



Figure 1. Maxwell's Service Portrait



Figure 2. Maxwell's Enlistment Photographs



Figure 3. Maxwell with fellow soldiers in the Middle East

Maxwell James Trengove

SX 7890

2/48th Battalion

Served for Australia
5 July 1940
to
19 November 1943

Anzac Spirit School Prize
2023

Maxwell James Trengove was born on 9 December 1911 in Kadina, South Australia.^{1 2} He was the first child born to his parents, William and Matilda Trengove of Bute.^{3 4} Over the next eight years, the family welcomed three girls and another boy to the family.⁵ Family reminiscences indicate that Max loved to play tricks on his siblings, and dance with his mother.⁶ Newspaper articles published during Max's teen years, and young adult hood, suggest he was a brilliant footballer and cricket player.⁷ Max spent his early school years in Bute, while also playing sport in Adelaide. Consequently, the Trengove family made the decision to send Max to Prince Alfred College.⁸

On 5 July 1940, when Max was 28 years and 8 months old, he enlisted in the Second World War as part of the Australian Infantry Forces (AIF). He had previously been denied a place in the Air Force because he was colourblind.⁹ Max reported for duty four days later, commencing training at Oakbank.¹⁰ On 9 September, Max was assigned to the 2/48th Battalion, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Victor Windeyer, which would later become Australia's most highly decorated unit of the Second World War.^{11 12} Max continued training until he was granted pre-embarkation leave from 16 October to 24 October.¹³

There are few written records of Max's appearance, however photos suggest he had dark hair, and a tan complexion, which is likely from spending time in the sun while working as a farmer.^{14 15} Recruitment officers mistook his complexion for being an Indigenous Australian.^{16 17} A fellow soldier described Max as "...a fine stamp of a man, 6 foot tall, well built, and a damn good footballer."¹⁸ Max's enlistment records indicate he had three distinct marks on his body. These marks were scars, found on his right hip, outer left calf, and inner right calf.¹⁹ Considering Max's love for football and labour-intensive job as a farmer, it is likely that this is where his scars came from. Max's enlistment records also indicate that he was not in a relationship, and he declared himself 'single.'²⁰

Max embarked for the Middle East on 'Stratheden' on 7 November and arrived in the Middle East on 17 December.²¹ Once in the Middle East, Max's Battalion spent some time in El Kantara, Algeria, their presence helping to deter the Italian forces in December, before travelling to Dimra, Palestine in March 1941.^{22 23} They continued to train here throughout March, then continued onto further training in

¹ Maxwell was known as Max to his family and friends.

² NAA: B883, SX7890

³ Aged 30 and 25, respectively.

⁴ nee Axford.

⁵ Constance, William, Linda, and Silvia, respectively.

⁶ Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) 'Maxwell James Trengove' *Virtual War Memorial* Available at: <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/601354> (Accessed: April 5, 2023).

⁷ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/category/newspapers?keyword=%22max%20trengove%22&sortBy=dateAsc>

⁸ Also known as P.A.C, an all-boys boarding school in Adelaide that offers an extensive sports program.

⁹ Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) 'Maxwell James Trengove'

¹⁰ NAA: B883, SX7890

¹¹ Australian War Memorial (2023) *2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion, Australian War Memorial*. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U56079> (Accessed: April 1, 2023).

¹² The 2/48th battalion was awarded four Victoria crosses, three of them awarded posthumously. A total of 14 battle honours were awarded to the battalion.

¹³ NAA: B883, SX7890

¹⁴ NAA: B883, SX7890

¹⁵ See Figure 2 for Max's enlistment photograph.

¹⁶ Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) 'Maxwell James Trengove'

¹⁷ First Nations soldiers fought to protect Australia for 87 years before they were considered citizens of Australia. Indigenous enlistment rates increased as the war progressed, but in the early years of the war, including when Max enlisted, Indigenous Australians were discouraged from serving. This quickly changed as the Japanese approached Australia. First Nations soldiers were discriminated against before and after their service, but often treated as equals when at war. Despite contributions on the battlefield and on the home front, Indigenous Australians experienced widespread racism, including institutional racism, that perpetuated a growing divide in health, education, employment, and civil liberties. See La Trobe University (2014), 'The History of Indigenous Servicemen and women' [online] available at: https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/585594/NAIDOC-2014-Servicing-Country-.pdf

¹⁸ Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) 'Maxwell James Trengove'

¹⁹ NAA: B883, SX7890

²⁰ NAA: B883, SX7890

²¹ 'Stratheden,' the ship which served as a troop ship for six years in the Second World War, was a former P&O cruise ship. This is a stark contrast to the experience of soldiers who embarked for the First World War.

²² The Italians were deterred without facing combat.

²³ AWM52 8/3/36/6 - March 1941.

Cyrenaica, Libya. During March and April, German forces made their way to Africa, forcing the 2/48th battalion to retreat to Tobruk, Libya, where the battalion faced its first combat of the war. Max's time in Tobruk saw him nicknamed as one of the 'Rats of Tobruk.'²⁴

The Siege of Tobruk began on 10 April 1941, when allied forces attacked the Italian garrison at Tobruk, Libya.²⁵ Despite some early success, a swift German defence saw the allied troops at Tobruk surrounded by German and Italian forces for a further eight months.²⁶ The soldiers withstood an onslaught of daily artillery assaults, tank attacks and bombings, protecting themselves by hiding underground and in any available crevasse or cave in the garrison. The Australians adopted the ironic nickname, 'The Rats of Tobruk' after American-born Nazi propagandist, Will Joyce, spoke contemptuously of the besieged men. In one of his broadcasts, he described them as being caught like '*rats in a trap*.'^{27 28} The Australians were extracted from Tobruk between August and October.²⁹ The soldiers' bravery, determination, persistence, and aggressive strategies at Tobruk slowed Germany's march on Egypt.^{30 31}

After Tobruk, Max continued his service throughout the Middle East. On 9 August 1942, Max was hospitalised for over a month with dysentery. After returning from hospital on 22 September, he was sent to the Middle East AIF staging camp in Alexandria, Egypt, and later to El Alamein.^{32 33} As the new year came, Max attended a mechanics course with a Light Aid Detachment (LAD), where he provided second line repair and recovery support to forward units.³⁴ After this training, Max embarked for Australia, though his service was not yet over. Australian soldiers were needed in the Pacific to defend Australia against the advancing Japanese.

Back in Australia, Max suffered a clavicle injury on 30 June 1943, and was sent to hospital three days later. Max returned to his battalion on 14 July where he quickly embarked for Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea, aboard *HT Allen*. The 2/48th battalion disembarked on 6 August with a goal to stop the Japanese at Sattelberg. While the Australian forces were ultimately successful, Max was mortally wounded during this campaign. He passed away on 19 November 1943. On the days before his death, Max had reported to his doctor that he was too unwell to fight, but his plight was ignored. He was buried in the field, and later reburied, at Finschhafen War Cemetery, on 1 April 1944.

Max was a courageous and heroic soldier who exemplified the Anzac Spirit. When our country needed help, Max raised his hand. Despite first being rejected by the Air Force, Max persevered with his goal to defend the country and enlisted with the AIF. He persevered during relentless attacks while besieged at Tobruk. He persevered through numerous injuries and illnesses during his service, including up to his death when he was suffering from dysentery. Max's mateship shone through in how he looked out for his fellow soldiers. Though he abstained from alcohol himself, some soldiers who drank too much

²⁴ This nickname was reserved for men who were part of the Siege of Tobruk.

²⁵ Army Museum of South Australia (2023). *Siege of Tobruk - Army Museum of South Australia - Anzac Highway, Keswick*. [online] amosa.org.au. Available at: <https://amosa.org.au/museum-exhibits/wwii-exhibits/siege-of-tobruk#:~:text=On%20January%2021%201941%2C%20the> [Accessed 17 May 2023].

²⁶ In less than two days, the Australians were able to capture 27,000 Italian prisoners, 208 guns, 28 tanks and a vast number of supplies.

²⁷ Peerage, B. (2023). *What You Need to Know About the Siege of Tobruk*. [online] Imperial War Museums. Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-siege-of-tobruk> [Accessed 16 May 2023]. Australian War Memorial (2023) 2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion, Australian War Memorial. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U56079> (Accessed: April 1, 2023).

²⁸ Corporal Leslie Harold Dufton is credited with reclaimed the term, even fashioning makeshift medals in the shape of a rat to distinguish the 'rats' from their fellow soldiers. Australian War Memorial, 2020, 'Siege of Tobruk' [online] available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/tobruk> [accessed 22 May 2023]

²⁹ Allied forces remained in the garrison until December 1941.

³⁰ Germany had set their sights on controlling the Suez Canal

³¹ Australian War Memorial, 2020, 'Siege of Tobruk' [online] available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/tobruk> [accessed 22 May 2023]

³² NAA: B883, SX7890

³³ The AIF staging camp was created to receive, hold, and dispatch men and supplies to units in the division. Returnees from hospital and training courses were often found in this staging camp.

³⁴ Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) '2nd AIF Light Aid Detachments' available at: <https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/3428> (accessed: 22 May 2023)

remember how Max would ensure they were safely put to bed and were well rested.³⁵ Max reflected mateship when he would stand up to bullies on the ship to the Middle East who were challenging other men to fight.³⁶ Max was a popular soldier, with Colonel Fryer stating that Max had a ‘...keen sense of justice and a strong Belief in God – he was one of the finest men I ever met.’³⁷

Word Count: 1491



Figure 4: Rats of Tobruk

This image, while not depicting Max himself, shows the rocky, desert conditions at Tobruk, as well as the tunnels that earned the men the nickname ‘The Rats of Tobruk’



Figure 5: Sattelberg, Papua New Guinea in 2019

This image shows modern-day terrain around Sattelberg, Papua New Guinea. The rainforest landscape is vastly different to the desert landscape of Tobruk. Max fought in both locations and therefore experienced a wide range of climates during his service.

³⁵ Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) ‘Maxwell James Trengove’

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³⁷ Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) ‘Maxwell James Trengove’

Part B

At School, the Anzac Spirit School Prize is undertaken by all Year 9 and 10 students. When my teacher presented the Year 10 class with the task to research someone from the Second World War, I immediately knew I wanted to research Maxwell Trengove. He was my grandmother's uncle, and the general story of his service is widely known within our family. I had previously heard that he was a 'Rat of Tobruk,' but apart from the appreciative tone with which my family used to talk about this, this term didn't mean much to me yet. I was keen to learn more about Max, the Rats of Tobruk and his service within the context of my Year 10 History where I was learning about the European, African, Middle East and Pacific theatres of war.

To begin research about Max's life and service, I searched his name on the Virtual War Memorial. I was familiar with this website as I used it while researching a soldier in Year 9. The website gave me an overview of his movements throughout the war, as well as some details about how Max spent his time as a child. This information was provided by family members submitting reminiscences and personal stories to the website. From this information, I was able to make inferences about his hobbies and how this may have influenced his complexion and caused the scars noted in his service record.

To gather more detailed information about Max's movements, I downloaded his enlistment and service record from the National Archives. This gave some greater details, however it also gave rise to numerous questions, such as which battles, apart from the Siege of Tobruk, he may have faced while on active service. To research this further, the Australian War Memorial's battalion diaries helped refine Max's movements. Using these phenomenally detailed diaries, it was an easy process to fill gaps, with over 100-pages of entries every month of Max's service. Entries discussed severe weather and details of the unit's daily movements. After reading these diaries, I developed an appreciation for the resilience and perseverance Max demonstrated, as he faced a wide range of battles, as well as varied terrain, climates, and environments, such as desert conditions and jungle warfare. The diaries were not able to clear up some questions I had, such as where Max attended his mechanics course in January 1943. While this missing information has not affected my work overall, it is still an unanswered question.

I found the Trove database to be helpful in providing information about Max's childhood, including his love of sport, as well as gain a picture of his family's grief after his death. Obituaries posted in newspapers after his death highlight that he was well loved and respected by his family and community.

Primary sources such as letters and reminiscences about deceased Anzac soldiers can sometimes be coloured by grief and people's memories can be influenced by time. I found that using the VWMA, which included family perspectives, Max's enlistment record, the battalion diaries and Trove articles provided a balance of primary and secondary sources and allowed me to cross reference information that may have been coloured by grief and time. Overall, I believe I have presented an accurate, balanced, and respectful examination of Max's life and service.

Word Count: 500

Figures

Figure 1 – Maxwell’s Service Portrait, taken from Virtual War Memorial Australia (2020) ‘Maxwell James Trengove’ *Virtual War Memorial* Available at: <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/601354> (Accessed: April 5, 2023).

Figure 2 – Maxwell’s Enlistment Photographs, taken from NAA: B883, SX7890

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Figure 4 – Rats of Tobruk, taken from Australian War Memorial (2020) ‘Rats of Tobruk 1941’ [online] available at: <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/programs/staff-rides/may-2019-1943-australian-new-guinea-offensives> [accessed 23 May 2023]

Figure 5 – Sattelberg, Papua New Guinea in 1919, taken from Army Research Centre (2019) ‘April 1919: 1943: Australian New Guinea Offensives’ [online] available at <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/programs/staff-rides/may-2019-1943-australian-new-guinea-offensives>, [accessed 23 May 2023]

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