



LORD ASHCROFT'S  
"HERO OF  
THE MONTH"

# Air Commodore Ferdinand Maurice Felix West

VC, CBE, MC

## SKILL

AGGRESSION • BOLDNESS •  
INITIATIVE • LEADERSHIP •  
SACRIFICE • 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. Air Commodore Ferdinand Maurice Felix West's VC medal group is part of the exhibition and Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of skill:

"Wisdom, sound judgement and technical knowledge are the hallmarks of skill. It is about using resources to greatest effect, usually under intense pressure. For many involved in bomb disposal, while a single movement might start the clock ticking, the puzzle still has to be solved, the game won. Perseverance is everything."



he travelled to England and enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) before being posted to a field ambulance in Ireland.

### INTO BATTLE

In May 1915, West was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Munster Fusiliers and, in November the same year, he reached France. Within 36 hours of his arrival in the Loos sector, he and his comrades were ordered to the front where, he later recalled, "we lived like rats".

After being promoted to acting captain in September 1916, West became determined to fly – one of his interests from childhood, but also to escape the horrors of trench warfare. In March 1917, his wish was granted when he was seconded to the Royal Flying Corps. After basic training, he joined 3 Squadron, near Amiens, in April of that year and was quickly promoted to lieutenant and, soon after, to flying officer (observer).

In October 1917, West was chosen for pilot training in Grantham, Lincolnshire, and the following month he made his first solo flight. In January 1918, he joined 8 Squadron at Amiens.

After his father's death, Freddie, as Ferdinand was usually known, was brought up and educated in Italy, attending Genoa University after leaving school. As a schoolboy and student, he became fluent in French and Italian, in addition to English. Until the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, West worked as a clerk in a bank in Zurich, Switzerland. However, after the start of the war,



RIGHT  
The aircraft that West was flying on 12 August 1918 was an Armstrong Whitworth FK.8, serial C8601 – the same type as that seen here. His observer was Lieutenant William Haslam.



## 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](http://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](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes). For details about his VC collection, visit: [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com)  
For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com). Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft



On 21 April 1918, and by now a member of the recently formed RAF, West, while on patrol, apparently witnessed the 'Red Baron', Manfred von Richthofen, being shot down over France and he landed to investigate just as the German flying ace was dying in his aircraft. In May, West took part in an action for which he was later – in July 1918 – awarded the Military Cross.

### HEROISM

On 10 August 1918, and by then a flight commander, West took part in his Victoria Cross action north of Roye, France. The citation for his VC, awarded for "outstanding bravery in aerial combat", takes up the story: "Captain West, while engaging hostile troops at a low altitude far over the enemy lines, was attacked by seven aircraft. Early in the engagement one of his legs was partially severed by an explosive bullet, and fell powerless into the controls, rendering the machine for the time unmanageable. Lifting his disabled leg, he regained control of the machine, and, although wounded in the other leg, he, with surpassing bravery and devotion to duty, manoeuvred his machine so skilfully that his observer was enabled to get



ABOVE LEFT  
An Armstrong Whitworth FK.8, C8445 'C', of 8 Squadron RFC, taken in March 1918. (SIR ROYDEN DASH)

LEFT  
Capt West leaning on the prop of FK.8 C8594 at Auxi le Chateau in July 1918  
Capt Freddie West leaning on prop with Lt J G G Haslam prior to the action in which West was awarded the VC. (8 SQN RECORDS VIA ATC)

several good bursts into the enemy machines, which drove them away.

"Captain West, then, with rare courage and determination, desperately wounded as he was, brought his machine over our lines and landed safely. Exhausted by his exertions, he fainted, but on regaining consciousness insisted on writing his report."

West, who was aged 22 at the time of his VC action, was treated

in Rouen hospital, where he had his badly damaged left leg amputated. He was later transferred to the London Hospital, Whitechapel.

His Victoria Cross was announced on 8 November 1918, just three days before the Armistice. He was later fitted with an artificial leg at Roehampton, Surrey. He received his VC from King George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 1 March 1919.

After substituting his basic wooden leg for a more advanced Desoutter limb, West revived his Royal Air Force career. He received a permanent commission, initially as a lieutenant, in the RAF in August 1919 and was soon flying again, initially without permission.

On 19 January 1922, he married Winifred Leslie at Westminster Cathedral in central London and the couple went on to have a son. During the inter-war years West's RAF career blossomed and he received several promotions, with both foreign and home postings. Between 1936 and 1939, he was Air Attaché to Finland, Estonia and Latvia. >>

LEFT  
With the serial number C3541, this Armstrong Whitworth FK.8 is believed to have been photographed at 1 School of Military Aeronautics RFC, Reading. (COURTESY OF THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL; P09378.009)





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RIGHT

Air Cdre West (left) with a painting of Baron von Richthofen at Hendon in 1978. (P H T GREEN COLLECTION)



RIGHT

The men of 'B' Flight, 8 Squadron RFC in front of an AW FK.8 in March 1918. (SIR ROYDEN DASH)

## SECOND WAR

After the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, West, by then aged 43, was appointed as temporary group captain. However, after serving in France, he was invalided to Aldershot Military Hospital in Hampshire with a burst ulcer over Christmas 1939.

Following a good recovery, there were senior postings to Italy and Switzerland to undertake secret counter-intelligence work. West served throughout the Second World War and in the summer of 1945 he was made head of the Directorate of Foreign Liaison. In the same year, he was made a CBE (Military Division).

He retired from the RAF on 29 March 1946 in the rank of

air commodore and joined film distributors J Arthur Rank, becoming managing director of one its associated companies, Eagle-Lion Distributors, the following year.

From 1956 to 1988, West was an active committee member of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association. In 1962, he was the subject of a biography, *The Winged Diplomat*, written by P R Reid.

West died at Princess Margaret Hospital, Windsor, Berkshire, on 7 July 1988, aged 92, when he was the last surviving VC recipient from the Great War. His name is commemorated on the RAF Memorial, St Clement Danes, London, and he was the subject of a portrait by Henry Campbell that hangs in the RAF Museum, Hendon, London.

I do not own West's VC group but it is nevertheless on display at the Lord Ashcroft Gallery in the Imperial War Museum, London, it being among the decorations that has been placed in the care of the IWM. ©

BELOW

Another 8 Squadron FK.8, C8594, taken at Auxi le Chateau c. June 1918. (J M BRUCE/ G S LESLIE COLLECTION)

