

PHILIP MUSSELL

# Gallantry VICTORIOUS

**F**OUR years ago when MEDAL NEWS first interviewed Lord Ashcroft, KCMG, about the Victoria Cross Collection that he had been building since 1986 he told us of his intention to exhibit the collection, in its entirety, so that everyone might know the incredible stories behind the medals and get a chance to see the groups in one place. He hinted back then that the Imperial War Museum (IWM) would probably be his choice for the location of that Exhibition and, on November 12, thanks to a £5 Million donation from the man himself, the Lord Ashcroft Gallery was opened on the Museum's fourth floor. I was lucky enough to be invited to the official opening reception and the press preview and, once again talk with Lord Ashcroft about the gallery, his new book *George Cross Heroes* and the accompanying television series on the Discovery Channel.

Before this week there had been much speculation as to how such a phenomenal collection of gallantry awards could be displayed. There was always the danger that with so many similar groups on offer a certain amount of medal fatigue could kick in—admittedly we collectors would be enthralled but, for the general public, row after row of medals, no matter how gripping the story, might well induce a sense of “seen one, you’ve seen them all”—which clearly isn’t the case. Anyone who has been to an old style “medal room” at a regimental museum will appreciate though that no matter how interested one is in the subject unless it is handled well there can be certain element of familiarity that creeps in—more so if only one or two “types” of medal are on display. It would have been a tragedy if such an amazing collection as this one were to fall foul of that same problem, however, I can now happily report that it hasn’t. It won’t. It simply can’t.

The new gallery has been artfully and carefully designed, not as a display of pieces of metal and silk but as an interactive exhibit that draws the visitor in, tells them the story, allows them to learn rather than just look. Unusually the gallery is not laid out in chronological order, although there is a chronological logic to many parts of it, partly because the IWM traditionally only covers conflicts from 1914, so earlier Victoria Crosses do not fit as neatly as they might, and partly because the gallery is about the story of the action that led to the award rather than the conflict in which it was won (remember this is a Victoria AND George Cross gallery and many of the GCs on display were civilian awards and not related to war at all, even though they are displayed at a War Museum!). So instead of a chronological layout, visitors to the gallery’s *Extraordinary Heroes* Exhibition will see the 241 VCs and GCs (165 of which come from the Ashcroft Collection)

categorised in seven sections each representing a different quality that led to the award—these being *leadership, sacrifice, aggression, skill, initiative, endurance* and *boldness*. Now of course it could easily be argued that in many cases far more than one of these attributes, indeed in some cases ALL of them, were exhibited by the decoration winner but I can see what the gallery has tried to do—and it does work.

In each section the medals are on display in simple wooden cases, but they aren’t hung on a wall, all the same, some are at eye level, others waist level and lower, drawing the eye down and almost into the group. Some are exhibited as a “set” with related groups all together, others shown alongside relevant items that add to the story—items like the steering wheel of the Zeppelin shot down by Leefe-Robinson, James Magennis’ diving suit, Johnson Beharry’s battered helmet worn on the day he won his VC in Iraq or the shredded

backpack worn by Matt Croucher when he fell on the grenade in Afghanistan to save his comrades and earn his GC, and a host of others. The information accompanying each medal group or display is, at first sight, minimal, no chance of information overload from the “write ups”, instead visitors are encouraged to discover more for themselves through use of the interactive information centres that tell you everything you could want to know about the recipient and what they did to win their Cross. Video is used extensively to “bring things to life” and to hear recipients, or in the case of Christina Schmid, widow of Olaf Schmid, GC, the next of kin of recipients, tell their own story, lifts the exhibition to a new level and the use of the “extras” gives the exhibition far more depth than simple medal groups, no matter how impressive, ever could.

Hoary old medal collectors like us will, of course, know the background to many



Three living recipients: Johnson Beharry, VC, Tony Gledhill, GC, and Matthew Croucher, GC.



Johnson Beharry, VC.



Matthew Croucher, GC.

of the stories and will know exactly what we are looking at, but this gallery isn't just aimed at us—it is aimed at those who have no idea about what it takes to win a VC or GC, it is aimed at children who are encouraged to study the stories in more depth with mock up *Victor* comics and a challenge to collect their own "medals", one for each story (difficult to explain but it works) and it is aimed at anyone who ever forgets that the medals are actually just symbols, recognition of an incredible act of bravery and are not like other museum artefacts or simply "collectables" like stamps or coins.

Is it perfect? From a medal collector's perspective maybe not—we know more than the average visitor and might well consider the interactive side of things, the "shark" hanging from the ceiling (representing Cadet David Hay's 1941 GC action) and the comic book mock ups a little beneath us. We might consider it

a mistake to hide the double VC of Noel Chavasse (acquired by the Aschcroft Trust in 2009) in a box (cunningly adorned with two VCs and a "plus" sign fashioned from a Red Cross symbol—it is on display but you have to hunt for it) and not mention in the visible write-up that Trigg's VC was the only one awarded on the say-so of the enemy (you have to search to find that information) but such criticisms are very minor and we must remember that others who visit this amazing gallery might not have the advantages we have or look at things as we do.

Is it worth a visit? Without a shadow of a doubt. It is a superb exhibition, a wonderful gallery and any medal collector who gets the chance should visit it more than once.

Of course, just because the Lord Ashcroft Gallery is now open doesn't mean the collection is complete, it has actually been designed with expansion

in mind and there are a number of empty cases in the exhibit just waiting to be filled. Whether they are for Lord Ashcroft's next acquisitions or for medal groups loaned by families remains to be seen. There are already a number of groups on loan from the recipients or next of kin on display in the gallery and, judging from the reaction of VC and GC holders and their families on the night of the opening reception, it is certainly possible that other Crosses may find their way to the gallery in due course. That, of course, was always Lord Ashcroft's aim—look back at the interview we conducted with him four years ago and you will see that his hope has always been to bring together the largest collection of VCs in the world—whether through purchase or through families deciding that the gallery is where they want the medals to be displayed. He has achieved that and the Lord Ashcroft Gallery is, and in all likelihood always



will be, without equal; it is an excellent monument to bravery and a fitting tribute to the men and women whose self sacrifice and courage earned them their nation's highest awards.

Lord Ashcroft can be justly proud to put his name to the Gallery and we medal collectors can be delighted that we have the chance to see his dream come to fruition. Am I being overly sycophantic? Is this couched in too much hyperbole? Under normal circumstances I would say

yes, but having been privileged enough to see over 240 VC and GC groups in one place at one time (not to mention being able to meet a number of the actual recipients of these medals at the opening reception) I think I can be forgiven. I am just amazed I've been so restrained!

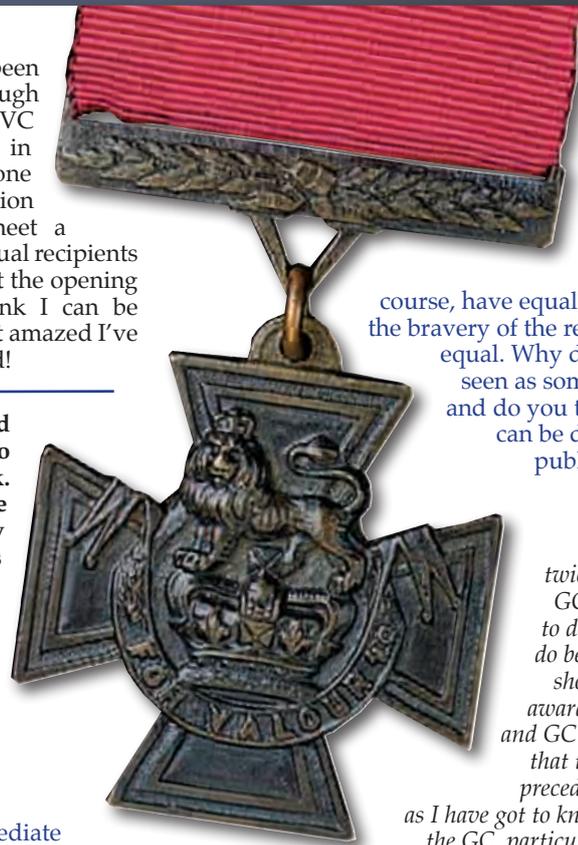
**Of course I didn't just go to the gallery to have a look round and gaze in stunned admiration at the displays—I did want to speak to Lord Ashcroft about the gallery and his new book. Fortunately he was able to spare some time to chat despite the last minute preparations. I caught up with him on the day before the official reception in the gallery itself where his pride and excitement were almost palpable. I started off by asking him about one of his latest acquisitions.**

Lord Ashcroft, you are known for your Victoria Cross Collection and indeed, more recently, for your interest in Special Forces Medals so the George Cross is a logical step. I see from your new book *George Cross Heroes* that you have one in your collection (the GC awarded to Special Constable Brandon Moss of Coventry Police) is this a new theme for Lord Ashcroft? Will there be others in the collection?

*Not in the same sense as the VC as such, for the simple reason that the GC itself (as opposed to the earlier awards that were later exchanged for the GC) has only been existence for a relatively small number of years and many of the 161 awarded are still in the hands of the recipients or the first generation next of kin so they are unlikely to become available for a generation or so. However, if one was to become available it would be very nice to be able to add it to the collection here but I wouldn't say that this was necessarily a new direction—if only because of the availability.*

In your introduction to the book you mention that you have concentrated on only the 161 immediate awards and have not looked at the Albert Medal or Edward Medal exchanges. Do those medals appeal to you in the same way as the GC or is there something about the GC specifically?

*I think every collector in their own way has things that they enjoy. That is not to say that any award could be considered for actions more brave or less brave than others but you can't collect everything. I'm not making any statements about any awards but my interest has obviously come from the military side and whilst it has extended into the GC more than half the GCs awarded have been military related. I'm fascinated by the civilian awards too, of course, but I don't want to go much further and look at other decorations like the Albert or Edward Medals.*



In the mainstream press the GC is often referred to as being "second only to the VC" but they, of course, have equal standing with the bravery of the recipients being equal. Why do you feel it is seen as somehow inferior and do you think anything can be done to change public perception?

*The very fact that the VC has been around for twice as long as the GC has something to do with that. But do bear in mind that should someone be awarded both the VC and GC then it is stated that the VC will take precedence. That said, as I have got to know recipients of the GC, particularly from latter day bomb disposal, my admiration for their cold courage knows no bounds and perhaps, just perhaps, there is an extra cachet in the fact that they have something different from a VC and I think it gives to them a particular merit.*

In medal circles there has often been debate about the nature of bomb disposal GCs, after all the bombs were left or dropped by the enemy and those trying to diffuse them would perhaps argue that they are very much "in the face of the enemy" and thus eligible for a VC. Or in the case of Christopher Finney's GC when his convoy was attacked by Coalition rather than Iraqi forces in a so-called "friendly fire" scenario, had the fire been from Iraqis he would



have been awarded the VC but because it was “friendly” he gets a GC. These battlefield circumstances are very different from someone who saves the life of someone drowning or from a fire—do you think perhaps the VC should be for war zones the GC for civilian situations? Or maybe there should be different divisions of GC as with the OBE etc?

*I've been very careful not to get involved with what others might term “advocacy”. I just want to recognise the bravery of the recipients regardless of what they have been awarded whether it is the VC or GC. I do accept as a matter of logic that perhaps in the beginning there might have been some thought given to the award of the VC being for brave action in a war situation whether the enemy was in sight or not and that the subsequent GC might then have been awarded solely to civilians but I don't feel strongly enough in my love of the subject to get into that debate. There are plenty of others who are happy to do that, they don't need my contribution!*

You've always cited Magennis' VC as being your “favourite”, if such a word can be used, because it was your first, closely followed by those awarded to Chard, Norman Jackson and Leefe-Robinson. You also said that you very much liked the story of Lloyd Allan Trigg. Are there any GC stories that stand out specifically for you?

*Many, and all for different reasons. Perhaps because I grew up watching programmes like The Sweeney and others about the “Flying Squad” and similar police units I can perhaps visualise certain stories more easily—like that of Tony Gledhill the policeman who had a gun held to his head and yet still hung onto the window of the gunman's car as it picked up speed finally managing to overpower the man. But then you have the story of the 15-year-old boy (John Bamford) who went time and again into a burning building to save his siblings or that of the driver and fireman of the ammunition train that caught fire [Benjamin Gimbert and James Nightall] who had to drive their deadly cargo to safety away from others. Each one is remarkable in its own way and what I have tried to do in the book and the television series (on Discovery Television, starting Thursday, November 18, 2010 for four weeks) is bring more public awareness to such stories.*

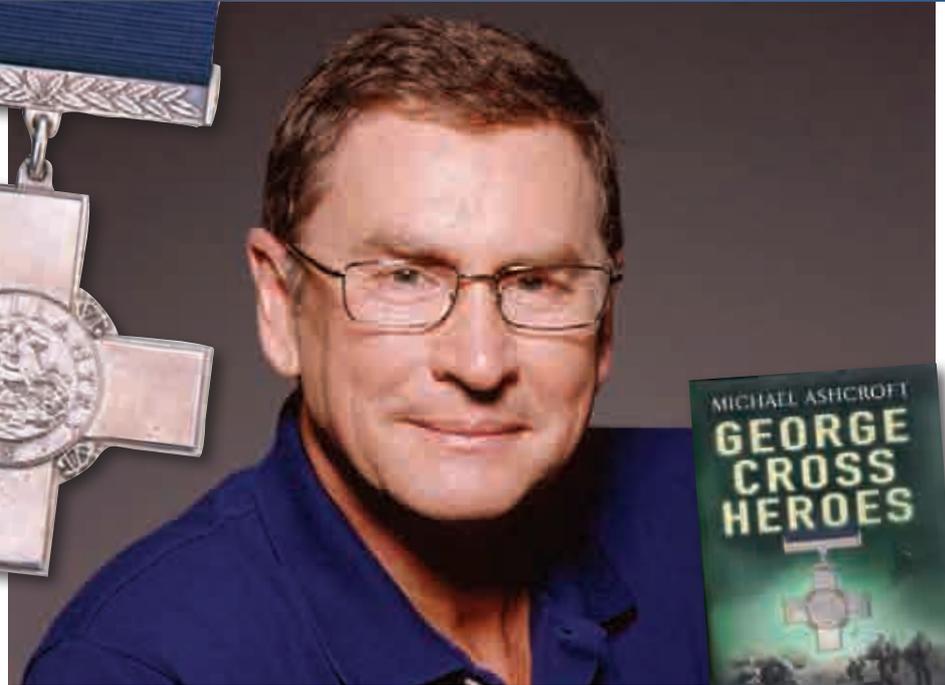
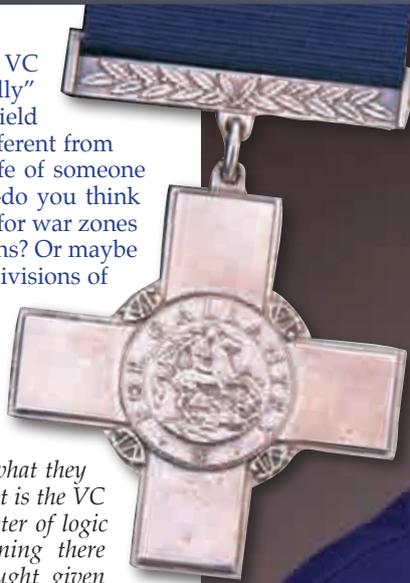
Moving on to the gallery, how many VC and GC groups are on display?

*Over 200, in fact I believe 241.*

And how many belong to the Ashcroft Trust?

*164 VCs and, of course, one GC.*

Obviously you donated a large amount of money to make the gallery a reality and your collection forms a large part of it but you are a busy man—did you have time



Lord Ashcroft, KCMG.

to get involved with the building of the gallery itself and the displays or did you leave that solely to the Museum?

*We have worked very closely together and my communications director, Angela Entwistle, has been intimately involved in the whole project—the planning, the design and making sure that it was something that the Imperial War Museum was proud of in a form that worked for both of us.*

And you're obviously happy with the result?

*I am ecstatic. I'm very proud and excited but also very humbled.*

When we first spoke about the idea of a gallery, back in 2006, you expressed a hope that other families who still owned VCs and GCs might come forward and allow them to be displayed alongside those of your collection. To your knowledge has that happened?

*Absolutely! The most prominent of these being Christina Schmid whose husband, Olaf, was awarded the GC Posthumously in 2009 for his remarkable work as a bomb disposal expert. I am honoured that she has also written the foreword for George Cross Heroes.*

You have previously mentioned that you would dearly have loved to own one of the three “double VCs”—you did this last year when the trust acquired the VC and bar to Captain Noel Chavasse. Are there any others that you know feel you would “have to have” if they came on the market?

*Many are, of course, already in museums and galleries and will not become available however, I do hope that any families who are still in possession of their relative's medals might come here and feel that now this is a superb home to honour the member of their family who won the award and would therefore consider this gallery alongside any other choice*

*they might wish to make. I will give you the example of the Ackroyd Family who wanted a place where the VC of their family member (Temporary Captain Harold Ackroyd of the RAMC) could be honoured with dignity plus they wanted to be able to use the money from the sale of that medal for charitable causes in his name and they feel that with the medal in this gallery they have been able to have the best of both those worlds. Something they would not have had if they had simply loaned the VC to a museum.*

Do you see the Ashcroft Gallery as just being for VCs and GCs or will other medals recognising outstanding bravery also be on display there? The CGC? The DCM et al?

*No I see this particular gallery will always be devoted just to the VC and GC. That is not to say, however, that in time the collection that I have of Special Forces Medals [outlined in Lord Ashcroft's second book Special Forces Heroes] might not be displayed. Perhaps somewhere else. There are no firm plans at this time, just a few thoughts.*

Museums often trade exhibits and host shows etc. Do you ever see the VC and GC collection going elsewhere in one form or another or is this its permanent home?

*This is its home. I think you can see that the problems of having this as a moving display, with the insurance, the digital displays, the layout of the exhibition etc. This is far more than just medals in cases and it would be impossible to move.*

You now have three medal related books to your name, are there any plans for more?

*Simply answered, yes, but I would rather not divulge any more at this time.*

Thank you Lord Ashcroft. We await your announcement on the new book in due course. Congratulations on the gallery, it truly is superb.

