RCMP seize rare war medal

OTTAWA (CP) — The RCMP seized a Victoria Cross medal from an auction house in London, Ont., on Monday, bringing an end to a 30-year search for a rare artifact many believed to be lost in the bowels of the Canadian War Museum.

"We've always assumed the museum had the medal," said Royal Military College professor Lubomyr Luciuk, who is also director of research for the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

The Commonwealth's highest honour for bravery, the lost medal was awarded in 1917 to Ukrainian-Canadian Filip Konowal for killing 16 German soldiers in hand-to-hand combat near Vimy Ridge.

"This is a part of all of Canada's heritage," Luciuk told the *Globe and Mail* on Monday, adding he is ecstatic that the medal has been found.

"It's a medal that belongs to all Canadians."

Of the more than 1,300 Victoria Crosses handed out, only 94 have gone to Canadians and Konowal is the only Ukrainian-Canadian to receive one.

The Canadian War Museum, which has 26 Victoria Crosses in its collection, bought the medal from Konowal's widow in 1969.

It went missing four years later, after it was removed for a photo session, museum spokesman Mark O'Neill said Monday.

The museum has never had evidence that the medal was stolen, and officials assumed it was misplaced within the collection and would eventually turn up, he added.

Museum staff reported the medal missing to police in 2001, but were unable to prove it was stolen or not still among the museum's vast collection.

As quietly as it disappeared, the medal surfaced last week after Jeffrey Hoare Auctions in London posted a notice on its website advertising the medal.

Despite the official release, museum officials, police and even Luciuk, who has been pushing to find the medal for years, did not immediately discover that the Victoria Cross was about to be sold.

It was not until a military buff in England named Iain Smith e-mailed Luciuk about the sale that anyone in Canada connected the missing treasure and the item that was about to go on the block.

"Remarkable," said Luciuk, who received Smith's e-mail last Friday.

"It's been missing for 30 years and now it's found," he said, adding the auction house was surprised when told the medal was the property of the Canadian War Museum and had been missing for more than 30 years.

Luciuk, who believes he received the message because he co-wrote a short biography about Konowal, said he immediately called the auction house, police and the museum, setting into motion a quick investigation that led to the seizure.

O'Neill said the medal will be returned to Ottawa by next week. He said the medal could have gone for hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction.

A collection of medals belonging to John McRae – the famed author of *In Flanders Fields* - was sold several years ago at a Jeffrey Hoare auction for $400,000.