ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: LEN PEARSON - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: LEN PEARSON

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

SUMMARY:

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

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Where were you born and when?

I was born of 27th January, 1918 at Goulburn New South Wales.

And did you live there as a child?

I lived there till I was fourteen when the depression years forced my mother to transfer to Sydney to get work.

You went to school in Goulburn did you?

I went to school at Bourke Street and did one year in high school.

Did you like school?

I don't recall not liking it.

Did you like any particular subjects more than others?

I was always interested in business and business principles, although in later life I considered I should have been an architect.

And is there anything you disliked?

Not particularly.

Well what did you like? Did you like sport?

I didn't play very much sport at school but I played much sport later on when I left.

What sort of influence did you get from your parents do you think?

Well my mother was a widow and she had five children under seven to rear and I don't think I got a very great deal of influence from parents, for that reason.

Your father was killed in the war was he?

No my father migrated from England during the First World War and died of pneumonia in 1925. He was a chronic pneumonia sufferer.

So you knew nothing of him really, very much?

Very little, I do remember him.

What do you think influenced you as a child to do what you did in later life?

Nothing in particular, I always regarded my later life was a series of opportunities grabbed. On coming to Sydney it was purely accidental that I took an early job in the State's Public Service because of the need to earn fifteen shillings a week to help support the family.

So you think the depression had a great effect on you?

Oh, it did definitely, probably prevented me from taking greater education, although I did educate myself at nights for many years after.

So the first job you took was in the State Public Service was it?

That was it. It was in June, 1932 when I was fourteen years, six months old.

And what branch or department was it?

I started in the old Family Endowment Department and the Premier of the State in those days was Jack Lang.

Did you ever meet him?

I didn't meet him to talk to but he used to pat me on the head and told me to stop running up and down the stairs when he was coming down.

He was a big man wasn't he?

He was a big man and I served under every Premier from Jack Lang to Neville Wran.

Did you know any of the others at all?

Oh, you get to know each Premier because working in the Treasury where I transferred in 1935, the Premier was always the Treasurer, so you do get to know them.

So which one did you get to know best do you think?

Oh, it's hard to say, I liked Jack Renshaw ... I liked Sir Askin, Sir Robin Askin. As matter of fact we socialised a bit with him, he always used to ask us to a party once in a year and things like that.

Did you go with him to Metropole did you?

Not with Sir Robin Askin but ... there would be ... he would have a party and ... I forget where he held the parties now but I think they were in the canteen in the State Office Block.

Was the Metropole the local pub when you first started?

Absolutely, yes, just across the road.

Yes I already heard about it actually. You were, right through the depression, did you get work rationed at all or did you have to pay the tax - unemployment tax?

No, I wasn't work rationed I was fully employed right through from '32 onwards, having a kind of a permanent job in the public service as a messenger boy, in the beginning in the old Family Endowment Department.

You mentioned the depression and you saw the problems that other people had.

Oh yes we saw the problems of other people and the number of houses that were vacant in the area we lived in Five Dock, we first moved to Five Dock. And the number of houses were vacant then, although rents weren't cheap compared to wages, a pound a week was paid in rent when wages were only two pounds ten to three pounds. So rents weren't cheap, there were many vacant places around.

In your family how many of you were in work?

Well I was the only one old enough to work until about 1935, the others were still at school.

So how did your mother manage?

Well, the State Government had introduced a Widow's Pension at about that time and she got the pension and I contributed by working. After paying four shillings and tuppence a week to go in on the train each day. In the beginning I rode a push bike from Burwood or Five Dock into Macquarie Street each day and I can recall the first traffic lights, I think, on Pyrmont Bridge Road and at the foot of Taverners Hill, which used to make me slow up on my push bike.

You mentioned something that happened about a nugget in the Treasury some years later I presume?

Yes, there was a nugget in the Treasury vault and somehow no-one seemed to know where it was so I told them I had been pulling a big metal case around on the floor to stand on to get things from the top shelf in the Treasury vault when I was down there. I asked them they might look in there and there was the nugget. It was immediately taken to the vault in the Rural Bank for safe keeping.

There's a story I heard was for years they couldn't find this nugget and then when you found it then some of the boys told who by then men, said, 'Oh yes, that's where we used to use that as the wicket, that's the wicket from the days we used to play cricket down there'.

I don't recall that. It was always locked in this steel case but I do recall it being very heavy and wondered what was in it for many years.

And they used to call it the wicket apparently.

If it was regarded as a wicket it could have been that they drew stumps on the steel case but not on the nugget itself.

No, no, not talking about that. That's why they didn't know where it was.

Yes, well it was stored in the Mines Department prior to it being transferred to the Treasury vaults during the depression years, I think, but I don't know for sure.

I think the other story I heard was that when the vault was being cleared out they couldn't find the nugget and they thought that this was impossible, it was there and they couldn't find it.

No, I don't think that was the case, the Mines Department couldn't find it in their storage and then they tried to find it and then when they were looking for it and I said it could be in the Treasury vault.

Yes well the story I heard was from the Treasury you see and the kids had been playing with it and using it for a wicket and they didn't know it as a nugget they knew it as a wicket for them drawing chalk on it.

Well I don't know if anyone had access to the Treasury vault unless they had two keys and had to go down in a lift.

Yes well the story was that these kids used to be down there and play up, anyway. I don't know whether there's any accuracy in this but let's leave it. When did you go into the army?

I was called up into the army on 8th October, 1940.

Have you got your service number?

Yes, my earlier number I have forgotten that, it was an N-number and then when the unit transferred to the AIF my number was NX117535 565.

And your full name?

Leonard George Pearson.

Right and was your brother in at that time?

My brother came in later and transferred to the unit while we were at the Green Toad, that would be about 1942, I think.

So when you came in first you were doing compulsory military training and going back and forth were you?

Yes, we trained - we were even issued with blue uniforms with a red stripe down the leg before they went into khaki and we trained, early at Victoria Barracks in Paddington and then ...

Was George Warneke there then?

I can't recall George being there but he probably was, he was one of the early ones and he always lived in Paddington. But when the unit was called up full time to Ingleburn and ... we were issued then with khakis and army uniforms.

And what do you remember of Ingleburn when you first got there, who was the commanding officer and what was the transport for the ambulance and such like?

The commanding officer of the Field Ambulance in those days was Colonel H. Whitridge Davies. Transport was horse-drawn with two or three commandeered utilities and it was called The Horse-drawn Transport and we was camped a bit away from it because of the manure and stuff.

Did Colonel Davies used to parade you with his horse did he?

Yes, Colonel Davies had his own horse and what was his named ...

Sally.

Sally, Sally was the name of the horse and he was very proud to his britches and get on that horse and parade in front of the unit.

Do you remember him turning you out at night?

Oh yes, he was very clever at turning us out at night and just to see whether we were awake or not and taking us probably for a route march.

Where did you go on the route march?

Oh generally down towards Darkes Forest and through the back of the artillery range.

Didn't every go down to the Cross Roads?

Each morning we went down to the Cross Roads before we did our PT but we never stopped at the Cross Roads for any specific purpose.

You went for a run so to speak?

No it wasn't actually running. It was a kind of a scout movement, we'd run twenty and we'd walk twenty and get back to camp for breakfast.

Was Colonel Davies very keen on physical fitness and such?

I would say so because we were a physically fit unit and not having much to do particularly in ambulance work it was mainly occupational therapy, I think, to keep you fit.

What form or training did you have in the ambulance side?

I was in a field company and training in looking after accidents, gun shot wounds and all that type of work. Headquarters Company was more or less taxed to looking after people that were stretcher bearers, stretcher borne or in bed. But the field companies were always our forward, particularly in practising artillery practice out on Holsworthy range. They always had an ambulance group there and we got that used to the guns that we could sleep behind the guns as they fired them.

You didn't have any occasion to rescue anybody?

No, very few incidents of accidents and injuries.

Did you from Ingleburn, did you do any outside training anywhere?

No I don't recall any outside training from Ingleburn.

Who do you remember there of the people you were with, I mean who was the sergeant when you were a ... which company were you? A Company?

I was A Company, always A Company.

Who was the sergeant in the first place, do you remember?

I think he was a Sergeant Reid, Sergeant Harry Reid was there at the time.

Do you remember Matt Nolan?

Oh I remember Matt Nolan. Matt Nolan has always been in the Horse Transport and I remember him quite well.

What was he like, was he a practical joker or what?

Matt? Yes, Matt ...

Any stories you could tell?

No I can't recall any stories of Matt's.

Anybody else, can you remember any stories of Ingleburn?

No. I recall they made a film, a film with Peter Finch in it and who else ... It was a propaganda film and I think it was called a Hundred Thousand Cobbers. And we did the mess hall scene and if you ever see that film and you don't blink you might see me.

Right, well I'll next time I see it, although I've never seen it. Where did you go from there?

The Japanese entered the war then and of course we were sent out to the coast. They had already shelled Bondi and had entered the harbour and sunk the HMAS Kuttabul, I think the name of the ferry was, killing nineteen people. And we were sent right out to the coast at Frenchs Forest in case there was any need for ...

So were you camped out there?

We camped permanently there, yes.

Were you there during the bush fire?

No, I don't remember a bush fire.

Were you sent away on any courses while you were there?

I forget where I went on courses but I did two courses while I was in the field ambulance. One, I went to Cowra and did a map reading and field sketching, about the time the Japanese made their break and I recall that well. And then I was sent to Melbourne to do an army medical corps school. I passed those courses and later on caught up with the unit.

So you must have missed out on the bush fire?

I think so, now you come to mention the bush fire I think I do recall something to do - it was more up towards Headquarters Company at a place called The Green Toad but I was out on the coast.

But it burnt right down to Middle Head I think - to West Head, I think - well I know it did because I've got the papers.

Yes, yes now I do recall that bush fire.

And do you remember being given an evening dance by the local community in thanks for saving some of their properties?

No I don't remember that, I must have been away at a school.

I think you must have been away yes, because there's a number of people spoke about it as being the main thing they remembered while they were down there, so you were away at the time or maybe you weren't part of it, I don't know.

No.

It would be hard to trace as well I think.

Yes, it was a long time ago, I can't quite remember.

So what did you actually do at Frenchs Forest?

Well there was very little to do because the Japanese didn't land there it was mainly to prevent anything if they landed or attempted to land or shell the place. So actually there was very little to do except look after the troops that were there and they weren't in action so it was only accident cases to handle and look after.

So where did you go next?

I can't quite recall where I went to next but ...

The unit went to Wallgrove but I don't know where you went.

I remember Wallgrove all right and ...

Can you describe it? What was that like?

Wallgrove was a good camp. It was properly constructed and I don't know whether we were in tents or not - no I don't think we were in tents, we might have been early on. And there would have been a brigade there, I think, there was a brigade of infantry there at the time and we just looked after those while they trained. But I just don't remember any little ...

Do you remember any bivouacs or trips that you used to do and exercises?

Oh yes, we did many marches down through the artillery range to Darkes Forest and to Woronora Dam and I can remember marching non-stop for thirty miles once. I forget the details of that, it was all night and half the day just to see if we were tough enough and that sorted out those with flat feet - they were discharged.

You'd think they would have been harder up for people than that. So where did you go next? Do you remember Narellan before you went to Queensland?

I faintly remember Narellan but that was probably the time I was in Melbourne.

Right so can you remember going to Queensland with the unit or did you go on your own to catch them up?

No I went on my own to catch them up. I was in Melbourne and they had left Sydney and had gone to Brisbane allegedly to form a task force to go to Goodenough Island. But I don't know how true that is but that fell through and I caught them up at the showground in Brisbane after returning from Melbourne.

You caught them up in Brisbane and where were where were they camped when you got there?

On one of the race courses.

That's either Doomben or Ascot, not Eagle Farm?

I don't remember, I could go there but I can't remember. [laughs]

So, do you remember the trip up north?

Yes, from there we went up to Ravenshoe on the Atherton Tablelands and I do remember that we got to Rockhampton and we were held up for four or five days because of floods on the Burdekin and the train couldn't get through. Apart from that it was unincidental.

You weren't one of the ones that was attached to an ambulance train at that stage?

No, I was never attached to an ambulance train.

I haven't found anybody yet but I noticed in the paper work that there were a number attached to an ambulance train, it did three trips I think. A lot of Americans?

Yes, there were - I forget their names now - but there were a number attached to an ambulance train at the time.

We were looking through a report the other day that's handwritten and the writing is not unlike your's but I don't know whose writing it is - it's a good hand you know, a very neat hand. So, you remember up on the Atherton Tablelands, what did you do up there?

Yes, we were at Ravenshoe which is right up on top of the tablelands and we manned a couple of posts. I think, there was a casualty clearing station or a base - a hospital there but it

was near Rocky Creek and Barrine and there was very little to do except look after the troops in camp there. About that time I think the 9th Division was recalled from the Middle East but whether they were camped up there or not I don't know but I do remember Rocky Creek and Barrine and Yungaburra I thinks the name of the place where the casualty clearing station was.

What rank did you have at that stage?

I think I was already a staff sergeant, the highest rank I achieved, when I got there.

Do you remember when and how you got that promotion?

Not particularly. I don't know why I got it. I suppose the CO thought I was worth it.

You were a steady sort of fellow whereas a lot of them used to play up, did you have any trouble with the fellows?

No I got on quite well with my unit, with my company.

Can you relate any cases when they got in trouble elsewhere and the CO had to defend them or anything like this or what was the CO, Colonel Bretherton like?

Colonel Bretherton was very proud of his men and he would defend any of his unit if they were wrongly accused by the miliary police or any one else. I think there was an incident somewhere on the train north where the military police were a bit obstreperous and he took them to task.

You don't have first hand experience of this?

No, I haven't got a first hand experience of this.

Well, there was the story there is that he wrongly defended the, if you like, and then wrongly took them to task when he'd managed to get them away from the American Military Police.

That may have been so but I wasn't involved.

Tom Kelly told me the story actually.

Yes, I think it might have been something like that.

He said that he did defend them, you know, that they defended them against the American Military Police but when they got them themselves then they really had a go at them.

Yes, that would be what he'd do. He would chastise them most severely after he had got them under his control away from somebody else.

Who was the officers above you when you were a staff sergeant?

Tom Kelly was the company lieutenant; I don't recall who the captain and major were at that time.

And who was the other company, who was the staff sergeant and the officer, bearer officer in the other company?

Dougy Dunlop was the bearer officer and I forget which officer. They change - the officers change from time to time.

What about the staff sergeant of B Company? You were A Company were you?

Staff Sergeant B Company was Carl Bromwich.

And the two of you did you used to ... did you have a sergeants mess or were you separate from the men or did you used to live totally with the men?

No wherever possible there was a sergeants mess but not always.

How many sergeants?

There'd been a sergeant, a staff sergeant, a warrant officer in each company, Transport Company, the B Company and the A Company. I suppose there'd be six or eight, then there was a sergeant pharmacist, a dental sergeant ... who else?

Fair enough. And how long, you have this on record how long you were up there but when did you go to New Guinea and do you remember what happened next?

Well when it was time to go to New Guinea we were returned from Ravenshoe to Townsville and after going to Oonoonba staging camp it was rumoured that we were to board the Centaur, a hospital ship, which was sunk the night before off the coast of Queensland by a Japanese submarine. So that delayed things a little and we stayed on at Oonoonba and then we off loaded and loaded onto various troop ships to fool what they thought was a fifth column acting as spies informing the Japs of troop transports. And eventually we boarded the Duntroon and there were sneaked out into the middle of the harbour and then back again and then finally went in convoy to Port Moresby.

And where were you stationed at Port Moresby?

[* Liberator crashes, p23.]

Immediately ambulance arrived at Port Moresby they were sent to Seventeen Mile or Rigo Road it was called, which was seventeen mile on the road to the Kokoda Trail. And I recall there there was a mule train or a mule camp where they had mules for transporting in rough country over the mountains. And at the time we were at Port Moresby there were two tragedies you might call them. One morning an American Liberator bomber fully loaded was taking off on some task force over the other side of the Owen Stanley Range and crashed into a company of Australian infantry. There were a 119 soldiers killed outright and so many wounded just by that one crash into this full company laying in full battle order on the ground ready to be transported over. That was one tragedy that I recall while I was there and another one ...

Did you had to be involved with the evacuation of the casualties there?

I wasn't personally, but I presume Headquarters Company and other ambulance personnel would have been involved in transporting the casualties to the nearest hospital which was at about Twenty-one Mile, I think it was. Everything was named in miles along that road.

The other tragedy was another fully loaded bomber - Liberator bomber - took off one morning about four o'clock and crashed just behind our camp at Rigo Road. The bomb load went up and killed everybody aboard the aircraft, of course, but nearly killed us too because it blew us out of bed. But it was about 150 yards from our camp.

[*]

Any casualties amongst your people?

No, no casualties, we were just out of range because of a little bit of a rise between us and where it crashed.

What was the camp like there? Was there a hospital and can you describe roughly what it was like, Rigo Road?

Oh, I can't remember, there was a hospital not far away so we wouldn't have much accommodation for bed patients but we had accommodation for emergency cases - malaria and what have you, a bit of fever.

Where you living in tents or where you living in huts or was there grass huts or did you build a grass hut?

No, I was in a tent, I remember when that bomber crashed because my mosquito net was on the ground or on a duck board on the ground. But everyone had to have mosquito nets there of course.

Did you get malaria at all while you were over there?

No, my brother and I didn't get malaria and I've often wondered and Carl Bromwich is another one didn't get malaria and we were all B3 blood groups and I've checked with every B3 blood group I knew in the unit and none of us got malaria. So whether that's got anything to do with malaria I don't know but it would be worth investigating.

Yes well, Kevin Ryan says you had negative blood group.

He didn't get it with negative?

Yes that's right ... no he did get it actually but he said he thought that every ... oh and that's right it was Carl Bromwich that mentioned it. He mentioned not B blood group but if you were Rhesus Negative?

Oh well I wasn't Rhesus Negative but Carl was B3 because I asked him especially.

Yes that's very interesting and he didn't tell exactly the same story on that one.

Didn't he?

No, ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Ninth Field Ambulance tape 10 - side b Mr Len Pearson two.

And I'll ask you now, so where did you go next from Rigo Road?

I was sent up to man a post or to help man a post with Carl Bromwich at Lux Lane it was called at the top of Rouna Falls.

And you were with Carl Bromwich at the time of the Rouna Falls were you?

Yes and Fred Richardson who later joined ANGAU. This is probably when I was made a staff sergeant after he left to join ANGAU which is the Australian New Guinea Administration Unit. And I recall the last bombing raid occurred - last Japanese bombing raid occurred while we were at Rouna Falls because I heard the plane go over very high and the phone rang down in the orderly room or down in the office warning us that there was a bombing raid warning. And I got Carl Bromwich out of bed, I decided I wasn't going to get out of bed and I got Carl Bromwich out of bed, to go down and answer it and he got very cranky about that, he might recall that.

He recalls sometimes that he used to get you out of bed to go and answer things.

Did he? Well I remember I got him this night and he went down to answer the phone because of the bombing raid warning and when he came back he said, 'Why didn't you go?'. And was very cranky about that but however that was only a little incident or a joke. But we were there for quite a while because I remember some of the men were planting vegetables - where they got the seed from I don't know. But they produced cabbages and a few other things down on the riverbank. There were crocodiles there but they were the fresh water type and it didn't prevent us swimming when we wanted to in the river - the Luloki River it was called.

You didn't go shooting crocodiles at all?

Oh no, we didn't shoot them.

And what were the conditions like there was it under canvas and what was the hospital ...?

No, no this was a fairly well established place, it wasn't under a canvas. As a matter of fact prior to us occupying it it was a dysentery post and anyone that got dysentery weren't sent to hospital they were sent to this particular place, and I won't say what it was known to us - do you mind if I do say? It was called 'shit hill'. [laughs] Because of the fact that it was a dysentery post when an outbreak of diarrhoea and dysentery occurred amongst the troops on the Kokoda Trail and they were evacuated there instead of into the hospitals, to spread it.

What was your treatment for dysentery?

A drug called sulphaguanidine we used and I think the initial dose was eighteen tablets about the size of your thumb nail and then the next dose was fifteen and then you dropped down to seven three times a day for four days.

Did you ever have problems with diarrhoea while you were up there?

That was the only time I got diarrhoea and I treated myself, I didn't to an A46.

An A46 is?

An A46 is a sick report.

Do you know what treatment used to be prescribed for you if you got diarrhoea in the unit?

Well that was the treatment we used sulphaguanidine, I haven't heard of it in ...

I'm not talking about that that's for dysentery, well what about just diarrhoea?

No, I don't recall, I never had it I don't recall any special treatment.

I was told that Colonel Bretherton was right down on anybody getting it or not treating it if they got it?

Oh yes, it was contagious and I think he got it himself once and was very sick for a while.

Did you ever hear of him using castor oil on people?

Oh no, no, I don't remember but that was the drug we used when I had it and it only lasted two days, very very effective it was.

And what other conditions were there? Was it good around there at that particular post?

Yes, it was a few hundred feet above sea level and from that point of view the climate was better and there was nowhere to go and nothing to do but ... it was as good a place as any to be around Moresby I suppose.

So where did you go next?

[* To Bulldog, Centre Camp and Wau, p32.]

I can't remember where I went next but then I was posted to Bulldog to establish a post called Centre Camp. And I went on my own because we'd already a few men up at a place called Terapo and at Bulldog. So I travelled on my own to establish a camp further up the Bulldog-Wau Road at Centre Camp. A boarded a small ship called the Muliana fully loaded with [monobell] a high explosive blasting material. And after dark in total blackout we set sail and about midnight the ship stopped or the engine stopped and I asked the first mate, I said, 'What's wrong?'. He said, 'Oh, we picked up a sub on ASDEC.' And I thought to meself - I was only curled up on a tarpaulin on deck it was only a small ship - 500 tonner and I thought to meself if a torpedo hits this lot there'll be no survivors so I immediately went back and laid down. I didn't go to sleep quite but after a while we got underway and arrived at Terapo at dawn. To unload the ship it had to be unloaded in the surf because there was no way to get into the Terapo River and I had to go ashore by jumped down a landing net onto a barge and going into our post at Terapo mouth of the Lakekamu River. After a couple of days there I boarded a barge to go up to Bulldog which was took two days because of heavy rain and flooding and we had to stop halfway.

The road was fully built by that time was it - what was it like?

No the road wasn't fully built that's why I was sent there and we had to stop halfway on a stilted hut built by the natives on the edge of the river above crocodiles and many crocodiles along the banks of that river and we had to sleep above ground and boil the billy, of course, it was only swamp. And next day arrived at Bulldog which was on the mouth of ... on the junction of the Bulldog and the Lakekamu River. And any barge going up fully loaded with petrol or explosives for the road would take two days and come down in half a day because it would flow down with the current and very little engine power just enough to keep the barge from going ashore. So the difference in consumption of petrol going up and coming back was quite horrendous.

However, after a couple of days at Bulldog - I think Captain Clipsham was in charge of the post there - I was sent up to establish the post at Centre Camp which would be approximately halfway between Bulldog and Edie Creek. This is a very primitive post but it was only to service engineers cutting the road through.

What was their problem was it apart from injuries, did they get diseases?

Well, there was a fair share of malaria and I got one case of appendicitis, I had to send for a captain to come and check my diagnosis - which was correct - so he could be evacuated to an AGH for an operation. But apart from that natives where getting injured by cutting their feet with axes and a few other minor things like that. There was also a pigeon post at this Centre Camp because to get a message from where the engineers were on the face of the mountain back to the Centre Camp where we had a telephone line it would take two days to get up to where the pigeon loft was stationed and they'd take four hours to fly down. And so they maintained this pigeon contact and I did have a couple casualties with pigeons stitching up pigeons that were ripped around by hawks. But there was an ANGAU officer there - that's the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit in charge of the natives that were employed with engineers - so between us there was only three of us running this post, apart from the engineer company.

How long were you there for?

I don't remember how long but the road was finally completed through to Edie Creek where there already existed a road down into Wau.

Do you have any idea how long you were there?

No not exactly ...

Days, months?

Oh well it was weeks or months and I don't know whether it would be months but it was weeks. And when the road was finally completed through to Edie Creek the whole unit - the Headquarters - I think Headquarters moved into Wau that way. And then after they had gone through I then - the engineers packed up and we all moved through. To get across to Edie Creek we had to go up 13,000 feet and it was necessary for the driver of the jeep to adjust the carburettor when we got up that high and it was very difficult to breathe if you exercised. So you sat pat in your jeep and you didn't do any running around, we went through what was called a mossy forest and at Blamey's Spur which was 30,000 feet up we could see the DC3s taking supplies over the range through what they called the Gap. We could see them flying down below us and they were flying at 10,000 feet. Eventually we got down to Wau and with headquarters and stayed there for a while and then I was posted.

[*]

What was Wau like when you got there?

Wau was blown about because there had been a heavy Japanese casualty list there and after they got the airstrip in operation they were flying in troops and fighting at the end of the airstrip.

Was there any hospital there?

The ambulance established an advance dressing station I suppose you'd call it or a medical post and we camped in an old German coffee plantation homestead, which was very comfortable except that the troops were in native huts. But Wau before the war was a big coffee producer and the coffee produced there was a beautiful blend and was only used for blending other coffee.

Can you tell me when you were at Wau there at that time where you were evacuating to, there was no hospital there so you were evacuating from there by air were you?

By air yes, the DC3s could land on the Wau airstrip - it was a rather short strip - and they had to land uphill and take off downhill just to make sure they could get airborne.

Did you ever take off and land at that ..

No, I crossed - I was one of the very few people that had virtually walked across or rode across New Guinea. I don't ever remember being in an aeroplane in New Guinea.

Fair enough. Well what did you manage to drive what did you drive a jeep?

Jeep, little jeeps and with a trailer on behind with supplies attached.

And you weren't in the ambulance section so to speak, were you evacuating people at all?

No the war was virtually over while we were in Wau and then it had moved on to the Nadzab, Tsili Tsili area and into the Lae area and they were establishing then a road from Bulolo to Lae via a place called Wampit. And the road had reached Wampit and I was sent to establish a post at Wampit.

So you went to establish a post exactly what did you do?

We got the natives to - there was an ANGAU representative there - the natives built a hut with beds above the ground made out of lawyer-cane. And most of the casualties were malaria, I think there were a few dengues and fever of that sort. Very few injuries except injuries to the engineers. I do recall one sergeant having blown himself to bits by going to a charge in a tree stump because he thought the line to the charge had burnt out and just when he got near it it went off - blew him to pieces. And that was the only death I recall on that particular section. But I do recall the Salvation Army having a coffee urn somewhere along that road but I don't know where it was now, it was probably just out of Bulolo somewhere.

Did you get many deaths at any stage during your time in New Guinea at any post that you were involved with?

No, they were mainly as they were evacuated by the ... my job was to get them back, get them back to where they could be treated.

But you didn't get any number of deaths?

No not many casualties except that sergeant and we had to beware of Japanese who'd been bypassed in the fighting because they were hungry and were likely to raid the camps to get food particularly.

What about your own people did any of your own people get any diseases or were killed or die?

Not in my crews, no. No I had a couple of serious illnesses, Frankie Starr was one I remember, I forget what he had whether he had a bad attack of malaria. But the malaria up there was the dangerous type it was called malignant tertian and while we had microscopes to determine which malaria people had, malignant tertian could turn to black water fever and black water fever was a deadly state in malaria. Any case that we got likely to turn to black water we got them back by jeep.

What about scrubtyphus, did you get any cases of that?

Not in Wampit, there was more scrub typhus around Wau, I think, than in Wampit.

Did you get to Wau at all, yes you did?

Yes, I went through Wau on the way to Wampit and in the meantime, of course, the Nadzab and Shaggy Ridge and Tsili Tsili attacks along the Markham River were in progress and B Company of our unit established went in that direction while I went - A Company went in the other direction.

So none of your company died or were killed while you were with them?

Not while I was with them no. The only casualties ...

Was Gerry Gilbert in your company?

No Gerry Gilbert was in the company that went over to Nadzab and up to Shaggy Ridge and he was in B Company, he wasn't in my company and apparently he was evacuated. I don't know what the line of evacuation was from Shaggy Ridge ... or we aeroplaned from ...

Nadzab from ...

... Nadzab from because they cleared the airstrip and were able to land aircraft there.

Did you ever during the time in New Guinea ever have to be evacuated with casualties in order to look after them in a flight?

No, no as I said I've never been on an aeroplane in New Guinea.

By foot and jeep and boat.

Yes, I crossed from the south to the very north of New Guinea across the Owen Stanley Range. I understand that after our episode there they blew the Bulldog Road up and it was never maintained because of the expense.

So, you finished up down the other side and how long were you there before you were moved out?

I stayed there until Lae was recaptured and then I moved along the road to the Markham - south bank of the Markham River and crossed into Lae.

Did you get any of the casualties from there or where they going the other way?

They were coming the other way and they were all going that way when I was at Wampit.

You were going behind them, only following them?

I was on a different branch following them more or less. They didn't need the road as it turned out because of Nadzab and attack.

So did you join the rest of your company down there the other side in Lae?

Yes, at Busu Medical Post I think they called it, that's where they were established and that's where we finally sailed for home.

So what was Busu like?

Busu was built in a middle of a coconut plantation and it was quiet when we were there, the war had moved on again and from a casualty point of view there were very few apart from sicknesses and that's why we were recalled I suppose back to Australia.

And do you remember coming back to Australia, is there any incidents - well before you left New Guinea can you remember any incidents that you may have told me that you haven't that you've written up perhaps?

No I do you recall going to Busu. I do recall going to the outdoor picture show which was established there after we got there, run by the ... no, it was run by the Australians. And there was a film being shown with Ginger Rogers in it and I recall her one scene in the film where she was saying. 'Where are you, where are you?'. And some wag from up the back of the audience on a petrol drum tin - nurses and all available there - said, 'He's gone for a shit and a sniper got him'. I don't know whether you want that in?

It's in now. That was the end of the war almost was it?

Well, then Morotai and that occurred after that and ...

Where did you go from there?

No we ... I came back to Australian and landed at Brisbane on the same ship that we went up on the SS Duntroon and landed at Brisbane and then after leave, being away sixteen or seventeen months, after leave I was sent to Goulburn for a while.

Doing what?

Just as an extra RSM, there was nothing I could do up there except supervise patients doing gardens and things, I wasn't working in the hospital as such.

Was that with the 9th Field Ambulance or not?

No, I and a couple of other of the field ambulance personnel were the only ones there, we were just attached, I think, for rations.

So where did you go, did you go back to Rutherford before the field ambulance was shut down - disbanded?

I don't recall going to Rutherford, the next camp I remember was in Sydney at the 101 AGH at Riverwood it's called now, it used to be called ... [Herne Bay] ... at this particular camp there was a big English navy camp and English navy personnel were camped there. Why they weren't on shifts I don't know but there was hundreds of them camped at this particular camp. There was a medical post there and a 101 General Hospital but I had nothing to do with the hospital, I just stopped there in the sergeants mess for rations until I was finally discharged.

Which was when?

I've got the exact date here somewhere. I was discharged from the army on the 8th April, 1946. Not being married I didn't have very high point score.

Were you aware that the 9th Field Ambulance had been disbanded?

Well ... the atom bombs were dropped and ...

But the 9th Field Ambulance was disbanded long before that. Some of them went up to Borneo after that?

Yes, they were scattered everywhere and I was at 101 and things seemed to be moving slowly. The rumour was that we were going to be formed up into other units and perhaps attack Japan from China or somewhere. But the atom bomb fell and we could see now in reflection that they knew they were going to drop the atom bomb and we were just killing time until things happened.

Is there anything I should have asked you that perhaps I haven't as yet?

I don't think so ... no that is about my history in the unit.

What happened to you after the war, you got married after the war?

Yes, I married shortly after the war and I went back to my job in the public service and stayed there until I retired.

Well, thank you very much Mr Len Pearson.

Thank you.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE TWO - END OF INTERVIEW