GREATER HONOUR HAS NO MAN THAN THIS

A salute to the badge that brands the bravest of the brave: the Victoria Cross

BY LORD ASHCROFT

I often try to imagine the scene. All around is the waste and desolation of three years of war. It is August, yet there isn't a blade of grass to be seen nor a leaf on a tree. Instead, there are craters and the smell of burning. It's early morning on August 2, 1917, and the major offensive of the Third Battle of Ypres has been raging for more than two days. Allied troops under British command are attempting to recapture Passchendaele Ridge.

Captain Noel Chavasse, 32, a doctor serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps, has been in the thick of it since the start of the battle. His battalion, from the 1/10th King's (Liverpool Scottish) Regiment, has already lost well over 100 men.

Two nights before, Chavasse received a deep skull wound, but had his injury bandaged and refused to be evacuated. Time and again, in unseasonably heavy rain, he had gone into no-man's-land to search for and attend the wounded, unquestionably saving numerous lives.

Now, before dawn on the third day, he is taking a short rest at his aid post, only for it to be hit by a shell leaving everyone there dead or wounded. Chavasse, who has himself suffered at least six separate wounds, crawls half a mile to get help, not for himself but for those with worse injuries still at the aid post.

Chavasse is eventually treated by medics, notably for serious injuries to his face and abdomen. After surgery and knowing he is dying, he dictates a letter to his fiancée in which he plays down his courage. Instead, he explains why he carried on helping others, saying simply 'duty called and duty must be obeyed'.

At 2pm on August 4, Oxford-educated Chavasse, one of twins and the son of a bishop, died. He had already received the Victoria Cross (VC), the Commonwealth's most prestigious bravery award, and the Military Cross (MC), both medals awarded for his gallantry earlier in the war.

For his courage at the Third Battle of Ypres, Chavasse received the rarest of awards – a second VC – this time posthumously. It meant he became the only recipient during the Great War of a 'double VC' – or VC and bar as it's known. Even today, that honour has only ever been bestowed on three men since the creation of the VC by Queen Victoria in 1856.

Later this year, Chavasse's service and gallantry medals will take pride of place when the Lord Ashcroft Gallery opens at the Imperial War Museum in London. The new gallery, to which I have happily donated £5 million to build, will display the largest collection of VCs in the world – a collection that I started building nearly a quarter of a century ago. It will also display a formidable collection of medals already owned by or in the custody of the Imperial War Museum, including more VCs and George Crosses (GCs), sometimes called 'the civilian VC'.

The gallery is a dream come true for me; the ultimate result of a fascination and admiration that I have had with bravery since I was a schoolboy. Unlike my father's generation, I have never had to fight for my country. But I was born the year after the end of World War II and, as I grew up, I heard countless references to the war years. This, in turn, gave me an interest in the war in general, and gallantry in particular.

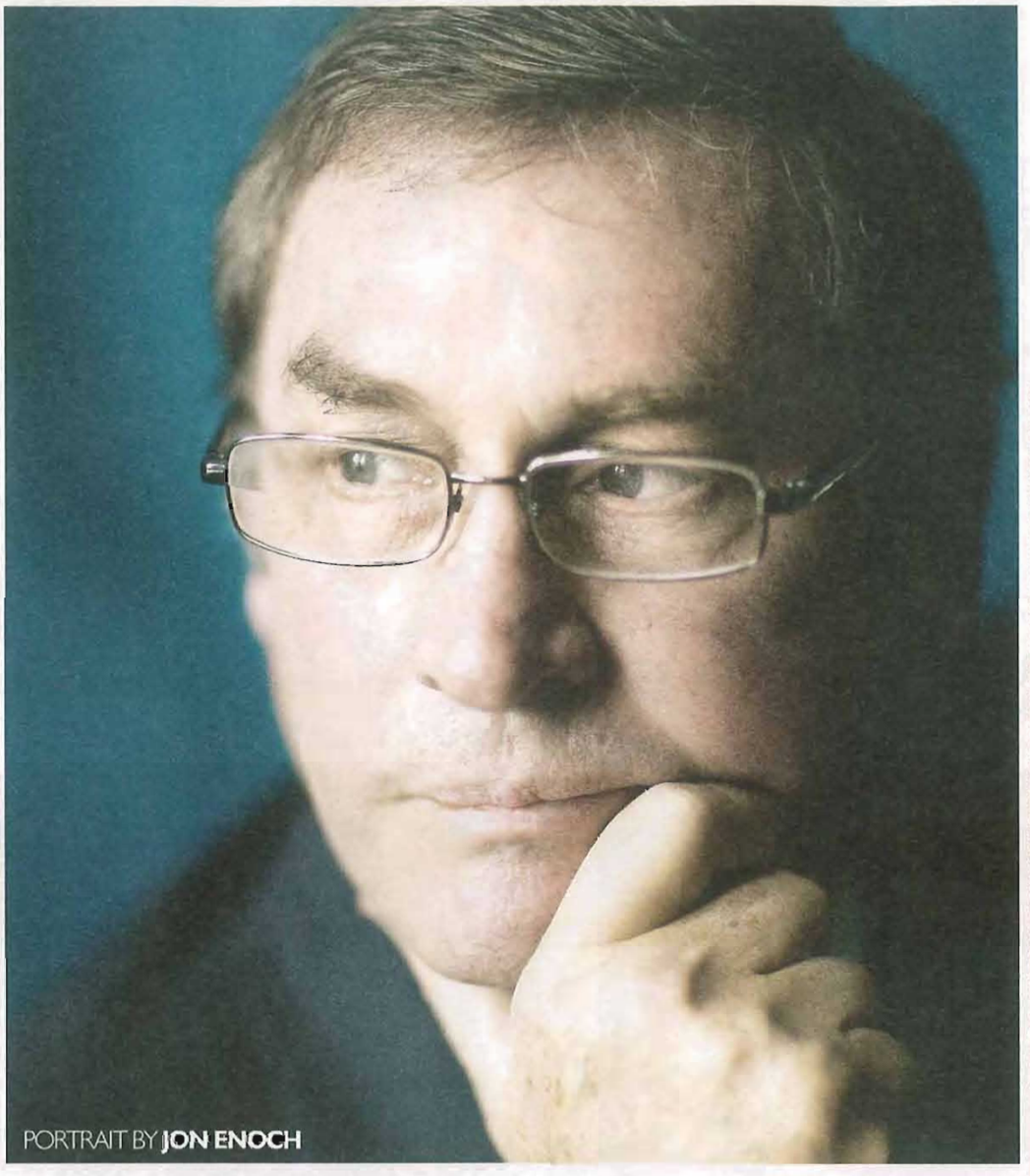
As a young boy, I looked up to people who had risked the greatest gift of all – life itself – for their comrades and their country. I was never particularly academic at school, but I took an almost obsessive interest in some of the heroic figures from World War II, particularly the Cockleshell Heroes. This was the name given to a small group of Royal Marines who mounted a daring and successful raid on German shipping in the French port of Bordeaux in 1942.

My late father, Eric Ashcroft, also proved an inspiration to me. As a young officer, he had been on Sword Beach at dawn on June 6, 1944, as part of the D-Day landings. The officers had been warned to expected 75 per cent casualties – dead and wounded – as they landed. Under heavy enemy fire, my father's commanding officer, a colonel, was shot dead at his side. My father was struck by shrapnel but he refused to be evacuated. He carried on fighting until eventually ordered from the battlefield, and his injuries were serious enough to end his front-line service.

My greatest military interest of all has been the VC: a medal that represents everything that is best about Britain. It can be awarded to anyone – regardless of class, colour, religion, creed or rank – provided he (or she) exhibits truly exceptional courage in the face of the enemy. The VC was instituted through a Royal Warrant on January 29, 1856, which announced a single decoration – for valour – available to the Army and Royal Navy (and later the RAF). Since then, the medal has been awarded 1,356 times.

All VCs were made from bronze cannons captured at Sebastopol until just after the start of World War I. At that point the original supply ran out and ever since then they have been made with bronze from various sources, but usually from cannons captured elsewhere.

Eventually, after I had made a little money as an entrepreneur, I successfully bid at auction for the VC belonging to Leading Seaman James Magennis, a submariner serving off Malaysia in 1945. Like every VC, there was a wonderful story of gallantry behind the medal. This tough, hard-drinking Ulsterman had been the diver on a mini-submarine at the end of World War II. When he and a comrade were placing explosives under a Japanese ship, one of the charges remained



PORTRAIT BY **JON ENOCH**

attached to their mini-submarine. Magennis was forced to dive back into the water, when he was already exhausted, and spend seven minutes desperately trying to prevent his own mini-submarine, and the two men in it, from being blown up along with their target. The citation for his VC – fortunately not a posthumous award – said he had 'displayed very great courage and devotion to duty and complete disregard for his own safety'.

Although the Magennis VC was originally intended as a one-off purchase, I soon developed a desire to own more VCs. I saw the medals as a tangible memento of an individual's service and bravery. Today the collection that I started 24 years ago has grown to 162 VCs – well over a tenth of all the medals ever awarded. It is a collection that has been built up honourably, sensitively and patiently. There has been no 'ambulance chasing' or pursuit of medals not on the market. The only medals bought are those that the recipient, or eventual owner, has wanted to sell.

The collection has also been amassed with a firm sense of commercial reality as to what the medals are worth. Some years ago I handed over the VCs to a trust set up to care for and protect the medals. The trust, in turn, and with my blessing, has negotiated the

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display of the medals at the Imperial War Museum. Every VC recipient has my admiration and respect. Yet, as a concept, courage is difficult to understand and impossible to measure. What makes someone go to quite extraordinary lengths on the battlefield? Is it upbringing, training, religion, patriotism, character or values (such as honour and duty) that makes people willing to risk their lives by taking unbelievable risks? I have concluded that in the broadest terms there are two types of valour: spur-of-the-moment bravery and 'cold courage', premeditated courage in other words.

The trust's VC collection has numerous examples of both types of courage. It also spans every force – Army, Royal Navy and RAF – and 128 years, from deeds of bravery in 1854, early in the Crimean War, to the posthumous medal awarded to Sergeant Ian McKay during the Falklands War of 1982.

The defence in 1879 of a mission station at Rorke's Drift by just 150 soldiers against 4,000 Zulu warriors is arguably the greatest collective act of valour there has ever been. The trust is proud that within the collection are the VCs of Lieutenant John Chard and Private Robert Jones, two of no fewer than 11 Rorke's Drift VCs, the largest number ever awarded for a single military action. To place this into context, remember that just one VC was awarded throughout the whole of the Battle of Britain and just one for the D-Day landings.

I have made the journey – for me the pilgrimage – to Rorke's Drift and have tried to imagine the courage that was displayed by those fine soldiers, and especially by those two young men. Incidentally, contrary to reports earlier this year, I purchased the Chard VC nine years ago, at a competitive market price, and only after it was authenticated by experts and certainly not when there remained any speculation that it might be a replica medal.

Long ago I realised that it was easier to cherish bravery than it was to grasp what is behind it. I hope the opening of the gallery will enable everyone from Britain and those visiting our country to learn more about the VC and GC, along with the recipients of the medals. As our brave servicemen continue to die serving their country in Afghanistan, it is more important than ever to commemorate gallantry and to salute the bravest of the brave.

Those who have risked – and on many occasions sacrificed – their lives, showing great courage, must never be forgotten. We all owe it to these courageous men and women to acclaim their actions and honour their memories.

Certainly Captain Noel Chavasse's bravery will never be forgotten. His death has been commemorated by at least 12 memorials worldwide – more than any other VC recipient. And the inscription on his headstone at the Brandhoek New Military Cemetery in Belgium could hardly be more appropriate than the words of St John: 'Greater love has no man than this. That a man lay down his life for his friends.'

The Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London opens to the public on November 12, 2010. Visit iwm.org.uk. 'George Cross Heroes', by Lord Ashcroft, will be published this autumn by Headline

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