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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes recording with Alan Braby, 2/6th Australian General Hospital, tape 1, side 1.

Let's begin with when you were born and where you were born, Alan?

15th July 1919. Born in Campsie, a suburb of Sydney.

Right. And I think you were saying that you left school about 1936?

That's right - from Sydney Technical High School where I had my Leaving Certificate.

And I think from there you went into working with the MLC?

That's right, working with the MLC in Martin Place, in various clerical positions and studying accountancy at night.

Right. Just two general questions about that period of the '30s, perhaps. As a boy, perhaps as a young man, were you particularly conscious or not of the general tradition of Australian servicemen in the first war, of the general tradition of ANZACs, or not?

Very much so because my father had been in the 4th Battalion in the first AIF. He'd been wounded within a couple of days of landing in Gallipoli and while not a great participator in RSL affairs he did enjoy his ANZAC Day march and that atmosphere pervaded the house. We were all very proud of Dad and what he'd been through. He was wounded in the shoulder and spent some time in England after that before being repatriated to Australia.

That's most interesting. The other question was: during the 30s were you conscious or not of the general political developments in Europe that certainly in the later 30s suggested that war was almost inevitable?

Oh, I think everybody knew that. It was helped by my having done history at school of course, but apart from that I think that everybody knew -who read the papers - would know that things were brewing in Europe. There was quite a lot of activity in journals and books that were being published at the time which led into it and I'd had a bit of interest in it and was fairly well aware of what was happening.

Was it much discussed amongst friends or family perhaps?

I can't remember it being much discussed amongst friends and family. I suppose that it would have been hinted at occasionally but as in other Australian activities, most of your friends talked about sport rather than anything else. But I read quite a bit about it in those days and I knew all that was - well, not everything that was going on - but you could read between the lines as to what was happening in Europe generally. And indeed in Asia, with the Japanese occupation of the Manchurian areas and the Hitler invasion of Czechoslovakia and Sudetenland and the other problems that were existing: Mussolini in Eritrea, Franco in Spain and so on. They were all strong issues. Yes, the people did talk about them for sure, that's right.

Right. That's most interesting, Alan. Moving on a little bit, I know you had tried to join the civilian air force before the war. I think after war broke out you applied again for the air force?

I tried to join 22 Squadron, I think it was, the Citizens' Air Force in Sydney and when war broke out they returned all the papers and said, 'Now, you need to re-apply to the Department of Air'. This was in September and I think I applied straight away and was medically examined in February or March and around about April or May they said, 'Sorry, we can't employ you even for ground staff'. And I felt ....

On the grounds of ...?

On my eyesight not being good enough for them.

How did that affect you?

Well, my right eye was pretty bad even then and obviously I couldn't see to - well they thought I couldn't see to drive an aeroplane. I've managed to drive a motor-car all right. But I do have difficulty in firing guns at all. I have no right sight at all.

Right. Sorry, I actually meant something slightly different. How did the decision that you could not become a pilot affect you?

Oh, it hurt quite a lot. It was a bash to my ego in a way because I had visions of going over there. I would have learnt to have loved to fly and to be in the air force.

Well, I know after that you did, I think, apply to join the army and I think it was about July - June/July - '40 you enlisted?

(5.00) That's right. I enlisted in June, was called up in July - I think it was - and went straight into the day boys in Hurstville and we had the nucleus of what was to later become the 2/18th Battalion, part of the 8th Div. And it was from there that various people came from other units recruiting for their own units and a Major Richardson whom I knew slightly through a cousin came along. He knew me and said, 'What about joining us? We're going to the Middle East fairly soon and we don't know whether the rest are stopping in Australia or what.' So I thought, well, here's a chance to get away so I joined.

I think you were also suggesting too, there was some feeling that your background in school biology might have led on to some medical aspect of the hospital's work?

Yeah, I had some inclination. I was keen on doing science at school but was frustrated because I was not doing a foreign language, and there was the expense of going to university which in my days was pretty expensive unless you got some scholarship and I couldn't see any possibility of that. In fact, generally, I was pretty illiterate as to the prospects of doing anything other than being a clerk in those days. But I always had the hankering to do science and I thought, well, there's a hospital unit, there's a chance I might become involved. But unfortunately it didn't turn out that way.

> Right. One other thing just to ask at this point perhaps, Alan, was the initial induction into the army: all the square bashing and so on that was no doubt part of that, how did you respond to that? How did you respond to the whole thing of the army's discipline and so on?

No problem at all because like you I'd been in the cadets for a couple of years and rather enjoyed the bit of the square bashing as you knew .... It was like a game in many ways. And the field work that we got involved in - the day boys - wasn't great but whatever we .... The little bit we did do was quite interesting - and a bit in section leading and so on I thought fascinating - but I didn't particularly want to go into the infantry. I thought the artillery or something else might have been better but this opportunity came up, particularly with .... I knew that a lot of the troops in Australia at that time probably would be held back and they had little prospect of going overseas and I wanted to go overseas.

> Right. Well, moving on, I know you were in the advance party that went to Wallgrove and I think you were immediately absorbed into the supply side of the operation.

That's right, I became involved in it straight away, probably because I had done some accounting and they thought accountants ought to know a bit about storekeeping. But I mentioned to you that shortly after - only a couple of weeks after I'd been at Wallgrove - I contacted [sic] measles and was put into Prince Henry Hospital and eventually convalesced and it was about a month out of my army career before I rejoined the unit. And shortly after that I was sent to Leichhardt to the ordnance stores to commence the packing of the unit's establishment of equipment.

> Well, I was going to ask you about that but perhaps just before we get onto that could you outline for us the staffing of the supply side of the hospital from the captain down through the different, well, the warrant officer and the different sergeants, Alan?

Yes, the quartermaster's side of the hospital consisted of a captain quartermaster with a warrant officer as his number two who was generally acting as number two on all sides, a sergeant in charge of cooking arrangements or catering arrangements, a sergeant in charge of transport, a sergeant in charge of clothing and a sergeant generally acting on the accounting and overall supervision - that was my job.

> And I think, was there one other sergeant for hospital stores too?

Oh, I'm sorry, yes, there was. That developed later on - another sergeant looking after linen and beds and blankets and that sort of equipment.

> But I think you were saying it was really just that small nucleus of men that went to Leichhardt with the shopping list for the hospital?

No, they didn't go. It was mainly a nucleus consisting of myself and about six or seven other corporals and privates who were not necessarily part of the quartermaster's establishment who went to Leichhardt. Typical of the army - they didn't take specialists, they just took whoever was available.

Right, so these other fellows went along as the sort of heavers and carters?

That's right, yes.

Well tell us about the establishment list - I think it's most interesting.

Yes, the army had developed over years - probably inherited from the British - a comprehensive document consisting of about sixty or seventy foolscap pages of equipment - dealing with all the equipment that would be needed by a hospital in the field. For instance, you would have cups - china, cups - coffee, cups - breakfast and all the different types one could imagine that would be needed in a hospital, and the quantities designated as being suitable. And that was the equipment we received from ordnance and proceeded to pack.

Including, I think you were saying, something like 600 mattresses?

Yes, there were at least 600 mattresses. I think that there was a ten per cent wastage - on everything there was another ten per cent more. So as a 600 bed hospital we had 660 beds and 660 mattresses and a corresponding number of sheets and blankets and so on.

(10.00) There must have been, well, just a huge amount of physical heaving and carting and packing I would have thought?

There was but it had its light-hearted side as well. Because we were all new to the game we had to rely on some of the civilian ordnance people to show us how to sew hessian up around the mattresses and how to pack things in the cases so they were least likely to be broken. As a matter of fact the stuff we did see at its eventual destination - there was very little damage caused to it. That is, as I said before, the stuff that we did receive because a lot of it was never received anyway.

Right. So having requisitioned all the material, it was wrapped, packed and then stowed away in what, in wooden crates?

Yes, stowed away in wooden crates or these big hessian cartons of mattresses and pillows and things, made as waterproof as possible - because it obviously would have been unloaded into an open area somewhere - and then that was the last we saw of it until we eventually received it in our final destination at that occasion up in Volos in Greece, because in many cases it was taken and put down to the wharves and then loaded on cargo ships. I think when we eventually embarked the only stores we took with us were those appertaining to the unit itself, that is its own personnel not the hospital.

Right. How long did that general period last, do you remember, of getting all these supplies organised?

I think it must have been about two and a half to three months, somewhere round about August-September until late November, early December.

Right. Well, let's move on a little bit. I know it was in mid-December following that, or in fact after Christmas, that the unit boarded the *Queen Mary*. The decision to leave Australia, that you were to go overseas, how did you greet that? How did your family greet it?

I think it was all expected and there was no question of whether it was being greeted or not but the family took it stoically because, well, as I said before, my father had been in the first world war and they expected that if one came along one of their family at least would join it again. So that it was - I think it was inevitable.

How did you feel yourself on leaving Australia?

Oh, quite excited. So much so that on the *Queen Mary* and going through the Sydney heads I got seasick.

Well, tell us about the voyage. You were saying, I think, that the quartermaster's operation was quite busy because you actually did have a small hospital running and had to ferret around in the hold for various items.

That's true. The unit was running a small hospital on the ship but in addition to that there was always somebody who wanted something out of the stores that were on the ship. I've said that most of the hospital stuff went separately but there was quite a bit of specialists' stuff that was on board. And the specialists of course in the hospital would always want something out of their equipment brought up on deck. But in addition to that we had to handle some extra supplies of stores and food particularly. I remember particularly having to go down and get bananas and things like that out of the hold and arrange for their distribution from time to time.

What was it like working down in the hold of the *Queen Mary*?

Well, the *Queen Mary* is a palace compared to some of the other ships we were on but it was good; quite good and clean even though people were a bit suspicious of Englishmen and thought that they were a bit smelly. But I thought that the *Queen Mary* was pretty good really.

Right. What about other aspects of ship life? Do you remember much social life, or much general training going on, or not?

There was a little bit of training going on all the time, particularly amongst the infantry units that were on board but I seemed to spend most of the time doing ordinary 'Q' store work around the place. Admittedly it wasn't as feverish or as active as it would be if we were on the land and we had a pretty idle life. And it was certainly nice going through the warm tropical waters and sunbathing on the deck whenever we had the free time.

Well at Trincomalee of course you trans-shipped I think to the *Dilwara*. How do you remember that?

Well, we handled the equipment coming across from the *Queen Mary* to the *Dilwara*. Some of it was being unloaded at night and this was one of the first occasions I remember having to work all night. We had, well there must have been Ceylonese doing the handling and it meant being down in the boats and trying to get these fellows to understand what was required while other people up on the top of the ship were looking down at us and laughing.

Right.

But we .... It was quite a difference moving off the *Queen Mary* onto the *Dilwara*. The *Dilwara* was a British army troop ship, fitted out as such, and as such for troops was pretty comfortable. The quarters were good for all concerned, particularly for the sergeants. I remember we had much more spacious accommodation than we did on the *Queen Mary*.

> That's interesting because I have heard that in other ways life on the *Dilwara* was a little bleaker than life on the *Queen Mary*.

(15.00) Yeah. You heard about having to line up on the gangway down aft to go down to the dining room on the part of the ship that was heaving most, I think it was. And as a result a lot of people got seasick there. I think another one was - and this is purely anecdotal - of lining up to go to the dining room past a kitchen with a great big fish in the sink. And every day you could see the tail of this fish but it didn't seem to shrink any much so nobody was eating the fish and it was just lying in this sink for the whole of the voyage. But there were interesting sidelights. One of them was that in the area where we were sleeping in the sergeants' - I don't know what you'd call it - bedroom, anyway, there were signs up that 'no wives allowed on these premises after 9 p.m. at night', so they apparently had separate accommodation in the British army.

> Yes, I could imagine that. There would otherwise no doubt have been a lot of jealousy and so on. The actual arrival in the Middle East - if you can picture in your mind crossing the Arabian Sea and so on up the Red Sea and then through the Canal - a totally different landscape really to what you would have known in Australia. How did that affect you? And how do you remember your first contact with local people?

Oh, that was quite exciting really, seeing the people. It was interesting in Colombo too, but eventually getting to the Middle East and seeing the sands of the desert on either side of the Canal was fascinating. And remembering the historical association of that place brought back a lot of thoughts and memories from readings. Then we didn't really see any people until we landed in Haifa and it wasn't very long - well, we didn't really get to contact many people - but it wasn't very long before we got caught up in the question of the Arabs versus Jews situation in the Middle East, which was very contentious when we first arrived and didn't abate in the whole of our stay there. Because we got fairly close to the Arabs, having to use them for employment in various places and at the same time in the job in the Q store, we had commercial dealings with some of the Jewish people in Tel Aviv and Haifa and Jerusalem and we got to know their side of the story and their activities as well. So that a lot of sympathy must be extended on both sides, but it did seem to be an insuperable barrier to overcome to see any reconciliation between the two races in spite of the fact that over the years they'd existed together in the Holy Land.

> That's most interesting, Alan. I know from Haifa you went first to where the 2/1st Hospital was set up at Gaza, or near Gaza, but there you basically worked alongside them with their equipment. What's your general recollection of that period?

Oh, it was a breaking-in period and getting to know how a hospital worked in action. There were some casualties coming through from the desert at that time but not anywhere near as busy as we had been at some other periods. And on our side, on the Q side, that was a pretty

quiet period really. But there's no doubt that the surgeons, and the physicians generally, were anxious to get cracking and get a bit more practice under their belt by working in the hospital. But it was an interesting period and I suppose in a way we were fortunate to be fostered by the 2/1st AGH as a break-in to the actual operation.

> Was there a clear feeling of the 2/6th as a distinct unit, despite the fact that you were working with the 2/1st? Or was it a rather more mixed situation?

Oh no, at that stage we still had our own identity. As a unit we were pretty fortunate having a man like Colonel Money in charge who did develop the *esprit de corps* to no uncertain degree. And he was a man who people looked up to and he was there all the time and he knew that he was concerned in his unit continuing. And as such our loyalty and our concept of the existence of the 2/6th AGH as an individual unit continued and even became greater.

> I was going to ask you about the question of morale because a lot of other people have said that the 2/6th had a particularly strong unit feeling. How much of that would you put down to Colonel Money's general character and leadership? How much of it would you put down to other factors?

I think a lot of credit must be given to Colonel Money. Generally the type of people in the 2/6th AGH were fairly compatible. We didn't seem to have any great temperamental strife even in temperamental situations. I know we had a couple of difficulties: one fellow suicided on the way over - or attempted to - and another, a pharmacist, suicided in Gaza in this particular period we are now talking about. Again, he could have been, they could have both been victims of the change in circumstances - a change of atmosphere and environment from what they would have in civil life. Now this pharmacist was .... I think it was from Colonel Money's attitude that caused him to suicide but I think the sympathy was with him but it was an understandable situation and no great blame was laid on Rex Money for it at all.

> Could you just elaborate on that? You said that that it was Colonel Money's attitude, or I think you implied, that led to this man's suicide.

I think it was only a case of the pharmacist doing something professionally wrong in something he'd done and having the tripe roared out of him by Colonel Money and he couldn't take it. I think it was as simple as that. But he must have been building up to it in other ways.

> Yes, sure, that would sound like the trigger that set off some other deep-seated thing. When that happened, incidentally, was it common knowledge at the time, and was there .... Did Colonel Money step in to counteract any demoralisation and so on?

No, I think that - typical in a situation like this - Colonel Money knew that he was on the right, that he'd done what he should have done and it was an unfortunate incident and life just carried on regardless. I think that was probably the best thing to do in the circumstances, too.

(20.00) Yes, sure. Moving on a little bit. I know it was only six weeks or so after arriving at the 2/1st set-up that you set off for Greece. I think you were saying that from the Q side that you had no real contact with your hospital supplies in the Middle East. They somehow arrived in Greece. Could you tell us about that?

Yes. This must be one of the things I'm vague about. I'm sure I must have known more about it at the time. But my impression is that the stores were loaded in Sydney. Some were on the *Queen Mary* but as I said earlier that was probably only for our personnel. But the rest of the hospital stores were probably loaded on cargo ships - one in particular I know was called the *Goalpara*, and they eventually came slowly to the Middle East and slowly proceeded through the Red Sea and up to Greece and there they eventually caught up with us in some way or other. But I think in the main a lot of them went to Greece and were unloaded - or were in the process of being unloaded - in Athens before they were sent to other destinations.

> I think your own journey to Athens via, I think, Alexandria was fairly straightforward?

Yes, we were lucky to go across on the destroyer, *Ajax*, and it was a good run across. We saw a couple of Italian planes floating across and the ack-ack guns went into action a couple of times but otherwise it was about a thirty to thirty-five knot trip and was only an overnight voyage, and it was quite comfortable.

> Right. Well, the actual unloading of the hospital's equipment ...

Can I say this? I should interpose that on the way over we were lucky enough to talk to some of the crew. And I remember particularly one of the crew being supported by his mates and saying, 'I hope you enjoy your short visit there because I'm sure we're going to take you off before three months are out'.

> Right. Was there any awareness of that within the hospital itself, that the whole Greek campaign was likely to falter and that perhaps moving an entire hospital was in fact a rather foolish move?

No, I don't think we knew very much about it at all. In fact the whole thing seems to have been messed up in some ways. Just one example is that we went across with full gear and even at the stage where a lot of us had carried palliasses that we used for sleeping on - stuffed with straw - some of them even carried those onto the ship which was ridiculous because they were a waste of time over there. I don't think we ever slept on a palliasse from there on in. But we knew very little about it but the local Arabs in both Gaza Ridge and Alexandria kept on telling us, 'We hope you'll enjoy your trip in Greece'. So there was no great secret about where we were going. Everybody knew about it. And we could see some logic in perhaps having a British presence in Greece but we didn't know how weak we were or that the dice was so heavily loaded against us.

> Right. So that all came as a shock later. Just moving on. Having arrived there, the unloading of the gear at Piraeus and so on, were you directly involved in that, or not?

No, I was mainly back at our headquarters in Kiphissia. We had people detached to work on the unloading down in Piraeus and sending the stuff up, but admittedly I had some job to do the checking of the stores on their arrival and the allocating for the various depots where we did store them. We used a little Greek school for storing a lot of stuff, particularly the mattresses, and these were stored in the open in the school yard. I know the schoolmaster was very upset at the fact that what he called material of war was being stored in the place but we had to reassure him that it was inoffensive. It was all hospital equipment and not the material

au faire la guerre. But it was here that we had an unfortunate incident that seventy mattresses caught on fire and burnt. And we had an investigation and it was claimed it was spontaneous combustion but the experts in the hospital said there's no such thing as spontaneous combustion - that it must have been deliberate. But I don't think the thing was ever explained. But ...

Were these mattresses stored in the school?

They were stored in the open in the school yard.

I mean, they were at the school when they caught fire?

(25.00)Oh yes, yes. But we had stuff everywhere, in various places, and it was pretty hard to keep control over it. And one must remember that even in Greece although Greece was regarded as a pretty strongly pro-Allied there was still some pro-German people around who were only too happy to get rid of Allied equipment if they could.

Yes, sure. I'd imagine also there was a problem in working out what gear was later to be sent on to Volos. How was that resolved? I assume not all of it was sent up there.

No, it's not a case of what gear was wanted in Volos. I think we wanted all of our gear, but not all of it arrived because it came up by various means - by rail and by caique or by, on one little cargo boat. But I know that in Volos we didn't get all that we had packed in Leichhardt, for sure. But certainly the equipment we packed in Leichhardt was the equipment for a 600 bed hospital and that was what we wanted in Volos but we didn't get it all together.

Well, that's interesting. I'd somehow got the impression that the hospital being set up in Volos was a much smaller operation, not a full-scale hospital.

Well, here again my memory may be playing tricks on me but I imagine that we would need it and it would be pretty hard to split up the equipment and say, 'Well, we only want 330 beds rather than 660, or we only want thirty of those sixty cups - coffee, or whatever it is'.

Right. Well, tell us about the journey to Volos, Alan, and ...? How did you get there?

My memory on this is a bit vague, but I think I went up by truck with equipment and, well, the rest of the unit would have gone up by train. And I remember we were coming through Larisa which had been recently bombed and the thing was to hop across to the NAAFI store and lift a couple of cases of beer and take them with you because nobody was guarding the place at all. They'd also had an earthquake which devastated Larisa which made it a bit of a mess.

Right. Well, having arrived in Volos I think there was a fairly frenetic period, you were saying, in accessing or checking all the stores that had arrived in different ways and so on. How was that?

That was so because they were arriving by various means and we had to set up in a great hurry. Fortunately tents for personnel were up and the cookhouses were going all right but a

lot of the hospital equipment was still dribbling up. But I suppose we had most of it there anyway. The thing was fairly well set up as far as we could go and it didn't take long before we started to get casualties from a couple of the infantry battalions that were being hard pressed by the Germans up north. And they weren't with us for very long before we were told to move on.

The general checking and unpacking of all the stores, could you outline that in any more detail; how you were involved and having, I think in your case, checked it, who the material was passed on to?

Yeah, that was .... It's all very well to say that someone should stand by and see that when the stores are unpacked everything's accounted for, but when you're in a great rush to open up a hospital and to get set up to receive patients you can't check everything. All you do is get the stuff, unpack it and then put it into use straight away. And that's what happened so strictly speaking the checking of unpacking was pretty haphazard - it couldn't be else.

So it was really just a matter of getting stuff out as quickly as possible and into operation. The actual running of the hospital at Volos before you had to leave, do you remember much about that? And how efficiently did the hospital move into operation - this of course being the first time you'd operated independently?

I think it was set up and operating pretty well. My memory from our side is that everything was pretty shipshape. I can remember the store being set up, for instance, for receiving the kit of soldiers that came in and how well that was organised. The kitchens were certainly well organised and we had no problem with transport. So that all in all I think that on our side, and indeed on the nursing and other side, things were operating pretty efficiently and it was a great pity that everything had to be closed down so quickly after being established.

Right.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Alan Braby, 2/6th Hospital, tape 1, side 2.

Right. So the hospital at Volos is in full swing. How much warning did you have that you would have to leave?

Not very much warning. We knew that the troops were falling back and the Germans would be down on us fairly soon so we weren't at all surprised when the sudden advice came that we were to move. First of all we thought we would have to pack and go and then we were very quickly afterwards told, 'No, just leave everything and go', and that in fact is what happened.

Was there any thought that once that decision had been made that you - there was no time to pack - of destroying equipment to prevent the Germans using it, or not?

No, I don't think that came into our minds at all at that stage. It was just a case of just leaving virtually everything as it was and that's what happened.

> Was that because the equipment was ...? Sorry.

I'm sorry, I may have some vague second thoughts on that. I've got an idea they did try to get something away. There was a lot of trouble getting it into caiques on the port, but I know it was the devil's own job to get a caique and it was very hard to get it down onto them, so that all in all it was a pretty hopeless job to get anything away anyway at that stage.

> Right. The decision not to destroy material was that made do you think, or do you know, because it being hospital equipment it could be argued that if the Germans used it they would only be using it to sort of, to save human life, whereas obviously when fighting units had to retreat they would often destroy their fighting equipment?

I don't know that that came into it at all. I can't recall any discussion on it but it could have done, but my impression is that we couldn't take it so therefore we lose it and we leave it. It wouldn't have been of any great value to anyone except, well, probably the army could use it but I don't think that that came into our minds at all.

> Well, in fact I know there was a slight change of plan because having retreated some distance you did in fact return in any case to try to salvage some of the gear.

Yes, after we'd been down to - we'd got down to Athens and we were camping in a place near Kiphissia where it was almost the same place as we'd left before going up to Volos - it was decided that we had left some stuff behind which maybe could be salvaged,and some concern was expressed that we'd been foolish in leaving behind an electric cardiograph which the cunning Germans might be able to convert into a shortwave transmitter. Well, I don't think that actually could have been done. But admittedly there were some other items of medical and surgical gear which had been donated by various bodies in Australia and given to the hospital, and it was thought it was only proper that we should go back and try and get it. At that stage the Germans weren't quite down that far and there was every prospect of being able get there and back again using our own trucks. And I think we had two or three trucks and we were under Captain Kennedy, and I think about half a dozen of us went down - two or three to a truck - back to Volos to pick it up.

> And you were saying that when you returned there in fact a lot of the equipment had been pilfered, taken, by the local people.

Yes. When we got there the place was a complete mess. Most of our stores had been kept in a large olive store which was a fairly new building and was used as our main administrative and Q store area and it was a shambles. Things had been broken up and taken and a couple of safes that we'd foolishly left locked but with nothing in had been blown apart and things generally had been looted and lifted around. We heard some story that the locals would have heard that it was desirable to remove a lot of stuff away from the prospects of the Germans using it, and they'd taken the hint and taken the stuff to their homes.

(5.00) But you were also saying, I think, which seemed interesting, Alan, that once you did get back people started turning up with armloads of gear and so on.

Yes, we hadn't been there for very long when people started to troop back in with big mattresses and things over their heads and dropped them on the ground and leave in a very undignified sort of a way, very quietly. In fact the people generally that we had met up there were nice people and I don't think anyone could blame them for moving in and taking goods that were abandoned by a retreating army; I imagine this has been going over all the years in history. But we were surprised to see them bringing it back again and wondered whether somebody had told them to do that for fear of the wrath of the British army coming back again or not, I don't know.

Well, that's most interesting. Well, moving on a little bit. There then was a period I know down in Kiphissia and then the decision came to leave Greece altogether. I think you were involved in the retreat southwards across the Corinth Canal?

Yeah. Obviously we weren't going to stop in Greece if the German armies were moving inexorably southwards and it was only a question of time before we were to leave and a question of how. Things were in a shambles and we knew that the prospects for getting off were becoming a bit remote but eventually as a unit we were moved down - some moved by train and I think I again came down with trucks and whatever stores we could grab. The unit owned two or three vehicles and we kept those with us right up to the death knock. We came down to the Corinth Canal and the stage .... We came over the canal but it was only the day after that I think the bridge was blown up and some of the other troops following had the difficulty of coming by train as far as Corinth then going across a makeshift bridge to - fortunately for them - some trucks that were still operating on the southern side of the canal, and they took them down to Navplion.

Do you remember the final stages of that retreat down to Navplion? Were they, um, how harsh was the journey?

Well, there was a bit of dive-bombing on occasions but it wasn't too bad. It's not that far from Corinth down to Navplion but when we got to Navplion that was a mess because a lot of army equipment and trucks in particular - all sorts of trucks - were left on the side of the road and soldiers were moving up and down with sledge hammers, smashing the engines and generally rendering the equipment unsuitable for use by any advancing army. But it was a mess and there were people sleeping, lying, everywhere. Fortunately for us Rex Money was still with us and we were in pretty good order. We admittedly had a few bombing attacks while we were there, mainly from high flying Italian bombers. One landed fairly close to us and I had the unfortunate job of digging out a Greek that had been killed. And also being given a job by Rex Money to go into the town of Navplion to try and find some more food. I took a small detachment of people in there but unfortunately all the shops were shut and there was nobody at home and we had express instructions not to break in anywhere so we didn't.

Did you get any help from local people in terms of people offering food and so on as you went southwards?

No, there were no people showing. We did see the people waving goodbye to us as far as Athens but from there on in people just disappeared and kept out of the way, especially .... You can't blame them with bombing going on, they wouldn't want to be involved in that.

> Sure. Well, the final evacuation I know from Navplion was fairly fraught, or so I've heard other people say, how do you remember it?

Yeah, well, it was at night-time and we'd had a few difficulties. We had intended to go off on the *Ulster Prince* on one night, and I remember being down the waterfront with an advance party watching it come in and the man in front taking soundings and reporting back to the captain, saying, 'So many fathoms, sir. So many fathoms, sir. Sorry, sir, we're stuck'. Unfortunately for them the Germans came over the next day and blew the hell out of that ship and that was the end of the *Ulster Prince*. But we managed to get off in barges and there were a couple of barges that had a bit of trouble and capsized but we managed to make it to the *Glen Earn*. I should say before this that a lot of the equipment that we'd gone back to Volos for and had brought down as far as the wharf in Navplion was on the side of the wharf ready for unloading, and the Royal Navy indicated in no uncertain terms that we weren't to bring anything more on so that rather reluctantly all that we'd worked for we just pushed over the side into the sea.

(10.00) Right, so it was destroyed in that way.

Yes.

> And did that include some specialist medical equipment?

Specialist medical equipment, x-ray equipment and this beloved electro-cardiograph unit and some other equipment that had been donated by welfare bodies in Australia before we left.

> That must have been very hard to do. Well, I know the journey to Crete was really quite brief. Crete itself though was fairly difficult I think in that you didn't really have the - much infrastructure or supplies or anything at all?

Yeah, we were virtually dumped on Crete. We had nothing there. We just lay on, slept on the ground, made our own kitchens, managed to get a bit of food ... [interruption]. I remember some incidents that we had to go in and try and get a bit of meat and one fellow was given some money to go and buy some meat and he came back with - as full as a boot - with, leading a donkey and told us that was the meat. And I had the experience of trying to inveigle more fruit and vegetables from some of the British dumps and I was virtually kicked out on the point of a bayonet at one stage; they very jealously guarded the small supplies they had. But all in all, sleeping out in the open in conditions which weren't too bad as far as temperature was concerned; it was quite ideal. It was a camping holiday except that you couldn't sleep at night for the bombing going on. And shortly after that they had some paratroop landings at Maleme, the airfield near us.

> Were they actually bombing where you were, or bombing in the general vicinity?

I guess we were about two or three miles away from Suda Bay and they were bombing Suda Bay and blasting hell out of it. That's as close as we were, but it was still noisy enough to keep you awake all night.

Yes, sure. Any other memories of the period on Crete?

Not really. We did manage to speak to some of the locals and found them quite interesting people. But there was a lack of news, nobody knew what was going on and the frustration of not having any equipment and not knowing how certain our future was as to whether we were getting off the place or spending the rest of our life there.

Yes, sure. Well, I could understand that. One little sidetrack just to follow up, that I did want to talk about at some point, Alan, although I should say I'm not referring to this particular period. We've talked about the morale of the unit, what was the general relation in your recollection between officers and men in the unit? How close or otherwise was it?

I don't think it was any different to that in any other unit. Having officers who were in the main specialist medical, surgical people meant that they were not career army officers. They were not trained in leadership. They were not in fact leaders at all. They were individual operators in their own profession and one could hardly expect them to be true leaders of men in the soldierly sense. But quite a few of them did rise to the occasion and they had quite a lot of respect. But I think in all the troops generally understood this situation. There was a bit of resentment at officers getting certain privileges but I think that was the sort of thing that existed everywhere. But I think that all in all we were pretty lucky that the relations between them were pretty right because after all the officers on Crete were living in much the same conditions as we were. They were just lying on the ground underneath olive trees and eating out of the same kitchen and that was all there was to it.

Sure. Did you perceive in the British units you must have occasionally run up against any difference in attitude between officers and men, or not?

Oh, sure, that was existent particularly in the early days of the war. I remember one experience in Haifa and I was sitting down in a café talking to some 'Tommies', er .... As you know we had our NCO stripes on one arm only - the right arm. Our left arm had no distinguishing marks on it at all. And this Tommy soldier I was talking to was opening up freely about relations between officers and other ranks because his sister was a nurse in the hospital somewhere and she was hardly allowed to see him such was the difference. Anyhow, as the conversation wore on I must have turned around slightly and he saw I had sergeant's stripes on. He suddenly stood up and - completely embarrassed that he'd been talking so freely to a sergeant. It was something that he couldn't do in the British army.

Really, to a sergeant, let alone an officer.

Yes, that was true. But we saw plenty of examples of that and I think that was particularly true in the early stages of the war when there were so many permanent British people around.

Right. And you're suggesting that that was modified somewhat as you had non-career officers coming into the British army.

I'd say so, yes.

(15.00) Right. Was there any difference in your mind between Australian career officers and Australian wartime officers?

Here we had very little opportunity to see that in a hospital because we had no - there were no .... I'm sorry, yes, we had one career officer and he was a decent sort of a fellow. But all the rest of the officers of course were specialists in their own particular career and were certainly not army types.

Right.

Quite a few of them had Citizens Military Force experience and they'd carried that with them but even their Citizens Military Force experience was still in the Army Medical Corps and was not in a combatant or a unit where, er, one would expect typical army officer attitudes - if you could call them typical - to prevail.

Right. Just one other thing on this relation between different groups. The orderlies and the nurses - of course later in the war, or during the period in the Middle East, the nurses were given officer status which they hadn't had before. Do you recall any tension there between male orderlies and nurses, or not?

Yes, I think there was a bit, particularly between some of the male orderlies who had been in the nursing business themselves. We had quite a few men who were ex-mental hospital staff, and I'm pretty sure they resented the female nurses getting commissioned while they were still restricted to being sergeants and staff sergeants.

Right. Well, moving on a little bit. Oh, we should, we might just mention here that it was after the period in Greece that I think you became a warrant officer and became second in charge of the quartermaster's stores. Is that correct?

That's right, yes. The captain - who was then Captain Palmer - together with some of the other older officers and in fact men, found that the going in the Middle East, particularly after the Grecian campaign was a bit harder than their physique could stand up to and were allowed to return to Australia. So that meant our warrant officer was promoted to become captain and I became the warrant officer in that period.

Right. Alan, after you returned to the Middle East I think 2/6th was again attached to the 2/1st hospital - this is pre-Mount Scopus - what's your recollection of that period?

A period when the unit was broken up to a degree. We had surgical teams sent up to Syria. The Syrian campaign had started at that stage - or about to start at least. Quite a lot of the nursing staff were attached to the 2/1st AGH but on the Q side, while some of our people were working for them, we were mainly on our own and we were not altogether active at that stage. It was a period of waiting around doing nothing to a large extent.

Right. Was there a fall in morale during that period because of that?

No, there was no fall in morale because again with a CO like Rex Money, he maintained the unit atmosphere and we still felt we were part of a unit that was going to be re-assembled and re-active again at some later date. And while it was a bit inconvenient and we were a bit frustrated at not being, operating as a unit, we still recognised that we were one.

> Was there any feeling, incidentally, of - not of failure after the Greek campaign - but of futile effort?

No, I don't think so. There was a recognition that it had been futile but I think that was a recognition that it was part of the futility of war, because at that stage, as you would remember, not only had they lost the Greek campaign but there'd been the fall back to Tobruk and there was a threat to come through Persia, there was the threat from Syria and things were pretty dreary all around in many ways. And you couldn't say, well, that was futile we're doing better somewhere else because it was a sad story everywhere. In fact at that stage there was some gas training going on because we thought there was some possibility of gas being used by the Germans in the Middle East.

> Right. Well, going on to the period at Mount Scopus which really was when for the first time the whole hospital operated as a unit within an established hospital framework without any attachment to any other hospital. I think that's correct?

Well, Volos was where we were the first time but it was a very brief period in which we operated on our own. But yes, Mount Scopus was the first time that we had a prolonged period when we were operating in hospital. We took over their equipment and their staff and it was first class in wonderful conditions.

> Tell us about taking over the hospital as it affected you in terms of the existing stores and so on?

(20.00) Well, there wasn't very much to say about that because we took it over running and we may have had to add a little bit but generally the British equipment was very much the same as the Australian equipment. Obviously in those days and that war we were very close to England in many ways and not as independent as we are these days. So, as I said, the equipment was the same and my job was then - had settled down to that of the role of seeing that the whole of the Q side functioned as it should do in an operating hospital.

> During the takeover period thought did you have to, for example, make a detailed inventory of all the equipment that you took over, or not?

Oh yes, that was done. We had to get our establishment drawn up again to see that all the peop - bits and pieces were there because the army exists on paper and we had to see it was there.

> Right. Well, then did that literally involve a sort of physical ticking off of everything that was in the Mount Scopus building, or not?

Yes, we had that but it was a matter of collating the pieces that people had ticked off to a large extent. I didn't physically have to do it.

> Right. Tell us a bit about the aspect of Arab labour? You were saying that one of your main roles here, I think, was working with Arabs who were either contractors or labourers.

In the Middle East generally we had some Arabs working in pretty well all of the establishments. This applied in the Kilo 89 and the Gaza Ridge area but became more so while we were at Mount Scopus. We used a few Arab labourers. For instance, we had one Arab storeman who was very good. He could handle some very heavy equipment and lump it around - stronger looking, stronger than we were until the period of Ramadan when they, their period of Arab fasting, when he suddenly lost a lot of his strength. But we had people cleaning out the cookhouse grease traps and removing the, daily removing the, er - what would you call it - the septic tank stuff, in horse-drawn, or donkey-drawn carts. But I remember particularly these carts had to be searched very carefully because by searching we'd find primus stoves and even sheets and blankets tucked away in all the filth and muck that was taken away from the hospital. So the Arabs would obviously take these, wash them up and use them, or sell them.

> And what happened to people who were caught stealing in this way?

I think we just reported it to the local police and legal proceedings came on from there. We washed our hands of the whole thing because it was a civilian matter and nothing to do with the military.

> Well, given what the sheets were in washing your hands sounds like a good move. Was it a very ...? How common was it, though? Are we talking here about isolated incidents over a period of months or regular day-to-day problems?

Oh no, I can't remember in detail now, but I'd say it'd be something that happened every two or three days, there'd be something like this happening. I suppose it was inevitable when you have a hospital fairly close to a civilian population.

> Yes, sure, and no doubt people are far poorer than the sort of general standard of equipment in the hospital.

They were, certainly. Yes, particularly the poor Arabs.

> Was there a feeling of sympathy on the part of Australians for the general poverty of those people, or not?

I think Australian soldiers are suckers for sympathy for all the people. And there were some of our people who were very pro-Arab in many ways and liked them, and a lot of other people who became pro-Jewish but not so much pro-Jewish because they could see the Jews were better off than the Arabs and the Australian seems to like the, prefer the underdog who was the poor Arab. We did hear some pretty horrible tales from time to time about the effect of the feeling between them and certainly the Arabs could be pretty barbaric in their dealing of the Jews when the opportunity arose. But it was quite interesting for me and a lot of others to meet and talk to the people and try and understand the horrible dilemma they found themselves in where you had this insoluble problem of race relations and the Jews through Zionism wanting to get as many of their fellows into Palestine as they possibly could.

Right. That's most interesting, I mean, looking at the situation today. How do you feel now?

Oh, much the same. One has a lot of sympathy with the Jews in this regard. I remember during the war you could see at Tel Aviv a number of wrecks - and at Haifa too - wrecks off the beaches where the people had come from Europe as refugees. They were not supposed to land and the only way of getting ashore was to wreck the ship and come ashore as refugees. The Jews have certainly transformed the Holy Land and have done a lot to it industrially. You can say that it's traditional Arab land but it's not because there have been so many races occupying the Holy Land over history that nobody can really claim to be the owner of it, or the true inheritor of it. And there's no doubt that for many, many years prior to the Balfour Declaration, Arabs and Jews and Christians had existed in peace and harmony in the Holy Land. But unfortunately the Zionist attitude and the Balfour Declaration have stirred things up and it's pretty hard to see how harmony can be restored in that area.

That's most interesting.

I could go on for days.

(25.00) Yes, sure, we'd better not go too far down that sidetrack. Transport I think is an interesting issue, Alan. You were saying that the hospital was generally well equipped in other ways but scrounging vehicles was fairly common.

Ah no, generally the hospital equipment consisted of, I think, a three-ton truck, a thirty-hundredweight truck, a utility, a bus and a staff car. All of those things were pretty actively used. It was only in the period, I think, of coming back from Greece in the period of inactivity in Gaza that we did strike a shortage of transport for things like officers going around the place, and I managed to scrounge a jeep or two. But I remember one senior officer who was very upset at this thinking it was not the right thing to do to observe the Australian practice of scrounging things. That was the first and only objection I've seen to - Australian army people objecting to the use of scrounged material.

Right. One other thing we should just clarify is that during this entire period, obviously now being 2IC you had I think a general eye over the whole day-to-day operation of all the different aspects of the stores: catering, transport stores, hospitals and so on - hospital equipment and so on. Could you just outline what that involved?

Well, it was pretty well organised as most of the army things are, as I've said before. There was a sergeant in transport who was very reliable and he kept the vehicles in tiptop order. We had the catering sergeant who became eventually a warrant officer. He again was in charge of the kitchens - all of the kitchens - the reception of the food. He also had a dieting officer with him - a female - and they worked closely in co-operation in preparing the special diets. There was a sergeant in charge of the clothing store and the sergeant in charge of the linen and so on. And all of them knew their responsibilities and acted pretty well, so my job in a supervisory and accounting role was pretty minor really.

Right. One other aspect that we might just turn to here is the general social life in the Middle East. Other people have said that the period at Mount

Scopus was more pleasant than any other period. Was that how you recall it, or not?

Yes. It was a pretty civilised place and we certainly took advantage of our days off to go around and have a look at the Holy City. But even in the hospital itself the Kaiserin's palace, as it was known as, was pretty well equipped and we had our mess in a delightful part. And I remember that was pretty well stocked with good liquors available from Jerusalem and we had some pretty good feeds and some pretty good nights with our own fun. Some of us got involved in getting to know some of the local people. We were invited out to homes and I found that was interesting, particularly as I got to know some Jewish people and they were strong Zionists and I had some delightful evenings listening to their side of the story. But they were .... Generally the Jews existing in Jerusalem were a pretty civilised lot. Unfortunately I didn't get to know the civilised Arabs to any great degree but I imagine they would have been pretty nice people too. But, yes, life was pretty good in Jerusalem and particularly the period at Christmas when we were snowed in - the country looked so beautiful at that time.

Yes, that must have been quite magical and obviously the associations with the Holy land and so on .... Was there much time for fraternisation with other units in the area? Did you travel around the area much seeing other people and that kind of thing, or not?

There weren't very many units in Jerusalem at that stage. It was the place for .... The provosts were settled in the middle of the city of course and there were the usual supply depots and so on from whom we drew our supplies and food. But apart from that there weren't very many so that I think there might have been .... Yeah, there were a couple of British units that I managed to fraternise with occasionally. But we fraternised with the people from the Hadassah hospital which wasn't very far away from us. But apart from that we were - we didn't see much of the army.

Right.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Alan Braby, 2/6th Hospital, tape 2, side 1.

After the Mount Scopus period, Alan, of course you went back to take over the whole 2/1st operation. I think there you just took over an entire existing hospital.

Yes, I'm pretty sure it was a 1200 bed hospital that we took over, not a 600 bed. And we prepared for expansion because Alamein was developing at that stage and one could expect casualties. In fact I think the figure went up eventually to about 3000 beds, or pretty close to it, at the peak of the campaign. But it was good to get back into a unit again as a typical unit receiving the sort of patients we should be receiving as an army hospital and ...

Was that different to the kind of people you'd been receiving at Mount Scopus?

A bit different, I think that Mount Scopus was designed to accept Syrian casualties which didn't eventuate in the same numbers that it was anticipated. I think we might have got out of that campaign a little lighter than we anticipated. But certainly the forthcoming Middle East campaign was regarded as a bold push and fairly heavy casualties were expected.

The change from the hospital from, as you were saying a 1200 bed to something like a 3000 bed hospital, where did all the supplies come from for that?

All I knew was that we managed to get them from somewhere. I've often wondered at the planning that goes on in the staff people, and I dip my lid to people like the directors of medical services and the assistant director of medical service and so on that can foresee these and advise the ordnance people that they may be requiring extra beds or extra equipment. Certainly we managed to get the extra equipment and we did function. I don't where it came from, it must have been in the Middle East somewhere but it was the ordnance people who managed to get it all together for us as and when we required it.

Right. But there must still, at the actual hospital itself, have been a very busy period of receiving and setting up equipment and so on?

I'm not conscious of that being very active. It was the sort of thing we were doing all the time and it came in waves. I think that we'd get the stuff in, it would be placed into position and utilised almost as soon as it came so one didn't notice that it was a period of getting stuff in to any great degree.

Right. Well, what are your other general recollections of that period, of the, at the new hospital and during the Alamein campaign?

Oh, just a few superficial .... I remember particularly there were quite a few amputees coming in and on one occasion they arranged for a cricket match to be held between two teams of amputees and I thought that was a pretty terrible thing. But these fellows hopping round on one leg or with one arm seemed to be pretty happy amongst themselves and I thought, well, obviously the orthopaedic surgeons were doing a pretty good job.

Oh, that's interesting. Well, perhaps the whole aim of it was to make them feel - not to be too conscious of their disability.

Oh, I'm sure that the occupational therapists and the orthopaedic surgeons and perhaps even the psychiatrists came into this to make sure that they were rehabilitated mentally as well as physically as soon as possible. And generally the .... Some of the pictures I have now and my memories of them are - they weren't a despairing lot they seemed to be pretty fit.

That's most interesting. I know of course you weren't involved in the day-to-day operation of the medical wards and so on, but did you, around the hospital, brush up much against men who were patients, or not, when they were generally wandering around and in a convalescent phase?

Yes, to a degree. We had the job of looking after their kit of course and that was stored and if they wanted to get something out of the kit they'd come along to the store and have a yarn with us at that stage. So, yes, we did meet the patients and, er, swapped experiences.

> And were they on the whole fairly positive or otherwise about what had happened to them?

I think they were fairly positive. It's pretty hard to recall that now but I can't remember any despairing tales from anybody at all, nope.

(5.00) Right. Well, just one sidelight: the men's personal kit. When they came to hospital I assume they were issued with hospital gear and so on ....

Oh, as they came into hospital their personal gear was put into a kit store and labelled and they were given a receipt for it. Then they were put into the ward and they were in pyjamas but once they got to the stage where they were ambulatory again we would issue them with the 'hospital blues': a blue pair of trousers and a white shirt. The British hospitals went the whole hog and issued a blue suit with blue jacket, blue pants, white shirt and a red tie, so that you knew what a hospital patient was. I presume it was so that they would be seen if they wandered away from the hospital.

> Right. Yes, I imagine the red tie certainly sounds along that line. Well, I don't think you were actually at the 2nd Hospital here for too long before news came that you were to go back to Australia. How did you yourself greet that news?

Well, it was obvious that we were going back because those patients who were being repatriated were put on the hospital ship and sent home and the hospital was gradually winding down. And of course at that stage we all wanted to get back because we were receiving stories about, er, what a terrible thing it was that Australian soldiers were still stuck in the Middle East while all the battle was going on around Australia. And I think that everybody wanted to get back as soon as possible.

> Right. What's your recollection of actually leaving the Middle East and then of the journey back? Was that fairly smooth, or not?

Oh, a fairly smooth transition. We came back on the *Queen of Bermuda*, I think, and that was a fairly small ship but not all that uncomfortable. And then we came from Perth across on the *Queen Mary*. And I think one thing that we were surprised at was that when we went to the Middle East on the *Queen Mary* we were sleeping - sergeants were sleeping four or six to a big cabin. The Americans had taken it over and loaded 17 000 troops on the *Queen Mary* on Atlantic crossings and they had about a dozen at least in some of the cabins where we had four or six.

> Right. So the whole ship had been changed from a peacetime to a wartime footing.

Yes, but it was still not uncomfortable. When you're a soldier you get used to living in conditions like that and you're happy for small mercies.

> Yes, sure. I can imagine that. Coming back to Australia, Alan, did you see any differences in the country? Was there anything that really struck you?

I think one of the amazing things was that coming back from the Middle East and - particularly - to come back to Australia where things were running as normal. I can remember one instance I went with my wife to .... And I got married incidentally on return. We went out to the races at Randwick and there was a struggle around the bar to get a drink and a strapper pushed his way in and made a comment, 'Why don't you let me in because if it weren't for me you people wouldn't be able to enjoy the races?'. And I thought that's a funny remark coming from a strapper when a lot of the people around the bar trying to get in were servicemen who'd come back from, perhaps the Middle East and New Guinea.

> I guess you were in uniform, were you?

Oh yes, you were in uniform .... Oh, it must have been a later period because I know I was covered in - I was atebrin - stained too, but it was strange that a civilian would be saying a thing like that. And that was one of the impressions, that it was amazing how things looked so normal in Australia.

> Was there any resentment towards men who, for whatever reason, had not enlisted?

No, I don't think so.

> What about feeling towards Americans? There was obviously a large presence of Americans in Australia now.

At that stage it was a little bit early for us to build up any resentment. Some of our fellows had experience of their wives being involved with Americans and they were very bitter about it. In my own family experience there were some contacts with Americans but it hadn't greatly impacted on me at all.

> Right. Well moving on a little bit, let's get up to Atherton. Perhaps leaving aside the actual journey although I think that was by fairly primitive wooden carriages ....

Yeah, I think it was when you .... Coming up to Brisbane from Sydney was where the war first impacted. For instance on leave in .... Well, let's put it this way: coming up by train we stopped in Brisbane and got out and had a couple of nights at the exhibition ground where we slept in pig pens on straw, the streets had these huge water mains going through with emergency supplies of water coming across from Stradbroke Island, I think, and there were many more servicemen and so on around. Oh, and the passenger trains in Brisbane were using firewood instead of coal because coal was pretty hard to get. And then our troop train moving up to the tablelands, we were in suburban cars with six people to a compartment which would carry eight people in a crowd but we had our equipment with us. The train averaged twenty miles an hour and there was a very grave shortage of water. We didn't wash at all for the whole period and we certainly had no chance of changing clothes. And when we arrived up there we were very glad to get off the train and get a decent feed.

Yes, I can imagine - and a wash. The supplies for the hospital were, I think you said, delivered to the site on the tableland?

(10.00) On this occasion the site on the tableland was prepared by army engineers who'd poured concrete slabs, who'd built annexes for wards and kitchens, so that everything was - the basics were laid down. We drew from the ordnance store at Tolga all of the equipment which was handled by ordnance rather than ourselves and we were set up very quickly and very efficiently.

Right. And I think you were saying the establishment by this stage had been somewhat modified through the experience of war.

No, the army establishment, as I called it - that big sheet I referred to, the eighty-odd pages - came down to ledgers in Australia where we had a much more strict accounting. And I remember when we eventually left the tablelands to go to Borneo there was a bit of a hurry to bring our ledger up to date to comply with the auditors who were seeing that everything was shipshape before we were allowed out of the country.

Tell us the story about the brooms. I thought that was rather amusing - and the chapels.

Oh well, the equipment schedule provides, for example, brooms - troops, for the use of; one for the sergeants' mess, one for the officers' mess and perhaps one for each ward and so on. And there might have been one for a chapel but at this stage we had probably two, at least, chapels - might have been a Catholic and a Protestant. But I remember one of the, I think it was a batman who was in charge of the chapel coming to me and wanting a broom. And I said, 'There's no provision for one, we haven't got any spare brooms they're all out'. And he said, 'Do you mean to say that you can't find a broom for God's house?'. And I was taken aback at that and had to scrounge one from somewhere.

[Laughter.]

So they - the establishment stretched a point.

That's right.

That's lovely.

But generally speaking the establishment was a pretty efficient document - drawn up with a lot of experience of course - and we found it was quite adequate for our supplies.

And as things were lost or broken or whatever, then they would be requisitioned again, would they?

Oh, the army system was that if a thing was broken or worn out you filled in a certain form, sent that along to ordnance together with your requisition and you had the things replaced. But it was your onus to make sure that the right amount of paper followed.

Was there much, you know, shifting of supplies sideways that became strangely lost and therefore could be requisitioned again, or not?

No, not really. I didn't strike much of that at all. We had one experience on the tablelands where one of our batman who managed to arrange a contract with a local dealer and flog off some blankets to him but we caught him redhanded and he went for the limit. But no, as I said earlier, it was hard living close to civilians but on the tablelands the civilians were quite a fair way away and we didn't have much stolen at all. I think we were pretty lucky in that sense as far as the unit was concerned - our stores were pretty good.

Right. Well going on to the general work of the hospital on the Atherton tablelands. What's your general recollection of the kind of work the hospital was involved in and what was your day-to-day life like?

I think that the hospitals were established there in anticipation of our losing Port Moresby but the 2/9th AGH was there and functioning and we did receive casualties from them but generally we had enough patients coming from the number of troops on the tableland. When you bear in mind there were probably five divisions there at one stage and with the things like scrub typhus occurring some of the nursing problems were pretty severe. But there was enough to keep us going and active as a 600 bed hospital.

Right. The day-to-day operation of supplies I think you said was fairly straightforward and I think you even had time here to study economics, Alan?

Oh yes, things were pretty well organised and it was a pretty soporific sort of climate and a lot of people used to have lunch and then have a snooze after lunch but I thought that was a dead waste of time so I started doing the economics course through the University of Sydney. I did Economics I and Psychology I, but then the Borneo campaign came up and kiboshed that.

And did you later finish that course?

No, I didn't do economics I followed up with law afterwards and did the law degree course at Sydney.

Right. What was the social life on the tablelands like?

Oh, quite good in between the troops and the nurses and the visits from other fellows, because obviously a lot of the officers and NCOs from other units would come and see their mates in hospital and they'd call on us in our mess and stay for lunch and have a yarn. We had a dance every now and then in the sergeants' mess and we'd invite some of the AAMWS and the nurses and, oh, it was a pretty good social life in many ways.

Did you ever get visiting entertainers?

No, but we had a picture show right alongside us which wasn't too bad. And I still remember vividly going to the pictures with your tin hat on and a gas cape - that was the best way to keep the water out.

(15.00) Right. The Aldis[?] was an open air ...?

Yes, open air theatre, sitting on boxes. And of course the other one was that the two-up ring was pretty popular. But no, we didn't see visiting entertainers to any degree at all. I can't remember any on the tableland.

You were saying before, Alan, that returning to Australia you married. Had you been engaged before you left Australia?

No, I got engaged during the war and we married after the 9th Div march in Sydney, 3rd - 2nd April 1943.

You became engaged in the Middle East?

Mm.

So your wife was ...?

No, we became engaged by correspondence.

Right. Sorry. Where did your wife live? And was there any - I mean after you were married - and was there any allowance made for married men to see their wives?

Er, I'm not quite with you on ...

Sorry, that was rather convoluted. After you married, having returned to Australia ....

After we married .... I married on the day of the 9th Div which was very shortly our time of moving up to the tablelands so time was short. I think I was allowed one day off as a honeymoon. I rang up the CO the next morning, he said, 'You can have the next night off', and that happened for three more nights. So I had four nights - four days honeymoon - before having to rejoin the unit and then go up to the tablelands. But my wife at that stage was also in the army in Sydney, in the Records Department and she had to get leave off too. And then that was a bit of a difficulty in future times that I had leave but we managed to get through all right.

How many times did you manage to meet in the eighteen months or so that the hospital was at the tablelands?

I think about two or three times.

Right.

I was sent to a school in Melbourne at one stage so I .... And she came down to Melbourne for some of those weekends so I saw her there as well.

I'd imagine travelling was very difficult for people making those, trying to get together, because of the difficulty of getting transport.

Travelling to and from the south was very difficult because you'd spend three days by train getting to Brisbane, then you were offloaded and put into a staging camp where you might be up to three or four days before you catch the train to Sydney. So that it was over a week to

get from the tablelands to Sydney and to return again. I was lucky on one occasion to go by air and that was quite an amazing transition, taking only one day to get down.

> Yes, that must have been a real thing. Yes, some of the air force people certainly talk of that and of how they certainly used planes to move people round a bit.

It was worse still of course if you wanted to leave in the wet season in the north when the road at, er, well I'm sorry, the bridge between Ayr and Home Hill, where the Burdekin flowed, would often be under water so the train would be diverted through Winton, that added another three days onto the journey.

> How unpleasant, incidentally, was life made by the wet season?

Where we were at Rocky Creek it wasn't really bad. We had heavy tropical downpours but being high we didn't have the humidity and the stickiness that Cairns experienced. We weren't as dry as Mareeba but it was quite a delightful climate. In fact I would say it was one of the best climates in the world. Not a great many mosquitoes and beautiful sunny days.

> Right, and just heavy rain - periodic heavy rain.

Just the periodic heavy rain in the wet season from January to March.

> That's most interesting. Well, moving on a little bit. It was during the period at Atherton that Colonel Money left the unit, and I think you were suggesting the morale of the unit did rather slump after that?

That's true, yes. There's no doubt that he was a great leader and we did suffer a little bit and unfortunately his successor copped the blame for it - whether he was deserving or not, I wouldn't like to say, but he wasn't the same leader that Rex Money was. And we did strike some periods where people did suffer at his hands, and one of the unfortunates was the warrant officer in charge of the catering and we lost him unfortunately because he was a good man on his job. And that was due entirely by a little bit, a little pinpricking by Colquhoun at him. A classic was when Colquhoun was in Borneo and the day that peace was declared and the GOC said, 'The troops can now have four bottles of beer on this day'. He said, 'No, my troops will get drunk on four bottles of beer on one day'. He said, 'Let them have one bottle of beer every day for the next four days', which seems to me to be quite sensible anyway. Anyhow the troops mutinied so he called on 9th Div provosts to put the whole unit under arrest, and he was on the plane back to Sydney the next night.

> That's remarkable. We might just talk about that in some more detail afterwards. That was during the period you were at Labuan yourself?

Mm.

> Right. Just tell us about Colonel Money's daily conferences. I think they're an interesting reflection of his leadership style.

I think so, yes. I think that typical of a good leader is the art of communication and he used to have these morning conferences starting at about eight o'clock I think and the heads of various

sides would be there, such as the senior medical officer, the senior surgeon, the matron, the quartermaster and the registrar. And they'd go through the current situation and talk about coming activities and he would use it generally for encouragement and reprimand and doing all the things that a good leader should do. But certainly everybody knew what was on his mind and it was clear where we were going at all times.

That's most interesting. I think you were saying, Colquhoun, when he took over tended to use them in a more, well, the reprimands were more common than the encouragement?

Well, he used it more as a direction rather than as a sounding board. He pushed things his way quite often.

(20.00) Right. Well, the decision to go north - of course you didn't realise exactly where you were going to go - how much warning did you have that you would be on the move again?

That's a bit hard to remember now but I suppose it would have been about a month. And that's when the feverish activity in catching up on the audits and getting ready took place.

And here you did have to pack up the entire hospital supplies, I think?

Yes, we packed it up all ready to go, even then that's getting a bit vague but I'm pretty sure we did, otherwise we would have had nothing when we got there.

How were you involved in that process yourself, Alan? Were you just involved with the overall thing of checking lists and so on ...?

No, just organising it generally. I didn't do any physical packing myself of course, but organising that things were being done and sent off to be loaded.

Right. And it was at Cairns I think that supplies were all loaded onto a liberty ship?

Yes, we went on a liberty ship and our supplies went on another one as far as I know - another one or two because we had a lot of equipment. And we went up to Morotai and then eventually to Labuan.

Just to interpose here, I think you were saying, although I'm not quite sure why, that the captain who was the captain IC quartermaster stores did not go to Labuan and that you in fact acted as - you were in charge of the whole operation.

Yes, that's so. The captain again was a first world war man and things caught up with him too and he went back south and by that stage they didn't replace him. But the captain who'd been seconded to us from an infantry unit who was the general duties officer took over the Q store as well and he was - Captain Robertson, that's right - he was quite a reasonable man to get on with and we managed to get the job done between us.

> Right. Well, you said something interesting about Labuan. I think it might have referred to the army generally: that it was both hectic and boring. What did you mean by that?

Well, it wasn't all that hectic in that there was .... We'd got up there after the real campaign had finished. Life was pretty easy. I think that the Japanese had been wasting away. If you read - as you would have read - the story about Sandakan, you'd know the Japanese were short of food and the fighting had actually stopped, or eased off quite a lot towards the end of the war and that same lassitude was experienced there. But we weren't all that busy and as a result we wanted to get back and get out of the place as soon as we could.

> But the actual setting up of camp there, I think, of the hospital, you were saying was a hectic period of, I think you were saying three days and three nights constant work?

Yeah. Well, that was only the initial period of getting the stuff off. As typical when you lug stuff around you've got to unload it again somewhere, and it meant for me anyway three days and three nights without sleep, but I was very tired after it was all over.

> So once the hospital was then set up it was a more empty kind of time?

That I think would be the story of my war: setting up, loading, unloading and then loafing until the next - oh, not loafing but settling down to a routine until the next period of hectic activity occurred. That was pretty typical of a lot of other people's experience too, I think.

> And I guess too there was the feeling now, I'd assume, that it was fairly clear the war was on the way to being ended and that I'd imagine one had other things in one's sights.

That's true, yes. I think we were all anxious to get over and get the thing out of the way as soon as we could at that stage and it seemed to be a long, drawn-out process, waiting for the ship to take us home.

> Well, tell us about the actual - your memories of the war ending. You were telling a story about beer and so on. When the news finally came through how did you feel? How did it affect you?

Well, I mentioned that there was this degree of inevitability about it because of the fact that we knew that the fighting had died away but we were intrigued to see .... We were quite close to the airport at - the aerodrome at least - at Labuan and we saw a Zero come in once a day for about a week with a long streamer tailing behind it, and so obviously we knew that peace negotiations were under way. And shortly after that .... Oh, I'm sorry, Hiroshima of course and Nagoya [sic: Nagasaki] had been bombed. We knew of that and it was only a period of time before it was all over, so that at that stage we were pretty lethargic.

(25.00) Yes, right. Well, after the actual declaration of peace the POWs gradually started coming down from Singapore and so on ....

Well, not from Singapore, they came from, mainly from Kuching. Sandakan had two and a half thousand when we got there but by the time the Japanese had finished them there were

none left. I think four or six had managed to live out of the whole period. But we received mainly the people from Kuching which was a pretty big camp. They were a mixture of British and Dutch and quite a lot of civilians. They were an interesting crowd to talk to, particularly the civilians who opened up with us. Most were greatly surprised that Churchill was no longer Prime Minister. The Dutch were a bit odd in that they insisted on getting the best of everything. While we were issuing groundsheets to most people they insisted on trying to get army raincoats issued to them that the officers were wearing. Just because the officers were seen wearing them they thought they were entitled to them too.

That's an interesting reflection perhaps of their colonial attitudes.

It could be, yeah, because after all the Dutch were colonials living in Borneo and Java at that time.

Sure. How did it affect you and perhaps your close friends, Alan, seeing these people who had been so poorly treated?

Well, it's very hard to recall that too. We were .... I don't think we were really bitter but I think it was understandable because we knew what sort of people the Japanese were. We'd heard of the stories of Singapore. They'd filtered through. We'd heard the stories of Sandakan and it was therefore no great surprise to see these people coming up from Kuching with their swollen bellies, their thin frames. And one of the odd things was they all seemed to have a little white towel around their neck. I suppose that was all they had to carry with them at one time. But it was a period of mixed emotions - a great deal of sympathy for them and delight that they were alive and going home I suppose.

Right. You were saying before, I think, I'm not sure if I got this right - just going back to the beer episode - that Colquhoun had the whole unit put under some kind of military arrest. What was the upshot of all that?

Well, as I said, the story - it could be apocryphal - but the story was that he claimed that as the troops had refused to line up for their four bottles of beer that he called on the 9th Div provosts to come across and put the whole unit under arrest and try and find out the recalcitrants. And as soon as that news was received by the general he sent Colonel Colquhoun back to Australia.

Right, so he was shunted off as obviously being inadequate for the task. Who arrived to take his place?

A Colonel Fisher had arrived up to take his place who was quite a nice fellow. I only knew him briefly of course before I went off too. But I think he was a gynaecologist from Melbourne and he seemed to be quite effective and I think that he would have been a good CO.

Right. Well, I know you yourself left a couple of months before the unit itself left Labuan. What were your feelings on leaving this unit you'd spent so much of your time with?

Oh, a bit of reluctance at leaving the company of the people that were concerned there but after all we were all moving out so it was a case of being happy to go and I wanted to get

home as soon as I could. And I knew that, or I hoped that at least, we'd able to renew acquaintances back home because I do regard the unit with quite a deal of affection.

Right.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Alan Braby, 2/6th, tape 2, side 2.

Arriving back in Australia, of course, must have been great - re-uniting with your wife and so on. How difficult was the adjustment to civilian life?

Well, for me, not very difficult at all. I did see some of the others who had difficulties in settling in but after all I'd had a fairly easy war in many ways and it was easy enough for me to settle back into the routine. With the job I had reasonable prospects and managed to get on quite well. I got involved in finishing off the accountancy degree first and then doing law so that took most of my spare time. And with a family coming along I was pretty busy on that score. But I do know some of the others who were, er, found it a bit hard to settle back into civilian life and who felt they ought to have a couple of beers after lunch and they were a bit resentful of discipline but I think they were the exceptions rather than the rule - and a very few exceptions as well. I think most people settled back and most people tried to do a lot better for themselves after the war than they were able to do before the war because we did have our eyes opened a lot by the experiences.

Right. Well, that's interesting. Perhaps just to end with I might ask you, if you look back on it all how do you think the war affected you or perhaps changed you as a person, Alan?

I think, number one, I'm able to eat and drink a lot now that I wasn't able to do before. It certainly developed my physical side. I must admit that I was a fairly frail character in some ways before the war and the war filled me out by hard living at times. It was an experience of mixing with people from the walks of life that one would not ordinarily meet with as an insurance officer - both upwards and downwards - and for that I'm appreciative. And of course, the experience of going overseas and being involved in history - I think that was important. So that all in all I'd say that I must admit it was an experience that I feel that has been an advantage to me.

That's most interesting. Well, just to end with, it's something I ask anybody, is there anything that you feel that you would like to add to this record of your work with the 2/6th and so on that's not been said that you feel you would like to say?

I don't think so, no.

Okay, good. Well, on behalf of the War Memorial, thank you, Alan.

Right.

END OF INTERVIEW