

Desmond George Loxton (SX5138)

*In my little dugout in Tobruk. There are days when the sand piles in heaps and the dust storms are with us for weeks. Midst the dust, flies, and heat, Lord Haw-Haw greets us: "Good morning, desert Rats of Tobruk."*¹

This was the nickname given to Australians sent to North Africa tasked with defending Tobruk during World War II. Despite the lingering consequences from World War I, almost a million young Australians of all ages lined the paths of enlistment stations around the country. Son of a Cowirra dairy farmer, Desmond George Loxton, was one of them (Figure 1). He served for a total of 1955 days, of which 1253 were overseas. Unbeknownst to Loxton, the Second World War (WW2) would take him on a journey through the dry and dusty desert conditions of Africa to the wet, dense, jungle warfare of Papua New Guinea.



Figure 1- Desmond George Loxton (SX5138)



Figure 2- Residence and Church of Cowirra (1900s)

Prior to the war, Loxton lived with his father Percival George Loxton, his mother Harriet Loxton (nee Fidge) and his brother Verdun Francis Loxton. The family house was the first on the left in Cowirra, across the river from Mannum (Figure 2).² Loxton's father operated the local ferry before buying a dairy in Cowirra which saw Loxton become a dairy hand, milking cows and taking heavy tins of milk to the Ponde landing where boats would collect it (Figure 3).³ Loxton went to primary school in Ponde and continued schooling at Mannum High where he crossed on the ferry every day to reach the school and play football on the weekends. The outbreak of war saw 500-600 locals from the area enlist, including Loxton and his brother, Verdun.⁴



Figure 3- The Loxton family dairy

At the young age of 18, both below legal enlistment age, Loxton and Verdun travelled to Adelaide and enlisted for service at Wayville Showgrounds on June 11, 1940.⁵ Enlisting as 21 years old, the brothers ended up in the same battalion. Loxton had intended on joining the navy but got talked into the army forces instead.⁶ *"I looked forward to doing something different and getting out, and it was 5 shillings a day in wages, a lot better than what I was earning at the time."*⁷ The brothers joined the 2/48 Battalion of the 26th Brigade of the 7th Division. The brigade later became part of the 9th Division, the second highest decorated unit with 4 Victoria Crosses and 80 additional decorations.⁸

Loxton trained at Woodside before embarking upon the HMT Stratheden in Port Adelaide on November 17, 1940.⁹ He arrived at Suez before moving to Dimra until early 1941 when Loxton was escorted to Cyrenica to complete training.¹⁰ News of German troops landing in Northern Africa saw him transferred to Tobruk on April 9.¹¹ Here the 'Rats of Tobruk' were to face Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel, a master of desert warfare.¹² Loxton's battalion became known as "The Rats of Tobruk" after

¹ Trove. 1941. *The Rats of Tobruk*. - *Western Mail* (Perth, WA: 1885 - 1954) - 25 Dec 1941. [online] Available at: <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/37950148>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

² Jamie Loxton, Interview with Author, March 15 2021

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ National Archives of Australia. n.d. *NAA: B883, SX5138 Desmond George LOXTON*. [online] Available at: <<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=6245608>> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ Australian War Memorial. n.d. *2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U56079>> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

⁹ Birtwistlewiki.com.au. 2020. *2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion*. [online] Available at: <https://birtwistlewiki.com.au/wiki/Category:2/48th_Australian_Infantry_Battalion> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

Birtwistlewiki.com.au. 2020. *2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion*. [online] Available at: <https://birtwistlewiki.com.au/wiki/Category:2/48th_Australian_Infantry_Battalion> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

¹² Australian War Memorial. 2021. *The great siege*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/54/james-great-siege>> [Accessed 9 May 2021].

overhearing German propaganda broadcaster Lord Haw-Haw describe them “as being caught like rats in a trap”.¹³ The Anzacs adopted the name as their own in true Aussie fashion. They were led by Gallipoli veteran Major General Lesley Morshead who stated, “We’re *not* here to take it (Tobruk), we’re *here* to give it.”¹⁴ The 2/48 Battalion were known for scurrying around eating out of tins and hiding underground. “The enemy had landed above us and we had little equipment, so we built underground trenches and took them over as other troops came. We were so close it felt as though you could hear them talking and breathing when [we were] sleeping.”¹⁵ During this siege, the Rats of Tobruk designed medals for themselves made from the scrap metal of a downed German aeroplane.¹⁶

Loxton caught the “Tobruk Ferry” with the first half of the Australian troops in October on route to Palestine and Syria for garrison duties.¹⁷ “Sometimes we were pretty lucky to have moved when we did.”¹⁸ By July 1942, the enemy had reached El-Alamein in Egypt and the battle was crucial for Britain. Loxton’s time was cut short as he rushed back into welfare.¹⁹ “We were told to pack everything up and we thought beauty we are going home... as soon as we hit Egypt, we all knew we were going straight back out into the desert.”²⁰ Advancing and breaking enemy lines, Loxton’s battalion took the first objectives as well as 400 prisoners.²¹ Germany started to retreat but a new course of war saw Loxton’s division needed in the defence of Australia.

The threat of an Australian invasion saw Loxton tasked with new a line warfare. Landing on Red Beach on September 4, his battalion was to fight the Japanese in New Guinea.²² During his service Loxton was a sniper and a linesman which saw him on the front line amongst the flying shrapnel and cries from wounded mates (soldiers). On two occasions Loxton was hit with shrapnel, one remaining in his arm for years after the war.²³ He also sustained a back injury after being trapped under a rolled tank.²⁴ The 2/48 returned to Queensland for leave and training in February 1944 before landing on Tarakan beaches to push back enemy in May 1945.²⁵ Between May 6 and June 16, the Australians were attacked with gas, grenades, artillery, and booby traps before being disbanded in Tarakan on October 25, 1945.²⁶ Loxton was officially discharged on November 19, 1945.²⁷

Anzac Spirit characteristics such as perseverance and mateship were portrayed by Loxton throughout his service. One afternoon the 2/10 battalion was marching by and Loxton spotted his cousin, Peter Bowen.²⁸ After marching beside him and catching up on his war experiences, news informed Loxton of Bowen’s death. Loxton then personally visited Bowen’s family when returning home and informed them of the last interaction he had with his cousin.²⁹ Another incident saw Loxton comfort and protect a fellow soldier who had been hit in the dark, unable to move from the heavy traffic of tanks. Loxton sat with this soldier until dawn to seek medical attention and ensure he was protected.³⁰ Perseverance was also portrayed by Loxton which

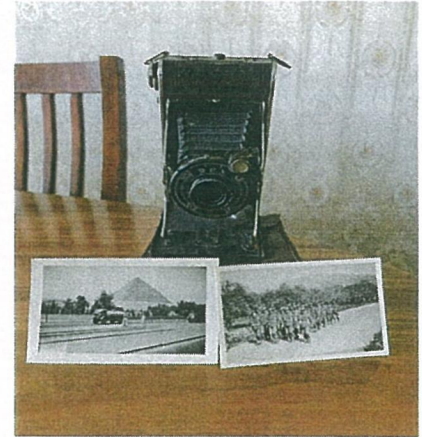


Figure 4- Despite restrictions, Loxton snuck a camera to document his personal experiences.

¹³ Australian War Memorial. n.d. *William 'Lord Haw Haw' Joyce*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P1077904>> [Accessed 29 April 2021].

¹⁴ Australian War Memorial. 2020. *Rats of Tobruk 1941*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/tobruk>> [Accessed 9 May 2021].

¹⁵ Lawrie.M, “Priceless memories of a ‘Rat’”, *Coastal Leader*, September 1, 2011

¹⁶ Australian War Memorial. 2020. *Rats of Tobruk 1941*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/tobruk>> [Accessed 9 May 2021].

¹⁷ Australian War Memorial. 2021. *Siege of Tobruk*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/tobruk>> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

¹⁸ Lawrie.M, “Priceless memories of a ‘Rat’”, *Coastal Leader*, September 1, 2011

¹⁹ Australian War Memorial. n.d. *2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U56079>> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

²⁰ Advertiser Article

²¹ Australian War Memorial. n.d. *Tel el Eisa*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E84632>> [Accessed 21 April 2021].

²² *ibid*

²³ Jamie Loxton, Interview with Author, March 15 2021

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ Australian War Memorial. n.d. *2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U56079>> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ National Archives of Australia. n.d. *NAA: B883, SX5138 Desmond George LOXTON*. [online] Available at: <<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=6245608>> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

²⁸ Jamie Loxton, Interview with Author, March 15, 2021

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

can be seen throughout his five and a half years of service. He worked tirelessly to adapt in the desert and then in the jungle. He was one of only 117 to be involved in every incident the battalion was engaged in.

Loxton returned home and began pursuing a fulfilled life. He assumed work as a Post Masters General after his dad sold the diary and bought the Mt Pleasant Hotel. Loxton married his wife Dolores in 1947 who had his three children; Jamie, Lesley and David.³¹ The family then moved to Mt Pleasant before relocating to Loxton, which is named after his grandfather; here he worked on a share-farm to gain experience. He quit when his partner refused to let him go to Adelaide for an Anzac reunion. It shows the great priority and importance of mateship amongst these soldiers, even after the war had finished. Nevertheless, Loxton had gained the knowledge he needed and received a 400-acre War Service Block in Meninge.³² Come 1956, a flood affected Loxton's land severely.³³ He was given a new block in the SE in 1960, on what is now Loxton Road.³⁴ Loxton worked the land tirelessly and displayed perseverance he continued to draw on after the war; the farm remains in the family today. Loxton is buried at the Robe Cemetery with Dolores where his legacy will forever live on and be remembered in the local area (Figure 5.) Loxton and those he served with carried the legacy left from their fathers and uncles of the First World War and achieved their own legendary status.

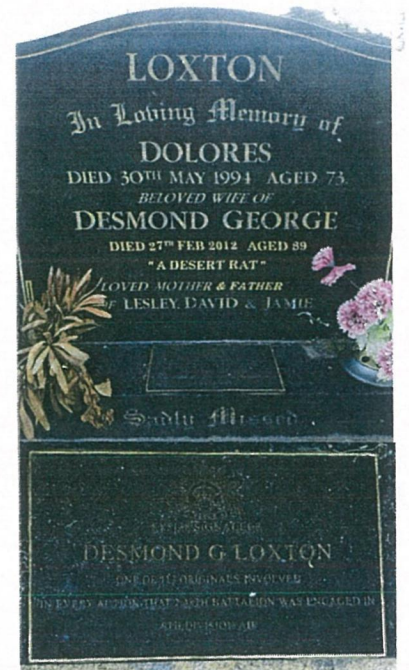


Figure 5- Plaques in memory of Desmond George Loxton at the Robe Cemetery

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- Jamie Loxton, Interview with Author, March 15, 2021

³¹ ibid

³² ibid

³³ ibid

³⁴ ibid

³⁵ Trove. 1941. *The Rats of Tobruk. - Western Mail (Perth, WA : 1885 - 1954) - 25 Dec 1941*. [online] Available at: <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/37950148>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

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Part B

Following the start of this competition Miss Lawrie informed me of a local war service veteran by the name of Desmond George Loxton. I was eager to do someone from the area to identify with the experience of a local service person and portray the courage and sacrifices of a young Australian. After reading a newspaper article about Loxton I was already intrigued and wanted to know more about his service and where his war journey took him. Fortunately, his son Jamie works at the local supermarket and lives just around the corner from me. We were able to organise a meeting where Jamie provided all the information he knew about his father and many primary sources Mr Loxton had left him. I was able to record the interview and take photos of the sources, all of which are used throughout my entry. Having the personal stories and possessions of Loxton was very important to me and I hope I have utilised the sources well and honoured him in a way his family and Jamie are proud of.

Despite the amount of information gathered from the interview, it was primarily about Loxton's life before and after the war. However, I was able to utilise Australian websites such as the Virtual War Memorial, Trove, Australian War Memorial and National Archives of Australia to broaden my understanding of Loxton's battalion, the conditions he served in and the adversaries he faced. These websites were able to tell me about his enlistment, casualties, deployment, the leaders he served under and against, the warfare of his battles and much more. They also helped me to understand the characteristics of the Anzac Spirit and how they were demonstrated by Loxton and all of our Australian soldiers, then and now.

Part C.

My name is Maddie Wirth and I am 15 years old. I live in the small country town of Robe, 40kms from Kingston where I attend Kingston Community School as a year 10 student. I play in the local netball and football league on the weekends. I play basketball in the school competition and have been involved in local tennis and dance competitions. I have also been a 'little nipper' at the Surf Life Saving club. I have volunteered at local events such as the Primary School Fete and netball club raffles as well as laying the wreath on behalf of the Robe Primary School on ANZAC Day in 2018. My favourite subjects at school include Humanities and Social Sciences, Home Economics, Art, Physical Education, Maths and English. Outside of school I have a part time job and am currently completing a Certificate III in Hospitality which has pushed me in confidence and ability. Every Easter I camp on the Cowirra side of the Murray River with my family where I swim in the river like Loxton used to and cross the ferry in which Loxton's father used to run.

Writing this piece and entering the competition has allowed me to interview a close family member of Loxton's and find out about his personal life as well as obtain many primary sources from his time at war. This project has developed my research skills and expanded my knowledge about Australia's involvement in World War 2 and the sacrifices, bravery, and courage of our Aussie soldiers, as well as the personal story of a local hero, Desmond George Loxton. It is evident that every Australian soldier comprised the characteristics of the Anzac Spirit throughout their service which is why I am proud to be Australian and glad I was able to further my knowledge through this competition.