



Victor Cassilles

Victor Robert Cassilles was born on November 26, 1920 in Cooma, New South Wales, the second child of Robert and Mary (aka Molly, née Rolfe). The Cassilles family was a large one – in addition to his older brother, Harry, Victor also had five younger siblings: Maisie, Vernon, Stanley, Rex and Joyce.

The Cassilles family lived on Timbery Range, a sheep property not too far from Nimmitabel that doubled as the local telephone exchange, as the area was quite remote. “I remember there was a travelling dentist who occasionally called in to each property to check on dental needs –

so it could be a long time between visits if you had a tooth ache,” Victor often said. “You just had to put up with it until the dentist arrived.”

While Victor’s family were Christians, he recalls that other families in the area could have ended up with different religious beliefs purely by chance. “It all really depended on which minister arrived first after the baby was born,” Victor said. On Sundays, in observance of the holy day, Victor and his siblings weren’t allowed to do anything, but they sometimes broke the rules by hiding behind the outdoor toilet to play cards. One day, their parents caught on to what they were doing and snuck up on them. “No trumps,” said Victor’s father Robert, much to the kids’ surprise as they realised they were sprung and the cards were confiscated.

Life in such a remote location with seven children under the age of 13 certainly had its challenges, but Robert and Mary were always able to provide. The family was lucky to have an income from the telephone exchange, and from an early age Victor learned how to ride a horse, use a rifle and shear a sheep.

Norma Mary Josephine Brooks was born on May 6, 1921, in Old Adaminaby, New South Wales, the first child of Charles and Dympana (née Greer). While Charles was a hard-working softy, Dympana ran a tight ship and always made sure everything was done to her satisfaction. As would become apparent over the years, Norma picked up elements of these traits from both of her parents.

Old Adaminaby no longer exists – it was flooded in the 1950s to construct Ecumbene Dam and Lake as part of the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme, and is now permanently underwater. The township of Adaminaby was relocated to its current location about six miles north-east. The Brooks family grew up on Heatherbrae, a sheep farm that Charles ran with his two brothers some 15 kilometres north of Old Adaminaby. Norma had two brothers of her own – John, who was four years younger, and Leo, six years younger. She was a devout Catholic from the day she was born, attending Mass every Sunday.

When Norma turned six she moved closer to Old Adaminaby to start school at St Josephs Convent, a two-room school. Then, at age 11, the family moved to Cooma to enable Norma to attend high school at Brigidine Convent. Later in life, whenever Norma and family would watch a weather forecast and saw Cooma with a state-lowest reading of minus nine to minus 13 degrees, she’d remind whomever was in earshot that she and all the kids from her area used to walk to school in the snow. “When we arrived, we were allowed to take our shoes and socks off and dry them by the log fire,” she would say. “You wouldn’t get me living in Cooma again.”

If her feet were built of tough stuff, her hands were more delicate – she was an accomplished pianist and at one point even travelled up to Sydney for a piano scholarship competition. Unfortunately, it was at this time that she developed mastoiditis in her inner ear, so instead of competing, she spent several weeks in hospital while they drained the infection. It was a delicate procedure without the use of antibiotics, but she showed her resilience and overcame it. When she left hospital, Norma proudly showed off her scar. It would be the first of many.

Duty calls

Victor spent much of his youth working with his family on Timbery Range, but as he grew up he began to enjoy socialising around the greater Monaro region at dances and other events. Meanwhile, Norma had taken a job as assistant for George Abraham in his Cooma department store, and would spend her free time on Sundays going to church, playing tennis, attending dances and relaxing in the local waterholes around the region. She couldn’t swim, so she’d simply paddle about in the shallows with her friends. While Victor and Norma rarely discussed their courting days later in life, it was during this time that they met and fell in love.

However, duty soon called, and just short of his 22nd birthday Victor enlisted in the Australian Army. He commenced duties in the Light Horse Brigade before being moved to the 2/10 Australian Infantry Battalion,

where he saw active duty in Borneo and New Guinea during World War II. Like many of his fellow soldiers, Victor never talked too much about the hardships of war, but he did sometimes share this one story: “We’d go out to have a bath under a waterfall and then have to run back and dive into a foxhole full of mud because we were being shot at,” Victor would say, seemingly madder about the waste of a good wash than the bullets that were raining down on him.

At the height of World War II, Norma too responded to her call to serve, enlisting with the Australian Women’s Army Service (AWAS) as a gunner. Like Victor, she was just shy of 22 years old. She was assigned to Victoria Barracks in Paddington, Sydney, before being transferred to Fort Scratchley in Newcastle. “It was a big move for a young country girl,” she often said.

The War ended in 1945, and both Victor and Norma were discharged from service and ready to start their life together. They first moved to Despointes Street, Marrickville, in Sydney, and were married at St Brigid’s Church on July 30, 1946. Soon after, they moved to Arthur Street, North Sydney, until 1948 when they moved back across the harbour into a semi-detached home on Jersey Road, Woollahra.

Starting a family

On January 23, 1949, the couple welcomed their first child, Robert. Three years later – on February 20, 1952 – they welcomed their second child, Peter.

Occasionally, Victor and Norma would make the long drive back down to Cooma to see their families. Norma’s brothers, John and Leo, liked to have a drink, and Victor would join them when he came to town. “Dad wasn’t the biggest drinker, but if he got with one or both of those brothers there would be a session,” Robert says. “The local pub in Cooma, which wasn’t far from where they lived, was closed on Sunday, but the owners would open the back door and sneak in more people than were probably even there during the week. If the cops showed up, they would just join in.”

Back in Sydney, Victor had commenced a trade as a carpenter, and his ambition was to eventually build the family home. While he put many hours into studying and working in his new trade, he still found time to take his sons to Trumper Park to watch Australian rules football, and to the Sydney Cricket Ground to watch rugby league, both a short walk from Jersey Road. If it was a fine day, Norma would join too, pushing the children in a stroller. Sometimes, they’d make the easy three-kilometre walk into the city. It was all downhill into town, so walking back home was the hard part.

In 1952 – the same year Peter was born – Victor and Norma put into action their plan to build when they bought a block of land at 16 Virginius Street, Padstow. Every Friday night after work, for two years, Victor would take the tram from Woollahra to Central Station, and then take the train to Padstow Station before walking down to the vacant block. Saturday and Sunday would be filled with building works on the new house; the first job was to build a shed to lock up Victor’s tools, and a place to sleep. On Sunday, he’d take the train and tram back to Woollahra in time for work on Monday morning.

Often, the rest of the family joined Victor on those weekend journeys out to Padstow. Robert, who turned five during this time, would pester Victor to take him to the new house so he could help out – though that “help” usually involved little more than playing with the kids next door. Norma would come along occasionally too, to check out the progress and give Victor a hand.

After two years of construction, the house was half-finished but far enough along to provide a roof over their heads. And so, on Peter’s second birthday, the family finally left Woollahra and moved to Padstow. The house, the sheds, the garage and the chook yards took many shapes over the years, but one thing was consistent: 16 Virginius Street would be a home for life.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Victor and Norma’s children each share a memory of life growing up as part of the Cassilles family.



Robert

“Our first car was a Ford Prefect – very similar to the black London cabs, but a bit smaller. I remember we all went for a picnic down by the river in Cooma one time. It was a gradual slope down towards the river, so when we were finished Dad piled everyone into the car to drive back up the hill. Anyway, the car didn’t have much power, and Dad couldn’t get enough traction or speed to get up the hill. Mum panicked and jumped out of the car while it was rolling back down the hill, and she nearly got run over. I remember they had a few words after that one – Mum being a bit silly and Dad getting cranky because he could have killed her!”

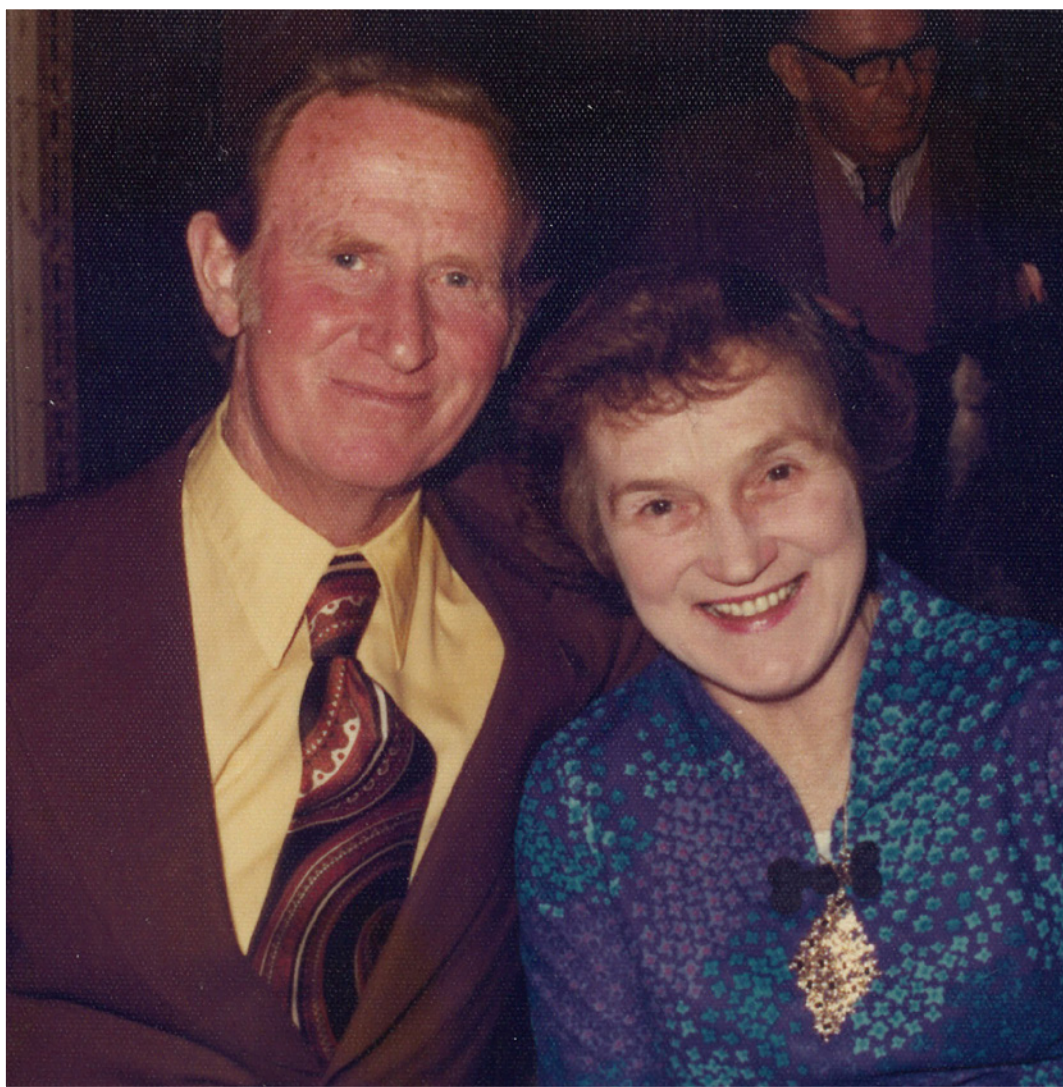


Peter

“Memories, hey? You mean apart from wooden spoons and straps? Ha. Well, growing up in Padstow, there was just a dirt road out the front, no kerb and gutter, no sewerage. That was how it was at that time. It was fairly basic, but Mum and Dad worked hard and they helped others whenever they could. They were always around us in the backyard while we’d be playing footy or cricket, and I remember there would always be other people from the neighbourhood around too. That’s the type of people Mum and Dad were. They were very communal, very helpful and friendly.”

Victor AND Norma

This is the story of a man and a woman from Cooma who found each other, served their country, and then built a life, a home and a family together.



The Padstow community

After seven years living at Padstow, on September 9, 1961, Victor and Norma welcomed their third child, Paul. Robert and Peter were now at school, and they enjoyed many games of cricket and footy in the Padstow backyard as Norma watched on.

Meanwhile, Victor continued to ply his trade as a carpenter for the Bank of New South Wales (later Westpac) at Summer Hill. “Dad would have to get on the old Red Rattler trains at Padstow, go to Redfern Station, change trains and then come back to Summer Hill to get to the warehouse. He had to be at work at 7am, so you can imagine what time he would have been leaving,” Paul says. Occasionally, Victor would bring the family along with him when he fitted out new banks in various country towns.

Victor was also more than happy to share his skills with the community. “If there was a working bee on at Revesby De La Salle, Dad would be up there digging footings for the foundations of the buildings,” Peter says. “He made all the tables for the gambling that went on. He’d build stuff for friends too, or help them with their cars. That was the era we were in – it was all about helping out your mates.”

There were a few disagreements over the years, most of which were settled by the woman of the house. Overall, though, life in Padstow was good. Victor and Norma were well-loved in the neighbourhood, and their home became a meeting place for the community. Of course, they had the drawback of owning a small black-and-white TV, which was the first in the area. They also owned one of the first telephones on the street, which meant they had to run to other neighbours’ houses regularly to let them know they had a call. “Life in that time was very simple and communal,” Peter recalls. “Mum and Dad were always entertaining the local community, who would drop in for a chat and a cup of tea while the kids were outside playing.”

Living in the Canterbury-Bankstown district and maintaining their lifelong love of rugby league, it was only natural that the family became fans of the Bulldogs and bought season tickets to Belmore Oval to watch them play. All three of the boys played rugby league, and every weekend Victor and Norma would do their best to watch all of their games (as long as they didn’t clash).

In 1973, Norma picked up a role as a teacher’s aide at Padstow Heights Public School, where she played piano for the kids as part of her duties. She loved that job, and the staff and children loved her. Better still, it gave her an outlet from home chores and also topped up the couple’s retirement fund.

Indeed, after decades of hard work, Victor and Norma planned for Victor to take an early retirement – at the age of 60 – and then buy a caravan, hitch it to their old Kingswood and do what many retirees did: travel around Australia. “They bought the caravan before he retired and did a couple of practice trips. Not sure how they made it home in one piece, as Mum was the navigator,” Robert laughs.

Sadly, Victor was never able to enjoy retirement, as he was diagnosed with lung cancer, which left him bedridden. Norma took compassionate leave from work to nurse him through this time. It was hard on her, but she knew it was her duty, and Victor was eternally grateful for the care she provided. He passed away on January 11, 1983.

“Rather wear out than rust out”

After Victor’s passing, Norma’s father Charles moved in with her. He had been living in Cooma after the death of Dympana. It was a great move for both of them, as Norma was able to enjoy Charles’ company while also taking care of him in his later years. She returned to work at the school for a few years before retiring in 1986.

While the loss of Victor was deeply felt, Norma was fortunate to have a new generation of family to focus on: her grandchildren. In 1969, Robert had given them their first grandchild, Dan, followed by Rebecca, Rachael, Belinda, Mitchell, Ashleigh and Lachlan. Peter also gave them four grandchildren: Shannon, Bridie, Sean and Caitlin. And Paul gave them two grandchildren: Nathan and Lauren. Most never had the pleasure of meeting Victor, but they did come to know, and cherish, their grandma Norma.

“Mum had many attributes, including a determined nature; some would say stubborn. And she also had an honorary doctorate in nagging,” Peter laughs. “However, she was loving and caring and always ready to help when required, whether it was for family or friends. She would drop everything to be there when needed. An example of this was when our daughter Caitlin was being treated for leukaemia. She would have a bag packed ready if we required her for assistance looking after the other kids while we dealt with other matters. We will be forever indebted to her.”

While Norma was always there for family and friends, she also made sure to take time for herself. During her stint at Padstow Heights Public School, she befriended a woman named Iris, who convinced Norma to join her on a short trip to Hong Kong. It’s fair to say Norma well and truly caught the travel bug from that point on. “The trip opened Mum’s eyes to a whole new world, and she made many more trips overseas,” Robert says. She and Iris visited Malaysia, Singapore, England and mainland Europe at various points in time.



(L-R) Peter, Victor, Paul, Norma and Robert at Peter's wedding, 1946



(L-R) Peter, Paul, Victor and Robert at Robert's wedding, 1951

Charles passed away on February 9, 1992, at the age of 99. Norma cared for him until his death with the selflessness and love for which she was renowned.

Never one to wither away, however, Norma continued to juggle many interests after Charles’ passing – many of which centred around her legacy as a servicewoman. She was a member of the

AWAS Association, which included being a member of the Committee, the Treasurer, and a Life Member. The association eventually disbanded due to the age of the members, but a few of the original members, including Norma, continued to meet each month for lunch at the Bowlers Club.

Every Anzac Day, she loved to attend dawn service at Martin Place

and then march in town. She’d stay at the now-demolished Menzies Hotel on Carrington Street, where she organised lunches and dinners for fellow AWAS members. Robert and his sons Mitchell and Lachlan would also attend and assist with transportation and seating arrangements, while Paul picked up many of the ladies in his ute to drive them in. As the ladies became older, that march evolved into a ride in Land Rovers, but that certainly didn’t stop Norma from attending dawn service. “I’d rather wear out than rust out,” she would often say.

Norma was also a member of War Widows and Legacy, attending meetings regularly. And when she wasn’t busy with all of the above, she’d find time to join her friends from St Christopher’s Panania on day and overnight bus trips to the Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands.

A new millennium

Then, in 1999, came the biggest decision for Norma since she and Victor purchased that block of land in Padstow almost 50 years earlier. Norma was very house proud, and was finding its maintenance and upkeep harder and harder. As it happened, a developer had purchased the block of land

next door, and approached her with a deal: to sell her house and land, together with next door, to be replaced by six villas – one of which would be hers.

It took a bit of persuading from the boys to convince Norma this was a great move. “She would still be on the block of land she and Dad lived on, she would still have her neighbours, and she would still be in the same suburb she knew so well,” Robert says. Eventually, Norma agreed, and in 2000 – on the day the Sydney Olympics commenced – she moved into her new villa, which was built on the original chook yard.

Now entering her 80s and with a much smaller

property to care for, Norma’s days were filled with meetings, appointments, and bingo at the Workers Club each Friday morning, followed by lunch. She continued to support the Bulldogs passionately, and Paul and his wife Rhonda would take her to the State of Origin, which she also loved.

What’s more, Victor and Norma’s lineage had extended to 19 great grandchildren at time of print. Joshua, Connor and Claire (from Daniel); Tom and Ally (from Rebecca); Kia, Valentino and Xanthie (from Belinda); Matilda, Eoin and Flynn (from Shannon); Ciara, Shea and Erin (from Sean); Aidan and Ashling (from Bridie); Aria and Theo (from Nathan); and Fletcher (from Lauren). At time of print, there were also three great great grandchildren on the scene: Charlotte, Aleeah and Nevaeh.

Norma loved to spend time with all of them, and the families would often visit, whether it was for a birthday, Easter, Christmas, or just because. “She was always there to assist with anything that needed to be done – peeling the potatoes, cutting up the beans, anything,” Peter says. She played forcing back with the boys, taught the girls how to knit, coloured in with the younger kids, and supplied endless lollies and biscuits to all and sundry.

As Norma approached her centenary, she took each day as it came and strove to be as independent as she could be. In 2017, however, she was faced with the toughest fight of her life – both physically and mentally – when she was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer, a terribly debilitating disease.

Nonetheless, she retained her fighting spirit and sense of humour to the very finish. “She never let on how poorly she was towards the end,” Robert says. “The closest she came was to say she was ‘tin fruited,’ which was an expression her brother John used whenever something was broken and couldn’t be fixed. Mum didn’t know what it was rhyming slang for and Paul had to explain to her what it actually meant!”

Norma passed away peaceful, calm and pain-free on February 4, 2018, just three years shy of her centenary. Vic had been waiting patiently for her for over three decades. They are now reunited, and together eternally with God.



Norma (back right) with some of the extended family, including her father Charles (front right)



Norma (right) with Paul and wife Rhonda at their wedding, 1964



Norma, aged 91, at Nathan's wedding, 2012