

## PRICELESS COLLECTION TO 'GATHER DUST' IN VAULT

Picture: JONATHAN BUCKMASTER

### EXCLUSIVE

By **Giles Sheldrick**  
Chief Reporter

THE world's largest collection of First and Second World War bravery medals is being removed from display because the acts they celebrate happened too long ago.

The Lord Ashcroft Gallery, housing 230 Victoria Crosses and a smaller number of George Crosses from his priceless personal collection closes at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) on September 30.

They have been displayed since 2010 as part of the Extraordinary Heroes exhibition commemorating the bravest of the brave. The VC is Britain's highest military decoration for valour in the presence of the enemy, while the GC is awarded to those who have displayed the greatest heroism or the most conspicuous courage while in extreme danger.

But the IWM has admitted it will pull down the shutters on the exhibition a month after Victory over Japan Day (VJ Day) – which marks the end of World War II – because so few people who remember the conflict are alive.

The collection in the Central London building will be replaced with stories of conflicts "within visitors' living memory".

### Sacrifices

The decision has sparked fury, with Iraq War hero Johnson Beharry, 45 – who became the first living soldier in almost 50 years to be awarded the VC – saying: "This stunning exhibition has recognised the sacrifices made by those who have served, and words cannot describe what it means. It will be a sad day for the public when they are no longer able to experience it."

Lord Ashcroft's haul, amassed over 40 years, was intended to be left as a gift to the nation. But after the IWM decided to scrap the exhibition, he ripped up a clause in his will. In just two months the medals will be packed up and placed in a vault at a secret location "to gather dust" instead.

The businessman, philanthropist, and writer, who used to be deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, built up his stunning collection to honour his father Lt Eric Ashcroft, who took part in the D-Day landings.

He said: "Unbeknownst to me, I discovered that IWM had made an audio recording of his memories. 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 had hoped my irreplaceable collection might be displayed permanently at the museum."

"Sadly, it will now be elsewhere." In

Collection...Lord Ashcroft at the IWM. Victoria Cross, below



SCHOOL holidays are already upon us.

This will offer the final opportunity for thousands of children, their parents and many others from all over the UK and beyond to visit the gallery bearing my name at the Imperial War Museum.

The Lord Ashcroft Gallery, which the IWM has decided in its "wisdom" must close at the end of September, is home to the world's largest collection of Victoria Cross decorations, well over 200 in total. It also houses a smaller collection of George Crosses.

### Courage

These medal groups, which I have built up into a collection over the past four decades, represent courage and service.

For behind every award of the VC and the GC is a wonderful story of personal gallantry.

The Extraordinary Heroes exhibition at the gallery seeks to intrigue, inspire and amaze by re-telling forgotten stories of great bravery from the Crimean War to the present day.

My medal collection, estimated by experts to be worth £70million, has been on public display at the IWM since 2010 after I donated £5m for the gallery to be constructed.

The collection included one of only three VC and Bars in the world – that's

### COMMENT

#### LORD ASHCROFT

Writer, politician and businessman

the equivalent of two VCs awarded to a single individual. This was awarded to Captain Noel Chavasse, VC & Bar, MC, a medical officer who displayed incredible valour during the First World War and was killed in the second of his VC actions in August 1917, aged 32.

In the short term, it seems likely that after September my medal collection will gather dust in a vault because there has been insufficient time to find a new "home" for it.

I am grateful to those who have helped with finding a new location where the public can continue to enjoy the collection.

I and others continue to work on finding a solution.

I am also grateful for the support of all those, including living VC and GC recipients, who have publicly opposed the decision by the IWM to close the gallery.

My greatest wish now is for a record number of people to visit the Lord Ashcroft Gallery – as always, free of charge – in its final weeks.

In doing so they will honour some of the bravest men and women the world has ever seen.

# Museum removes medals because the heroism they honour was too long ago

a parting shot the 79-year-old said: "I can't believe that you can just ignore the people that contributed so much – including their lives. I am like this because of the respect I have for each and every one of them. Clearly I can't leave something to a

museum that doesn't appreciate the valour and sacrifices made."

The museum, which was founded in 1917 to record military and civil effort and sacrifice, said: "IWM London has proudly displayed Victoria Crosses and George Crosses since 1968. We remain committed to sharing these stories of the greatest acts of brav-

ery and sacrifice in defence of our nation with the public. We plan for VC and GC medals from our collection to continue to be displayed across our UK branches.

"Over the past 10 years we have opened galleries exploring the First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust, and our art, film and photography collection. Our dis-

plays exploring post-Second World War conflict, including the Cold War, Falklands War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, are less well developed. Our aim is to address this by creating new gallery spaces on upper floors, which will allow us to share more stories of conflicts that are within many of our visitors' living memory."

## SOLDIER WHO TWICE DEFIED DEATH IS 21ST CENTURY'S FIRST LIVING VC HOLDER

TWO extraordinary acts of valour led to Johnson Beharry becoming the first living soldier in nearly 50 years to receive the Victoria Cross.

On May 1 2004 while in Iraq with the 1st Battalion Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, a rocket-propelled grenade hit the Warrior

Bravery in battle...Johnson Beharry

By **Giles Sheldrick**

armoured vehicle he was driving. Beharry drove through a road block and over a mine that did not go off.

Shot in the head and under fire, he rescued his CO and burned gunner before leading two other soldiers to safety. He was back on duty six weeks later. On June 11 2004 his company

was ambushed and an RPG hit their vehicle. Seriously wounded, he drove backwards at high speed to safety, saving his fellow soldiers. The dad-of-three became the first recipient of the VC in the 21st century in March 2005.

Warrant Officer Class 2 Beharry's VC is extremely valuable and he only ever wears copies. It will be on public display until September 30.

