



Bid to extort \$200,000 from Crowe

By Legal Affairs Editor Cindy Wockner

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Two men, including a Coffs Harbour nightclub owner, conspired to extort \$200,000 from Hollywood star Russell Crowe by offering to keep secret a security video of a brawl involving Crowe, a court heard yesterday.

The plot was revealed when the men appeared in different courts, where it was alleged that planning of the extortion bid was captured on telephone intercepts monitored by police.

Phillip Antony Cropper, 35, a Gold Coast businessman who has a \$250,000 interest in Sydney's Rogues nightclub, appeared in Central Local Court charged with conspiring with Malcolm Brian Mercer, a nightclub owner, to demand \$200,000 with menaces from Crowe.

Cropper is also charged with conspiring to pervert the course of justice and conspiring to hinder an investigation with Mercer and Mark James Potts by withholding a VHS security video of the brawl from police.

According to a seven-page police statement of facts tendered to Central Local Court detectives from Strike Force Parkmore had been monitoring Cropper's mobile telephone from November 16, two days before the Crowe incident, which occurred outside the nightclub in the early hours of November 18.

The statement alleges that at 8.26pm on November 18 Mercer called Cropper and told him he intended asking for \$200,000 from Crowe to dispose of the tape and thus destroy the evidence.

According to the statement, several days later Mercer called Cropper, telling him they were thinking of approaching the South Sydney coach Craig Coleman in a bid to contact Crowe.

On the same day Cropper left a message for Sam Ayoub, a sports manager, telling him he "wanted to get in touch with Russell Crowe as Crowe has some dramas and a mate has a video he might want to purchase".

On November 24 it is alleged that Mercer again called Cropper and told him to call a third party, either Crowe or Mr Coleman, and tell him "that the tape shows him (Crowe) ripping some girl's top on the bar" and "just tell him that I'm the, I'm about to f...ing give it either to American, they phone or whoever but the (Daily) Telegraph want to fly up".

And later on the same day, Cropper is recorded telling Ayoub's mobile message bank that he should contact Crowe: "put his hand in his pocket and f...ing buy it, if he can pay forty grand for a f...ing bell (laughs). He'll be wanting to pay forty grand for a tape of him biting someone's face



and f...ing punching a sheila". The bell relates to \$40,000 Crowe paid at a South Sydney charity auction.

It is also alleged Cropper then called Mr Coleman, telling him he should call Crowe and "tell him it is a video, it's very clear, very clear, the TV want to buy it, the last thing a bloke wants to do is f...ing end up with CNN buying the c... or something like that, you know what I mean".

It is alleged that on November 24 Mercer contacted Channel 9's A Current Affair and The Daily Telegraph offering to sell the tape. The statement says Channel 9 paid Mercer an undisclosed sum of money and The Daily Telegraph paid for still shots taken from the video.

Police alleged that Cropper had "extensive ties to criminal milieu in NSW and Queensland".

Bob Somosi, representing Cropper, said at least \$500,000 of Cropper's assets had been frozen and if bail was refused, Cropper's Gold Coast golf ball retrieval business would completely fail.

Cropper was granted bail and will appear in Coffs Harbour Local Court on February 14.