

Lord Ashcroft's Victoria Cross collection - the largest in the world - is to go on public display following his £5 million donation to the Imperial War Museum"

The world's largest collection of Victoria Crosses (VCs), belonging to the Michael A Ashcroft Trust, is to be displayed publicly for the first time in a new gallery at Imperial War Museum London

The 152 medals, which range from the Crimean to the Falklands wars, will be displayed alongside the 50 VCs and 29 George Crosses (GCs) already held by the Museum.

The medals to go on show in the new gallery are the result of a collection of VCs first started 22 years ago by Lord Ashcroft, the Tory peer, international businessman and philanthropist. The new display, in what will be called the Lord Ashcroft Gallery, is due to open in the autumn of 2010.

It is estimated the new gallery will cost £5 million and the project has been made possible by a donation from Lord Ashcroft. The collection of VCs is also worth several millions of pounds.

Among the medals to go on display are the VC awarded to Lieutenant (later Rear Admiral) John Bythesea, who during the Crimean War became only the second man to earn and receive the award; the medal to Lieutenant (later Captain) William Leefe Robinson, who shot down the first Zeppelin over British soil during the First World War; and the posthumous medal to Sergeant Ian McKay, of the Parachute Regiment, which is one of only two VCs awarded during the Falklands War.

The new gallery will examine the creation of both the VC and the GC, and the personal stories behind the award of the medals. The VC is Britain and the Commonwealth's premier award for extreme gallantry in the face of the enemy. The GC is Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious civil decoration.

Sir Robert Crawford, the Director General of the Imperial War Museum, said: "The museum is delighted to be providing the first public home for Lord Ashcroft's remarkable VC collection. The Imperial War Museum tells the story of people's experience of war and we look forward

to working with Lord Ashcroft to display this important collection, which demonstrates better than any other the extraordinary experiences of very ordinary people in wartime.”

Lord Ashcroft said: “I am absolutely thrilled that this unique collection of gallantry medals is to go on display at the Imperial War Museum, which has a reputation second to none for helping people to understand the experience of modern conflicts. I hope visitors will enjoy seeing the new collection as much as I have enjoyed helping put it together.

“The new gallery is the result of my fascination with bravery, in general, and the Victoria Cross, in particular, which go back to my childhood. My passion for the VC stems from the fact that it can be won by someone regardless of class, colour, religion, creed or rank – provided they exhibit truly exceptional courage in the face of the enemy.”

Lord Ashcroft bought his first VC at auction in 1986 – the medal awarded to Leading Seaman James Magennis, one of two crew serving in a midget submarine that planted limpet mines on a moored Japanese cruiser at the end of the Second World War.

The purchase of the Magennis VC, intended as a one-off, quickly turned into a desire to create a unique collection. Today the trust, which was set up to care for and protect the medals, owns well over a tenth of all the VCs ever awarded.

Lord Ashcroft is the author of *Victoria Cross Heroes*, published in 2006 to mark the 150th anniversary of the creation of the VC by Queen Victoria through a Royal Warrant. Ironically, given today's announcement, his book, which had a foreword by the Prince of Wales, was launched at the Imperial War Museum.

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Notes to Editors:

LORD ASHCROFT

Lord Ashcroft is an international businessman, Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party and a philanthropist. Lord Ashcroft has been a successful entrepreneur for nearly 40 years, during which time he has been an active supporter of the Conservative Party. He was Treasurer of the party under William Hague's leadership from 1998 to 2001. Lord Ashcroft has been responsible for a range of charity work including the setting up of Crimestoppers, the crime fighting charity, in 1988. He bought his first VC 22 years ago, which has since grown into the world's largest collection. The 152 medals are now owned and cared for by the Michael A Ashcroft Trust.

THE VICTORIA AND GEORGE CROSS GALLERY

The Victoria Cross and George Cross gallery at Imperial War Museum London houses the Museum's collections of these supreme awards for military and civil gallantry. The centrepiece of the display is the 13-pounder 'Nery' horse artillery gun and the three VC's awarded to members of its crew during the Retreat from Mons (August 1914). The stories of Boy First Class Jack Cornwell, Lieutenant J D Smyth (later Brigadier the Rt Hon Sir John Smyth), Commander Robert Ryder RN, Group Captain Leonard Cheshire and other First and Second World War VC's are told.

Among the George Crosses are those won by resistance hero Wing Commander FF Yeo-Thomas, the 'White Rabbit', and by Lieutenant Robert Davies, who saved St. Paul's cathedral by defusing a bomb which fell close by during the Blitz. Related exhibits include a telescope used by Lieutenant Augustus Agar VC and a beret belonging to Colonel 'H' Jones VC.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM LONDON

This London branch of the Imperial War Museum houses exhibits ranging from tanks and aircraft to photographs and personal letters; they include film and sound recordings, and some of the 20th century's best-known paintings. Visitors can explore six floors of exhibitions and displays, including a permanent exhibition dedicated to the holocaust and a changing programme of special temporary exhibitions.

Imperial War Museum London

Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ

10.00am – 6.00pm

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IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

The national museum of the experiences of people who have lived, fought and died in conflicts involving Britain and the Commonwealth since 1914.

The Imperial War Museum is the museum of everyone's story: the history of modern war and people's experience of war and wartime life in Britain and the Commonwealth. It is an educational and historical institution responsible for archives, collections and sites of outstanding national importance.

The Museum's five branches include **Imperial War Museum London** which houses the award-winning Holocaust exhibition; the Second World War cruiser **HMS Belfast**; the **Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms**, housed in Churchill's secret headquarters below Whitehall; **Imperial War Museum Duxford**, a world-renowned aviation and heritage complex, and **Imperial War Museum North**, one of the most talked-about Museums in the UK