

'I cannot believe that you that contributed so much

EXCLUSIVE

By **Giles Sheldrick**
Chief Reporter

WAR heroes took a final stand yesterday before their gallantry gongs are removed from display.

Britain's "bravest of the brave" – holders of five Victoria Crosses and nine George Crosses – saw the medal haul for the last time before they are locked in a vault.

It comes as the Imperial War Museum prepares to shut the Lord Ashcroft Gallery on May 31.

Lord Ashcroft, the philanthropist the exhibition is named after blasted the decision, saying: "The behaviour of the Imperial War Museum, a publicly funded body, has been little short of shameful."

Britain's veterans have also described it as wrong and short-sighted. And Iraq War hero Johnson Beharry, 45, said: "This stunning exhibition recognised the sacrifices made of those who have served and words cannot describe what it means."

Mr Beharry, the first living soldier in almost 50 years to be awarded the VC, added: "It will be

'I am lost for words that the museum would just abandon the medals gallery'

a sad day for the public when they can no longer experience it."

The museum's decision to close the gallery – suggested by some to be politically motivated – means there are just 28 days left to see the world's largest collection of military decorations before they disappear, potentially abroad.

And yesterday, a week before VE Day marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, 14 bravehearts visited the Extraordinary Heroes exhibition, which tells stories of derring-do, before it closes for good.

They toured the £5million exhibition alongside Lord Ashcroft in the gallery which has hosted his priceless haul since 2010.

Later they posed outside for a photograph in front of 15-inch guns originally mounted on the Royal Navy ships HMS Ramillies and HMS Resolution during the First World War. It was the biggest gathering of the UK's gallantry medal holders in recent years.

Lord Ashcroft, 79, has amassed a collection of 240 VCs and 41 GCs since 1986 in a painstaking labour of love.

The gallery was opened by the Princess Royal in 2010 and has proudly displayed 230 VCs and a smaller number of GCs, along with

COMMENT

LORD ASHCROFT

Businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster



IT IS heartbreaking for me to comprehend that my collection of Victoria Cross and George Cross gallantry medals is due to be dismantled and removed from public view.

I have spent four long decades amassing the world's largest collection of VCs and now it seems inevitable that, as a result of a decision by the Imperial War Museums, these medals from the "Extraordinary Heroes" exhibition will disappear into a vault for the foreseeable future.

Since learning of the IWM's baffling decision from an intermediary, there have been some silver linings to the cloud hanging over the closure of the Lord Ashcroft Gallery after 15 years.

They include being joined by so many distinguished guests, including VC and GC recipients, at the gallery yesterday. Many of these men, whom I like to refer to as "the bravest of the brave", told me they shared my belief that the IWM's decision to shut the gallery is wrong and short-sighted.

Another silver lining has been the reaction from so many members of the public who have written to me to express their opposition to, even their disgust at, the decision.

Many of these people are convinced that there are politically correct motives behind the move.

Now my overwhelming hope is that, before the gallery closes, thousands of visitors will go to see, free of charge, a collection of well over 200 VCs and a further collection of GCs.

The VC is Britain and the Commonwealth's premier medal for gallantry in the presence of the enemy.

The GC is the premier medal for bravery not in the presence of the enemy.

Yet another silver lining has been the generous offers, including from abroad, to house my VC and GC collection, either in the short term or longer term, so that the decorations can continue to be enjoyed by tens of thousands of people every year.

There are still obstacles to these but I hope they can be overcome.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. Visit lordashcroft.com and follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft.

LORD ASHCROFT AND HEROES OUTSIDE THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

From left, **JOHNSON BEHARRY VC**
JIM BEATON GC
SAM SHEPARD GC
CHRIS FINNEY GC
DOM TROULAN GC
KEITH PAYNE VC
LORD ASHCROFT
PETE NORTON GC
KIM HUGHES GC
TONY GLEDHILL GC
MICHAEL PRATT GC
MARK DONALDSON VC
DAN KEIGHAN VC



a number of others either owned by or loaned to the IWM.

Lord Ashcroft owns eight of the medals awarded to the 14 heroes at yesterday's valedictory salute, with seven on display at the IWM.

His intention was to gift them to the nation, but after the museum announced it was closing the gallery, he ripped up the clause in

his will leaving them to the public. Choking back tears, he said: "I am sad to have come. This has been a major part of my life.

"I can't believe that you can just ignore the people who contributed so much – including their lives. I am lost for words that the museum would just abandon it.

"I am like this because of the

respect I have for each and every one of them. I made arrangements to leave all this to IWM believing they understood what this means to the memories of the few.

"Clearly I can't leave something to a museum that doesn't appreciate the valour and sacrifices made."

Lord Ashcroft, the former deputy chairman of the Tory Party, built up

his stunning medal collection to honour his heroic father Eric who took part in the D-Day landings.

The gallery will close just five days before the 81st anniversary of the Normandy invasion on June 6 in which Lieutenant Ashcroft stormed Sword Beach with The South Lancashire Regiment. The Express understands the IWM

VC GALLERY FACES CLOSURE

can just ignore the people ..including their lives'

Picture: JONATHAN BUCKMASTER



Hero Johnson's acts of courage in Iraq led to Victoria Cross honour

FEW acts of valour are as extraordinary as those that saw Johnson Beharry awarded the Victoria Cross.

The hero carried out two separate acts of courage while serving in Iraq with the 1st Battalion Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment.

On May 1, 2004, a rocket-propelled grenade hit the Warrior armoured vehicle he was driving in Al Amarah, Iraq, setting it alight and knocking out his commanding officer. Warrant Officer Class 2 Beharry took over, forcing the vehicle through a barrier and driving over a mine that failed to explode.

He was shot in the head and the helmet he was wearing is on display with his VC in the Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum.

Under fire, the hero climbed out of the burning vehicle to rescue his CO and gunner before leading two other soldiers

By Giles Sheldrick

to safety. He drove his Warrior to where it would do no damage if it exploded, disabled it and its weapons and ran for cover before collapsing from exhaustion.

He was sent to hospital but discharged himself and was back on duty just six weeks later. On June 11, 2004, a grenade hit his vehicle and exploded inches from Johnson's head. Barely conscious, he drove away at high speed to safety. He was left in a coma but had saved the lives of his fellow soldiers.

Beharry became the first recipient of the VC in the 21st century on March 18, 2005. When presented with his medal, he was the first living soldier since 1969 to be awarded one, and the first serving VC holder in the British Army since 1985. His medal will be taken off display in June.



Victoria Cross holder...Beharry



refused a request to keep the exhibition open beyond June 1 until an alternative venue was found.

Lord Ashcroft demanded his gallery be kept open for the full term agreed, which is September 30, threatening legal action if not.

He said: "Unbeknownst to me, I discovered that IWM had made an audio recording of the memories of

my late father, recalling his part in the D-Day landings. Listening to him speak of his experience was exceptionally moving.

"As far as I was concerned, I was a good friend of IWM and one of its biggest supporters. After my death, I hoped my irreplaceable collection might be displayed permanently at the museum. Sadly,

that will now be elsewhere.

"I have written to the trustees to ask that the full term of our agreement be respected. I am hopeful they will agree.

"However, if not, I intend to ask the courts to intervene. In the meantime, I trust that the museum will not resort to any precipitation of the gallery closure by invoking a

termination of our agreement. That could not possibly be in the public interest and it will be resisted."

The Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military decoration for valour, was first awarded in 1856 by Queen Victoria. The George Cross is bestowed on those who have displayed the greatest heroism or the most conspicuous courage

while in extreme danger. Only 418 have been awarded since 1940.

The IWM said: "We are enormously grateful to Lord Ashcroft and to other private lenders who have enabled us to display these important medals since the gallery opened."

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