

Collector offers \$200,000 for return of stolen medals

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By [Juliet Rowan](#)



The Victoria Cross

A British medal collector is planning to offer a \$200,000 reward for information leading to the recovery of the Victoria Crosses stolen in a smash and grab robbery on Sunday.

Lord Ashcroft has a collection of over 140 Victoria Crosses worth millions of pounds.

He would not discuss his own security measures but said many of the medals on display in Britain were replicas.

"In the UK many museums cannot get insurance. What they actually do is keep the Victoria Cross itself in their safe and put a replica on display and you can say, people go to see the actual cross itself, but it's the insurance that has driven them to do that," Lord Ashcroft said.

He said he had never heard of a robbery on this scale before.

"For New Zealand it is an absolute tragedy in terms of percentage of Victoria Crosses ever awarded to your military," Lord Ashcroft said.

He said the Captain Upham cross and bar – was considered the "Holy Grail" because it was awarded to a fighting soldier – and would be worth between \$2.5 million and \$3 million on an open market. He said on a good day at auction, the other nine could fetch up to \$6 million.

Lord Ashcroft said there was no black market for medals like there was for international art.

"I know of no one in Britain who would have any interest and certainly I can't think of anyone in any Commonwealth nation who would want to sit there with nine New Zealand Victoria Crosses on their wall," Lord Ashcroft said.

He said the worry was that if it was an opportunistic burglary, the medals could be destroyed or hidden forever and that would be a tragedy.

Ruapehu Area police commander Inspector Steve Mastrovich said a decision would be made later today as to how much information is publicly released from the viewing of the security tape of the burglary.

The army has found that 12 groups of medals were taken.

Police said they plan to interview the entire town as they hunt the thieves who stole the medals from the Army Museum.

Mr Mastrovich said last night police would step up their investigation today, increasing the number of officers in Waiouru from 12 to 40.

"We're keen to speak to everybody in Waiouru, military and non-military," he said.

Forensics staff including Institute of Environmental Science and Research experts yesterday combed the exterior of the museum, focusing on the thieves' point of entry – a fire escape at the back of the building.

The team also began examining the area around the Valour Alcove, where the medals – including nine Victoria Crosses, two George Crosses and an Albert Medal – were stolen in the smash-and-grab at 1.10am on Sunday.

Police have established that the thieves were in the museum for four minutes – the time between when a fire alarm triggered and a security guard arrived on the scene.

They fled through another fire escape, smashing two of three glass cabinets in the Valour Alcove and making off with the entire contents of one. Almost all the medals were taken from the second smashed cabinet.

"It's not the untidiest burglary I've ever seen," Mr Mastrovich said.

"There is a degree of sophistication, but it's not like an Oceans 11 raid," he said, referring to a Hollywood movie about super-smooth criminals.

He would not be drawn on whether the thieves were likely to be from the Army, locals or from overseas, and whether it might have been someone acting alone or part of a larger group.

Prime Minister Helen Clark said last night that if it turned out to be an international crime, New Zealand had the means under international law to get the stolen medals back if they turned up in a foreign country.

The Protected Objects Act, passed last year, had enabled NZ to sign up to two international conventions that prohibited the import, export and change of ownership of stolen cultural items such as the medals.

Helen Clark said 114 countries were party to the conventions.

"If in the event these medals turn up offshore in countries which are party to these conventions, we do have legal means to get them returned here which we didn't have in the past," she said.

"Needless to say, all the hopes are on an effective police operation stopping them moving out of the country and getting them returned."

The PM said the medals had been deposited in the museum so people could see them, and the theft was very distressing. She did not know anything more about the theft that the police had not already announced.

"My best guess would be that this is a steal-to-order theft. These people knew what they were after, they were in and out of the building at the speed of lightning. Staff were at the premises within five minutes, but it was very surgically executed."

Police were still examining surveillance footage from the museum yesterday and Mr Mastrovich said so far there were no significant leads.

He said officers would continue with their area canvas, which included speaking to 500 soldiers training in Waiouru.

They also wanted to speak to anyone who passed through the town on Saturday night and Sunday morning between 10pm and 2am.

- with NZPA