ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: JOHN RAINBOW - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN RAINBOW

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, Tape 17A, dated 17.5.1991 and talking to Mr John Rainbow. This is side 1.

Where were you born and when?

Where was I born? I was born in Chatswood, Sydney, in 1924 - twenty-sixth of May.

Did you grow up around there?

Until I was about seven and then I went to Manly, where I lived until 1936 when I was sent to boarding school in Bathurst at St Stanislaus College where I stayed till 1940. Came back from Bathurst in 1940 and went to live with my mother in Mosman. In December, 1941 I remember well the Japanese declaring war and attacking Pearl Harbour and I at the age of seventeen went up to my father with the newspaper and said, 'Read that and sign this'. He looked at me and said, 'Don't be a bloody fool'. He said, 'If you can get your mother to sign it, I'll think about it'. Anyway, I went and saw my mother - my mother and father were divorced - and I think I was causing a bit of difficulties in the home and she was sort of glad to get rid of me and so she said yes she'd sign. I went back to my father with her signature on the form, and he looked at me rather quizically, signed it and I went off to Martin Place with the form signed.

I remember clearly going up into the building that they had put up where that rather strange looking fountain is there now, and handing a document over and this fellow saying to me after he'd eyed me over, 'Seventeen I'd say not nineteen, still if your parents have signed it on your way'. And I went out to the showground and I was enroled as a transport driver and I spent about four weeks getting my licence in Sydney Showground, attached at that particular time to a company called the 2nd Ambulance Car Company. After I got my license I was sent out to Cowra to do my initial training. We were only there four weeks when we were entrained back to Sydney and found ourselves as a nucleus of the 209th General Transport Company.

After two days we were sent to Brisbane and then up to Townsville where we met up with the rest of our unit and then we went - most of those fellows came from South Australia and Melbourne, Victoria. And we went by train out to Mt Isa and our first quarters out there were the old miners barracks and then we were put out onto a spot on the Leichhardt River, where we had to build our own camp. And after we'd been there and set ourselves up after a few days the first convoy set off to go to Larrimah which was about 300 miles south of Darwin.

For nine months we went backwards and forwards, did some very interesting trips. One I remember going out to Brunette Downs

with a load of aircraft fuel for the planes that were coming in from the Philippines and Singapore with big brass on them. And they had to have somewhere to land and refuel and Brunette Downs had an airstrip and was one of the places that ... Well we were there for nine months - it was a very rugged nine months too. Conditions were dreadful and we were near enough to front-line troops and I think back on it now with a little sort of shiver runs up my spine when I think that each soldier had ten rounds of ammunition and to each convoy which was comprised of thirty trucks, there was one old Bren gun with two belts of ammunition. If the Japanese had come through they would have walked down and that was the type of equipment that was right throughout the Northern Territory at that time - absolutely dreadful.

Food supplies were dreadful and our food was very, very minimal and, anyway, we survived and of course, you know. And the only consolation about it was that while we were there there was always supplies of beer in the Mt Isa pubs and we could go down into the pub when we got back from our trip - which took incidently fourteen days return trip to Larrimah, the roads were so terrible. We carted up all the bitumen, we carted up barbed wire, we carted up food supplies. It was five day up, one day rest, five days back, then two days maintenance and then one day at the pub.

> So what you were actually doing you were carting the materials for road from Darwin to Alice Springs, were you?

Some of that and also supplies to Darwin itself. The railway line comes down to Larrimah. Because Darwin itself as a port was blocked by the Japanese raids they were landing all their supplies into - that came from America particularly - into Townsville, railing them across to Mt Isa. We were the first unit there then eventually there were three or four other American units came in with us taking the supplies across up to ... we carted all the bitumen for the north south road, we carted bulldozers up in our trucks. And the trucks were grossly overloaded and then we had lift buggies with D6 tractors on them and I mean they could just make the journey, that was about all.

It was a period of great strain on us all because I was a very young fellow, a lot of the fellows were bus drivers in the unit. We were a pretty happy group of fellows and we put up with the lack of supplies and things, you know what soldiers are like you don't really think you are doing a war effort, I mean, you just think, crikey, this something that a period of my life I've got to live through, you know? But I think we did probably a pretty good job at that time.

We were sent back down to Brisbane to re-equip because our trucks were just about finished after nine months of what we had been doing. And then one platoon of thirty men - the company was over strength - were sent up to Townsville and I

was amongst that group. We stayed up in Townsville ... that was from December, 1941 till about May, 1942, yeah that's right, May, 1942 ... sorry, December '42 to May 1943. I could see that we were getting bogged down in Townsville and I was going to spend the rest of my war there and I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about that I wanted to get overseas and drinking in the pub one day down in Townsville, I can't remember for the life of me which fellow I ran into but some guy, and he said, 'Oh yeah'. He was from 9th Field Ambulance and they were short of an ambulance driver. So I went to my lieutenant, a fellow by the name of Arthur Watson and said, you know, could I get a release if I could get on the strength of this and he said sure, you know, no problem at all. So I got paraded before Colonel Bretherton at the Oonoonba Staging Camp and he said, 'If you can get a release'. I said, 'Well I've got permission, you know, if you want it in writing or you can ring him'. Anyway, he rang Arthur Watson and the next thing I knew I was transferred over the 9th Field Ambulance and went on strength there, I think around about the end of May, 1942 just two or three days prior to their embarkation to New Guinea.

That would have to be '43 wouldn't it?

'43, I keep saying '42, yes '43. And I think it was the Duntroon that we sailed overseas on. I remember amongst the other soldiers on that ship were the 2/2nd Commando Squadron. It was a tremendously overcrowded ship but we managed. It was rough, very uncomfortable journey and four or five days it took us to get to Port Moresby. And I remember clearly getting in there. They had a big arch over the wharf with 'Abandon hope all yea who enter here'. Oh it was ... we were put onto to trucks and taken out to Rigo Road. And I stayed out there for, I think around about six or eight weeks, by my time ... But one of the jobs I had while I was out there - which wasn't a great thing - was to man a water pump down on the ... I'm not sure of the name of the river that runs into Port Moresby the ... not the Lakekamu the ... anyway, whatever the name of the river was, it was about a mile away from our camp and ...

Was that Rouna Falls was it?

We that was up on the early part of the beginning of the river, we were down at Rigo Road, halfway towards the estuary running out to sea.

It's not the same river is it, or is it?

Yes. And we had to pump water up. Adjoining our camping area was an American mule pack outfit, the 98th Mule Pack Outfit. And they had artillery, light artillery and ...

What packed on mules?

Yeah. And when I was sent down to the water pump by Bill Peters - I think he thought it was a good place to get rid of me actually.

Was it a hand pump was it?

No, no it had a motor and I was a very good swimmer and the problem with the pump was that when it was working it would drag slush up out of the river and used to block up and it flowed very quickly. And whoever was looking after it had to dive down, grab, get onto the pump, clean it - the intake - and then let yourself go and the river was flowing very quickly and they had three steel cables across and when you came to the top you grabbed one and you made sure you didn't ... and pulled yourself into the shore. The two American guys who were down there were really nice fellows and I became very friendly with them and one day Bill Peters came down to inspect our job and found me out with these two American guys catching butterflies and he wasn't impressed, [laughs] so he made some arrangements with the Americans that they would run our pump as well as theirs and I was taken back on strength. Then some time after that we went ... we used to work out on gravel pits for a while to get fit and then we cut timber for some rebuilding of the AGH. They were doing all sorts of things to keep us occupied.

What about the mad mile, did you have a mad mile there?

Not that I can recall, no, I don't think so.

You know what I'm talking about?

The run?

Yes, the obstacle course.

Yes, but I was never involved in it. Maybe the fellows were doing that when I was down on the water pump, I'm not too sure, [laughs]. Anyway, we were then as a group, twenty-five thirty of us, were sent to Bulldog and we went on a little coastal boat called the Muliana up the Gulf of Papua. And on a wet, dull morning we pulled up and naval landing barges came along side and we had to jump down the ... go down the rope ladders and jump into these barges. And I recall many of the fellows being sea sick and once one started to get sea sick well everyone got sick because of it was ... we were squeezed in like ... sandwiched into the barges and we ended up I don't know how many hours it took us to get up to Terapo.

Terapo, I have never ever struck a worse place in my life. The mosquitoes were unbelievable. It was like if you can envisage flies around a dead body out in the country, well, these were the mosquitoes all day, not just at night time. We used to sit under our mosquito nets, it was a dreadful place. And we had about two or three days there until the barges were equipped for us to go up on the barges. During that time the doctors

gave quite a bit of attention to the natives who were all suffering from skin diseases, skin rashes and things. And it was quite amusing actually, I can remember at times when they would put stuff on them it would sting and they thought we were burning them, you know, and they'd race away and dive in the water to stop the stinging. We saw one girl there who was covered with scars and they told us that she had been taken by a crocodile and buried on the opposite side of the river. Apparently it's a habit of a crocodile to bury and let the carcase, or whatever it is, decay. And she fainted when the crocodile took her and it thought she was dead and buried her in the side of the river bank and her arm was out and it moved and they went across in their lakatoys and brought her back and there she was walking around the camp.

We were about three days going up the Lakekamu River. The only real thing of importance that I remember on that was our guards running onto a snag and being a good swimmer I was volunteered to swim down with a cable and attach it to another bigger snag down the river and the barge was winched off. During that period, while I was sitting on the log, I started to realise what a rather dangerous position I was in and I was glad when the barge eventually swung off and came back upstream and picked me up and we went up to ... I can't remember the places where we stayed on the way they were just little platforms really, very uncomfortable and we were I think after probably three days we got to Bulldog where we set up camp.

We took over from another unit, I can't even remember the name of other unit that was there before us, and ...

I do have that on record here.

And from there I acted as ambulance driver with three or four other fellows.

What sort of ambulances?

They were Jeep ambulances. They comprised of a driver's seat and behind the driver a medical orderly. There was room for a stretcher along beside the driver and the orderly and then a frame work with another room for two other stretchers up above that. We ... well I had never drove an ambulance with them filled upstairs but certainly on many an occasion I had fellows who were injured in various types of accidents. The worst I remember was one of the fellows going over, in a truck, over the side of the mountain - I don't know how many hundred feet he fell down - and how he survived I would never know. We had to bring him up from down in the gully and then we took him up to Wau because they had much better medical facilities up there than what we had down in Bulldog.

The Bulldog road was complete by that time, was it?

Oh yes, yes it was running right through to Wau. It was never an efficient road as such and it could never be maintained as a road. It was all, the major part of it, was benching and you could see on two or three occasions I recall, planes flying below us through the gorges and we were up. Very, very cold, it was up 11,000 feet.

Did you go through the mossy forest?

Yes, yes the mossy forest was a place of ... a weird area with the mists which were continuously there and the natives - the Kukukukus - would sometimes appear through these mists and it was like a Walt Disney cartoon or something. It was so mysterious looking, they in themselves with their strange garb and strange appearance and with background of the mists of the mossy forest, it was quite a strange place.

Did they ever attack you at all, the Kukukukus?

No, but they used to come into our camp down at Bulldog and raid it on occasions and mostly I think they were going for trinkets, they had no idea of the value. They were in those days very much untouched by white people, we were the first people and of course they were most impressed. But on one particular occasion Maurice Kilkeary and I were driving along and these fellows appeared out on the road and they stood across the road and he and I were both petrified, we didn't know what to do. We didn't want to shoot them or anything. So I said to Maurice well I'm just going to gun the thing and we'll go through and the next thing we heard a rattle in the back of our Jeep and they'd some bows and arrows in, which they were wanting us to barter for something else but we had the bows and arrows and we weren't going back, no way. We didn't really have a great deal of close contact with them because they were very frightened of us and we were equally concerned about them coming too close to us.

So where were you actually based at that time or were you moving up and down the Bulldog road?

Well, we were based sometimes at Centre Camp and sometimes at Bulldog and we used to vary our position.

Was there anything at Dead Chinaman?

Not that I can recall. No I don't recall anything there.

Do you recall the name?

Slightly, but it's not, you know, I looked at it there and I know that I must have been there because if that's the ...

Well it's on the road, that's why I put it down, that's all.

Yes, I don't recall it as a place. No, it meant nothing to me that but obviously I went through it. Centre Camp was a very primitive camp there was nothing much there just a waterfall running down beside it I can remember and ...

Were there any huts?

Tents, yes ... tents or huts? You're asking a question there that I'm not sure of.

So what about Bulldog, were there native huts or tents there?

Well yes, no we had huts there and quite comfortable huts they were up about four feet from the ground and thatched with palm leaves I presume. And we had a big dining room, recreation room and a hospital that I suppose had about twenty beds in it. And we treated natives as well as soldiers and on one occasion I remember being roped into work in the hospital because there was nothing to do with the ambulance and looking after a native who'd died from malaria and ...

Did you contract malaria at all?

Yes I did, twice. I had BT and MT malaria and also dysentery. At one particular stage I was flown out from ... back down to Port Moresby.

From where?

From Bulldog in a RAAF two-engine plane, I don't ... one of the very primitive planes I recall.

What was the airstrip like at Bulldog?

Oh it was just a dirt strip there was nothing terribly elaborate and it wasn't used a great deal. We used to get air mail, our mail in and things like that, probably once a fortnight or something, you know, stuff used to come through.

And what about at Wau what was the airstrip like there?

At Wau airstrip was by comparison a much better strip. It was on the side of a hill and it was quite a hairy strip, you know, the planes would land going uphill and take off running downhill. But we were on the Bulldog road for about four months, five months and then we were withdrawn up to Wau and Moss Kilkeary and I were the last vehicle over. They insisted an ambulance should be last just in case anyone was injured or anything like that. And the engineers blew up all the bridges on the way and closed the road completely. And we drove up and into Wau, I wouldn't remember what time of the year it was, probably around about December I would imagine.

Who had been your commanding officer during the time you were at Bulldog?

Captain Clipsham.

You didn't have a transport officer?

No, no well there was only a few of us there, I think four or five. We had, I think, three ambulances and there might have been six of us but no more.

What about medical orderlies can you remember who was a sergeant, who was a warrant officer?

No, frankly I can't, no.

And you can't remember any of the medical orderlies? I suppose Maurice Kilkeary was a medical orderly?

Moss Kilkeary, Moss was yeah, and ... was George Reeves ... I've got all the names listed down but frankly I couldn't remember them.

Is there anything else you can remember about the Bulldog road and working up and down it? I mean for instance, roughly have you got any idea how many casualties you would have shifted in the four months you were there?

Oh yes, it wasn't a great number. I imagine probably fifteen to twenty, it wasn't a great number. We were mostly treating people who were sick there, you know, thank God there weren't too many injuries on the road, when there were they were mostly injuries from the engineering units that did ... had natural types of accidents that occur and we serviced them.

And when you got down to Wau then were you working as an ambulance from there?

Yes, but really a lot of my work when I was there seemed to be running as a messenger boy between Wau and Lae. I did the trip I don't know how many times, twelve or fifteen times I suppose, at least, going down picking up supplies from Lae the unit had a detachment in Lae. When we needed certain supplies I would be sent down to go across on the barge from Labu to Lae and go over to the unit, pick up the stuff and come back. And I recall on one particular time being sent down to pick up fresh food for the hospital - fresh meat and butter.

Real butter?

Yes, yes and I had all this stuff in the back of the Jeep and it was all packed in ice and I'm not sure if it was going to go to the hospital or the officers' mess but anyway it didn't get to either because I got it halfway along the road and there was an engineering camp there and they'd put a thing across the

road - and the road I might add was a very narrow bush track - and I went into the engineering camp and said what's, you know, I've got to get through with ... and they said, 'You won't be going through for five or six days mate'. And I said, 'I've got all this fresh meat in the thing'. 'What about we have a barbecue?' [laughs] We better signal the unit and let them know and so that the ... there was only eight of them there and second lieutenant signalled up that I was caught there and we didn't ask what to do with the meat when I got up the colonel was very disgusted but there wasn't much he could do about it. And we'd had a great old feast.

Did you have much to do with Lieutenant Colonel Bretherton at all?

Not a great deal. He was a rather a brusque sort of fellow and my first introduction to the unit, actually, was rather a bad one with him. The night before we embarked we were on a closed camp and I'd been in Townsville for quite a while and had some friends amongst the civilians there particularly a girl who I was a bit keen on. And I thought I'd duck into town I can easily get in and anyway I did get into town all right and coming back I got on the train which only ran to Oonoonba station and there were two other fellows from the 9th Field there and they were a bit full and the guard was remonstrating with them as to whether they could get on the train or not and I said, 'Oh don't worry them' to the guard, you know, I said, 'Look, I'll make sure they were all right'. But unfortunately while this was going on the MPs had seen the bit of a ruckus that was going on. And - I hadn't had a drink - they came over and said, you know, 'What's going on here?'. And I said, 'These two fellows are from my unit and we're a bit drunk, you know, but I'll make sure they get back to camp all right'. I went to walk away and they said, 'Have you got your leave pass?'. And none of us had leave passes. I said, 'Look we came back to camp, you know'. Anyway, they lumbered us into their van and took us out to wherever the military gaol was and I kept saying, 'Look we're sailing tomorrow morning'. 'Oh you should have thought of that before you left, you know'. And all this sort of rather ... they took us back to camp about ten o'clock in the morning and the colonel was furious. We got paraded before him and but the one thing he was also furious was when I put my bit in that we'd been, you know, they'd just sort of taken their time and I'd told them that we were embarking and they didn't hurry themselves. And he abused them, ticked them off and then he ticked us off too. But he was all right, I got on all right with him other than that.

What about Captain Clipsham?

Oh, he was a nice man, I liked him very much. He seemed to like me quite a deal too and also Captain Richards. And I worked on a number of occasions, even though I wasn't a medical orderly, in the operating theatre and I think some of the guys

used to get a bit sick and it didn't worry me at all for some reason.

Is this at Bulldog?

At Bulldog, yeah. And I remember the first time it happened I was asked to sterilise all the instruments and Clipsham was doing all the operating and Richards was doing the anaesthetic. And I had over in the corner of the operating theatre - which was a tent - a little bunsen burner going boiling the instruments up and Clipsham looked over and said, 'Turn that bloody fire off you'll blow this fellow out of the place'. [laughs] And of course he was filling him up with ether and ten feet away I had a bunsen burner going, boiling the instruments. But the operations were mostly ... oh, repairing of accidental cuts ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Mr John Rainbow side 2.

When you went down to Wau you said you were going back and forth to Lae but did you do any ambulance driving in that area?

Oh, yes several times we had calls from various units for people who were injured or on one particular case a fellow committed suicide and I had to pick up his body and bring it back to camp for an autopsy.

Was that one of your unit?

No, no he was from an infantry battalion that was in the nearby area.

Did you run across the Japanese at all?

No, no I never had any contact at all with Japanese. We were well away from any front-line involvement in my particular part in the war.

Any bombing?

Not really, no, nothing like that. No it was a pretty peaceful sort of a war as far as I was concerned. To a great degree a lot of it was very boring excepting that someone had to be behind the lines and doing things. Originally I understand that the road between Bulldog and Wau was intended for an infantry advance but it was never was utilised in that way. It took more effort to get a gallon of petrol up there or a gun up there than it was worth. Someone worked out that to get a forty-four gallon drum of petrol from Port Moresby up through Bulldog to Wau you used forty gallons, so it didn't become much

of a proposition, which I think is one of the reasons they destroyed the road. Anyway, I was eventually sent from Wau down to Lae and ...

Were you on a truck or on the ambulance?

On an ambulance. And I was down there only about three months when I had a letter from my father saying that he had been sent by the Department of Supply to England - that was in 1944 - and he wanted me to come down to sign some documents - witness some documents for him. I approached Captain Clipsham and he gave me permission, so I flew out of Lae in September 1944 back to Sydney and that was really the last I saw of the 9th Field Ambulance.

My only contact with anyone during the war after that was with a fellow by the name of Herb Taylor who I met when I was in Camperdown in the showground and he was there also waiting to come back. And we were approached by ... a whole group of us standing around and they came and announced that they wanted anyone who was accustomed to public speaking to put their names ... step forward, you see. I looked at Herb and he looked at me and I thought, well I'd been in the university debating club so I stepped forward and he followed. And it turned out that they wanted fellows to go on a war loan campaign and there used to be a soldier, sailor, an airman and a nurse, we were going around ... and a civilian compere. And we'd go around all the various establishments, public service offices and factories relating and recounting our experiences of the war and why people should invest money in war bonds. And it was quite a racket actually, and I was sold that for three months. We used to ... oh, I won't go into the funny details about that period. [laughs] I did have one very funny experience, Herb and his family lived in Surry Hills. In those days it was a very rough and tough sort of place. And they had a house with earthen floors and we used to stay there and we used to sleep in a double bed because we had to congregate each morning up near St. Phillips Church. And he had one civilian compere who was a great mate, he was a fellow who I had, and I don't know I suppose we were just having a few beers one night and we sort of dropped the thing that we used to sleep together, you see. But you know as a soldier that was nothing it never dawned on us that these two were queers and they of course thought that by the virtue of the fact that we slept together we were too and they asked us out for dinner this night and then asked us to come home. They filled us up with grog and Herb and I thought this was good we're getting ourselves a tummy full of grog for nothing and we lay out on the couch - we decided it was too far to walk from Rushcutters Bay over to Redfern to Herb's place - we'd spend the night there. The next thing these guys tried to get into to bed with us [laughs] and Herb and I both went for our lives and it the most extraordinary experience. That was the only time really that I ever had anything like that happen to me but I never wanted it to happen again.

Anyway, I spent the last nine months of the war out in the hospital out at Punchbowl which was ... I was out there as a medical orderly come driver and ...

Had you had any training as a medical orderly?

Only what I'd done up at Bulldog with Captain Clipsham and Captain Richards. But I was quite competent, I could do what they wanted, give injections, take blood pressure and take temperatures and assist in operations. Things that were all basic, of course, but you know.

It always amazes me, I mean people like George Warneke was a cook and so when he comes back out of the 9th Field Ambulance and I asked him what he'd been doing and he said, 'I was in the 9th Field Ambulance'. So they immediately assume that he's got training as a medical orderly and the next thing he's doing the same sort of thing.

Yes, well that was the way it sort of went and it didn't do much for you but it gave you a job. And then the war ended and my father knew - I don't know who he knew - but eight days after the war ended there wasn't any problem with points with me. My discharge came through and so I got out of the army and went back into the rag trade.

You weren't in the rag trade before the war because you were still at school or university?

No, I was doing a night course at the university, economics, and I was working just as a ... measuring materials and ...

Oh your father was in the business?

Yes, he had a clothing business and that started off. He died not long after the war and I was left with the business that I took over and ran very successfully.

So looking back over where you variously where during the war there's places like Sunshine, Wampit, Bulolo and Zenag, now did you stay at those places or did you just pass through?

No, I only drove through, we only had small clearing stations there, you know, a tent and a couple of orderlies.

Were any of them operational when you were through there?

Yes, yes you'd call and say g'day as you were going through. It used to take about a full day to drive from Wau down to Labu which was on the ... I imagine the southern side of the river at Lae.

So is there anything more that I should have asked you?

I don't think so, I think that I've covered pretty well a year and a half of my life.

Okay, thank you very much Mr John Rainbow.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW