

Crowe's title fight: jury gets ringside seats

Author: Ellen Connolly

Date: 21/06/2002

Russell Crowe bashed, head-butted and abused people, and "if the Yanks got on to this, who knows what it's worth", the man accused of trying to extort money from him allegedly told one of the Oscar winner's friends.

"This Crowe is a c---, he's got to go. I've got the security tapes," Malcolm Mercer is alleged to have said.

"A Current Affair would be interested in these. I reckon they would pay \$50,000 for them. This is Russell Crowe. He's big time, you know."

The District Court at Coffs Harbour was told yesterday that this conversation took place between Mercer, 38, and Crowe's friend Martyn Phillips on November 24, 1999, six days after the Hollywood actor was involved in a brawl outside the Saloon Bar nightclub in Coffs Harbour.

The fight, which lasts for 24 minutes, was captured on video. It was shown to the court yesterday and depicts Crowe punching and spitting on patrons, head-butting Mr Phillips and allegedly biting a man.

Mercer, a part-owner of the bar, and his friend Philip Cropper tried to sell the tape to Crowe for \$200,000.

They have pleaded not guilty to attempting to make an unwarranted demand of Crowe that unless he paid an amount of money, the videotape would be published.

Mr Phillips told the court yesterday he had been drinking with Crowe and his minders at the bar. The fight occurred as they left about 3am and he was assaulted when he tried to hold Crowe back.

Six days after the incident, Mr Phillips said he was approached by Mercer, who told him: "If the Yanks got on to this, who knows what it's worth."

Mercer, he said, continued: "[Crowe] has played up in the club before. Who does he f---king think he is by bashing people? He has started that much trouble, head-butting people and abusing people."

Mercer also approached The Daily Telegraph and told reporter Tim Hilferty: "The story you ran was wrong. I have a video which shows what really happened.

"Crowe has a bad reputation in town and I want people to know what he's really like.

The Sydney Morning Herald

"We could make a commercial arrangement to sell you the video."

A deal was subsequently struck with the Telegraph , which paid \$6000 for four still images from the tape.

The Nine Network's A Current Affair also struck a deal, paying \$12,500 for the tape.

After the tape was aired on A Current Affair it was handed over to the police investigating the assault.

The jury asked the judge yesterday why no further action was taken in relation to the assault, given that police took possession of the tape.

Judge John Williams said this was not known, but said that the issue was "immaterial to these proceedings".

The trial continues.