ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE:	MR F J (PINKIE) RHODES, 2/15 FIELD REGIMENT
INTERVIEWEE:	MR F J (PINKIE) RHODES
INTERVIEWER:	DR JOHN MITCHELL
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Fred, I wonder if you could tell me about when you first started training as a gunner and a medical orderly in New South Wales.

I joined the 2/15th Field Regiment as a gunner. Then at Glenfield training camp Doctor Richards decided that the 2/15th Field Regiment would require trained medical people so he arranged a course where we sat for St John's Ambulance Certificate and the St John's Ambulance officers came out and put us through a training course which lasted three or four weeks and eventually we past and received a St John's Ambulance Certificate.

Did you go back to the gunnery training then, did you?

Yes. Then we went back to gunnery training and the idea of being trained as a medical orderly, or having St John's Ambulance Certificate, was in case during war that there'd be somebody there to administer to the injured at the time of fighting.

Oh right. That's made it fairly clear. Fred, maybe we'll skip the campaign and the period when you were first POW and perhaps you'd tell me when you set out for Singapore for Burma, what you remember.

After capitulation we were transferred to Changi prison. We were there for about three months and the Japanese got together a force which they called A Force of about a thousand men who were shipped from Changi on the Toihassi Maru to Megui. The Force ... Colonel Anderson was in complete charge of the Force. When we arrived at Megui we were then marched about thirty kilometres to Tavoy and at Tavoy there was an aerodrome. We worked for about a month on the aerodrome and from there we went on to Kan...

Don't worry if you can't remember the name.

We went on to Thanbyuzayat which was a staging camp and from there on we started and we worked on the railroad. And ...

You were first of all working on the railway itself, were you, rather than ...

I was originally working on the railway until people became sick with pellagra, dysentery, malaria, beri-beri and in some stages, at some camps, we had cholera. Cholera broke out. ...

Can you remember which camp it was?

I think it was [Tusan], I'm not certain, but I think it was at Tusan where the cholera epidemic broke out, which was very severe. I think there was about fifty or sixty people infected

with cholera. They were put in isolation and the orderlies were put in isolation with these cholera patients. They were nursed. I think about eight or nine died. The remainder recovered although they were very sick after they recovered.

So it was at this stage you had pretty close contact with Doctor Richards, I guess, was it? You more or less worked under him from then.

Doctor Richards, he organised everything, and it was through his administration and he was very keen on hygiene and personal hygiene. He made certain that all the men drank boiled water and was very careful in regards to sanitation and hygiene in the camps. I know that in other camps where the cholera had broken out it was pretty disastrous. But through his methods of hygiene it saved a lot of our men.

I don't suppose you can remember the names of the other orderlies but there were a number, weren't there? Jim Armstrong, the sergeant, was one, wasn't he?

Jim Armstrong was the sergeant, he was in charge of us and there was Arthur Baker, Donnie Booth, Alan Taylor ... and there were two or three others. I just can't remember their names.

And did you use any intravenous therapy there? Can you remember were there intravenous injections?

They did use intravenous injections with special ... with distilled water and one of the personnel there he made up, I think it was out of bamboo and also out of copper, a needle so they could give intravenous injections of liquids into the people who were suffering from cholera - saline solutions.

Fred, can you describe what the typical cholera person looked like when he got the attack?

By the appearance of a person who had cholera, from the outward appearance, his skin became a very yellowy whitish colour and it looked very parched and if you touched it or pinched it it was like a sponge. And, also, they started to vomit up liquids and also when they went to the toilet or they'd excrete a liquid, sort of a brownish greyish liquid. And of course the most important thing was to get liquids back into their bodies. We did this through intravenous injections and also making up salines solutions which they could swallow.

Yes, it was too, because it was very difficult.

This puzzled me how they were able to swallow in between the vomiting. And they'd get down a certain amount but they'd vomit it up but a certain amount would stay there. It wouldn't all come up. And of course some of them were in worse condition than others. But the vomiting was the major problem because they'd try and drink the fluids that we made for them - I think there was one fluid that we made was we used Condy's crystals in sterile water and we used to feed them Condy's crystals in sterile water, a very diluted amount of it.

Mmm, they'd take pretty intensive nursing then. You'd be with them almost one to one, wouldn't you?

It was. It was highly ... it was very intensive nursing and they needed a lot of care and looking after. And as we were in complete isolation the food would be brought to us and placed outside the isolation hut that we were in and then we'd take it in, feed the patients, and we'd clean and sterilise all our own instruments and food, containers, and we never touched the other containers that the other orderlies used to bring the food across to us because of the cholera is very infectious. It's carried by flies. Your hygiene had to be absolutely spot on; it had to be perfect, wash you hands - cleanliness was the most important thing.

Fred, did you develop it yourself?

I'm not sure. But at one stage I did feel as though I could have possibly had it because most of the people in the camp we were in had it - had it in some form or other, whether it was mild or otherwise. The Japanese did come in and they took a lot of tests and samples and took them away and we got the results back and most of the people in the camp in some way or other had a mild form of this cholera.

Well, of course you'd been immunised against cholera before, hadn't you?

We had in Australia.

And then over in Malaya so ...

Yes, that helped.

That would help.

I think the immunisation lasted about, I'm not sure, I think it was two years. It didn't last that long.

Probably not even that long. It would need to be repeated. But still it would take the edge what otherwise might be a fatal attack.

Well it helped as a protective measure, it built up your resistance against it.

Yes. I just wondered about the people who died, whether they'd somehow missed the cholera injections. Did you hear about ...

Well I don't know, I couldn't answer that. I'm not sure. But I'd say that those that died it was through contamination of some sort either they'd drunk the water that wasn't boiled or food which would be contaminated by flies or through unhygienic methods that they used.

And how long were you living in that isolation ward? How many months, can you remember?

I think we were there approximately about ... I don't know, it could be two to three months, I'm not certain.

Mmm, a long period. And how about the other diseases, Fred? Can you remember those, beri-beri and so on?

Yes. Well there was beri-beri where you'd get swollen ankles, swollen feet and swollen knees which is caused from a deficiency of vitamin B. Pellagra, the inflammation down the shin bones; malaria; dysentery, amoebic and [percillary] dysentery. And, of course, there were other types of diseases. Also ulcers, tropical ulcers on the legs and the hands. If you got a scratch from a bush or a tree invariably it would develop into a tropical ulcer and of course they were very difficult to treat because the medical supplies weren't very good.

And was that later ...

Beri-beri, pellagra, malaria and these types of diseases were almost continuous right through from Thanbyuzayat to Three Pagoda Pass. But the cholera was more or less an isolated disease. I think we only struck cholera once very seriously and another time it was minor.

Right. Fred, you were involved in a case for appendicectomy on the line, a person called Oakshot. I wonder if you mind describing what you remember of that operation and so forth and then your part in nursing him?

Yes. The operation performed by the surgeon, Major Kranz and Captain Roly Richards. Kranz was doing the surgery and Richards was administering the anaesthetic. He only had a small amount of anaesthetic so Major Kranz had to do the operation very quickly, which he did. They completed the operation in a short and then the patient was taken to hospital and he was nursed but his condition wasn't very good. Apparently the peritonitis set in and we nursed him for some days but eventually he died.

Yes, I notice in the book he lived for three weeks. So ...

Oh yes.

... your nursing must have been pretty good to keep him going that while. Because even these days there's a high morality from that condition.

That's right. It is too. Well he did last that period of time apparently.

Did you see any other operations other than ulcer treatment?

Yes.

Maybe you could describe those.

There was another operation. A patient was brought in from one of the other camps who had very bad ulcerated legs and on one leg in particular the ulcer had eaten right through into the bone. And Major Kranz and Captain Richards checked the patient out and said that they had to have an operation. So Major Kranz performed an operation and took off the lower part of the limb with the assistance of Roly Richards and stitched the leg up again. But, here again, this patient lasted - the operation was successful - but the patient did die some days later. I probably got that one mixed up with the other one.

> Of course with all the severe malnutrition and malaria, vitamin deficient, everything against them ...

Well it is. It's the shock and the malnutrition and the malaria and the condition the patient was in. Well he had everything against him; nothing much going for him. So it was very difficult for him to recover.

> And, Fred, with these operations did you actually physically assist in the operation or Jim Armstrong because ...

We attended the operations just by handing instruments to the doctors ...

> That's what I mean.

... and serving anything that they needed or that they required while doing the operation.

> Now I think Doctor Richards said one of these operations was done on the quiet so far as keeping it from the Japanese. Can you remember whether that was so or ... I might have misunderstood him.

I'm not sure about that. I can't ...

> ... can't recall whether a Japs watching or not or ...

Oh well, as far as I know I think the amputation on this person's leg was the one that they did without the Japs watching. I'm pretty sure that was the operation.

> And how about the ulcers, Fred? Can you elaborate more on the various treatments that were done to those?

Well the people who suffered, and they were of a very serious nature because in these tropical ulcers if you had a scratch, because of the tropical conditions, the ulcers developed very quickly and we had very little to treat them with. In some cases we had some sulphanilamide which helped a lot but there wasn't very much of that and we would have to ... we made little instruments whereby we'd scoop the pus out of the ulcers; we'd give them heat treatment with foments; in some cases we even used charcoal, pure charcoal, to try and clean the wounds out. Some healed, others didn't. It was a very difficult type of thing to look after, ulcers - or to treat.

Now I don't think either Doctor Kranz or Doctor Richards used scraping, is that right? Did you see any scraping of the ulcers?

Well as far as ... I don't think so. All we did was when the pus had formed on the legs - mainly they were on the legs or the hands - we would just wash them out with warm sterile water and then rebandage them.

And how many ... quite a team of you were doing this, were there?

Yes. Well it varied, depending on how many were sick with ulcers and how many orderlies the Japs would let work in the RAP as it were. Sometimes there'd be two or three, sometimes there'd be four or five but it depended on the circumstances and how many orderlies the Japs would let work in the RAP.

In the beginning the Japanese allowed a first aid man to accompany the work forces that were working on the line. That was in case of any injury, the first aid man could attend to the injury and give first aid. But then they realised that they needed the first aid man to work so they decided that at the same time as he was working he would also be a first aid man and then he'd administer to anybody that was injured or sick while he was out working on the line.

Fred, as the construction of the line progressed towards Thailand I presume, from time to time, you moved camps. Did the pattern of work that you had to do change then?

As we were moving towards Thailand, as we were finishing the line, the tempo of the work increased. The Japs had us out working more often on the line as many hours as possible and as many men as they could possibly get could stand up they would bring out working on the line. Even while we were moving from camp to camp the different parties would be split up because a lot of the sick would be left behind and the men who were reasonably well would be marched forward to the next camp. And because of this a lot of the [kumis], as the Japanese called them, were split up and we kept being split up continuously along the line. And the further the line went the tougher the work became and the more difficult the Japs became.

When we finished up at the Three Pagoda Pass and the railroad was finished we were transferred from there back to Kanchanaburi and of course conditions there were much better. The improvement was great. The food was better and we were put in a hospital camp. There were about 112 patients in the camp with about fourteen orderlies. Major Kranz and Doctor Hacking ran the hospital. We were there for some months and then they selected different men - odd numbers - and they were sent back to Singapore and from Singapore they were sent on to Japan. A couple of months later we were transferred from Thanbyuzayat back to Singapore and then we were shipped from Singapore over to ... on our way to Japan but we only made Saigon. On the way over American submarines came up and we were in a convoy of two small destroyers and two cargo ships. The submarine sank one of the destroyers and one of the cargo ships. Fortunately it

was no the cargo ship that I was on. Eventually we reached Saigon and the cargo ship that we were on, the Chinese crew that was on the ship deserted the ship and we were left in Saigon. We went to work from there on an airfield and then on this airfield there were Americans, Malays, Dutch and British. So there were only fifty Australians.

And when the war finished we were in a compound - the Japs were guarding us on the outside - and we were released there by Anglo-Indian troops who were under the charge or an English colonel was in charge of the Anglo-Indian troops - they were gurkhas. And we were put in the Legionnaire barracks and kept there until we were flown from Saigon to Bangkok by British DC-3s and from Bangkok to Singapore by Australian DC-3s and Australian airmen. And we left Singapore on the ship called the Highland Chieftain. Our first port of call was Darwin in Australia and then Brisbane and then Sydney. I think that about covers it.

> Right. When you were at the camp at Saigon, just before the end of the war, was there evidence for the Japanese executing you, exterminating you?

There wasn't any evidence, no, there wasn't any evidence but we understood after we were released that they had been given orders to execute us or to shoot us but fortunately that didn't happen.

> Right. Many of the camps there was a ditch around the perimeter with machine guns but you saw nothing like that?

That's right. In the camp we were in, we were in the centre of a compound, then on the outside was another big bamboo circle. The Japs walked around that outside circle. There were two lots of bamboo around the perimeter of this camp - scaffolding or bamboo poles - and the Japs walked in between the two and that was the type of camp we were in. They kept us in there and wouldn't let us out. Even the Japanese towards the end were frightened to move around because the Indo-Chinese people were starting to terrify them and they were starting to attack them.

> Is that right.

Yes, right towards the end.

> I didn't realise that was happening.

Yes.

> Fred, perhaps you could tell me a little about your fellow orderlies.

Arthur Baker, he was a sheep farmer, he came from Wagga and he was very dedicated in his work. Donnie Booth who came from Yass in New South Wales, he was an insurance agent and he's also the bugler for the 2/15th Field Regiment. Jim Armstrong who got the BEM, he went on to chicken farming and Donnie Booth to an insurance agent. Sid Bryant moved to Sydney; Pickles

Brawn, he became a tramway department in Sydney; Tom Cooney to Cobar; Duncan McNorton was a butcher in Kyogle; Pinkie Rowlands a salesman in Sydney; Alan Taylor is in the banking; and Arthur Baker to a grazing. These were all orderlies who worked on the railway line from Thanbyuzayat to Three Pagoda Pass. And Arthur Harris who also was with us, he finished up in North Sydney working for the North Sydney Council.

> Thanks Fred. Were some of the others drowned on those boat trips?

There were but I didn't know they were. One of the boats went over ... the people that went over before us, the submarines came up and blew up the boat - probably the American submarines because some were picked up. But that's only on hearsay. I don't know, I wasn't there when that happened. But on the other thing I was there when was aboard the boats when the submarines came up and blew them out of the water.

> And of those that you mentioned a minute ago, have you seen some of those since the war at reunions?

Yes. Some of them have died but most of these I had seen at reunions. Arthur Baker, he's passed on. Donnie Booth died, he had a heart attack. Pickles Brawn, Alan Taylor who lived up at Katoomba, he died. As a matter of fact, out of all those people that were orderlies on that line, I think right now that I could be the only one that survived, that is alive.

> I do too. That would be right you know. I fell Doctor Richards told me that some months ago, six months ago on a telephone conversation. I think that's true, Fred. Well now, I'll ask you perhaps about some of the doctors if you can remember some of those people.

While working on the railroad as orderly I came in contact with some doctors and doctors were Captain Roly Richards, Major Kranz and Doctor Hacking who was a Dutch doctor.

> Well did you have much contact with Sid Kranz the surgeon? I know you had a lot of contact with Roly Richards, he thought highly of you.

Yes, with Sid Kranz as a surgeon he was with Roly and he was taken back to Thanbyuzayat but he mainly did surgery although if Roly wasn't well he'd help Roly.

> You can't remember anybody like Tom Hamilton the SMO of A Force? You were really too isolated I guess, too far away from them.

We were isolated. Actually as the line progressed we were going out in small parties all the time and there were major bases or hospitals that were established where they'd bring the sick back to. And, as I said before, the main doctor who I was with most of the time, practically all of the time, was Doctor Roly Richards.

> Thank you Fred. Well now, there was an officer, a Captain

Ron Grenville that was a hygiene officer more or less for the area and Doctor Richards had a lot of contact with him. Can you recall him? Did you have any contact? He now lives in Canberra.

No, I can't remember him. I just can't place him.

No. Well, don't worry. Fred, about your own name, in Melbourne when I interviewed people your fame as Pinkie was well-known so perhaps you'd explain the origin of the nickname.

Well Pinkie was a nickname that was given to me shortly after I joined the 2/15th Field Regiment. I was very fair and when I'd get sunburnt I used to go a pinkish colour. The name stuck with me right throughout, right through the railroad, while I was in the army and a nickname was much easier to remember than a surname.

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