



Violette Szabó's George Cross goes on display at Imperial War Museum London

The George Cross which was posthumously awarded to Second World War secret agent Violette Szabó has been put on permanent display today for the first time in Imperial War Museum London's The Lord Ashcroft Gallery: *Extraordinary Heroes*.

The exhibition, supported by Lord Ashcroft, houses the largest collection of Victoria Cross and George Cross medals in the world. Violette Szabó's medal collection was recently acquired at auction by Lord Ashcroft for a record price of £260,000.

Violette was a truly remarkable woman and the story of her short and formidable life is one of love, courage and bravery, and ultimately tragedy.

Daughter of a British soldier who fought during the First World War and his French wife, Violette was 18 years old when the Second World War broke out, living locally to IWM in Stockwell with her parents and working as a shopkeeper.

Whilst working in the Women's Land Army Violette met Etienne Szabó, a Free French officer in the Foreign Legion and after a short whirlwind romance they were married in August 1940. However, just four months after the birth of their beloved daughter Tania in June 1942, Etienne was killed in action during the Battle of El Alamein.

Shortly after Etienne's death Violette was recruited to the Special Operations Executive joining the French 'F' section, whose agents were sent undercover to occupied France to work against German Forces.

On the night of 7 June 1944, the day after British troops landed in northern France on D-Day, Violette parachuted into France on her second mission to set up a network with local resistance groups. Three days later whilst on a courier trip with a resistance leader they encountered German troops. Their car was stopped at a road block. Violette and two French agents engaged the German soldiers in a lengthy fire-fight, until Violette was eventually captured. She was brutally interrogated in prison before being deported to Germany. Violette was later executed at Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1945.

This year marks 75 years since the George Cross was established as Britain's most prestigious decoration for bravery for civilians and service personnel not under direct fire. Only 4 George Crosses have been directly awarded to women, three of which were awarded to members of SOE. Violette's medals will go on display next to those of Odette Samson, another 'F' Section agent who also endured torture and imprisonment but survived the war.

Displayed alongside the George Cross will be Violette's GQ Parachute Company badge and her wartime pistol.

Tania Szabó, Violette's daughter who was just two years old at the time of her death says; "Violette, my mother, would be chuffed and deeply honoured, as am I, that through the generosity of Lord Ashcroft the medals awarded to her are going on display at the Imperial War Museum in London. Her life, although tragically but heroically cut short was lived with great bravery and courage, and intense joie de vivre. Her legacy will live on and it is my hope that anyone who visits the Imperial War Museum may be inspired by her story."

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC said: "I feel privileged and humbled to be the custodian of this iconic medal group. More than 70 years after her tragic death Violette Szabó GC remains a hugely inspirational figure and quite rightly so because of her relentless bravery both before and after her capture. I am delighted to

have enabled her medal group to remain in Britain and I am thrilled that it will now go on public display at Imperial War Museum London."

Diane Lees, Director-General of IWM says "The story of Violette Szabó GC is one of the most remarkable to emerge from the Second World War. As a strong, determined woman who fought the enemy face to face, resisted torture and brutality, and maintained a determined defiance throughout her capture, her character and experiences resonate strongly with the modern generation of women who live in Britain today. We are delighted that the George Cross which was awarded to her in recognition of her extraordinary courage is now going to be placed at the heart of IWM's displays in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery: *Extraordinary Heroes*."

For more information about Violette Szabo see our web article <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/who-was-violette-szabo>

– Ends –

To film the installation, or for interviews and images please contact:

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Images:

Note: Images of the installation will be ready by 11am on 7 October 2015



Violette with her daughter Tania circa 1943



Studio shot of Violette (date unknown)



Etienne and Violette on their wedding day, 21 August 1940



Violette's daughter Tania wearing her mother's medals and her father's tunic ribands

Notes to Editors:

About the Medal Collection

- The medal group was acquired by Lord Ashcroft at an auction on Weds 22 July 2015 at London's Washington Mayfair Hotel within a minute of going on sale.
- They were acquired at a price of £260,000 a record for the acquisition of a George Cross.
- The medal collection also consists of 1939-45 Star; France and Germany Star; War Medal 1939 – 45; and the French Croix de Guerre 1939 – 40.

About The Lord Ashcroft Gallery: *Extraordinary Heroes*

- The exhibitions opened in November 2010 to critical acclaim, featuring over 240 VC and GC decorations on display from both Lord Ashcroft and IWM's collections.
- The Gallery aims to intrigue, inspire and amaze by re-telling forgotten stories of bravery that show how, when faced with extreme situations, some people do extraordinary things.

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC

[Lord Ashcroft](#) KCMG PC is an international businessman, author and philanthropist. He has many, varied business interests with significant investments and participation in both public and private companies in the United Kingdom, United States and the Caribbean.

He was Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party in the UK from December 2005 to September 2010. In May 2011 he was appointed as lead adviser to the Ministry of Defence for the strategic review of military bases in Cyprus. In September 2012 he was appointed a member of the Privy Council and was made the Government's Special Representative for Veterans' Transition, working with all departments to ensure military personnel receive the support they need when making the transition to civilian life. In November 2012 he was appointed to the Board of the Imperial War Museum until November 2016. He is also Treasurer of the International Democratic Union.

In 2012, with the approval of the MOD, Lord Ashcroft published *The Armed Forces & Society, a study of the relationship between the public and the military*, which included the biggest ever independent survey of serving Forces personnel.

Alongside his business acumen, Lord Ashcroft also has numerous altruistic endeavours that focus on his areas of particular interest, notably crime prevention, education and military history.

Lord Ashcroft is the founder and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Crimestoppers, the only UK charity dedicated to solving crimes, Vice Patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, a Trustee of the Imperial War Museum Foundation Ltd, Ambassador to SkillForce, a Trustee and President of the West India Committee, Chairman of the Trustees of Ashcroft Technology Academy and Chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University in the UK. He is also a Trustee of the Cleveland Clinic in the US.

Lord Ashcroft has a life-long interest in bravery and gallantry medals. In 1986, he started collecting Victoria Cross medals (VCs), an interest which eventually led to the creation of largest collection of VCs in the world. There are now more than 180 medals in the collection, which is estimated to be worth some £30 million. In the autumn of 2010, the collection went on public display for the first time at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London. The new Lord Ashcroft Gallery, paid for by a £5 million donation from the Conservative peer, also exhibits VCs and George Cross medals already in the care of the IWM.

Lord Ashcroft is a principal benefactor to the Bomber Command Memorial, donating £1 million in support.

Lord Ashcroft has written five gallantry books. The author royalties from each of his books on gallantry have been donated to military charities.

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IWM London

IWM London - IWM's flagship branch - tells the stories of those whose lives have been shaped by war through the depth, breadth and impact of our Galleries, displays and events. Visit our brand new First World War Galleries featuring over 1,300 objects from IWM's collections, explore what life was like at home during the Second World War in [A Family in Wartime](#); delve into the world of espionage in [Secret War](#); visit our award-winning [Holocaust Exhibition](#); discover stories of bravery in [The Lord Ashcroft Gallery: Extraordinary Heroes](#); see work by some of Britain's most significant 20th Century artists in our [art galleries](#) or take in our latest major temporary exhibitions. Our family learning sessions and events encourage debate and challenge people's perceptions of war.

Open daily from 10am – 6pm (except 24 - 26 December)

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IWM

IWM (Imperial War Museums) tells the story of people who have lived, fought and died in conflicts involving Britain and the Commonwealth since the First World War.

Our unique Collections, made up of the everyday and the exceptional, reveal stories of people, places, ideas and events. Using these, we tell vivid personal stories and create powerful physical experiences across our five museums that reflect the realities of war as both a destructive and creative force. We challenge people to look at conflict from different perspectives, enriching their understanding of the causes, course and consequences of war and its impact on people's lives.

IWM's five branches attract over 2 million visitors each year. [IWM London](#), our flagship branch, marks the Centenary of the First World War with new permanent First World War Galleries and a new Atrium with iconic large object displays. Our other branches are [IWM North](#), housed in an iconic award-winning building designed by Daniel Libeskind; [IWM Duxford](#), a world-renowned aviation museum and Britain's best preserved wartime airfield; [Churchill War Rooms](#), housed in Churchill's secret headquarters below Whitehall; and the Second World War cruiser [HMS Belfast](#).