

Never forget the bravest of the brave



Michael Ashcroft
explains why he is giving the Imperial War Museum £5 million to display his collection of Victoria Crosses

The Victoria Cross represents everything that is best about Britain. It can be won by anyone – regardless of class, colour, religion, creed or rank – provided he (or she) exhibits truly exceptional courage in the face of the enemy. Our premier gallantry award raises morale within the forces and inspires national pride in the bravery of our men and women at war.

The alarming figures published by the MoD yesterday, which suggest that nearly 50 per cent of soldiers and officers across the forces regularly consider resigning, show how important the medal is.

It is difficult to exaggerate my passion for bravery and the VC. I have had an ambition to own one since I was a schoolboy. Born in 1946, the phrase “during the war” was one that echoed relentlessly through overheard conversations when I was young.

My father, Eric, was involved in the D-Day landings. I remember him telling me about his experiences at Sword Beach on June 6, 1944. He and other officers had been briefed to expect 75 per

cent casualties – dead and wounded – as they landed. My father was one of the casualties, wounded in the shoulder by

shrapnel and ordered from the battlefield. This was where my great interest lay: not in uniforms, weapons and battleplans, but in danger and bravery.

It was later that I learnt about the VC and eventually came to write about it. The medal came into existence in 1856 at the end of the Crimean War, “backdated” so that it could be awarded to those who had displayed bravery at the start of the conflict two years earlier.

The Army had shown outstanding bravery in the most appalling conditions. The heroics came despite a lack of adequate clothing and provisions to protect Servicemen from the harsh Russian winter. There was a growing feeling that the rank and file should be rewarded for their bravery for the first time.

The VC was instituted by Queen Victoria through a Royal Warrant issued on January 20, 1856 which announced a single decoration –

“For Valour” – available to the Army and Navy (and later the RAF).

Eventually, when I had made a little money as an entrepreneur, I successfully bid in 1986 for the decoration belonging to Leading Seaman James Magennis, a submariner. At the time, I considered that VC to be a one-off purchase. However, once I owned one, I developed a desire to collect more. Now the collection that I started 22 years ago is the largest in the world.

And it is soon to go on display at the Imperial War Museum. The museum is a great institution that has gained a reputation second to none for helping people to understand modern conflicts. Which is why I have made a £5 million donation so that the VCs can be seen in a new gallery.

The **Lord Ashcroft Gallery** will open in the autumn of 2010. The medals belonging to a trust – set up to care for and protect them – and will go on show alongside the 50 VCs and 29 George Crosses already held by the museum. Among those to go on display are

the VC awarded to Lieutenant (later

Rear Admiral) John Bythesea who was the second man to receive the award; the medal to Lieutenant (later Captain) William Leefe Robinson, who shot down the first Zeppelin over British soil during the First World War; and the posthumous medal to Sergeant Ian McKay, of the Parachute Regiment, one of only two VCs awarded during the Falklands conflict.

The collection spans every force – Army, Royal Navy and RAF – and 128 years: from deeds of bravery in 1854 to a wonderful act of courage during the Falklands in 1982. Our servicemen now face constant dangers in Afghanistan and Iraq, and too many are losing their lives fighting for Queen and country. It is, therefore, right that at this time, more than ever, we should remember those men who have a special place in our history – as the bravest of the brave.

Lord Ashcroft is deputy chairman of the Conservative Party. He is also the author of Victoria Cross Heroes

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