ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: LIEUTENANT COLONEL DR NOEL THOMAS - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: LIEUTENANT COLONEL DR NOEL THOMAS

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance AIF Oral History Project. I am talking to Lieutenant Colonel Doctor Noel Thomas. The date is 13.3.91 and this is tape 13A.

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas, where were you born and when?

Born in Sydney, 24th December 1911.

And you grew up where?

All in New South Wales. My father was a Methodist minister so I lived in various places.

And you'd go to school at various places?

Yes. I went to schools at various places but I eventually won a scholarship to Newington and was educated at Newington.

And did your father give you a religious influence or any other influence do you think?

I never ever thought of it. We just accepted it was so.

What other sort of influence did he give you? What decided you to become a doctor?

Well I had the opportunity to study at Newington and I was dux of the school. So not knowing what to do I went to the highest ... hardest thing to get into then which was medicine and did medicine.

I understand. And when you were at school at Newington, you left Newington and went straight to Sydney University did you?

That's right, yes.

And from the university you went straight out into practice. Where did you do your residency?

No. I graduated with honours so I went from there to Sydney Hospital and then to the Children's Hospital and then to Newcastle. By then the war had started. See, I was still in the army as medical officer to various places and various COs of minor units - field companies. And then being in the army I had to go to camps but I wasn't accepted, I didn't go overseas till later when I was posted to the 9th Field Ambulance.

When you got to the 9th Field Ambulance, where was that?

In Sydney.

At what camp? Was it Ingleburn? Is that where they had the horses?

No, no, that was a different time. I think the camp originally it was at St Ives.

But you mentioned the camp when they had the horses there first.

That was earlier.

Well, can you tell me about that?

Well, when I was with Colonel Davies he said one night he had to go out on a reconnaissance one day and he said would I like to come with him. I said, 'I'd love to'. So I went out the next morning. He said, 'I'll arrange the horses. I'll get a horse from remount'. So the next morning we went out and he had Sally, which was a beautiful horse, and he had two drivers, or whatever they were, from the remount who came out and brought this horse for me. And this horse - I'd had a lot of experience in riding, as I told you being in the Cavalry Field Ambulance ...

Where were you in the Cavalry Field Ambulance?

It was in Sydney.

Well, that's what I was after getting you to tell me about first.

Well before the war had started I was posted to various units which I didn't like very much as a medical officer and I heard that there was a cavalry field ambulance still in existence and as I loved horses and I loved working with horses and I'd had the requisite number of falls, I decided to join the Cavalry Field Ambulance. And they moved straightaway and I was accepted immediately. Not only that, they were encamped then and I was to go into camp the next morning at eleven o'clock. So I went there at eleven o'clock.

Well, there I was met by a very personable sergeant major who said the officers were all giving lectures and would I go around and pick a horse. So I said, 'Look, I don't know anything about picking the horses'. I said, 'These horses belong to somebody', and I said, 'I can't just take one of their horses'. He said, 'You pick whatever horse you like and he can get another one'. So I went along about 160 horses and picked a beautiful horse. When we came back I went into the mess and met the other officers and I had nothing to do and I went back to my tent. The next thing the sergeant major to say, 'Excuse me, Sir, with the CO's compliments, would you take the parade?'. I said, 'What!', I said, 'I don't know anything about cavalry drill; I know a fair bit about infantry drill

but nothing about cavalry drill'. And he let me rant on and when I'd finished he said, 'Excuse me, Sir, you're the only officer that can ride'. And that was literally so.

How long were you with them at that stage?

I was with the Cavalry Field Ambulance only for a few months when I went to Newcastle. I had to leave to go to something else.

When you came back to the 9th Field Ambulance ...

Before I'd been to the 9th Field Ambulance I was with Lieutenant Colonel Davies and he was the one who asked me would I like to go riding and I said, 'I'd love to'. So he got this horse for me from the remount and the four of us went out - he, myself and two drivers, or whatever they call them.

Was one of them Matt Nolan at that stage, was he?

... Ah, and then we went out on this horse I got was dreadful. He wouldn't stand, he wouldn't walk, he wouldn't pace, he wouldn't canter, he wouldn't gallop; he wouldn't do anything. He was forever swivelling around, kicking up and bumping up and down the whole way, swinging around and trying to bite your leg and when he got near any of the other three horses he was forever trying to kick them and I had a hell of a time. I was on this horse for a couple of hours, pulling and going like this. After I was relieved to get off for lunch. Well, that didn't help because we had an army packed lunch - that didn't help matters. When we came back they brought the horse back and the horse had a cut on its neck from something or other and he'd been fighting with the other horses. And they brought him back and they brought him to me and I put one foot in the stirrup and he was off. And he went - full gallop down this road. And I was sawing his teeth, sawing him trying to get control, trying to get his head down. I just about got his head under control and he swerved around a bend in the road and coming up to us was a man with a horse, a draught horse in a dray. The horse I was on very sensibly swerved suddenly to the left; I turned a complete somersault and landed on my back at the feet of this dray horse who obligingly stopped. I was all right. I got up and managed to walk. With a lot of trouble they caught this blessed horse and brought him back and I had to ride this horse back to camp. I noticed that none of the attendance, they didn't want to ride the horse. So I rode it back and when I got back to camp they said, 'They'd take the horse in'. I said, 'No, I want to take it in. I want to see the sergeant - whoever's in charge'. So when I got in there I asked them, 'Where's the sergeant?'. 'Oh I don't know'. I said, 'When will he be back?'. 'Oh I don't know'. So I waited. I waited for about twenty minutes I said, 'Look I can't wait any longer. Would you tell the sergeant that I think this horse is dangerous and I think he shouldn't be ridden'. They said they'd tell him. The upshot of it was, as

I heard later, apparently the sergeant came around who happened to be Matt Nolan and he said something to the words to the effect that all these bloody officers, they can't ride and they blame the horse. So he got on the horse and it threw into a [xxx bucket] (laughs) and he was taken to hospital. Later they had to correct the records, which they'd lost, to get him an entitlement for an injury.

So when you ...

It was later in the unit. It was later I met him later in the Field Ambulance.

So where did you go before you came back to the Field Ambulance then?

I went to another Field Ambulance and then ...

Which one was that?

The 4th or the 1st or something.

Where?

At Rutherford. And they sent down about eighty private soldiers from that Ambulance with two officer, myself and John Sands, to bring them down. We were transferred to the 9th. It was the best thing that ever happened to us.

John Sands, was he a doctor? Was he from the John Sands family?

That's right. And he and I were these two officers - two medical officers.

And about what year would that be? Would it have been ...

It would be '42, would it? Somewhere about that I suppose.

And did you go straight into camp at Frenchs Forest or ...

No, it was somewhere out - I've forgotten where it was now. It might have been Ingleburn way, I've forgotten.

And did you go to Frenchs Forest later ... or the Green Toad at St Ives?

Yes, we were at St Ives for a while and then we went into camp at Ingleburn or one of those other places.

And then before you went to Queensland did you go to Narellan? Or did you go to Wallgrove, did you?

No, I think Narellan. Yes, we were in Narellan for a while.

What was that like?

You know ...

Just one of those camps.

Just one of those camps.

And then you went up to Queensland on the train with the unit, did you?

Yes.

And were you in Ravenshoe, or where were you up there?

Ah yes, I was at Ravenshoe.

Were you attached to the Field Ambulance trains during that period? There were some attached to them.

No. We went on the train but three days up in the train.

But I understand the unit ran a few trains - ambulance trains.

I wasn't on that. That's right.

So you were at Ravenshoe were you?

Yes, at Ravenshoe for six weeks to three months, or something.

Do you remember any problems up that way in Queensland?

Well, yes, it rained a lot. We went in for the wet season and apparently it was really wet. It was the wettest one they'd had for twenty years or something like that. 'Cause I was to march a company down to Innisfail, sixty miles. And we went down in pouring rain. We marched with packs - carried everything. We did twenty miles the first day and the second day we had done eighteen miles. We were trying to get through it quickly because they wanted to spend the time in Innisfail. And then the trucks came down late in the afternoon to pick us up and take us back to camp. We were moving. So we stayed back in camp about another six weeks.

Did any of your men get into any trouble with the Americans?

Yes. Yes.

Can you tell a story about that?

Mmm. In Townsville when we were camped at Oonoonba a lot of the ... As soon as the Americans came the prices of everything went up. For instance, hair cuts which were one and sixpence

then immediately went up to seven and six. Peanuts which were ninepence - fresh peanuts for ninepence a pound - went up to three and six a pound. Tek toothbrushes which were a set price at one and nine went up to seven shillings. Everything was bad and further more the townspeople were terrible. They wouldn't serve Australians because they could make so much more out of the Americans. So two men from our unit were in Townsville one night - not very big men either - and they went to a cafe - I've forgotten the name offhand - to get a milkshake. The milkshake prices had gone up from about sixpence to whatever but the girls wouldn't serve them. They were only serving the Americans. So they wrecked the cafe: really wrecked it. The military police came around and took them away. I was in charge then, the CO was away and they rang me up to say that they had them and would I come and get them. So I took a truck. I drove a truck in just on my own to get these men and the military police didn't want to let me take them. I said, 'Oh they'll be all right', and they said, 'Are you sure'. So I took them and took them home and then they said they'd committed an offence and they had to be tried. I said, 'Do you want to be tried by me or to be tried by court martial?'. They said, 'Oh, by you, Sir', knowing very much that I was on their side and the men were happy but I don't think the military police were very pleased.

We had another two going up in the train to Townsville. We had two men who were professional fighters and they were real characters; real personalities. But everywhere we went they went AWL but they left a note with the - we knew this too - they left a note with the office, the headquarters of the company, where they were in case we got a call to move out. They didn't want to be missed. Always knew where they were.

What did you give them for going AWOL?

Oh, I think confined to barracks for two hours or something.

That sounds good. So shortly after that you went to New Guinea. Do you remember the ship you went on? It doesn't matter, it's on record. Some of them went on the new Duntroon. I don't know whether ...

No, I was on a Liberty ship. We were booked to go on the Centaur - have you heard this?

And you didn't go.

No. Well the CO was away again and I was to take them on the Centaur at first light. And they woke me during the night to tell me that it had been sunk.

That was lucky.

This was before we started.

Yes, I mean it was lucky for you.

Yes. Well we went up on a liberty ship I think and we went up at four knots because we had an Australian escort and they could only do six knots I believe, so that they could keep up ... (laughs)

So where did you land in New Guinea?

Moresby.

And where did you go first?

As soon as we landed in Moresby we went to a little camp a few miles out - no camp, we had to make the camp. A native was brought in straightaway who had been bitten by a taipan. He had already been slashed about. He'd been bitten on the hand and he'd been slashed across his forehead to let the bad out of him - whatever the natives thought. Apparently he'd been chasing a snake and it ran into a hole and he put his hand in after it and this taipan bit him. This had been an hour ago and by then he was unconscious and bleeding and coughing ... had been coughing and bleeding from his mouth. So we got him up to the general hospital there but they couldn't do anything either. We had no serum or anything. He wad dead in an hour.

And from that date did you treat many of the local New Guinean people?

No, very few.

Where did you go then?

We went to ... We stayed in this camp for some time and a detachment went farther up ...

What was the name of this camp?

It was actually Moresby itself, some miles out but in ...

Was it called Nine Mile or ...

I would think so. I can't remember now.

There was another one as well which was known as the Seventeen Mile - Rigo Road. It wasn't there, was it? That was where the headquarters was.

Well that would be where we were I suppose, Rigo Road.

And how long did you stay there?

Some months I think.

Until you went up to Tsili Tsili or ...

I was to take a detachment up to Tsili Tsili of thirty-odd people to make a dressing station for what no-one would tell me or no-one knew. The supplies we had to go up were just about nil. We were told practically nothing.

The going up was interesting because the CO wrote out this order for me to go, to take this detachment and listing the people to go. And this order had come I presume through Army Corps, this detachment would go to Tsili Tsili because this was just before the assault on Lae.

Where was Tsili Tsili exactly?

About thirty miles as the crow flies from Lae.

How did you get there?

Well we got this note to go from the Corps to say that we were to be at Port Moresby aerodrome at first light. Well the Corps apparently sent this out so presumably it went through the ropes. Corps would say it would be at first light, so they said make it four o'clock to be sure. Corps told Division so Division sent out to be there at three. Division sent it to the Brigade, Brigade set it at two. Brigade sent it out to the ADM as the medical officer, he said to be there at one. CO gave the thing and he said, well, he's not going to be out of it and he told me to be there at twelve. So I wasn't going to get the blame for anything so I left with the troops at eleven. We got out to Port Moresby airport, because there was nobody about. We had nothing to do and we waited there till first light - nothing happened then. Dawn came and after a while a few odd bods were strolling about. We went over and no-one knew anything about us. And later a few planes took off. I went to the office or whatever they had there. No-one knew anything about us. And when I told them we were to go to Tsili Tsili, still no-one knew anything about us. We went on till eight o'clock and they still didn't know. They said they'd put us on a plane to Tsili Tsili eventually which I left somewhere about nine o'clock in the morning by which time we'd had nothing to eat because we'd been given nothing. We weren't even allowed to have water bottles I think.

We got the plane to Tsili Tsili and with a lot of excitement we flew over this range and when we got there there was a red alert. That means that there were Jap bombers overhead. So the plane flew around for a while and then it decided it would land, that either they'd gone away but at any rate they came down. The plane would only touch down. They left the engine running and we had everything ready and we had to jump out. It's a fair distance to jump from a C-47. And we had to jump, all the stuff was pitched out and they cleared off. We were left there in the middle of this airstrip with no-one about. I remember taking them up on a little hillock or something and we sat there just watching it. And we saw a few bombs dropped.

We just watched them. Then when they went away and half an hour later and we came back and of course no-one knew anything about us, they didn't know where we were to go. We were never told to this day what we had to do or what it was for.

So what did you do?

So they told me there was a camp ... not a camp, but you could go over somewhere there - there was no-one over there. That's where we went. We went over and established a camp around there.

And how did you get your food and such like?

Well, the food was only iron rations; it was only bully and ... it didn't matter whether we got it or not.

What did you do for vegetables or vegetable supplement then?

Nothing, we had nothing. But the Americans who were there at Tsili Tsili, they had everything. They had fresh meat flown in three times a week. They had fresh bread daily. They had icecream.

Didn't you do all right in that case?

We got nothing from them except once. We got a loaf of bread a day old that they'd thrown out. I remember taking it back to the camp and we had a little piece each. I went to the Americans and asked them - they had a lot of 44-gallon drums, and I wanted a 44-gallon drum for something - and I asked could I have a 44-gallon drum. The captain there said, 'Sure, Buddy, you can have what you like'. So he told one of the men to give me a 44-gallon drum. And after a while he came back and he said, 'Corporal so-and-so says you can't have it'. So I just looked at him and I said to this captain, 'Well, what happens now?'. He said, 'Well you heard, the corporal said you can't have it'. And I said, 'Does that mean I can't have one?'. He said, 'Yes'. So I just took one. (laughs)

What did you want it for anyway?

I've forgotten now.

How did you go at that camp? I mean, there was a proper water supply was there? What was the situation there?

No. I can't remember how we got the water but all the water we had had to be sterilised at all time. I remember that sterilisation with that bit of Condy's taste, you know. It was dreadful. You couldn't drink it.

And how long were you there? Weeks or months or ...

Between a month and six weeks.

Did you get any instructions at all while you were there? Were there any wounded for you to attend to?

No. Only a few people I think that came from one of the Australian battalions which was there.

So you just set up your camp and that was it?

That's right. Set up not knowing we had to do or why. That was when I told you about expecting the parachute landing.

And ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Identification: This is Lieutenant Colonel Doctor Noel Thomas - side two. This is 13.3.91. The 9th Australian Field Ambulance, tape 13B.

At Tsili Tsili you mentioned that you were expecting Jap paratroops at one stage.

Yes. I was told to expect within three days a parachute landing. Well the first day went on uneventfully. It was either the second or third morning at dawn I looked up to see forty-eight Liberators and fifty B-26s going over presumably accompanied by fighters. At any rate that was the morning they destroyed something like 220 Jap planes on the ground at Wewak - I think it was at Wewak. That was the end of the parachute landing.

When did you leave ... you know, four or five weeks later, whenever you left that area, where did you go next?

We came back to Port Moresby.

Whereabouts at Port Moresby, back to Rigo Road?

Rigo Road I suppose.

There was quite a number still there, was there?

Yes.

Was there a hospital at Rigo Road or ...

No.

So what was the set-up there? Just a headquarters ...

We were just in training.

You mentioned while the tape wasn't running there that you had had army training before you actually joined the Ambulance, before you became a doctor or while you were qualifying as a doctor. What sort of training did you get?

Well I was in the university regiment for six years. I never missed any camp and I had been trained. I went through the Randwick Small Arms School, I was a qualified instructor. I was always one of the two machine-gunners that they had in their - what do you call the big things they have there? - tattoos. I was the champion rifle shot in the university regiment and I won the snap shooting.

You had this army experience but that was when you came into the Ambulance. That was of very little use to you, is it?

Well it was a lot of use to me because there was a lot of drill concerned and a lot of movements of men and if it was done efficiently it was very much better. And I wanted to go on and say from that that I'd been in a lot of units and Colonel Bretherton was far and away the best CO I've ever known.

Was he an experienced army CO or was he just a doctor other than that?

He'd had a bit of training, a bit of infantry training in camps. But as a CO he was a big man; he was a strong personality; a bit harassable but a great sense of humour, but he wouldn't let the unit be separated - wouldn't let them be broken up. Everywhere we went in Queensland particularly, as soon as we arrived there the ADMSs used to think: oh, here are 200 bods, nothing to do, I'll snaffle them for something or other and he wouldn't let his unit be broken up. And he wouldn't let them be taken away particularly for combatant duties. You know, not only were they supposed to be non-combatant, so ... So everywhere we went he was in trouble with the ADMS and he wouldn't speak to them. So I used to go into the ADMS and talk to them and they'd tell me what I had to come back and tell Colonel Bretherton and this happened everywhere we went. But he wouldn't let the unit be broken up. And the unit was essentially the same for about three years. It was just like a big family. We got to know each other very well and the abilities of these men, what they could do, were brought out and there were a lot of very able people.

When you got to New Guinea you were broken up though, weren't you? Sent all over the place.

Exactly. But they were brought back again, in the main we came back together though. They were only sent out as detachments of his own unit, not sent out to someone else.

Did you know anything of the men that were sent up to some of the other places - to Nadzab? Did you ever go up to Nadzab?

No.

Did you ever go up to Dumpu?

No.

Wampit?

No.

Bulldog?

Yes.

Can you tell me about that?

We had a detachment at Bulldog and Bulldog we had to go down the coast in some vessel and then come up either the Loki or Lakekamu River - whatever it was - and come up this river and this river was a very fast running river. Very interesting to weigh up because we saw on one of the beaches salt water crocodiles completely obscure in the sand, there were so many of them. Heads and tails, all over it. At any rate we went up. To go from there we had to go up on one of these landing crafts. We went up this river. We had to go sixty miles up to Bulldog and it took three days to do it because the river, the flow of the river, I believe was fourteen knots. It looked to me about forty the speed it was going. And these big engines could do about sixteen knots. So we went up at a net speed of two knots. And they used to go up in three days and come back in four hours.

We went up in this landing craft and we had to spend two nights in there and they were the most miserable nights because it rained all night. There was no protection on the landing craft. You huddled at the side with no roof because it was just on a wharf and with the water pouring down with just a ground sheet. The mosquitoes were so bad and so big. And waking up one morning, looking over the side, I saw a forty-four gallon drum floating down. I was just dully looking down, just watching it floating near the side of the ship and then, whoozz, it was away. It was a huge crocodile.

And how long were you up there?

We went on to Bulldog. When we got to Bulldog they had transported up there, we were told, two bulldozers. They took them out at the ramp or whatever they had at the end there, up the side of the road, and left them there over night and the next morning they'd disappeared into the sand and they never got them again.

We went to Bulldog. At Bulldog it was just as bad as it sounds. One of the MOs up there, Bill Richards ...

One of your men, was he?

Yes, one of our men. ... he wanted a shower and it was water but, you know, he wanted a hot shower. So he rigged up, he found some old gas pipe or water pipe or some very thin pipe and he rigged this up over a range of about twenty yards. He had the boongs, the natives, he had to build fires under it. They poured water in one end and let it trickle along the edge and he stood under at the end and showered - to get his warm shower. It didn't work very well. He was also very interesting in as much as they say ... the boongs would call us for lunch, so he'd go over to lunch. It would be bully, in front of us was bully beef, and he'd take one look at that and wouldn't have any. There were dog biscuits and he tried to bite one bit and he'd spit it out. So he'd light a cigarette and you could have tea which was made with this sterilised water that you couldn't drink because it was sweetened tea - you could get nothing else - he couldn't drink that. So that was his meal - a cigarette.

We went from Bulldog over, right over the mountain range, over ten thousand feet through the mossy forest over to Wau and that was the most exciting, really an exciting time because this apparently had been ... Blamey had said when he was talking to the Americans that you couldn't get across and he said his Australians could get across it and they built this road just to prove that he could. So they went through this road, which was only built at the side of a mountain range all the way, and it was terrible. And we went three days to get through this place. It was very very cold. The troops at the top there, the engineers, were issued with twelve blankets each as they told us. And then we also had the pigeons for any messages. And I was very interested to see the pigeons there because when they came out of these big valleys they flew in a corkscrew up to the top and then went off where they were going. It was very interesting. Then we went through from there to Wau.

How many with you on this trip?

A company - about sixty.

And who were the officers in that troop?

Myself ...

Was Tom Kelly with you at that time or not?

Well, Tom Kelly was with us all the time. He was the bearer officer and a very good officer.

He went over the top there I know on one occasion but did he go over with you or did he go over on his own?

No, he'd have gone over with me because we were the only ones that ever used the track. The Australians ... was built for us. And it was a wonderful experience to go over it. We went to Wau but when we got to Wau, Wau we found with hills all around it and the airstrip was eleven hundred yards long. It was one hundred yards lower at one end. So to get down planes flew in a corkscrew and then landed from the bottom and landed uphill. We got there on a Saturday. On the Sunday I was told that an air force man had had his foot blown off at Koitaki, seventeen miles away. So I was detailed to go in a jeep to see him. So I went over this seventeen miles to Koitaki - about seventeen I think - a lot of the road was corrugated, that is xxx. When I went to this air force man, there was an air force corporal there looking after him, and when I got to him his foot was hanging by a few shreds and just a few ligaments holding it up, a few tendons about and he looked terrible. And I said to the corporal looking after him, I said, 'He's in a terrible way. He looks awful'. I said, 'How much morphia has he had?'. He said, 'Oh, he hasn't had any morphia, Sir. He's had one Aspro', he looked at his watch and he said, 'Three hours and fifty minutes ago. He's due for another one in ten minutes'. (laughs)

He wasn't one of your men, was he?

No. So I thought, how on earth can I get him back to this place? And I heard a whirrr, a plane revving up and I ran about a quarter of a mile down the road and found a bit of a strip and a C-47 about to take off. So I ran out onto the field, waving my arms in front of the C-47 as it was coming up the thing and I was still in front of them. Ran down the thing, waving away, and they eventually thought they were going run over me, they revved down and pulled up. And they were wild ... taking off, and they were Americans. So I told them who I was and what I had and said I wanted to back to Wau, would they take ... I said, 'Could you take me to Wau?', 'Sure, buddy'. So they took me up, put me on their plane; we took him up in the plane. When we got up in the air, they said, 'Well, where is Wau?', and I said, 'Well, I don't know. I know where it is, I've only just come there'. And I said, 'Haven't you got any map?', and the only map they had was an atlas. They took me back to Wau and they landed there. So we took him to there and I amputated his foot. And that wasn't the end of the story. The next morning, the man in charge of the natives came and said, 'What's happened, because the whole village of natives' - about three or four hundred yards down the road from us - 'had cleared out?'. The end of the story was that when I cut the foot off, instead of them digging a hole and burying the foot, it was all so rocky and stony, they just chucked it in the water. It went to this village - the village took a swerve turn around - and this foot landed on their ... this foot, and the village just cleared out.

Yes. Did you have a hospital set up there or was it a temporary hospital or ...

Before I go on with that. I later found out that why the C-47 was there, for the people out there, the Australians, were mining gold and selling gold rings at the price of forty pounds Australian. When they got there apparently they had it all set out on jewellers' felt and they sold them these rings. But after a while they thought why bother getting the gold, so instead of using the gold, they used pennies and coated it - they even shined it all up, the brass - and sold them these things. And when the Americans found out, as I heard from one of them later, they said, 'Yes, they were going to go over there one day and bomb the bastards'.

It wasn't any of your men doing this, was it, doing the mining and ...

No. But at Wau we had a set-up. Yes, we had a main dressing station because we had two thousand troops in the area that we had to look after and I was to do the surgery in these troops and there wasn't very much to do. We were there for months - eight or nine months I think.

Was that the camp where they had the newspapers and the ninth bully tin and these ...

Yes.

And the adverts for the homebrew?

Yes. The adverts for 'Rocky's Homebrew - two shillings for forty-four gallons'. (laughs) When the ... Colonel Bretherton and myself used to do the rounds and he knew very well what was going on. He knew where the still was and he knew a still was there and he said, 'I'm not supposed to know about this when we go around. If you go up and have a look and see if they're not going to blow themselves up'. So I went and inspected the still every day. It was on this day too they had the 'mad mile'. He thought they mustn't get into poor condition so we went over the - he worked out a mad mile which was that you had to cross a very fast running stream that if you fell over I don't think you'd ever get up. And you went over crossing it on rocks. Then find a very steep hill which supposed to be over a hundred feet high at an angle of about seventy degrees, very steep. Then you came down the other side, then they'd arrange an obstacle course where you had to get over big obstacles hanging onto loiya vines. Well, the CO said one day, 'The cook, he never goes on this thing'. He called the cook over and he told this Corporal German, and he said, 'You go over this thing'. So we stood there and waited to see that he did it. I think we saw him go over the water, climb up the hill. He started to come down on the other side and then there was the most terrifying scream. And then he came back the way,

he came down slithering right the way down. He said he was going down the hill and he said coming up towards him was a hell of a big snake. And that was so because the day before, or two or three days before the natives came to me and said that there was a big snake around the camp. A number one fella snake - [himkill you], he'll eat you. And wound around a tree was this huge python. And I thought it was about twenty feet long. And I so I thought - it was right in the camp - I gave them permission to shoot it and they shot it and when we wound it out it was thirteen feet six long. So presumably it was the mate of the other one that he saw coming up to him.

The Chinese cook didn't cook it, did he?

No.

You didn't have any local game at all, you stuck to the bully beef.

We had supplies then. Wau was a little bit better because there was a bakery then. We got some bread but they would only allow so much per man. As you know if the troops are not eating well they want more bread but they wouldn't allow us to have any more than the set amount. If they were eating well they'd only eat a certain amount of bread a day.

How did you go for keeping them fit then because you didn't seem to have any vegetables of any description? Did any of them get scurvy or anything like that?

Yes. We had a lot of sickness in the area. Anyone that got scrub typhus up there automatically died.

I knew you had three deaths in your unit.

Yes. But the only one that was saved was a man from our unit. He got scrub typhus and we said that any man that we'd sent out that we'd diagnosed and sent away had died. So he was one of the men in our unit, so we kept him ourselves. We looked after him and looking after him was a very difficult shot because his temperature was 103 for over three weeks and didn't come down to 100 for about three weeks. In the third week he was unconscious for three days. We had the unit put themselves on a roster, two at a time, to sit on for two hours at a time day and night holding his jaw up to keep him breathing and the MOs put themselves on a roster, one of them to sleep next to him. We had one of the people, one of the men had had scrub typhus and had recovered in Moresby and we tested his blood and his blood was compatible so we transfused the man with his blood. Whether it did any good, I don't know. But we kept him there. We gave him intravenous feeding with whatever we had which was mainly saline and kept him alive and he was the only one that ever recovered. Mentally it was a tragedy I think really that he ever recovered because the people that knew him said he was a vegetable after that.

What about malaria? Was there many cases of that? Did you ever get malaria?

Yes. I think everyone had malaria.

Did you religiously take your tablets?

Atebrin ...

And you still got it?

Yes, still got it. After all Atebrin was only a suppressant. Atebrin would stop you getting malignant tertian malaria, which was the bad one but if you took the other you wouldn't get xxx or the benign - everyone would get benign tertian, you only suppressed it. And six weeks after you stopped taking it you'd come out in malaria, which I did.

But what did happen with lack of vegetables and fruit and that sort of thing? I mean, did everybody ...

We got a little bit of pawpaw, and odd amount of bananas - not very much. We had a lot of tins. When we were up there we weren't on iron rations so much then because we had bread, but we got tinned vegetables. The tinned vegetables we got would be - we were at the end of the line - so we would get, not the asparagus and beans and peas, but we got the tinned cabbage ... (laughs)

Potatoes?

No, I don't think we got potatoes, no. Baked beans and M&V - meat and vegetables. But the cabbage was so bad that when it was delivered and we were starving, the troops would throw it in the fire and keep it down until it blew up.

You were all thin at that time.

Mmm, pretty thin.

But you didn't lose that many people when you come to think of it.

No.

You lost the three of scrub typhus. I was looking at the war diary in the War Memorial and at the end of the war there, well, coming towards the end of the time, I believe you were at Wau I think. Colonel Bretherton wrote up the illnesses that the unit had had since they arrived in New Guinea. He listed all the hospital cases and what they were and also the people that had died. Just after he'd listed it another one died. His name was Private Bevan,

of scrub typhus, which made three. Men from your unit. Where did you go next from Wau? Did you go straight ...

We went to Lae and I think after from Lae we came home, evacuated back to Australia.

And where did you go then?

I was transferred to another unit - terrible unit - in Bougainville. Went straight back to Bougainville. And I went from the best unit I've ever been into to the worst.

What happened there?

Well, our troops were in action against the Japs in Bougainville and we had this militia unit and having been in an AIF unit all the time where the spirit was so high and everything, we went into a militia unit - which is nothing against the militia unit part - except the morale and spirit was at the lowest possible ebb. They were terrible. I had a lot of surgery to do.

So you came back after that. And were you discharged after the war or did you stay in?

No, I stayed in until I could get my discharge. I was the CO of an AGH then in Bathurst for a while.

Right. And is there anything else that you can remember from New Guinea that you can tell about the 9th Field Ambulance?

That was up at the Rigo Road ... Where was the other thing they went to first ... it's not on, is it?

Yes, it's going. Rigo Road and there is Wampit and Tsili Tsili and various other places. Where did you go first? You went to Rigo Road first didn't you?

Yes.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW