



# News received, 76 years on

By David Rak

After 76 years tucked away, a World War II condolence letter has provided closure to a Seymour district family when it was finally delivered this year.

“See that big star up there? That’s your father. He’s been killed at war and he won’t be coming home.”

Maree Hillebrand remembers the look of despair on her mother’s face when she gathered her three children to tell them that fateful news.

Seymour’s Sergeant David J. McCullough was a member of the 2/10th Field Company (Royal Australian Engineers) in the Battle of Singapore, also known as the fall of Singapore.

The fighting in Singapore lasted from February 8 to 15, 1942. The Japanese victory was decisive, resulting in the Japanese capture of Singapore and the largest British surrender in history.

Sgt McCullough was presumed dead after he had been missing in action for five years.

How he had been killed and where he was when he died remained a mystery.

His wife and children had a lot of questions that they were beginning to accept would never be answered.

Sgt McCullough’s commanding officer Major Keith Lawrence was with Sgt McCullough when he was injured by an artillery shell on February 11, 1942, just before the fall of Singapore.

Major Lawrence became a prisoner of war only a few days later following the surrender, along with 50,000 other allied soldiers.

After six months he was shipped to Japan along with several other officers and spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner in Zensutji.

Shortly after his repatriation to Australia in late 1945, Major Lawrence wrote a series of condolence letters to the families of the men who had died under his command.

One of those letters failed to make it to its destination in Seymour. Addressed to Sgt McCullough’s young wife, Vera, it was returned by the post office marked unclaimed.

Major Lawrence could never bring himself to discard the unclaimed letter, and it sat buried in his files until he died in 1968.

It then stayed with his wife Beth for another 20 years or so and eventually came into the possession of Major Lawrence’s grandson, Milton Taylor.

Mr Taylor rediscovered the letter in his own filing cabinet in January this year, and upon reading it, became curious about whatever became of Sgt McCullough’s wife, and whether there was any surviving family who would appreciate finally receiving the letter, which was still in its original envelope.

“I started with a few broad Google searches and slowly worked my way to-

**“See that big star up there? That’s your father. He’s been killed at war and he won’t be coming home.”**

Sgt David J. McCullough’s wife telling their three children that their father wasn’t coming home from the war

wards Sgt McCullough’s grandsons, James and Peter Nunn,” Mr Taylor said.

“It took a few days of emails and phone calls to finally make contact but eventually we connected, and it became obvious that the family had kept a candle burning for news of their grandfather for all these years.”

The letter does not say exactly what happened to Sgt McCullough, but it does reveal important details that were not known to the family.

Major Lawrence had been sitting on a grassy slope with several men, including Sgt McCullough, when he got up and crossed the road to speak with some more of his men.

A shell landed right next to where Major Lawrence had been sitting and where he had left his map case and haversack.

Major Lawrence said the exploding shell injured Sgt McCullough in the chest along with several other men. Major Lawrence himself would certainly have been killed had he not moved moments before.

The letter states that Sgt McCullough was taken to a military hospital and operated on by eminent military surgeon Albert Coates, a lesser known but equally noteworthy contemporary of Edward “Weary” Dunlop.

He was given a fighting chance, but at that time the hospital was in imminent danger of attack and was then relocated to the central part of the city in the space of about 24 hours, in what would have been an extraordinary logistical exercise.

Sgt McCullough did not survive the transfer, passing away either during the move or shortly after. His body is most likely buried along with many others from the hospital who perished during those few tumultuous days.

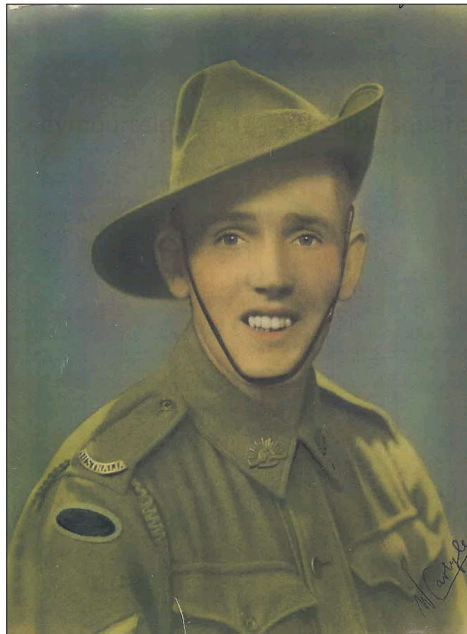
“Meeting the descendants of David McCullough was a very emotional experience for everybody, and it seemed both incredible and gratifying to be delivering this letter on behalf of my grandfather after so many years,” Mr Taylor said.

Ms Hillebrand said she could not stop crying when she was told about the letter and when she met Mr Taylor.

“I’m one of David J. McCullough’s three children.



Memories: David McCullough and Maree Hillebrand with a portrait of their father, Sergeant David J. McCullough. Picture: Wayne Herring



The ultimate sacrifice: Sergeant David J. McCullough served in World War II as part of the 2/10th Field Company (Royal Australian Engineers) of the Australian Army.

Dawn has passed away, but I was able to receive the letter with my brother David,” she said.

“We were only very young when Dad was killed, and we have been trying for years to figure out what happened to him.

“I remember going to the Broadford train station with my mother and watching all the servicemen get off the train.

“I’ll never forget my mother sobbing on the plat-

form when she realised Dad was not on the train.

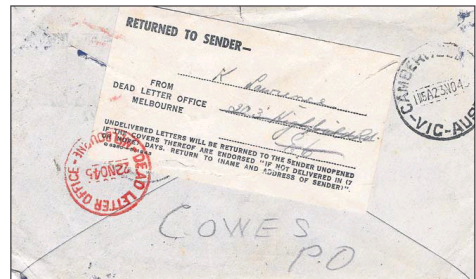
“This letter gives us closure. We know what happened to him and we can finally fully accept it.

“Words can’t express how grateful I am to Milton and his family for writing the letter and preserving it for so long.

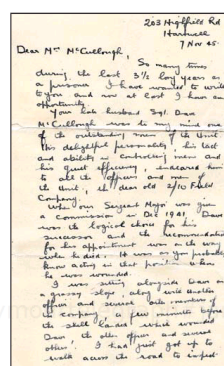
“An important part of our family history is still in existence because of their effort and generosity.”



Final piece of the puzzle: Sergeant David J. McCullough’s grandson Peter Nunn and children David McCullough and Maree Hillebrand with Milton Taylor, who delivered the letter after 76 years.



Above: The letter was returned to Major Keith Lawrence by the post office in 1945.



Left: A letter sent by Major Keith Lawrence to the family of Sergeant David J. McCullough that was undelivered for 76 years.