



LORD ASHCROFT'S
"HERO OF
THE MONTH"

Company Quartermaster-Sergeant Alexander Brereton

VC

INITIATIVE AGGRESSION • BOLDNESS LEADERSHIP • SACRIFICE SKILL • ENDURANCE

The many Victoria Crosses and George Crosses in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London are displayed under one of seven different qualities of bravery. Company Quartermaster-Sergeant Alexander Picton Brereton's VC medal group is part of the collection and Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of initiative: "Difficult situations, which place lives under threat, require quick decisions and clear solutions. Often those who act are not in charge, but they take control. Confident, aware of what needs to be done, they are convinced they can pull it off. Someone has to act."

into the 144th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, in January 1916.

In September 1916, Brereton embarked for the UK with his Canadian comrades. In January 1917, he arrived in France and joined the 8th Battalion, Manitoba Regiment (2nd Brigade, 1st Canadian Division) in February of that year.

His Victoria Cross action took place on 9 August 1918, during the second day of the Battle of Amiens in France. On this day, the Allies continued their successful progress eastwards. As the British and French advanced, the Canadian Corps also made significant gains, including the capture of Warvillers. However, Brereton's platoon was ambushed at Hatchet Wood, near Warvillers, to the east of Amiens.

HAND-TO-HAND FIGHTING
Machine gunners threatened to wipe out the entire platoon but, as *The London Gazette*



RIGHT
Sergeant Alexander Picton Brereton VC, pictured wearing his VC medal ribbon. (DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE/LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA)

RIGHT
Canadian troops clearing enemy dug-outs on 9 August 1918, during the Battle of Amiens. Note the German prisoner on the right. (DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE/LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA)



of 27 September 1918 explained, Brereton, then aged 25, went into action, bravely and calmly: "For most conspicuous bravery during an attack, when a line of hostile machine guns opened fire suddenly on his platoon, which was in an exposed position, and no cover available. This gallant NCO at once appreciated the critical situation, and realised that unless something was done at once his platoon would be annihilated. On his own initiative, and without a moment's delay and alone, he sprang forward and reached one of the hostile machine gun posts, where he shot the man operating the gun and bayoneted the next man who attempted to operate it, whereupon nine others surrendered to him.

"Cpl Brereton's action was a splendid example of resource and bravery, and not only undoubtedly saved many of his comrades' lives, but also inspired his platoon to charge and capture the five remaining posts."

As the Great War drew to a close, Brereton was presented with his VC by King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 24 October 1918. Also present at the investiture was Sergeant Frederick Coppins, from the same regiment as Brereton, who was awarded the VC for his bravery during the same action.

As a 24-year-old corporal, Coppins had also been met by machine gun fire and, like Brereton, he and his men had no cover. Coppins called on four men to follow him and they rushed straight

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES II

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II* was published in hardback in 2016 and is now available in paperback.

For more information, please visit: www.victoriacrossheroes2.com
Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at Imperial War Museum, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com
For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft



for the guns. The four men were killed and Coppins was wounded but he nevertheless reached the enemy alone, killed the operator of the first gun and three of the crew before capturing four other soldiers. His medal citation stated: "Cpl Coppins, by this act of outstanding valour, was the means of saving many lives of the men of his platoon and enabled the advance to be continued."

After war ended, Brereton returned to Canada where, after being welcomed by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur W Morley and other officers from the 144th Battalion, he initially spent some time with family friends. After some relaxation, he travelled to Viola Dale, Manitoba, where he was given a hero's welcome. >>

ABOVE
Sergeant Brereton VC's medal group. (LORD ASHCROFT COLLECTION)

BELOW
Tanks going forward through Hourges during the fighting on 9 August 1918. (DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE/LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA)



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RIGHT

A Canadian 'armoured car' is pictured going into action on 9 August 1918, along with a number of Canadian soldiers.

LIVING THE SERVICE

After being discharged from the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1919, Brereton farmed at Elnora, Alberta, where he eventually acquired 640 acres of land on which he lived and worked. In June 1925, he married Mary McPhee and the couple went on to have a son and two daughters.

In November 1929, Brereton attended a VC dinner at the House of Lords. In June 1939, Brereton was presented to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their visit to Edmonton, Canada. He resumed his military service, aged 46, some three months after the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, serving as a company quartermaster sergeant at Red Deer Training Camp, Alberta.



BELOW RIGHT

Sergeant Frederick Coppins VC.



BOTTOM

The Rt Hon Daniel Roland Michener, Governor-General of Canada, with holders of the Victoria Cross and George Cross at Government House, June 1967. Brereton is standing in the back row, third from the left.

He was discharged in 1944 and ran a butcher's shop and later a general store before returning to farming in Elnora. However, by this time his son, Mac, had taken on most of the responsibility for running the farm, where he built up a splendid herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle.

In June 1956, Brereton attended the Victoria Cross and George Cross Review in London, which was arranged to mark the centenary of the VC's creation. Later he moved to Fort St John, British Columbia.

In May 1976, Brereton was admitted to hospital suffering from heart

problems. He died at Colonel Belcher Hospital, Calgary, on 11 June 1976, aged 83. He was buried in Elnora Cemetery four days later, following a funeral service at Knox United Church, Three Hills.

His wife, Mary, had died four years earlier. A Royal Canadian Legion post at Elnora has been named in Brereton's honour and there is a portrait of him at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

I acquired Brereton's medal group in a private purchase in 2006 and I feel immensely privileged to be the custodian of this splendid soldier's decorations and service awards. ©

