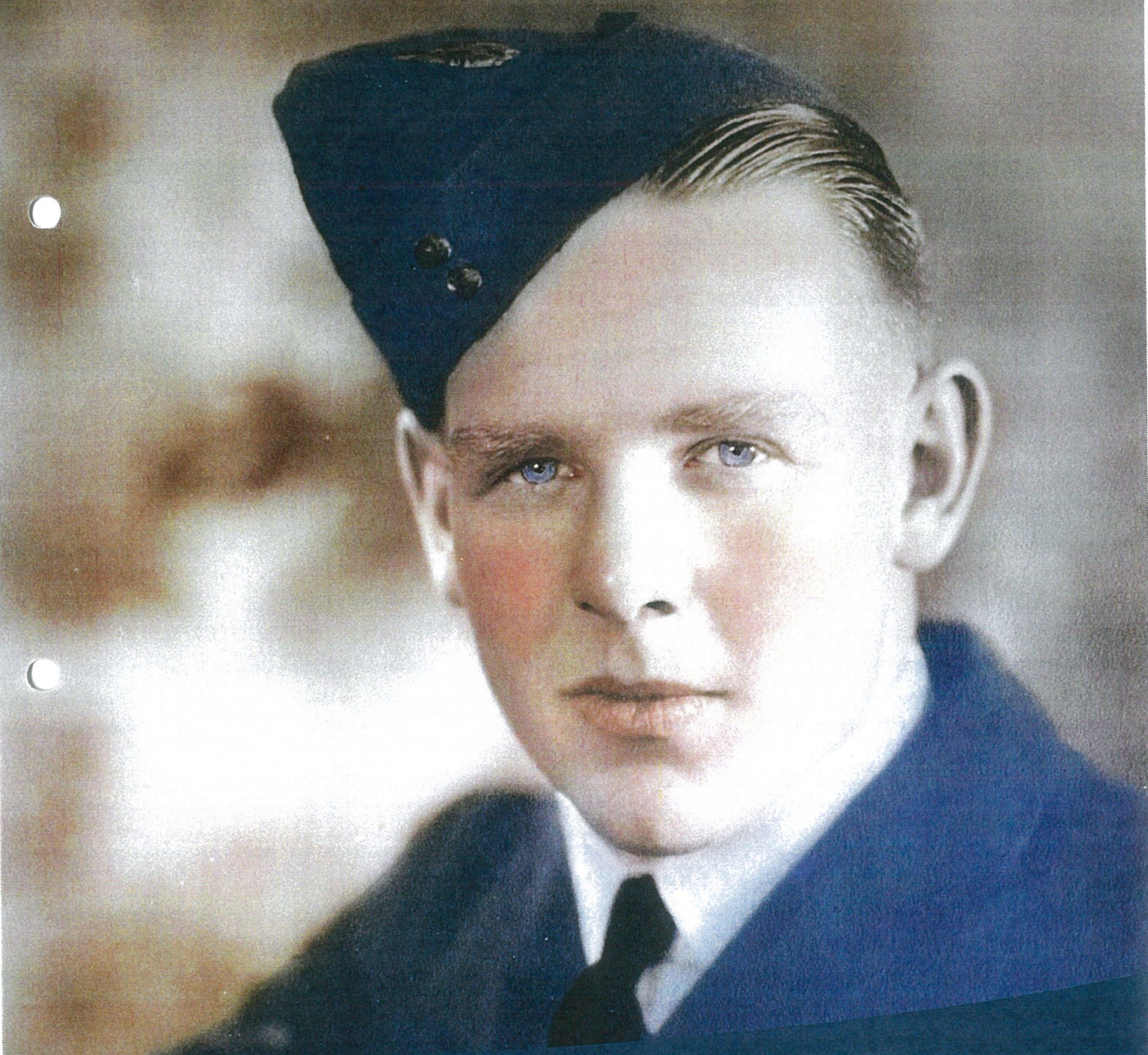


Maxwell Leonard Thomas

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE
Flight Lieutenant | 2ND and 13TH Squadrons
1922 – 2004



Written by:
School:

Max Thomas
Prince Alfred College



On the 17th of August 1922, a triumph of the Australian ideals of courage, mateship and compassion was born. Born into the Adelaide middle class to businessman Walter Thomas and Linda May Penno, Maxwell Leonard Thomas spent his childhood growing up in Malvern. A talented young tennis player and keen footballer, he spent much of his childhood playing sport. A bright student, Maxwell attended Unley Primary School before moving to Prince Alfred College in year eight, where he would stay until the completion of his studies.

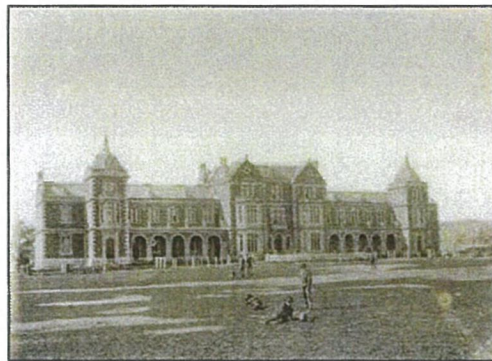


Figure 1: Prince Alfred College Main Building

After leaving Prince Alfred College, he moved to an undeveloped property in Coonalpyn purchased by his father, who intended to turn it into a farm. Maxwell worked alone on building fences and clearing vegetation for paddocks for several years. Concurrently, the outbreak of war in Europe had begun to stir up trouble in Australia. On the same day that UK Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared war, Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced a tragic yet consequential outcome: Australia was again going to war. This increasing possibility of having to serve Australia saw Maxwell apply for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Reserve at the No.5 recruiting centre in September 1940.



Figure 2: H.J. Penno & Co on Franklin St

Moving back to Adelaide in 1941, Max began work at the family business. Max worked alongside his father, who had achieved modest wealth as the managing director of H.J. Penno & Co, a hessian bag manufacturer on Franklin St in the Adelaide CBD. The six months following Maxwell's enlistment in the Reserve saw the conflict rapidly escalate including the Italian invasion of Greece, and then Slovakia, Hungary and Romania joining the axis forces. It was likely this escalation and a sense of duty that motivated him to enlist as a permanent member of the armed forces.



Figure 3: Maxwell in his RAAF uniform

Maxwell enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force on the 29th of March 1941. At 18 years of age, weighing 153lbs at a height of 5'10, he was modest in stature. After taking his oath, Maxwell was mustered as Air Crew, and received some basic training in Adelaide and was briefed on his forthcoming service. On the 1st of May 1941, he was posted to No. 1 WAGS in Ballarat to begin his training as a wireless air gunner.

For five months he was trained to communicate through wireless signals in flight and assist other members of aircraft with navigation. Further training in Port Pirie and Geraldton saw him train with Avro Anson aircraft, a twin-engine British design used by the RAAF throughout World War II. As is noted by the RAAF Museum at Point Cook, "It was also the RAAF's first low-wing monoplane, the first with a retractable undercarriage and with an enclosed gun turret." (RAAF, 2009).

On October 1st, 1942, following a period of 18 months of training, Maxwell was deemed sufficiently prepared for his duties to go forth and fight for the country. He was commissioned as a Pilot Officer and appointed to the position of Wing Air Gunnery Sergeant to the 13th Squadron, which was situated in Darwin. Formed in June 1940, this squadron was initially tasked to fly reconnaissance missions and survey maritime movements over the seas north of Darwin in Avro-Ansons. As the presence of Axis forces around Australia escalated, the squadron were equipped with Lockheed-Hudson bombers and duties expanded to include operational attack missions. By the time Max arrived, the squadron had already been severely affected by the February 1942 Bombing of Darwin, losing many resources at the Darwin base. Despite this major setback, the determined ANZAC spirit conveyed by the RAAF allowed the squadron to continue to carry out reconnaissance missions and operational attack missions against the Japanese. Throughout these daily missions, Max played a key role on the aircraft, communicating with Allied forces on the ground and assisting in navigational duties.



Figure 4: Lockheed-Hudson Bomber Aircraft

Furthermore, during his time in the 13th Squadron, it was said that Maxwell was also successful in gunning down a Mitsubishi A6M Zero Fighter Aircraft. This type of long-range fighter aircraft gained a notorious reputation for its outstanding agility, with a dogfight win ratio said to be 12:1. However, he was never awarded a medal for the supposed downing of one of these aircraft, due to the defeat never officially being confirmed.

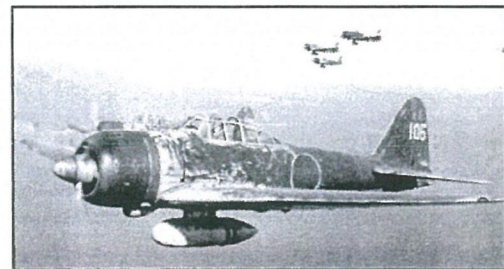


Figure 5: Mitsubishi Zero Aircraft

On April 1st of 1943, Maxwell was promoted to the position of Flying Officer and posted to 2 Squadron in Darwin. On the same day, the 13 Squadron gave its Hudson Bombers to the 2 Squadron before relocating to Canberra. Maxwell continued flying in Hudson Bombers surrounding the East Indies throughout April and was involved in the attack on the 18th of April.

As historian David Vincent notes in his 2010 book, *The RAAF Hudson Story*, an attack against Koepang and Penfoei on the night of April 18th was the "largest ever force of bombers ever assembled to undertake an offensive operation from the Darwin area" (Vincent, 2010). The squadron was up against a large fleet including Mitsubishi Zeros on floats, allowing them to land on water. By April 25th, the attack was still underway, and disaster had struck. Hudson Bomber A16-217, with Max working as a wireless air gunner onboard, was shot from the ground whilst flying over Timoeka, New Guinea. One of the pieces of shrapnel injured Max in the leg, and another bullet passed through the arm of a fellow crew member. Flying back to Darwin, Max's directorate of postings indicates that he had the small piece of metal removed from his leg. It is difficult for one to imagine the impact that near misses like this had on the mental health of military personnel. Although only a minor injury, this incident would go on to be a cause of Max's Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder. Demonstrating the perseverance of the ANZAC spirit, following this incident Maxwell took to the skies again, further participating in daily attack missions on Kupang, Lautem, Penfoei, and Dili for the remainder of 1943.

On New Year's Day of 1944, Max was posted to Evans Head, New South Wales, for further training to become a Flight Lieutenant. At this base he would also meet his future wife, Margaret Nancy Clarke. Enlisting at age 14, Margaret, an intelligent woman served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force as a wages clerk and carried out administrative tasks for the war effort. They would go on to be married for 60 years, until Max's passing in 2004. Upon his promotion to Flight Lieutenant, Max was also trained to fly in Consolidated B-24 Liberator aircraft. A Californian design, these planes could reach up to 400km/hr and featured a highly efficient, low drag 'Davis Wing' design (US Air Force [via Wikipedia], 2007).

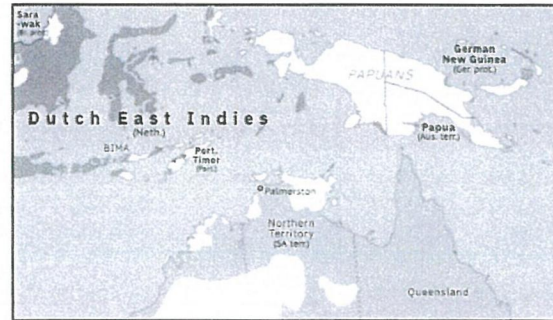


Figure 7: Map of Dutch East Indies, where Maxwell flew in Hudsons

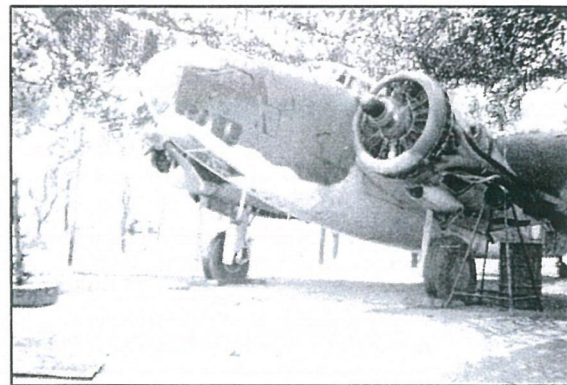


Figure 6: Lockheed-Hudson Bomber A16-217, the aircraft in which Max was injured



Figure 8: Evans Head RAAF Base during WWII

At the 24th Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Thomas participated in highly successful attacks on power stations in East Java, limiting the functionality of enemy bases in Indonesia. He was also involved in taking down an enemy convoy near Koepang, and troop concentrations at Tawao. By this stage of the conflict, the Allies were in full control of the war. Paris and Guam were both liberated, and the Russians managed to gather pace in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the squadron continued movements throughout much of the island states north of Australia. 1945 saw Max continue dangerous bombing operations and anti-shiping strikes against the Japanese in the 24th Squadron which no doubt required immense courage like the rest of the war effort. These operations were carried out right through until September when the conflict was formally ended, and Max was officially discharged in March 1946.



Figure 9: Maxwell with wife Margaret

Maxwell was awarded the 39-45 Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 39-45 and the Australian Service Medal 39-45. Upon being discharged, he would go on to work at H.J. Penno & Co alongside his father before the sale of the business several decades later. He was very much involved in his local community, becoming the president of the Sturt Lawn Tennis Club, and an active participant in the Returned & Services League. However, the scars from war never truly left his side, and Max suffered from these memories in fits of anger and stress for the rest of his life.



Figure 10: Maxwell with fellow Servicemen on reunion in Ambon, Indonesia

Most Australians are aware of the concept of the ANZAC Spirit. A term used in memorial services, history books and speeches, the true meaning of the phrase is somewhat ambiguous. What most can agree on however, is that it most certainly includes a love of country, sense of duty and immense courage. Whether it be overcoming injury or having the courage to take to the skies after having his life flashed before his eyes, Maxwell's story is truly one that embodies the true ANZAC spirit, whatever definition that might indeed be. Without the sacrifice of our ANZACs we would likely live in a far gloomier world, and as such, it is essential to acknowledge the sacrifice that people like Maxwell gave in defending our ability to call Australia home.

Part A: 1473 Words

Part B: How did you gather the evidence about your individual in order to tell their story?

Throughout the course of this project, I have used a variety of primary and secondary sources in an attempt to portray the most accurate recount of Maxwell's service. I began my research by conducting an extensive interview with my grandfather, and Maxwell's son Peter Thomas. Although he did not have much recollection of Maxwell's service, it was this interview that allowed me to begin to piece together parts of his childhood and undertakings after his time in the Air Force. Going through numerous issues of the Prince Alfred College chronicles in the State Library of South Australia also confirmed which year Max began his tuition.

The online National Archives of Australia were invaluable in piecing together the different parts of Maxwell's story. Many hours were spent searching through the online database, and I was fortunate enough to find casualty reports and an extensive 'Directorate of Postings' file which included enlistment forms and records of his training. From there, I was able to research specific aspects of these postings both online and in books. Many historical documents have been published on specific squadrons and important events, and through referring to his postings file I was able to align the events that Max was involved with. The internet was particularly useful in this, as there are a number of defence force history pages which were able to offer detailed recounts of events. Utilising a number of different sources to create a single story was in some ways aligned to completing a jigsaw, and has given me an insight into how research can be conducted to present a rounded picture of an individual's life.

The collection at the State Library of South Australia was also a valuable resource, with numerous books relevant to my research. Working with the library staff and browsing through the online catalogue, I was able to source a number of books which thoroughly detailed the histories of a number of training campuses, squadrons and attacks in which Maxwell was involved. My uncle Nicholas, a retired major of the Australian Army was in possession of Maxwell's medals, which I was then able to list in the paper. Several family members were also in possession of photos of Max, which I was able to scan and upload to the report which I think was able to complement the writing. Furthermore, I gathered evidence from the Australian War Memorial database for images that depict and support the research.

As my great-grandfather, this research project has not only given me an interest in my own family history but has allowed me to better understand the personal impacts that war had on millions of people across the world. Ultimately, many people have been of much help in giving me access to resources as well as offering small pieces of information here and there. By piecing together a number of different sources and their information, I believe I was able to give an accurate recount of Maxwell's service.

Part B: 493 Words

Combined Parts A and B: 1933 words

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