



LORD ASHCROFT'S
"HERO OF
THE MONTH"

Group Captain Lionel Wilmot Brabazon Rees

VC, OBE, MC, AFC

BOLDNESS

AGGRESSION • INITIATIVE
LEADERSHIP • SACRIFICE
SKILL • 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. Group Captain Lionel Wilmot Brabazon Rees' award is part of the collection and Lord Ashcroft feels that it falls within the category of boldness: "At certain times people take a calculated risk. With audacity, dash and daring, much can be achieved. In simple terms, who dares wins. Boldness combines force with creative thinking. It is impetuous and often completed before anyone knows what is going on."



RIGHT: Lionel Wilmot Brabazon Rees pictured wearing his Victoria Cross ribbon. (ALL IMAGES HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS UNLESS STATED OTHERWISE)

RIGHT: An artist's stylised depiction of Rees' VC action on 1 July 1916.

LIONEL WILMOT Brabazon Rees was born in Carnarvon, Wales, on 31 July 1884. He was the son of Colonel Charles Rees, a solicitor, and his wife, Leonora, and was educated at Elms Preparatory School in Colwall, Worcestershire, and Eastbourne College, Sussex. After leaving school, he decided to pursue a military career and attended the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, as a Gentleman Cadet. On 23 December 1903 and aged nineteen, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant into the Royal Garrison Artillery and quickly established himself as a superb shot. Rees, who was promoted to Lieutenant in 1906, spent some six years in West Africa from 1908 until the outbreak of the Great War, during which time he showed a great interest in and aptitude for the new 'sport' of flying. He received his pilot's certificate in January 1913 after undertaking private lessons. Shortly after the war began, he voluntarily transferred to the recently-formed Royal Flying Corps on 10 August 1914.

After further training and being promoted to Captain, he was transferred to command a flight of 7 Squadron. In January 1915, he survived a crash landing in his two-seater Vickers aircraft. The following month, he was given command of a flight of 11 Squadron. By July of that year, the squadron was in France, stationed at Vert Galant, near Amiens, with eight aircraft, a figure later increased to eleven. During one early mission, Rees became involved in a dogfight with an enemy Fokker machine. Both pilots displayed immense skill and Rees' Vickers was hit and badly damaged, before he got in a burst of fire that sent the monoplane crashing to the ground behind enemy lines. However, the Fokker aircraft soon began to gain ascendancy in the skies leading



to what was known as the 'Fokker scourge'. During the summer of 1915, Rees and his gunner, Flight Sergeant Hargreaves, repeatedly showed great courage in various encounters with enemy aircraft. This led to the award of a Military Cross for Rees and a Distinguished Conduct Medal for his gunner. After a short stint at the end of 1915 as the commander of the Central Flying School in Upavon, Wiltshire, which saw Rees promoted to Major, he was soon back on operational duty. On 12 January 1916, Rees took command of the newly-formed 32 Squadron. With the Fokker still ruling the skies, the new squadron was equipped with the nimble, single-seater Airco DH.2 biplane. By 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 32 Squadron was based at Treizennes, near Aire-sur-la-Lys, France.

At around 16:15 hours, after acting as an escort for a bombing mission, Rees was in the air when he sighted a formation which he believed to be British bombers returning from a sortie. He made towards them to offer protection on their home journey, only to discover that he was approaching around ten two-seater enemy bombers. By the time he had realised his error, Rees courageously opted to turn defence into attack and fired on the first aircraft to come into range, hitting it so that it spiralled away out of control. After turning and approaching the enemy again, he hit another German

However, one of the enemy aircraft closed in on Rees' machine with its gunner firing all the time, and the British pilot felt a sudden pain shoot through his thigh, meaning he was unable to use the rudder bar. By now, Rees had used all his ammunition and so he drew his revolver and fired that at an enemy aircraft before turning for home. Rees made a successful landing before sitting on the grass and telling the ground crew that he needed to be taken to hospital. An enemy bullet had narrowly missed a vital artery yet Rees was still annoyed that he had not been able to cause more damage to the enemy, telling medics he 'would have brought them all down, one after another if I could have used my leg!'

Rees spent some six months in hospital but, despite walking with a slight limp for the rest of his life, he soon resumed his military service. His Victoria Cross was announced on 5 August 1916 and on 15 December 1916 Rees received his decoration from King George V during an investiture at Buckingham Palace. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel on 1 May 1917, shortly after heading to America to act as an aviation adviser to the US Army. On 7 March 1918, Rees was appointed to the command of No.1 School of Aerial Fighting in Turnberry, Ayrshire. As the war drew to a close, he was, on 2 November 1918, awarded the Air Force Cross for services as a flying instructor, as well as an OBE. The Great War formally ended nine days later but Rees was determined to pursue a career in the recently-formed RAF. This meant

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His five books on gallantry include *Victoria Cross Heroes*. For more information, please visit: www.victoriacrossheroes.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. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit: www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

he relinquished his Army rank and became a Wing Commander. One of his early post-war appointments was as Assistant Commandant of RAF Cranwell in Lincolnshire. For thirteen years from 1918, Rees took up a number of senior positions both at home and abroad before retiring in 1931 with the rank of Group Captain. Between 1941-2, Rees was briefly recalled for military service during the Second World War. He married Sylvia Williams in the Bahamas in August 1947 and the couple went on to have two sons and a daughter. Rees died in Princess Margaret Hospital in Nassau, Bahamas, on 28 September 1955, aged seventy-one. His devotion to aviation was recognised many years later when someone who could not be kept away from his aircraft engine became known affectionately as a 'Rees'.

BELOW LEFT: The memorial plaque to Group Captain Lionel Wilmot Brabazon Rees which can be seen on the wall of the building in which he was born in Castle Street, Caernarfon, Gwynedd.

BOTTOM: An example of an Airco DH.2. Designed by Geoffrey de Havilland, the DH.2 was the first effectively armed British single-seat fighter; 14 Aces scored five or more aerial victories using the type. The DH.2 had sensitive controls and at a time when service training for pilots in the RFC was very poor it initially had a high accident rate, gaining the nickname 'The Spinning Incinerator'.

aircraft before coming under attack from up to five opposing aircraft, whose fire all missed the intended target. In continued fighting, Rees hit and damaged a third enemy aircraft before giving chase to yet two more.

