that men would be more prepared to join if they knew they would be serving alongside others of a similar

background. The 1st Hull Battalion became known as the 'Commercials' as they were comprised of clerks and businessmen. The 2nd Battalion was to be a 'tradesman's battalion'

On 12 September a meeting was held at the Park Street Artillery Barracks (pictured), aimed at attracting sportsmen and sports enthusiasts as it had been decided this would be the 'sportsmen's battalion'. Perhaps it is significant, then, that Jack was to join up two days later.

honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs, and Successors, His Enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Officers set over me. So help me God.

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE OR ATTESTING OFFICER.

named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any question furnished as provided in the Army Act.

were then read to the Recruit in my presence.

that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken

on this 14 day of Sept 1914.

Reproduced courtesy of the National Archives, Kew

However, this was also where I double checked my maths.

I checked his date of birth, 28 June 1897, and the date of enlistment, which is quite clear on his attestation form, 14 Sept 1914. He was 17 yrs and 2 months old.

The form also contains the information he gave the recruiting office, such as his name, place of birth and, of course, his age.

1.

2. In the Parish of.....
near the Town of.....
in the County of.....

3.

4. Years..... Months.

5.

Reproduced courtesy of the National Archives, Kew

Which is something less than clear. Unfortunately, the service records from the FWW were destroyed or damaged by fire during the SWW and, while Jack's survives, some of the writing is lost.

The Army would certainly not have allowed him to enlist had he declared his true age.

MILITARY HISTORY SERVICE

1. Service at Home and Abroad.

COUNTRY	FROM	TO	YEARS
Home	14-9-14	14-12-1915	1
Med Exp Force	15-12-1915	16-4-1918	2
Home	17-4-1918	26-6-1918	3

Reproduced courtesy of the National Archives, Kew

He was also sent abroad at in December of 1915, at which point he would have been 18 years and 5 months, breaking the Army's rule of not sending 18 yr olds overseas. They must have believed him to be 18. Certainly, he was not as far under age as some boys who lied in order to enlist.

His brother also enlisted underage.

SERVICES of No. 21		Na	
Part in which served	Part or Dep	Army Rank	Dates
Service towards limited engagement reckons from 14-9-14			
Joined at Hull		on 14-9-14	
3 Hull Batt	12th	Attested	12 SEP 1914
6 Yorks Rgt	12th	POSTED	14 SEP 1914
	10th	Posted	11.2.1918
	Depot	Posted	17.4.1918
	Depot		

Reproduced courtesy of the National Archives, Kew

His service record also reveals that he was posted to the 3rd Hull Battalion. In December 1914, the designations would be changed and they were numbered alongside the rest of the East Yorkshire Regiment. The 3rd Hull Battalion became the 12th Battalion (3rd Hull) of the East Yorkshire Regiment.

I'm not sure that will have made much difference to Jack, who will have been emersed in his training by that point.



DCRO Ref: D/DLI 2/18/32

Recruits like Jack, who joined in the first months of war, had a different experience from those who came before and after.

Billeted at home

Equipment shortages – wooden rifles, no uniforms

Getting used to Army life and discipline

Sportsmen's battalion – cut across class distinctions.

3rd October – Route march through Hull to attract more volunteers. No uniforms, so they marched in their civilian clothes, with armbands to denote their battalion.



DCRO Ref: D/DLI 7/752/11(28)

When the Hull battalions did finally leave British shores, it wasn't for France but for Egypt.

This isn't actually as unusual as it might at first seem. The Suez Canal, as the shortest sea route between Europe and Asia was a vital strategic asset and the Ottoman Empire (modern Turkey) was an enemy nation.

It must have been an experience for Jack and the other men to travel by ship – despite living in a port city, most of the men were not sailors – and to find themselves in a climate and culture so different to their own.

In some ways, their lives were not too different for those of any soldiers in wartime. They wrote and received letters – there was a complaint at one point that the 'Commercials' were writing too many letters. They had at times to cope with insufficient rations, particularly when the men were stationed outside of Port Said ('Sed'). They

encountered the perennial problem of lice – inevitable when so many people live at close quarters.

They spent Christmas of 1915 here and in February 1916, they were on the move again. The destination wasn't announced, but many men had a good idea where they were going.



DCRO Ref: D/DLI 2/8/62 (7)

The trenches of the First World War need almost no introduction. Enough films, books and exhibitions have been created that many of us have a strong impression of the realities before we look at an archive or open a history book.

And the reality was horrific. Miles upon endless mile of barbed wire separating equally endless miles of trenches, where soldiers would – sometimes for weeks at a time – live in the most basic conditions, enduring mud and rats, to say nothing of the constant fear of enemy bombardment and sudden gas attacks.

Men were not constantly on the front lines, however. They were rested away from the front lines at regular intervals and might, for example, be billeted in a farmhouse miles from the front lines where some relaxation might be possible, even if they could not forget where they had come from and, ultimately, where they would be going back to.



DCRO Ref: D/DLI 7/920/10(5)

As Jack and the other men from Hull arrived on the Western Front, preparations were already beginning for a big offensive to take place at the end of June – what would come to be known as the Battle of the Somme. On one day, 1 July 1916, The British Army suffered 57,470 casualties, including 19,240 killed, more than on any single day in the history of the British Army. Their gain? Three square miles of territory.

The men from Hull were lucky in that they were in a reserve position. Even so, though their losses and experience couldn't compare with those of the attacking units, they did still sustain some casualties and spent the day waiting in trenches, under German bombardment, for the order that they were to 'go over the top' - leave their trench and join the attack. The order didn't come, but the wait must have been agonising.

The Battle of the Somme, however was not fought in a single day. It went on for five months, finally ending in November 1916 with the

Battle of the Ancre. This was where Jack was to earn his VC.

*War Office,
13th January, 1917.*

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to confer the Victoria Cross on the undermentioned Men:—

No. 12/21 Pte. John Cunningham, E. York. R.

For most conspicuous bravery and resource during operations.

After the enemy's front line had been captured, Pte. Cunningham proceeded with a bombing section up a communication trench. Much opposition was encountered, and the rest of the section became casualties. Collecting all the bombs from the casualties, this gallant soldier went on alone. Having expended all his bombs, he returned for a fresh supply and again proceeded to the com-

munication trench, where he met a party of ten of the enemy. These he killed and cleared the trench up to the enemy line.

His conduct throughout the day was magnificent.

No. 7709 Pte. David Ross Lauder, R. Sc. Fus.

For most conspicuous bravery when with a bombing party retaking a sap.

Pte. Lauder threw a bomb, which failed to clear the parapet and fell amongst the bombing party. There was no time to smother the bomb, and Pte. Lauder at once put his foot on it, thereby localising the explosion. His foot was blown off, but the remainder of the party through this act of sacrifice escaped unhurt.

Image Courtesy of the London Gazette

Rather than summarise his actions, I'm going to read out the citation as it was printed in the London Gazette.

You may have noticed the date – January 1917. The reason for the delay is simple: paperwork. Awarding a medal was the end result of a lengthy involving various recommendations by officers and quite a lot of forms. So some time would pass before the man himself was informed and still more before it was announced publicly.

He was the first man from Hull to be awarded the VC. One of only two men from the Hull Pals Battalions to be awarded this honour.

And the celebrations began. Literally.

At this point, the county had been at war for three Christmases longer than expected. There was conscription, food shortages and no end in sight. So acts of outstanding bravery such as Jack's were celebrated

with voracious energy. These men were heroes and were treated as such. VC winners became celebrities in their home towns and the local papers in Hull were quick to pick up on the news.



Image Courtesy of the London Gazette

The Hull Daily Mail devoted much of its third page to Jack's achievement. It includes a photo of him and both his parents, describes his action and mentions that his home street has become something of a tourist spot within the city. 'Edgar Street, a humble throughfare near St James Church, Hessle Road is indeed in the limelight. It has drawn visitors like a kind of magnet'.

The unnamed journalist had also visited the family home where he spoke to Jack's mother, who had this to say about her son's achievement. 'He is a very good lad; we could not have had a better. A strong lad, who could do a day's work with anybody, he practically kept this home.'

A neighbour added, 'He had a brave and bold heart and seemed to fear nothing from being a boy'.

It refers to the family as 'hawkers' – a common term for Gypsy in those

days and mentions that the war has inhibited their ability to travel. Jack's father has been working on the docks when he can.

Interestingly, he is often referred to as a 19 yr old in these articles. I wonder if anyone did the maths and realised that if he was 19 in 1917, he couldn't have been 18 when he enlisted two and a half years previously.

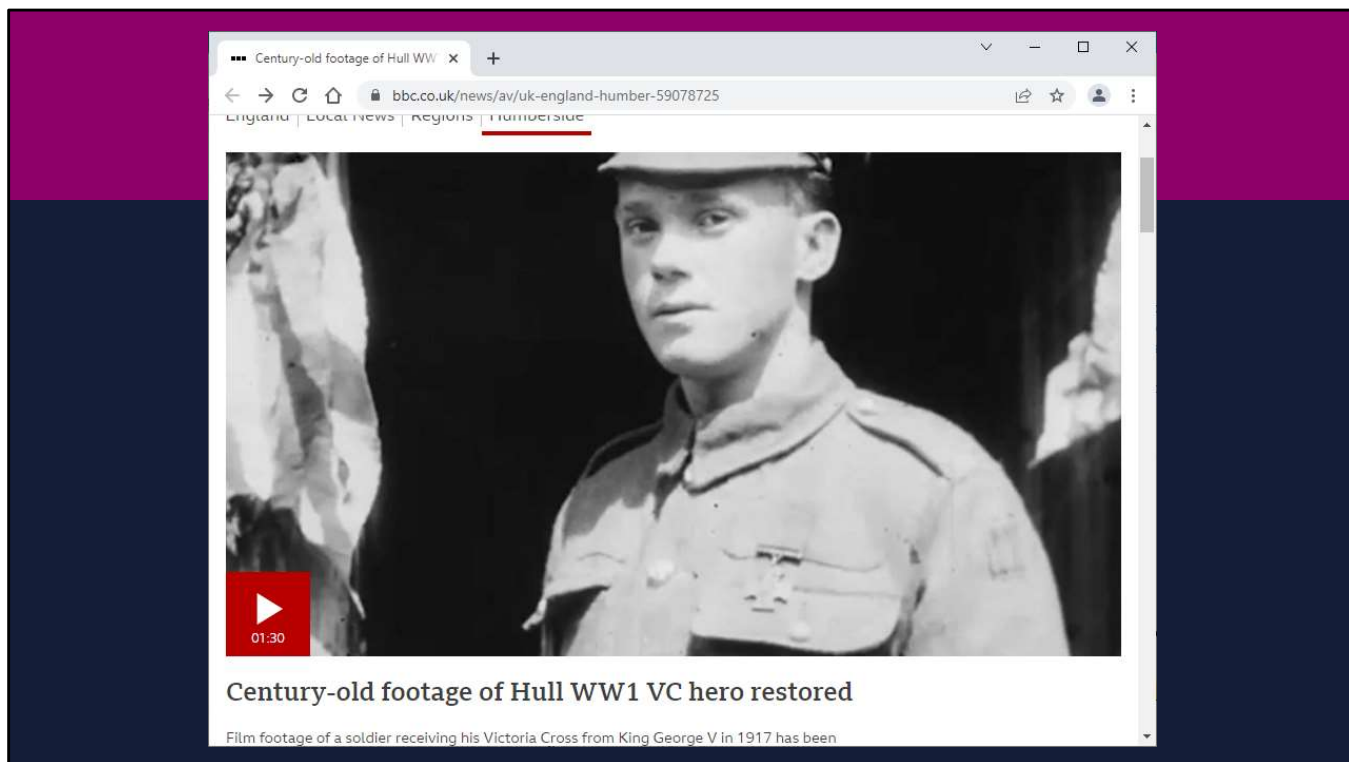
The article also includes a recent letter from Jack to his mother.

From Jack to his mother, January 1917

I got your parcel all right. But I am sorry to say everything was spoiled but the 'cigs'.

I am very pleased you all enjoyed yourselves this Christmas. We were in the trenches for the holidays, but we had a jolly time afterwards and a jolly good dinner with a slop of English beer, which makes everything a bit better.

I wish you all at home a happy New Year.



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-humber-59078725>

Jack was awarded his VC by King George V in a celebratory ceremony at Hyde Park. The Royal Flying Corps, one of the service arms that would eventually make up the RAF, patrolled overhead and a Guards Brigade provided music. The day was also filmed and footage was recently restored. A number of clips can be found online, but I chose this one as it is very clear – considering it was filmed in 1917 – and shows footage of his parents that doesn't feature in any of the others.

Play clip.

You can see at the beginning that he has a conversation with the King as he is awarded his medal. Billy Welch, a relative of Jack's, revealed that the King had been told Jack was a Gypsy and talked to him about it.

Alongside Jack, several other men were awarded VCs. The men were numbered to ensure the smooth running of the event and, being perhaps more superstitious than we are today, the number 13 was not used. The 13th man, however, was one Roland Bradford VC of the Durham Light Infantry. His exploits are recounted elsewhere, but it is perhaps significant that he was killed by a stray shell a few weeks later. Was this unlucky fate in any way connected to the order of his presentation? We may never know.



Image courtesy of ww1hull.com

Jack returned home that evening with his parents. Despite arriving after 1am on a Sunday morning, he was met by a band and a substantial crowd who hoisted him to shoulder height and carried him to his parents' home.

He had a short leave to spend at home, during which he returned to his old school, St James' in what was surely an inspiring visit for the boys there. Along with his parents and brother Matthew, he was a guest at a meeting of Hull City Council, where he was presented with an illuminated address. The Lord Mayor, Alderman Francis Askew, said this to Cunningham in his public address:

".....It was open to him, as well as to any of the rank and file, not only in the Army, but in civil life, by his zeal, industry, and determination, to achieve higher honours in the future. There was no doubt that his deed would be talked of for many years to come..."



Image courtesy of ww1hull.com

In June of 1917, while on leave, Jack married Eva Harrison. Naturally, as he was a local hero – still Hull’s only VC holder – his wedding attracted great interest. A large crowd gathered outside the registry office and the happy couple were showered with confetti as they arrived.

The ceremony itself was private, attended only by Jack’s brother Matthew, Eva’s sister and a single journalist from the Hull Daily Mail.

Naturally, the newspaper coverage featured a description of the bride’s outfit. The Hull Daily Mail reported – the bride wore a pretty frock coat of putty shade. She had silk stockings to match and a hat of a delicate mauve. She also wore a spray of white roses. Jack’s outfit was not described, other than to say he wore his VC.

18 JUN ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the "WAR BADGE."

27 Pilgrim St London, W.C. 20
is inserted in the envelope. 664

No. 0/1844/1

WAR OFFICE

Para 2 sub 1934

Page

Regtl. No.	Rank	Name (in full)	Unit discharged from	No. of Badge and Certificate (To be completed at War Office)	Date of :-		Cause of Discharge (Wounds or Sickness and para. of K.R.)	Whether served Overseas (Yes or No)
					Enlistment	Discharge		
11957	Pte.	Frank Jackson	East Yorkshire Regiment.	417, 223	6-9-1914	21-6-1918	B.1. 23 years	Yes.
29872	Pte.	Frank A. Bishop	"	417, 224	9-12-1915	18-6-1918	B.1. 34 years	Yes.
28923	Pte.	Robert Miller	"	417, 225	28-12-1914	21-6-1918	B.1. 36 years	Yes.
3/7169	Pte.	John Neil	"	417, 226	5-9-1914	24-6-1918	B.1. 34 years	Yes.
3/6514	L/C.	George Barker	"	417, 227	15-8-1914	21-6-1918	B.1. 33 years	Yes.
9939	Pte.	Henry Bulmer	"	417, 228	5-10-1912	24-6-1918	B.1. 23 years	Yes.
12/21	Pte.	John Cunningham V.C.	"	417, 229	14-9-1914	26-6-1918	B.1. 23 Years	Yes.
6528	Pte.	James Knight	"	417, 230	18-8-1914	19-1-1918	B.1. 41 years	Yes.
30239	Pte.	Harry Elton	"	417, 231	26-6-1916	26-6-1918	B.1. 22 years	Yes.
28191	Cpl.	Walter Quantrell	"	417, 232	11-11-1915	26-6-1918	B.1. 21 years	Yes.
35100	Pte.	Melburn Green	"	417, 233	23-3-1917	11-1-1918	B.1. 30 years	Yes.
15165	Pte.	Robert Mortimer	"	417, 234	11-11-1914	16-8-1918	B.1. 28 years	Yes.

I certify that the particulars furnished hereon are correct.

Place YORK. Date 15th June 1918.

I.V. 2912 date. 25 JUN 1918

15 JUN 1918

J. Shaw-Twinn for Colonel, i/c No.1 Infantry Records, York.

Signature and Rank of Officer certifying Claimants' service.

Image courtesy of the National Archives, Kew

Jack returned to the war and continued serving until he was wounded. He received the Silver War Badge, designed to enable men who had been wounded in less obvious ways to show that they had served in the war and so avoid being labelled as a coward or shirker. Often, the badge was accompanied by a King's Certificate.

Jack was awarded such a badge, his entry is here. But, as so often with Army records, it doesn't go into a lot of detail, merely listing the men. His name, rank, regimental number and his status as a VC recipient are not news, but it does tell us that he was discharged on 26 June 1918. Interestingly, his age is given as 23, when in fact he would have been just a month shy of his 21st birthday. This fits with his having lied about his age to enlist and of course, we don't know what age he gave the Army as it was faded on his service record.

Regtl No. *13/21* Name *John Gunningham* *VC* s/Rank. *VC*

Unit.- *Depot* EAST YORKSHIRE REGT.

Name and Station of the Medical Board:- *The King George Hospital*
Stamford Street, London

Name and Rank of President of the Board:- *Lt Col. H. J. Parry*

List of documents received from President of the Board, and date received. *6.6.1918*
D.173, 179, D.400 A. D.103, 120, 121, 122 J.3484 B. J.3494.

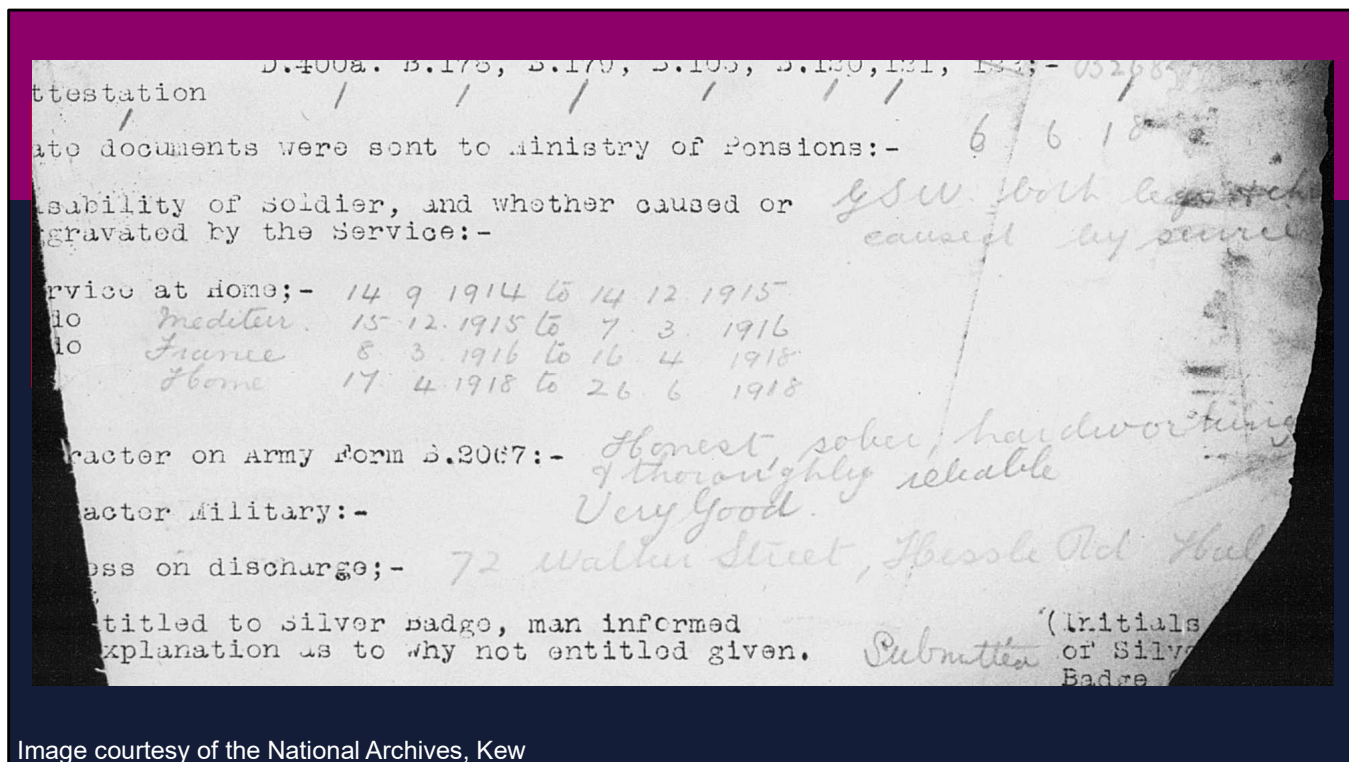
Date of discharge under King's Regulations, para 392(xv1) *26.6.1918*

Disposal of Army Forms:-
W.3455 to Officer Commanding:- ☒
W.3453 to Regimental Paymaster:- ☒

Image courtesy of the National Archives, Kew

This is one of the pages pertaining to his discharge. It gives his name, including the initials VC of course, his rank and unit. At this point he is attached to the Depot, or home base, of the East Yorkshire Regiment, rather than the 12th Battalion. This often happened with soldiers who were wounded. Depending on the extent of their injuries, they would then either serve behind the lines, freeing a fit man for the front, or as in Jack's case, be discharged on medical grounds.

Jack's medical board was held at the King George Hospital in London, under a Lt. Col. Parry. It goes on to give his date of discharge – 26 June 1918 - and list the various forms that were submitted. We'll skip that part because the end is far more interesting.



It tells us the nature of his injury – GSW (Gun Shot Wound) both legs and chest. Possibly chest, possibly cheeks. Caused by service.

It also details his service at home, then in the Mediterranean, then in France. Interestingly, his service in France ends on 16 April 1918, which is likely when he was evacuated. We don't know precisely when he was wounded, but this narrows it down.

It also gives his character. The Army often did this on discharge papers in order to help men secure employment afterwards. In this case, it's very complimentary. Jack is 'honest, sober, hardworking and thoroughly reliable'. His military character is simply described as 'very good' and, of course, his VC speaks for itself.

His address on discharge is 72 Walker Street, Hessle Road, Hull

A 19
2

Week ending 30.7.18

MINISTRY OF PENSIONS,
THE ROYAL HOSPITAL,
CHELSEA, S.W. 3.

SIR,
I am directed by the Minister of Pensions to inform you of the undermentioned decision in the case of a man whose discharge documents have been recently received with the view to having the claim to pension considered.

I have the honour to be, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
MATTHEW NATHAN,
Secretary

To the Officer Commanding
East Yorks Regiment.
10th Bn Depot

Rank and Regimental Number Pte 21

Name John Cunningham

Regiment or Corps East Yorkshire Depot 10 Bn

Date of discharge

Address on discharge

Weekly Pension 27/6 from 27.6.18 To be reviewed in 26 wks

Disability

Image courtesy of the National Archives, Kew

He was also awarded a pension. This page from his service records the decision to award him the weekly sum of 27s and 6p, effective from 27 June 1918 – his date of discharge.

He would also have been entitled to an annuity as a VC holder. When the award was instituted by Queen Victoria, this sum had been £10 per year. The amounts were increased over time and today is worth £10,000.



© IWM (Q 7541)

Returning to civilian life was a struggle for many soldiers. Today, veterans are given counselling and help to deal with their experiences. In 1918, no one had heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some soldiers were diagnosed with shell shock – a condition with symptoms ranging from panic and the inability to walk or talk to dizziness, amnesia and hypersensitivity to noise. Some doctors held it was a result of physical damage to the brain – hardly surprising when artillery shells fired on the Western Front could be heard from British Shores. Other doctors favoured a more psychological explanation and they had a case too, given the horrors of trench warfare and trench life.

But shell shock was a label for extreme cases, where the symptoms were inhibiting a soldier's ability to function. Most men were simply discharged at the end of the war, or if wounded, sent home as soon as their physical condition allowed it. That any man could be expected to return from the trenches and take up civilian life as though nothing

had happened, seems unthinkable today, yet that was the approach.

But it was a different age. People in general were not expected – and did not expect – to discuss their problems or emotional difficulties. They would probably have been astounded at the idea this might help them. ‘Stiff upper lip’ was very much the order of the day and many men simply never spoke of their experiences, managing their memories and emotions privately as best they could.

Billy Welch, one of Jack’s surviving relatives said ‘he was never the same again. Mentally and physically, he was never the same’.

I think it’s important to bear in mind as we look at his life after the war.



Image courtesy of Billy Welch

Jack and Eva had two children. The first, Annie, was born in the summer of 1919. Sadly, she died a few months later.

The couple went on to have another child, John, in the following year. After that, it seems their marriage broke down. Eva Cunningham was granted a separation order and Jack was ordered to pay her regular maintenance. He was later in court for failing to make these payments and for other minor offences. Clearly, he was a very troubled man.

	0/5/22	10/5/22
Cpl J. Cunningham No 1 Coy 2 Platoon K.O. Royal Regt Lancaster	Requests that his records be forwarded to D.C. Depot as a man with the V.C should be given a staff job & not to go on parade	Letter passed to Depot K.O. Royal Lancaster & info will be sent to Preston when app. Precis. of service furnish - Draw attn to file 18 18-5-22

Image courtesy of ww1hull.com

It's at this point we come to an unexpected story I discovered in Jack's service record. It started with this sheet – dated 1922 and containing a report that a Corporal J Cunningham VC of the King's Own Royal Regiment in Lancaster, who requests that as a VC holder, he should be given a staff job and not go on parade.

Well, there was a Corporal John Cunningham – an Irishman awarded the VC in 1917. But it wasn't him – he died of wounds soon after winning his VC.

Clearly, someone smelled a rat, because there is also a letter from Officer in Charge of Records at York to the Commanding Officer at Lancaster.

The Officer Commanding,
Depot King's Own Royal Regiment,
Bowerham Barracks,
LANCASTER.

With reference to our telephonic conversation of this morning, regarding No: 12/21 Private John GUNNINGHAM. V.C. late of the East Yorkshire Regiment, I have to inform you that the man called this office and I verified ^{it is the same} that he was the man who served in the Yorkshire Regiment and awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry during the operations in France, consequently I append below full particulars in respect of him, to enable you to deal with the man now serving the Depot under your command purporting to be John GUNNINGHAM. V.C. of the East Yorkshire Regiment.

Particulars regarding the true John GUNNINGHAM. V.C.

Image courtesy of ww1hull.com

Read it

Well, there's no record of how the imposter was dealt with, but given the regard in which VC winners are held and the fact that many of the men around him would have had first hand experience of the trenches, I think it's safe to say that he quickly saw the error of his ways.



Image courtesy of Memorials to Valour www.memorialstovalour.co.uk

Jack Cunningham died on 21 February 1941 at his home in Campbell Street, Hull. He was just 43 years old.

He is buried in an unmarked grave in Hull's Western Cemetery, but his name and his brother's are on their parents' memorial stone nearby.



Image courtesy of Memorials to Valour www.memorialstovalour.co.uk

In November of 2016, 100 years after the action that won Jack his VC, a memorial paving stone was unveiled in his birth town of Scunthorpe. You can see it here at the base of the town's war memorial.

This was part of a national commemoration that saw a similar stone laid for every VC won during the FWW. The stone is like the medal itself: understated. It bears only his name, regiment and the date he won his VC. The act of bravery speaks for itself, needing no additional embellishment.



Image courtesy of the National Army Museum

And I think that's an appropriate idea to end with. The idea behind the Victoria Cross from its very inception was that it wouldn't be an ornate medal – certainly others are prettier and more eye catching. They're not made of gold or silver, the metal used to make them comes from guns captured during the Crimean War.

The focus is on the act that earned the VC and it should be. Jack's bravery was extraordinary, his life was extraordinary and I'm very glad to have had the chance to find out about it and to share it with you.