

# Great War's only double VC sells for record £1.5m

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Chief Reporter

THE “ultimate” gallantry medal – the only double Victoria Cross awarded during the Great War – has been bought privately by a Conservative peer for a record price of nearly £1.5 million.

The story behind the medals of Capt Noel Chavasse is deeply moving: he was awarded the second of his VCs after dying from battlefield injuries in 1917. Since then at least 12 memorials have been erected worldwide in his honour – more than for any other recipient of the Commonwealth’s greatest bravery award.

Capt Chavasse’s service and gallantry medals were left by his family decades ago to St Peter’s College, Oxford. The college has now sold the medals to **Lord Ashcroft**, the billionaire Tory peer. According

to college sources, the price was “close to £1.5 million”, easily passing the previous world record for a medal, rumoured to be a private sale for £1 million.

Capt Chavasse received one of only three VCs and Bar – or double VCs – that have been awarded since the medal was created by Queen Victoria in 1856, initially to honour servicemen from the Crimean War.

The Chavasse medals will be placed in the new Lord Ashcroft Gallery, which is being built at the Imperial War Museum, thanks to a £5 million donation from the Tory peer, and will open next year.

The gallery will house Lord Ashcroft’s collection of VCs, which he started to build in 1986. It is now the largest collection of VCs in the world and is estimated to be worth at least £30 million. VCs and George Crosses already owned

by the museum will also go on display in the gallery.

Capt Chavasse was a remarkable character whose academic and athletic achievements came close to matching his wartime courage. One of twins, he graduated with a first in philosophy from Trinity College, Oxford. While at university, he earned his blue in both athletics and lacrosse. After qualifying as a doctor, he went to work at the Royal Southern Hospital, Liverpool. He, along with his twin Christopher, represented Great Britain in the 400 metres at the 1908 Olympic Games.

After war broke out, Chavasse served with the Royal Army Medical Corps in France and Belgium, where he was attached to the 10th King’s (Liverpool Scottish) Regiment.

Capt Chavasse – already a winner of the Military Cross – was serving in Guillemont, France, during the Battle of the Somme in August, 1916, when a unit of 600 men sus-





tained 189 casualties.

The young officer tended to wounded servicemen all day and night under heavy fire. He was awarded the VC for "conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty" after saving the lives of an estimated 20 seriously injured men.

Almost a year later, Capt Chavasse was involved in the Third Battle of Ypres. On the evening of July 31, 1917, he suffered a skull wound. He had his injury bandaged, but refused to be evacuated. Instead, time and again and in appalling weather, he went into no-man's-land to search for and attend the wounded.

In great pain and desperately weary, he again saved several lives. In the early hours of Aug 2, he was finally taking a rest at his aid post when it was hit by a shell. With all at the post killed or wounded, Capt Chavasse, who had at least six injuries, crawled for half a mile to get medical help for comrades.

By now his swollen face made him unrecognisable and he was operated on for a serious abdomen injury. Yet he found the strength to dictate a letter to his fiancée and cousin, Gladys Chavasse, in which he explained why he had carried on helping others despite his injuries. "Duty called and duty must be obeyed," he said. He died on Aug 4, 1917, aged 32. The citation for a Bar to his VC praised "his extraordinary energy and inspiring example".

Lord Ashcroft, 63, the deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, is a self-made businessman and a philanthropist. He has been a controversial figure because he has given more than £10 million to his party and some of his companies operate out of the Central American tax haven of Belize.

Lord Ashcroft said yesterday that he was "thrilled" to add the medals to his collection. "I always felt the collection would never be complete unless it had a VC and Bar in it

– and this is the ultimate VC and Bar. It has a spectacular story to it in terms of sustained bravery. Day after day, this courageous man was risk-



**Lord Ashcroft has amassed a collection of 160 VCs, which will go on display at the Imperial War Museum**

ing his life in the trenches to save his comrades."

The peer, who would not confirm how much he had paid for the medal and whose collection includes 160 VCs, added: "It is also nice that the funds from the sale will be used for superb academic purposes. It is fair to say it has helped me be 'uncommercial' about the price."

St Peter's College was founded by Capt Chavasse's father, the Rev Francis Chavasse, who was Bishop of Liverpool. A spokesman for the college said: "St Peter's College welcomes the opportunity [the sale] will provide for the medals to be seen by the public in their proper context. The sum received for the medals will be applied for the educational purposes of the college, which was founded by the Chavasse family in 1929."

The world record for a VC paid at auction is £491,567, at a sale in Sydney, Australia. But it is rumoured that the Imperial War Museum, using a grant from the Garfield Weston Foundation, a charitable trust, paid £1 million in a private deal for the VC and Bar of Capt Charles Upham, a New Zealand soldier who served in the Second World War.





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