

Lieut-Col Cecil Frederick George
Humphries DSO MC and Bar DCM
Formerly Private '14000' 1st Bn Manchester Regiment



A Military Biography

Cecil Humphries had one of the most remarkable careers of any man from the 1st Battalion Manchester Regiment's rank and file who served overseas with the 1914 British Expeditionary Force. A New Zealand citizen, Cecil was on holiday when War was declared. He promptly joined the Army Service Corps and went to France in August 1914. Having transferred to the Manchesters, Cecil was one of the first 1914 citizens to serve with the Regulars and one of less than one hundred New Zealanders to qualify for the 1914 Star. He was awarded the DCM for gallantry at Givenchy in December 1914. Cecil was promoted to Sergeant and wounded at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915. Cecil received his commission and continued an illustrious career as an officer with various regiments. He received further awards for gallantry and was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, in command of 1st Bn Norfolk Regiment, at the time of his death on 22 August 1918. Cecil Humphries was an incredible soldier.



Credit War Graves Photographic Project

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Civilian Life



Cecil Humphries NatlibNZ Sun (Christchurch), Volume III, Issue 789, 21 August 1916, Page 6

With credit to the South Canterbury Museum for their research on Cecil Humphries. please see full details of his family life and career from their [profile](#) and [diary](#).

Cecil Frederick George Humphries was born at Mataura, New Zealand on 27 October 1886. He was the son of Charles John and Ada Rebecca Humphries, who were proprietors of the Bridge Hotel, Mataura. Charles Humphries died in 1896 and Ada remarried Henry James Rowse. Cecil attended Mataura, Kaikora, and Waimate Schools. He was a successful sportsman at rugby, golf, cricket, athletics, and swimming. Cecil became general manager of the Excelsior Hotel at Christchurch.



Army Service Corps Cap Badge

Army Service Corps

Cecil joined his mother on an around the world tour in February 1914. They had arrived in England when war was declared in August 1914. In the patriotic fervour of the time, Cecil enlisted in the Army Service Corps (ASC) 'SS/207' on 7 August 1914. Cecil was 27 years 284 days old, single and of Church of England affiliation. He was 5' 9¾" tall (much greater than the average 'Tommy') and weighed 170 pounds. His complexion was fresh, his eyes grey and Cecil had brown hair. His physical development and pulse rate were excellent.

After a short training period at Aldershot, Cecil disembarked in France as a Corporal, on 27 August 1914. He was posted as a Supply Special clerk at Le Havre and was promoted to Sergeant.



Credit Auckland Museum & NatlibNZ Otago Witness, Issue 3364, 4 September 1918, Page 33 (Supplement)

Manchester Regiment



Manchester Regiment Cap Badge

Cecil reverted to Private at his own request and was transferred to the 1st Bn Manchester Regiment as a Private '14000' on 15 October 1914. He considered that the clerk position was "too slow for a healthy young New Zealander who wanted to be doing things." Many men transferred from the ASC to infantry regiments, but no other examples have been found of post August recruits of 1914 joining the Regular battalions of the Manchesters in 1914.

Life in the trenches

As a keen diarist and letter writer, Cecil provided some excellent narrative on the conditions in the [Festubert](#) trenches in Artois and his subsequent experiences. Extracts are copied, with further credit to the South Canterbury Museum for their transcriptions.

Cecil's Diary extract records his arrival with 1st Bn at camp in Orleans on 15 October 1914.

Having moved north to the Festubert sector, Cecil embraced the hardship of life in the trenches. Cecil also assimilated himself with the experienced Regular Army soldiers in his Company; men who had been serving in India prior to hostilities. Most of the other ranks in the battalion had backgrounds in the labouring classes of English cities and often had challenging upbringings. Despite the stark contrast with Cecil's childhood and circumstances, he made good friends with a number of men mentioned in his Diary. The comradeship with 'Jock' was significant and recorded by Cecil – known to Jock as 'Charley' – in his Diary:

"Friday, November 27th — ...We started our little fire at 7, and Jock had some cheese and bacon and bread for me. You will be thinking Jock is something of a servant, but these little favours are done for me because he is unable to read and write, and I conduct all his correspondence, including letter-writing to his girl (just another experience!) Then again the rum issued—well, it is all if it is very cold on night sentry, but I was never very fond of it, so Jock gets that, and the tobacco. Why, he is a human chimney, with his own and my tobacco, and, to use his own words— "Gawd lummy, if I aint in bleeding heaven, if it were not for these b-- Germans messing up our bleeding stew." But the roughest are often the best soldiers, as they care not what happens, and old Jock, who has done

10 years' service, would follow "Charley" (that's me —Cecil, they say, is too d—d swanky for a Tommy) anywhere."

Many men have been identified from Cecil's Diary, yet the identity and record of the ever-resourceful 'Jock' is sadly unattainable. Cecil was appointed Lance Corporal on 20 October 1914 and gained Junior NCO duties in the Company. His bravery and commitment to assist comrades is recorded in his diary entry of 28 October 1914.

"5 p.m. — It is absolutely hell — Dante's Inferno! ...They have lost seven and about 15 wounded. The moans and groans— will I ever forget! ... Towards evening, or rather just after dark, we were taking our dead and wounded out of the trenches when the enemy opened out with the machine gun on us. We had to drop flat on the ground with our wounded and wait until we could steal away. The stretcher-bearers would not go back to the trenches, so "Sizzie" (Jim Harding—my mate), and myself, volunteered to take a man out, which we did safely enough."

Vivid descriptions of the death of some of Cecil's comrades add critical records for the men concerned. In the instance of Pte 995 John Butterworth, we find he was given a proper burial – even though this was not identified after hostilities. John Butterworth has one of the Manchesters numerous inscriptions on the Le Touret Memorial. The Diary entry for 9 November 1914 also refers to Cecil helping the wounded.

"I was moving my position along the "communication" trench, when directly in front of me a private named Butterworth was shot dead through the heart, and our colour-sergeant, ['4796' George] Johnson, who was on my left, got shot right through the wrist [Evacuated home on 12/11/1914 and later served as RQMS '65024' with Royal Defence Corps]. I had to

take my field bandage and with the aid of a little pair of scissors split up his coat and did the necessary ambulance work ... The other poor chap is lying face down in the field not 10 yards away from me—dead, and we will not be able to bury him until dark as anyone going near would be smartly sniped off by the enemy ... As I was coming past a trench a little in the rear of mine, some four of the boys were digging the grave of their old mate Butterworth. All you do is to take their personal belongings and Identification Disc and bury them in a 4ft hole fully dressed then get two crow sticks, and with an ink-pencil write “Died in action” —this is a soldier’s grave, which we have passed by the score ever since we have been in this neighbourhood.”

Cecil’s selfless support for his comrades is exemplified in the Diary entry of 11 November.

“My little “hut” I spend so much time in stood the elements well, but one of my section who was on “outpost,” came in shivering with cold and ague [Malaria], so I did his extra hour duty and gave him my rum and “house” to try and get warm. Next relief I crept in beside him but slept wet through—my blanket dry when I left, but ringing wet now with my sick friend curled up in it, and you can imagine me, lying down beside him and me shivering with cold while my friend shook all over with ague. I stood it for a while, but had to give in, and got up and walked up and down in the slush and mud of the trench trying to keep myself warm.”

The most compelling elements in Cecil’s Diary are the events of 20 to 21 December 1914, written in his billet after he had withdrawn with the remnants of his battalion from the [Battle of Givenchy](#). The Diary corresponds with events recorded in the Battalion and Brigade War Diary – altogether more vivid and fascinating from the perspective of an NCO in the thick of combat. The notes also confirm Cecil’s strategic awareness in the heat of the battle, signalling skills and temperament that would be developed in the coming years:

“We could plainly see the shells, and the booming of the big guns told us we were “for it.” We were marched or rather forced marched...It was not until my friend Webster [Cpl ‘7935’ John Rynie Webster Bombay Light Horse attached to Royal Engineers Signals see Reflections] ... gave me the following startling news: “Enemy broken through the natives. Captured small village. Moving towards Canal!” As soon as we heard this our packs seemed to get lighter and we all had our fighting blood started...”

“We were being pushed along with all speed until our arrival at the brewery, where we were told off in single file and worked from a big factory ready to go across a large field to take a



Credit British Library Givenchy Sheffield Daily Telegraph 23 March 1915

small village at the point of the bayonet. As we were getting ready, the enemy spying our massing in the yard, put two well-directed shells plump into the yard, and oh! the sight! It is useless for me to try and picture the horror of it all, but I counted 7 beside wounded, where that dreaded shrapnel had taken effect. "File on," and across that field at the double—run 25 yards, and then a breather, and on again, all the while the shrapnel making our line smaller every few yards, but on we went until the outskirts of the village were reached—then another breather, and, "Fix bayonets and charge!"—and now this will have to stop. I must, if God looks over me, tell you the rest by word of mouth. Suffice it is to say that we captured the village, and the heaps of dead of our enemy in hundreds told of the bayonet's deadly work. On we went, blood fully up! The first trench we took—up again, and the second—then again the third—and again the fourth, but our ranks were getting weaker, so we retired into the third and made a stand for it.

Fighting like hell, we were going to try and make a general advance to absolutely rout the enemy in the morning, before daylight."

Cecil was promoted to Acting Corporal on 21 December and Acting Sergeant later that day.

"My duty was to take charge of 10 men in the trench and guard all the communications—a very risky job! — and to bayonet anyone who came along! Then came the order to advance in a creeping position as near as possible to the enemy's trenches, ready for the charge. On our left the other half of the company could be seen plainly to us by the light of the two straw stacks lighted by the enemy. The Germans meanwhile by the aid of those dreadful night lights, spotted our position, and then a machine gun opened on that thin khaki line, and oh the sight!"

"The "supports" woke up to take the place of the fallen, and taking advantage of whatever cover we could, we crawled along. Our

commands now were done by a whisper from one to the other, and as a message came along. I touched the one next to me and gave him the order—no reply, dead—touched the next —no reply, dead! Then I realised the position. Crawling along, and it was now just breaking daylight, I worked my way in some mysterious fashion over to where our captain was, and what should I find! Our captain shot through the head! I dragged him under cover, and then made the startling discovery that I was right under the very nose of the German trenches, but getting down under the screen of a communication trench I did my best to get the captain along, but he was too heavy. I took off my scarf and tied it round his legs, then putting my head through, tried to drag him along that narrow and mucky trench. I got him along a bit until I came to a body of a dead native, and it was too much for me. I couldn't get his 13 stone dead weight along, so I left him, and poor devil, long ere this he has breathed his last.”

[The Captain who Cecil endeavoured to recover was his OC and Boer War Veteran, [Captain Leo Creagh](#). He is commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial.]

“Going along the trench a comrade by the name of Mick Hunt, noticed me and said “Charlie, you won't leave me here will you”—he was lying in the open on the opposite side of a hawthorn fence, with his leg absolutely shattered. I had to fell the hedge with the butt of my rifle (under fire all this time) and getting him to put his arms around my neck, dragged him with his shattered limb into the trench. Then with him on my back we struggled along, stopping every now and again for a breath. I got him out safely, and after taking him to the shelter of a house, cut off his boots, socks and puttees and did my best

with a bandage. What a terrible leg—the bone was powdered and presented an awful sight.” [No Mick or Michael Hunt has been identified as serving with 1st Bn Manchester Regiment and it has not been possible to determine whether this man recovered from his wounds.]

“I had just got him finished and laid alongside the building to await the arrival of the stretcher-bearers when another poor devil staggered along. I gave him a lift to a building near at hand, and his wounds were also gaping ones in the leg, and partly disembowelled. I got some wads of wool and did my best for him and gave him a little ease until the stretcher-bearers came for him. After this my time was taken up for the next hour in doing small wounds, such as wrists, shoulders, etc.—and the road, what a sight! Men limping along and staggering. I got back to the firing line, and had no sooner arrived there when we were opened on by the enemy, rapid fire and the booming of the guns—it was hell. We were expecting a reinforcement up at 2 p.m. ready for an attack at 2.30, and we were to hold on at all costs. The battle raged and raged, getting worse and worse. Two o'clock came—can we stand! No sight of the reinforcements, it was awful. The enemy broke through in several places, but we drove them out again and again at the point of the bayonet. 2.30, and no relief, then the enemy put all their forces against us on our right, our weakest place, and we did our best until 3 p.m., when we were forced to retire.”

“Will I ever forget that awful sight as we struggled along—no food and fighting continually for two days. The enemy opened their deadly shrapnel and mowed some of our poor chaps down. The only way I can describe it—

it was like a hot blast of wind from hell. How I got through it all God only knows, but arrived back with a whole hide, and on our way, we met the reinforcements going up to keep the position.” [The British 1st Infantry Division successfully regained the village.]

“The whistle went to try and bring that scattered little army together. My section “E,” usually 200 strong, could only muster 50 now, and there we stood, asking where so-and-so had gone, and so on. What a sight! I could never picture to you the dreadful of all this. I am minus my rifle and all my kit, so only have my ragged clothes I stand up in. We were marched off to the Brewery to rest for the night, and I believe go into a billet for some days to reorganise, as we only have two officers left out of 14. It seems awful, this dreadful waste of human life. Now I have several things myself to-day I have not mentioned, as I do not like “blowing my own horn,” but all I have done is nothing to my discredit or anyone belonging to me. During the whole performance I have been hit three times (most marvellous)—once through the puttees, cutting completely to the sock— through the seat of my pants (this done while I was bandaging a wounded man on the field—it went right through my pants and under-pants and two shirts, and never even drew blood). The third was through my helmet, and only raised a lump on my head. I have been lucky, and all I can say is “Thank God.” After the battle the roll call. Will I ever forget! ... “Fall in,” and there we stood, everybody looking at one another, and you could hear on all sides: “Where is so-and-so”—“Oh he is wounded,” “He is killed,” and so on—it was awful. For my part, there I stood out of my section. I only had another beside me — 12 out of 14

dead, wounded, or missing. I looked a pretty looking object, mud up to the eyes, knees out of my pants, and blood all over me; but it was a sad, sad “Roll Call.” “All mustered; how many, sergeant,” called our only officer. “380 sir.” We started off 1150 strong, and there we stood, truly the remnant of an army ... The wounded kept up their stream of suffering—in ones, twos, and threes they arrived. My heart always goes out to these poor devils. I worked hard bandaging and doing what I could for them.”

Following his exploits at Givenchy, Cecil Humphries was promoted to Sergeant and awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. The citation in the London Gazette of 1 April 1915 reads:

“14000 L/Cpl (A/Sjt) C F G HUMPHRIES 1ST Bn formerly 207 Army Service Corps.

For conspicuous gallantry and coolness at Givenchy, during the attack on December 20-21, 1914, and also for gallantry in endeavouring to bring into cover the body of his company commander, who had been killed in the engagement.”



DCM

Neuve Chapelle March 1915

Three months later, 1st Bn Manchester were part of the first planned British advance in the Battle of [Neuve Chapelle](#). The British and Indian Army successfully liberated the village on 10 March 1915. 1st Bn, as part of the Jullundur Brigade, was charged with extending the gains on 11 – 12 March. Cecil’s commentary of events seems to relate the War Diary records from 11 March 1915.



Neuve Chapelle - Credit 'Jullundur Brigade in France and Flanders' New Delhi 1993.

"After leaving the village of [for] Neuve Chapelle for our charge we formed up on the road and marched along a dead cow lane to the Rue. All the time we were under the shell fire of the enemy, but, thank goodness, their aim was none too good. As soon as we arrived at what used to be the German trenches the awfulness of our deadly bombardment could be plainly seen ... After passing 'Port Arthur' we came into the German line again, where but a few days ago we were getting sniped." [Port Arthur was a British position, now situated opposite the Neuve Chapelle Memorial, southwest of the village. on the junction of the La Basse Road. 1st Bn had held these trenches on many occasions.]

Writing in the third person about the arrival of the 1st Bn in Neuve Chapelle on 11 March, Cecil recounted the established records of the men sheltering behind the ruined buildings.

"When they reached the ruined village, the New Zealander was hit on

the head by a piece of tile, which gave him "a little headache." By this time the shell fire was very hot, the enemy having the range to an inch, and they were told that their boys a little further on were having a hot time ... In consequence of the furious shelling, the men had to get close into the brick walls for protection. Sergeant Humphries had not been under shelter for more than two minutes before a shell came and knocked the wall on top of him. After a struggle he managed to get out, none the worse for his strange experience, save a little bleeding from the ears. Of course, he was covered with a thick coating of brick dust and mortar, and the black burnt powder of the shell."

The War Diary corroborates the battalion moving into defensive positions in the open fields, as being safer than the storm of the German bombardment on the village.

"Next the order came to line an old German trench. All was silent for a short time, when, without warning, a

shell burst in the trench alongside of Sergeant Humphries, but as this trench had about 4ft of water in it the force of the explosion was arrested, otherwise he would assuredly have "joined the aerial scouts." He was completely covered with mud and water, but as the position had to be got out of there was no time to think of such trifles."

With orders to advance in the second phase of attack (later withdrawn), Cecil watched the British and Indian infantry attack on the Bois du Biez, to the east of Neuve Chapelle, on the afternoon of 11 March.

"Before long, at a given signal from three aeroplanes, big guns opened fire, and the bombardment lasted for a long while. Our casualties were numerous—mostly shrapnel wounds. At 3 sharp all was silent for a few moments and on our left three good old british cheers went up, and then the 'Jocks' (for the Seaforths were charging) came along with their bayonets flashing and did the 20 yards dash in really good style. After a brief pause, on they rushed, the machine guns of the enemy accounting for a few. The first trench taken! Will they get another? I was greatly excited and had my head well over the parapet—a silly thing, I know—watching it all, when the next line of Gurkhas started running on to the left line of trenches, but they were unfortunate, as a small field gun did great havoc among them, and the sight of men being blown skywards is not too nice. But when seething with excitement like this one does not think of things in that light. On and on they went, and the enemy's rifle fire died away to practically nothing. We knew all was well, as the boys had got there, and the bayonets were doing their work with what was left, if any showed fight. The first line was taken, so the supports and reserves moved up

another trench ... As soon as the rifle fire died down, the British set to work to improve the captured trenches and change their fronts."

With some level of fortune (1st Bn had heavy losses on 12 March) Cecil found himself to have been wounded in the German artillery barrage.

"It was growing dusk, and stretcher-bearers were out bringing in the wounded. "While I was watching this my back started to ache, and I thought I had better look to see what was wrong. I was surprised to find that I had two flesh wounds by fragments of shell, one of them being about 3in long and ½in deep. The officer ordered me straight to the first-aid place."

The narrative on evacuation shows the development of medical facilities for the pre-planned advance, with an anecdotally improvement in survival rates compared with the previous fighting at Givenchy.

"On my way I met wounded by the dozen. To his surprise, Sergeant Humphries was ticketed for hospital, and he walked down the road a mile or two to meet the ambulance. He found himself that night in the village from which he had started out two days previously, waiting with 100 other wounded to go to Bethune ... Sergeant Humphries says that the provision for the wounded was wonderfully efficient, even when they arrived at the cowshed they found a brazier burning comfortably and sweetened milk ready warmed up. All the cases were at once re-dressed, the two doctors and their assistants working all night on the continuous stream coming from the front. In the evening, about 40 motors arrived, and, without a hitch, the native stretcher-bearers shifted the sick and wounded into the motors and left in half an hour. At the receiving hospital at Lillers Sergeant Humphries enjoyed a good night's rest, having his boots off for the first time for 14 days. The following day he was taken down to Calais,

when he met some of his regiment who had been at the base ill or wounded and were going back to the trenches. "It seems so strange to me," he writes, "to be here wounded. It was a very sad sight to see the wounded being carried and placed on beds, and my wound seems so small I almost feel ashamed to admit it. The last time I was on this line we were a merry band—40 odd in a truck—for four days, and anxious to get to work in the trenches; now here in the ambulance train, and everybody looking sad and miserable ..."

Highland Light Infantry



HLI Cap Badge

The wonderful commentary from Cecil Humphries' diary does not extend beyond his time in the ranks. Following hospital treatment at Sevenoaks and his Furlough in England, Cecil was discharged as Acting Sergeant on 10 June 1915, having been granted a commission as 2nd Lieut in the 12th (Service) Bn of the Highland Light Infantry (HLI). He had served 309 days in the rank and file. Cecil was ordered to report to Major Munroe Southfields for a course of instruction at Stirling Castle. He was able to draw an Outfit Allowance for his new uniform. Cecil was subsequently posted as an instructor to an officers training unit at Stobs Camp, Hawick before returning to overseas duty.

Peter Eric Hodgkinson's excellent research on [British Infantry Commanders in the First World War](#) provides the observation on Cecil:

"Lieutenant-Colonel C.F.G. Humphries provides a fine example for a citizen with no military experience of any sort who showed extraordinary qualities, becoming one of the select band of citizens who commanded a Regular battalion."

Peter Hodgkinson has reviewed Cecil's service file to record his commissioned service, and this has been supplemented with London Gazette entries and NZ records.

Cecil was promoted to Lieutenant with the HLI on 26 September 1915. The London Gazette of 24/12/1917 subsequently confirmed the rank on this date as Temporary Captain. The nominated rank as Captain indicates Cecil held a senior position training new officers at Stobs Camp. Decorated and commissioned from the ranks, Cecil clearly had versatility and a personality that commanded respect from the new subalterns as well as the rank and file, not least his old friend 'Jock'.

12th Bn HLI had landed at Boulogne on 10 July 1915. Cecil arrived with the battalion as 2nd Lieut and joined A Coy in the field at Verquin on 22 November 1915. He wrote to his mother concerning his new comrades:

"All the officers of this battalion I knew before I came out, and they gave me a right hearty welcome on arrival. I have a good set of boys, real Glasgow lads, hard as iron and always willing to go on with the game."

In commanding B Company of 12th HLI, the War Diary at the Hohenzollern Sector for 26 April 1916 recounts:

"Captain Humphries took charge, very good work was also done there in beating off the enemy."

Cecil's rank as Temporary Captain was confirmed with effect from 16 July 1916. He was wounded during the Battle of the Somme on 12 August 1916, when 12th Bn HLI attacked the German Switch Line near High Wood. Cecil was Admitted to hospital with a GSW right arm on 19 August and transferred to 17 Park Lane in London on 30 August. Cecil was Mentioned in Sir Douglas Haig's Despatch of

13 November, presumably relating to events on the Somme.



CAPTAIN. CECIL HUMPHRIES.
Wounded. His mother (at present in England) resides at Christchurch.

NatlibNZ Auckland Star, Volume XLVII, Issue 211, 4
September 1916, Page 8

Labour Corps - MC



Labour Corps Cap Badge

With effect from 8 February Cecil was posted as Captain in the Labour Corps. As the Labour Corps was not formed until April 1917, he was probably initially serving in the 2nd Labour Company of the Royal Scots Fusiliers – presumably remaining unfit for front line duty.

Cecil was awarded a Military Cross (LG 14/09/1917) for his actions at Bailleul:

“An ammunition train was being bombed by aeroplanes, and Captain Humphries, commanding No. 10 Labour Company, arrived on the scene and took charge of the party. Under this officer’s guidance and help eight trucks were salvaged. The eighth was uncoupled by Captain Humphries and Sergt.-Major Harland, while the ninth truck was burning fiercely, and its load of shells was exploding freely. This remarkably gallant piece of work was carried out under a hail of shell and fragments, any one of which could have exploded the contents of the trucks

which were being moved. I consider, from my observation of the explosion, that Captain Humphries and the other members of the party are deserving of the highest praise, and I have the honour to bring to your notice their gallant and valuable work.”



MC

Cecil received his award at Buckingham Palace on 1 December 1917. His mother and sister were present. Cecil’s reiterated his concern for comrades when writing to a friend about the award:

“It’s all luck; we just happened to be there, but the rotten part of it all was that I had ten killed and thirteen wounded.”

Eleven Commonwealth casualties of 5 June 1917 are buried at Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension - primarily men serving in artillery units.



Capt Cecil Humphries MC DCM. Wearing the uniform of the HLI, Cecil also has the Mons Star ribbon, indicating the photo was taken after November 1917 – possibly on 1 December when he received the MC from the King. Credit Auckland Museum

Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry - Bar to MC



DCLI Cap Badge

Fully recovered for front line duty, Cecil was gazetted as Captain to 1st Bn Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI), – arriving in the field at Flanders 13 November 1917. 1st DCLI embarked for Italy on 12 December 1917.

Continuing to avoid jeopardy once again, Cecil was involved with a collision between his car and a train in Italy:

“...thrown out, escaping without a scratch, the only damage being that the sleeve was torn from his coat — one more narrow escape, as he wrote, from joining the ‘aerial scouts’...”

1st DCLI returned to France in April 1918. Cecil received a Bar for his MC, probably for events during the German Spring Offensive, near L'Épinette, on 12-14th April 1918.

“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. When the left of the company of his battalion was forced to withdraw under superior wight of numbers, this officer, who was with the next company, formed a defensive flank, and caused such a heavy fire to be brought on the enemy that the attack was abandoned and the line re-established. By his personal influence he saved a very critical situation.” (LG 16/09/1918)



MC and Bar

Evidence indicates Cecil may have been Acting Major and Peter Hodkinson states he took command of the 1st DCLI on 17 April 1918. Peter Hodkinson also notes Cecil was gassed at the Forest of Nieppe four days later.

1st Bn Norfolk Regiment – DSO



Norfolk Regiment Cap Badge

On 30 May 1918 Cecil became Commanding Officer of 1st Bn Norfolk Regiment, initially on attachment and confirmed as a transfer on 4 June 1918. He had leave from 2 to 18 July and possibly visited his mother in London.

Returning to his command in the Somme sector, 1st Bn Norfolk Regiment attacked and held positions against a fierce counterattack at Achiet-Le-Petit on 21 August 1918. The battalion was withdrawn to reserve and on the next fateful day the War Diary for 22 August recounts:

“Enemy bombardment of our position very heavy and his Machine Guns very active about 12 Noon. Lt Col C F G Humphries MC DCM and Capt G C Tyler (adj) wounded by shell fire and died an hour later.”

Cecil is buried at [Foncquevillers Military Cemetery](#) in Picardy. He was 31 years old and had served four years and fourteen days in the Army. His mother, Ada, chose the personal inscription for Cecil's headstone - TO LIVE IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WE LOVE IS NOT TO DIE.

Ada received the posthumous award of Cecil's Distinguished Service Order (DSO):

“For conspicuous gallantry and fine leadership. Having taken his objective, he reorganised his battalion, and, on hearing that the attack on the final objective was held up, he went forward under heavy fire and



DSO

reconnoitred the whole position, after which he returned and led the battalion forward. Later he personally controlled his men during a very determined counter-attack by the

enemy under the heaviest machine-gun fire. His courage inspired great confidence throughout the operations.” (EG 29/11/1918)

The DSO Award probably relates to events recorded in the 1st Norfolk's War Diary for 21 August:

“As it was the personal initiative of this officer [Lt Col Humphries] (since killed) and the way he carried out his orders to protect the left flank, from the moment onwards were undoubtedly the means of enabling the whole of the 5th Division line to maintain their positions just short of the railway.”

Further explanation of events was provided in the New Zealand press:

“Having taken his objective, the late Lieutenant-Colonel C. F. G. Humphries, M.C., D.C.M., Duke of Cornwall's L.I., attached 1st Battalion, Norfolk Regiment, reorganised his battalion, and, on hearing that the attack on the final objective was held up, he went forward under heavy fire and reconnoitred the whole position, after which he led the battalion forward. Later, he personally controlled his men during a very determined counter-attack by the enemy under the heaviest machine-gun fire. His courage inspired confidence throughout the operations. The award of the D.S.O. was posthumous.” [Evening Post, 11 February 1919.]

Reflections

Peter Hodkinson's research identifies just 29 Commanding Officers of Regular infantry battalions (2%) who had been civilians in 1914. Most would have volunteered for a commission and very few would have qualified for a 1914 Star in the ranks.

There were many more citizens who gained promotion to command New Army and Territorial battalions. By remarkable coincidence, one of these men was Cecil Humphries' friend, John Ryrie Webster DSO MC, the Jullundur Brigade Despatch Rider mentioned above.

Born in Bootle, Lancs in 1887, Webster was working in India in the timber business in 1914. He joined the Bombay Light Horse '7935' and disembarked at Marseille, alongside 1st Manchesters, in September 1914. Webster was a Corporal and motor cyclist attached to the Royal Engineers, 32nd Signalling Company of the Jullundur Brigade.

John Webster's connection with Cecil Humphries has not been identified but this friendship is a plausible explanation why Cecil transferred to 1st Bn, as part of the Jullundur Brigade. John Webster was commissioned in the Sherwood Foresters on 10 March 1915 and received his MC and DSO awards with the regiment. Webster was killed in action near Villers Faucon on 22 March 1918.

Having followed the fascinating a gallant record of this New Zealander it is difficult to express a conclusion.

Cecil's Brigadier provided a fitting summary:

“He was without exception the bravest man I have ever met, and his loss to me as commanding officer is irreparable. He died leading his men in a very difficult position, where we had been heavily counter-attacked. His example of coolness and courage was magnificent. I admired him immensely both as a friend and a commanding officer, as did all the officers serving under him. I feel his loss the more as he was commanding my own regiment.”

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<https://vimeo.com/140211157>

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https://issuu.com/battlefieldsleuth/docs/cws_manchester_and_1914_recruitment

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Military Biography of the Marillier-Miller Family

Three brothers who served in the Great War with the Manchester Regiment, Seaforth Highlanders, Machine Gun Corps and Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

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Military Biography of John and James Clegg.
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Military Biography of Cecil Frederick George Humphries DSO MC and Bar DCM. 1st Manchesters and Lt Col with 1st Norfolks

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<https://17thmanchesters.wordpress.com/guest-book/>

