

# McCARTHY VC, CdeG Lawrence Dominic Service No: 422



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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The Australian War Memorial

### Basic Information

Name: Lawrence Dominic McCarthy

Service Number: 422

Date of Enlistment: 23/9/1914

Age at Enlistment: 22 years 8 months

Civil Occupation: Farmer

Medals, Honours, Awards: Victoria Cross, Croix de Guerre

Height: 5 feet 7 inches

Weight: 182 pounds

Chest Measurement: 40 – 42 inches

Complexion: Fair

Eye Colour: Grey

Hair Colour: Brown

Father: Florence McCarthy

Mother: Ann McCarthy (nee Sherry)

Siblings: James, Patrick John and John Edward

Married: Florence Minnie Norville (known as Polly)

Children: Lawrence Norville McCarthy



Photo Courtesy: Neville Browning

### Family History

Florence McCarthy, born in Cork, Ireland, was the son of a farm labourer. He emigrated from Ireland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and settled in York, Western Australia. Florence met local girl, Ann Sherry, and married her in 1887.

The couple's marriage was a short one, lasting only nine years. Ann died in 1896 after suffering from whooping cough and tuberculosis.

In the short time they were married, the pair had four children together: James (born 1888), Patrick John (born 1890), Florence Joseph (Lawrence Dominic), born 1892 and John Edward (born 1894). John Edward was only eighteen months' old when Ann died.



Ann McCarthy (nee Sherry)

Courtesy Terry McCarthy

### Life Story

Florence Joseph McCarthy was born in York on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 1892, the third son of Florence and Ann McCarthy. He was baptised three days' later on the 24<sup>th</sup> January at St Patrick's Catholic Church in York.

Florence's mother died on the 17<sup>th</sup> January 1896, four days before his fourth birthday. Ann had suffered from whooping cough and tuberculosis for a prolonged period and, when she was finally overcome by the illness, her husband spiralled into a deep depression. Ann was buried in the Catholic section of York Cemetery on the same day as her death without the presence of a priest. This would have been because, at the time, people were terrified of tuberculosis and wanted the dead to be buried as soon as possible to reduce the chance of it spreading.

On this same day, Florence deserted his four sons and is believed to have never again had contact with them.

The youngest boy, John Edward, was taken in by Ann's brother and sister-in-law, Jack and Mildred Sherry, but the three older boys were admitted to Subiaco Boy's Orphanage on Florence's fourth birthday, the 21<sup>st</sup> January 1896. While living at the Orphanage, Florence's name was changed to Lawrence Dominic. Maybe his older brothers changed it because it was the name of their father, the man who had deserted them. However, the true reason for the name change is unknown.

In 1899, the three McCarthy boys were transferred to the Christian Brothers at St Joseph's Orphanage in Subiaco before being moved on again, in 1901, to Clontarf, the new Christian Brothers' orphanage on the banks of the Canning River. In later life, Lawrence said that he was grateful for the education, manual skills, toughness and upbringing he received from the Brothers at Clontarf. His brother Patrick, like many other orphans, described Clontarf as "the cruellest place on Earth".

Lawrence, aged thirteen, left Clontarf on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1905. He was apprenticed to a farmer at Jennacubbine, near Northam, for four years before working at the Bunnings Brothers' Sawmill at Lion Mill (now Mt Helena). While working for Bunnings Brothers milling railway sleepers, Lawrence severed several of his fingers on his left hand.

Lawrence was rejected when he first tried to enlist in the A.I.F. in early 1914 because of his missing fingers. However, he had won a number of shooting competitions at Northam Rifle Club and was able to prove that the missing digits did not compromise his shooting ability. Lawrence was accepted into the A.I.F. on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1914. Like many other York men, he did his training at Blackboy Hill before being transferred to Broadmeadows, Victoria, for further training.



Lawrence McCarthy as a young man. Note his left hand is hidden from view.

Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial



Returning from Melbourne, McCarthy sailed to Egypt from Albany on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1914, arriving at Alexandria on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1915 and training with the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion for two months before being sent to Gallipoli. Members of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion affectionately referred to Lawrence as 'Fats', because he was such a heavy-set man.

McCarthy landed at Gallipoli at about 4pm on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915. While serving there, he was engaged in heavy fighting and was promoted to Sergeant on the 1<sup>st</sup> September. McCarthy was wounded in September and evacuated to the island of Imbros to convalesce until November, when he returned to Gallipoli. During the evacuation of Gallipoli, Lawrence was amongst the last of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion to leave, finally departing on the 20<sup>th</sup> December 1915.

Regrouping in Egypt after the disastrous Gallipoli campaign, the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion were in France by June 1916. In a postcard sent home to his brother, McCarthy expressed a desire to see action and prove himself. He became a Sergeant-Major in March 1917, then a second Lieutenant on the 1<sup>st</sup> April.

The following day, Lawrence was wounded in action during the first attack on Bullecourt and evacuated to England for three months to convalesce. One of these wounds resulted in him losing a testicle. While recovering, Lawrence met Florence Minnie Norville, known then as Flossie. Flossie worked at the lodgings where Lawrence was staying in England. The pair were engaged before he returned to the Front.

At Beaumont in 1917, McCarthy was awarded the Croix de Guerre Avec Palme. – the top French Bravery award. Two days after being presented with the award, he was promoted to Lieutenant.

From February to August 1918, Lawrence instructed Australian soldiers at Tidworth in England, but he re-joined his battalion in early August to fight in the Amiens Offensive. Two weeks into the battle, Lawrence performed an exceptional act whilst under enemy fire, an act that would later win him the Victoria Cross.



In the report signed by Sir John Monash, General Commanding Australian Corps, Lieutenant Lawrence Dominic McCarthy...

*“is expressly brought to notice for his wonderful gallantry, imitative and leadership on the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1918, when an attack was being made near Madame Wood, West of VERNDOVILLERS N of CHAULENS. The objective of this battalion was obtained without serious opposition, the battalion on the left flank were less fortunate. Here several well-posted machine gun posts were holding up the attack and heavy fire was being brought to bear on our flank. When Lieut. McCarthy realised the situation he at once engaged the nearest Machine Gun post, but still the attacking troops failed to get forward. This officer determined to attack the nearest post. Leaving his men to continue the fire fight, he with two others, dashed across the area and dropped into a disused trench which had been blocked. One of his two men was killed whilst doing this. He was now right under the block over which the enemy Machine Gun was firing. The presence of head cover prevented the use of bombs. He therefore tunnelled a hold through the bottom of the block, through which he inserted his head and one arm. He at once shot dead the two men firing the gun. He then crawled through the hold he has made, and by himself charged down the trench.*

*He threw his limited number of Mills bombs among the German garrison and inflicted some more casualties. He then came in contact with two German officers who fired on him with their revolvers. One of those he shot dead with his revolver the other he seriously wounded.*

*He then charged down the trench using his revolver and throwing enemy stick bombs and captured three more enemy machine guns. At this stage some 700 yards from his starting point, he was joined by the NCO whom he has out-distanced when he crawled through the hole in the trench block mentioned above. Together they continued to bomb up the trench, until touch was established with Lancashire Fusilier, and in the meantime yet another machine gun had been captured.*

*A total of 5 Machine Guns and 50 prisoners (37 unwounded and 13 wounded) were captured, whilst Lieut. McCarthy during his amazing and most daring feat had single-handedly killed 20 of the enemy.*

*Having cleared up a dangerous situation, he proceeded to establish the garrison in the line. Whilst doing this he saw a number of enemy getting away from neighbouring trenches. He at once seized a Lewis Gun and inflicted further casualties on the enemy.*

*The determined and daring conduct of this gallant officer saved a critical situation, prevented many casualties, and was mainly, if not entirely, responsible for the final objective being taken."*

The German troops surrendered to McCarthy and let him lead them away. His bombs and revolver were taken from him to stop him from shooting or inflicting any further injury on the prisoners. After his weapons were taken from him, McCarthy suggested that he be carried back to Australian lines on their shoulders, as a hero.



Lawrence McCarthy's medals now housed at the Australian War Memorial

Courtesy the Australian War Memorial

The press and members of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion later described McCarthy as a "Super-VC", because his actions went beyond those of a regular Victoria Cross winner. He was awarded, not only a Victoria Cross for his actions at Madame Wood, but also another Croix de Guerre.

Although there is no doubt that McCarthy was a brave man, he was pulled from the front lines during the latter part of the War and has been described as being mentally unbalanced. Lawrence was also reprimanded on a number of occasions for shooting prisoners, an act that today would be considered a War Crime. Private Alfred Frederick Lawrence DCM later stated,

“Fats McCarthy was a madman.”

On the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1918, just after the War had ended. Lawrence was evacuated to England with Influenza. His fiancé met him in England and, when he recovered, the pair were married on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 1919.

Unlike many other Australian soldiers, McCarthy’s military career did not end with the War. In April 1919 he was sent to Ireland as the North Dublin Union Area Officer for Ireland. This meant that he controlled the Australian troops stationed in Ireland during the Irish Uprising.

By November 1919, Lawrence was preparing to leave Ireland and take his new bride home to Australia. He arrived back in Western Australia on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1920 aboard the *SS Runic*.

On his return to W.A., Lawrence suffered from illnesses that kept him in hospital for most of 1920 and much of 1921. He was officially discharged from the Australian Imperial Force on the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1920.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1921, despite McCarthy only having one testicle, Flossie (now known as Polly) gave birth to the couple’s only child, Lawrence Norville McCarthy.

During the 1920s Lawrence was employed by the R.S.L. An extremely active member of the community, he attended numerous functions throughout the State to support returned servicemen. Unfortunately, McCarthy fell out with the R.S.L. over an illegal tipping competition that was held on R.S.L. premises and, in late 1926, he was sacked.



In April 1927 McCarthy was invited to participate in the ANZAC Day march in Melbourne. During this trip he was offered a job with Sunshine Harvesters and decided to take it. Lawrence was followed to Melbourne by his wife Polly and their son, Lawrence junior, in May 1927.

Lawrence and Polly's son enlisted for World War Two in 1941, wanting to follow in his father's footsteps. Aged 24, he was Killed in Action on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1945 while serving near Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. His father later said,

"World War One made me. World War Two Killed me."

After Lawrence junior's death, the relationship between his parents deteriorated. Lawrence had insisted that his son become a machine gunner and Polly blamed her husband for his death. Lawrence considered that Polly had married above her class because he was a VC winner.

However, they never divorced or separated, as it was not socially acceptable at the time.

In 1956, Lawrence and Polly travelled to London for celebrations marking the centenary of the introduction of the Victoria Cross. While in Europe, the couple also visited the spot near Madame Wood where he earned his VC. They also travelled to Gallipoli to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the campaign.

Lawrence was among seventy-seven other veterans from Australia who had landed at Gallipoli on the first day of the campaign.



Lawrence junior with his mother Polly at their flat in Melbourne Circa 1944

Courtesy Terry McCarthy



McCarthy and nephew Reginald John McCarthy in Melbourne 1942.

The message on the back reads  
“what a pity you are cut off. The fat  
boy could have easily been the one  
to have been cut!!!”

Courtesy Terry McCarthy

After three weeks of hospitalisation, Lawrence McCarthy died, on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 1925, at the Repatriation General Hospital, Heidelberg, Melbourne. He was eighty-three. McCarthy was given full military honours at his funeral. Polly died at the Aaron Private Nursing Home in Melbourne on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1996, aged 103 years and 10 months.

Many years after Lawrence McCarthy’s death, a scandal surfaced. McCarthy is said to have had an illegitimate daughter, conceived before he left for the War. Marjorie Ida Thackrah was born on the 11<sup>th</sup> February 1915, meaning she was conceived in May 1914. Her

mother, Mabel, is said to have been in love with Lawrence in 1914, but when he asked her father for permission to marry Mabel, it was denied because he was a Catholic.

This may go some way to explaining why McCarthy was so cavalier with his life during the War, because he would not be going

home to the girl he loved or his young child.

When Marjorie was born, she was raised as the daughter of her grandparents with her mother as her eldest sister. Marjorie attended school until she was fifteen or sixteen years of age and also had singing lessons, a luxury her other ‘siblings’ did not receive. It is likely that Lawrence McCarthy paid for this additional education, although Marjorie never met her father.



## Acknowledgements

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