

ONE of Australia's most controversial and colourful relics has cut quite a swathe at Newcastle City Hall.

The sword used by Captain Francis de Groot when he infamously gatecrashed the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932 was the surprise star attraction of a Newcastle Boys' High School reunion on Saturday night.

Brought to Australia from Ireland just under two years ago, the sword is insured for a \$1 million and is the prized item in an

invaluable collection of harbour bridge memorabilia in the keep of former Novocastrian and BridgeClimb entrepreneur Paul Cave. The collection holds more than 6000 items, but the sword is the Holy Grail.

Addressing the 22nd Annual Newcastle Old Boys Association Dinner, Mr Cave said it marked only the fourth time the sword had been out for display since arriving in Australia after a 17-year international search.

When the artefact was located in the possession of de Groot's nephew in Ireland, Mr Cave assigned Irish-born John Bowe to negotiate its purchase. He already had a personal connection to the family. While Mr Bowe was studying in Dublin years ago, Frank de Groot's niece Helen had boarded in the family home.

"I sent John to Ireland with a cheque that had a lot of noughts on the end," Mr Cave said. "The experts identified 37 markings on the sword to validate that it was the genuine article."

Mr Cave has never revealed how much he paid for the artefact.

Since its return to Australia it has been used as a focal point for a fund-raising initiative launched by Mr Cave for cancer research, a campaign prompted by his own brush with melanoma.

The cancer scare, Newcastle and a sharp blade were up for discussion on Saturday night. Mr Cave's melanoma was identified by plastic surgeon and Newcastle High alumni, Alf Lewis. When de Groot's sword debuted at the Opera House last year it helped raise \$5 million on the night.

The blade represents a fiery moment in Australian history.

Premier Jack Lang was to cut the ceremonial ribbon with a pair of scissors but de Groot, a former cavalry officer and member of the right-wing New Guard, beat him to the blow. Slashing the ribbon with his sword, he declared: "In the name of the loyal and decent citizens of NSW, I declare this bridge open."

Mr Cave suspects Saturday's reunion may not have been the sword's first visit to the region.

As detailed in Andrew Moore's de Groot biography, in 1942 the captain was appointed commandant of the Greta Army Camp. In the heart of the trade union-dominated Coalfields at a time when the Communist Party of Australia was on the rise and the Allies at war with fascist Germany and Italy, the presence of the ribbon-slashing right-winger did not go down well at all.

The then secretary of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council wrote to the Minister for the Army, saying that it was "not in the best interests of the war effort that de Groot's services should be retained in the military services. De Groot's action in slashing the ribbon at the opening of the harbour bridge is still fresh in the minds of thousands of unionists in the north".

One assumes Frank de Groot had reason to sleep with the sword by his bed in those uncertain times.

