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Irishman travels to Thailand in search of answers and finds film gold

Fight or Flight details triumphant personal journey after near tragedy

By Michael Norby

In the summer of 2002, something happened to Peter McCarthy that would change his life forever. The results of this event were initially desperately traumatic, but, from the ashes of despair and inner turmoil, the affable Irishman managed to pull his life together and, in the process, he produced one of the most remarkable pieces of film that you are ever likely to see in its genre.

Described as "an odyssey of self discovery" the movie *Fight or Flight* is uniquely inspiring, disturbing, funny and compelling as McCarthy attempts to overcome a life filled with fear and anger.

Attack

"I went to Galway to visit my brother," McCarthy told



Fight or Flight is spiked with rugged personal accounts recorded by McCarthy as he deals with crippling fear and anger throughout his time in Thailand.

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 Landing
 PJ Ryan's
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 Rest. & Banquet
 Rambling House
 Shamrock Nation
 Sly Fox
 Stack's Tavern
 Starting Gate
 The Tinker's Son
 Village Manor
 West Roxbury Pub
 William Patterson
 University

The Irish Emigrant. "We were coming out of a restaurant and walked around a corner and we saw this group of men there. I just got a feeling inside that there would be trouble."

The group of threatening ne're-do-wells, drinking and malevolent on the sidewalk stood between the McCarthy brothers and their destination. Perhaps they should have turned and walked the other way but they wordlessly elected to press on – both displaying differing body language and levels of confidence.

"They didn't pick on my brother because he walked by confidently," said McCarthy. "They saw that I was scared of them. They saw the fear in me and that's why they attacked me."

McCarthy tried to run but was furiously attacked by the men and had a bottle stabbed into his face, causing physical injuries that almost resulted in the loss of his left eye, and an emotional impact that left the young man psychologically devastated.

During his lengthy stay in hospital, McCarthy had time to ponder a life spent backing down from confrontation and adversity. Why had they attacked him and not his brother? What steps could he take to ensure that this would not happen again? Why did he constantly shy away from taking a stand?

"I wondered why I didn't walk strong and tall and why I felt fear," said McCarthy. "There was a lifelong pattern. I never stood up for myself and when I looked at everything I started getting [angry] at myself and I wanted to do something about it."

Fighting back

After reading a newspaper article on the sport of Muay Thai boxing, McCarthy decided to travel to Thailand and learn the art – a sport with a long history that has been popularized most recently with its emergence in the growing world of mixed martial arts – most notably with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).



Fight or Flight has won a slew of prestigious international film awards since its release.



Victim turns bully. McCarthy looks on after demolishing his first Muay Thai opponent.

By thrusting himself into the world of Muay Thai, McCarthy hoped that he could dispel the demons that plagued his life. He set up camp in the remote northern region of Chiang Mai where he immersed himself in the sport and began to train in a small, sweat-laced gym filled with gritty characters. His first bout that would take place in a popular Thai stadium but, after suffering through the rigors of training to become a professional prizefighter, he quickly began to question his decision.

"I was training for a few days and watching the guys," he said. "We went to a stadium in Chiang Mai. It was a coliseum and I was thinking, 'what the hell am I doing here?' It all went downhill from there."

Days before his maiden contest, fear forced him to pull out, much to the dismay of his trainers.

"That was a tricky moment in the whole episode," he said. "I got freaked out and panicked and backed out of the fight. The trainers were pushing me to do it but I just knew in my gut that I wasn't ready."

The replacement fighter was promptly knocked out by the opponent that McCarthy was scheduled to face. Nevertheless, the Irishman forced himself back into the gym and, within weeks, he stood sheepishly in a ring faced with a veteran opponent and a referee about to give the order to fight.

Extremely nervous and trying to muster up some last minute drive to see him through what he was about to encounter, he thought back to the personal disputes, emotional battles and lack of confidence that had brought him there. With just seconds to go before the fight of his life, McCarthy started to lose fear and began to feel angry.

"When I stepped into the ring I thought of something," he explained. "I had badly fallen out with my brother a couple of years before and I hadn't talked to him since. I had all that stuff spinning around in my head and I was definitely using it."

"Then I realized that's why I was there and that's why I was waiting for the referee to drop his hand and say 'fight.' The documentary got really personal from there."

Triumph and emptiness

McCarthy dominated his opponent, using greater reach, power and focus to knock out the overwhelmed veteran with a series of right hands in the second round. Surely this triumph would resupply the hitherto empty cup that McCarthy was seeking to fill with renewed sense of purpose. Indeed, he was initially ecstatic, but quickly began to feel emptiness after the experience.

"I felt great the day after and maybe the day after that," he said. "I thought it would give me something else, though, [a feeling] that I could deal with anybody. At the end of the day, I was still myself outside of the ring and winning that fight wouldn't change that."

Unsuccessful in finding fulfillment in the ring, McCarthy decided to retreat to the lonely confines of a monastery in an effort to find inner peace. There, armed with only a camera to record his deepest thoughts, he brings viewers on a jarring personal journey as he tries desperately to retool.

"The camera was a little like Wilson to me," said McCarthy in reference to Tom Hank's volleyball companion in *Castaway*. "The camera was my Wilson and that's why I got so personal with it."

After weeks of confinement, and almost going crazy in the process, McCarthy vacated the monastery and continued in search of answers. He climbed into the ring for the second time; he explored the vicious world of cock-fighting, pondered Buddhist principles and embraced Thai culture. In fact, it wasn't until he returned to Ireland and looked over almost 140 hours of film footage that his ultimate goal was achieved.

"I came back to Ireland a lot more relaxed," he said. "I sorted everything out with my brother and I think I made it my mission and my purpose to do that. I look at life a lot differently now. I don't take it as seriously."

It took McCarthy and co-director Shane Sutton over five years to complete *Fight of Flight*. Since the movie's release, it has been widely heralded on the international film circuit – winning highly prestigious awards across the globe. The film is available for purchase at www.fightorflight.tv for \$15.99 – it's well worth it.

McCarthy is now working on securing funding for a movie based on the 1847 donation of much needed money from the Choctaw Nation to the people of Ireland during the Great Famine.

For your chance to win a signed copy of this terrific film, send an email to editor@irishemigrant.com with the subject heading "Fight or Flight Competition."