ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE:	LESTER ROSE - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR
INTERVIEWEE:	LESTER ROSE
INTERVIEWER:	RICHARD RAXWORTHY
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START OF TAPE

Identification: I am talking to Mr Lester Rose. This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance AIF Oral History Project. Tape 19B. This is 5.6.1991.

Where were you born and when, Mr Rose?

Scone, November 1920.

Did you grow up around there?

Yes, and I still live there.

Did you go to school there?

Yes, I spent the whole of my life there.

Did you like school? Is there anything you were good at?

I left school when I was fourteen because I could get a job. It was just after the Depression and work was the most important thing. I left at fourteen.

Was your father in work during the Depression?

My father was in permanent work during the Depression but he reared six children and there wasn't too much to spare I can assure you.

So was the Depression one of the things that influenced you during your life?

Only that it was a good lesson that we shouldn't forget, that's all. I think it stays with you forever. We were never in trouble, we were never hungry or anything like that but there was no money to throw about and I think you remember that forever.

So what were you working at when you first left school?

I went into a grocer's shop straight from school and was there till the army days and I returned to that immediately after, back to the same job.

And you were called up in the first place or did you volunteer originally?

Originally called up, yes.

And where did you go when you were called up?

To Rutherford.

To which unit?

The 1st Field Ambulance.

And can you remember what it was like there at that time when you were first called up?

Oh, it was a new life, different life, but I think we enjoyed it. We had a lot of fun. We didn't take things too seriously for a while but eventually we thought we'd better do something about it.

Why did you end up in the 1st Field Ambulance, do you know?

We were just allocated to the 1st Field.

It wasn't a matter of choosing to be a non-combatant?

No, no.

And when you got there who was your commanding officer, do you remember?

Colonel Brown.

What was he like?

He was a good old fellow; he loved sport. I mean, it was interesting that we could pursue any sporting activities which was not always possible.

And at Rutherford what sort of equipment was there when you first arrived there? Did they have a full set of ambulances and that sort of thing?

It was a working hospital for the surrounding area. It was the hospital unit actually on the hill at Rutherford and there was all things - infectious tents and those sort of things and several wards. A pretty busy place really.

And what about ambulances?

Yes, they had a transport unit attached and the necessary ambulances and so forth.

Can you remember what sort of vehicles they had?

Not really, no.

It wasn't like the 9th Field Ambulances, it had horses.

No, we didn't have any horses (laughs). That was a long time ago I'll bet.

No kidding, in 1941 they still had horses.

Did they.

In '40 anyway. How long were you at Rutherford before you moved on ... a year?

It was a bit over a year.

Did you volunteer at any stage or ...

Yes. We volunteered and were transferred to the 9th.

Did the 1st cease to exist at that time?

Not entirely but I don't think it lasted a great while just the same. I don't know much about the 1st really after that.

And where were the 9th when you were transferred to there?

St Ives.

Exactly where at St Ives?

I don't know. I didn't know much about Sydney and there was just an old house that had been converted, a big place, and obviously it was an army unit that was ...

Sounds like the Green Toad to me.

That rings a bell. (laughs)

That was a private hotel or a boarding house of some sort.

Yes, that would be it. It was a two-storey place.

And how long did you stay there? Did you go down to Frenchs Forest at all?

No, no, we weren't very long there and we transferred ... I'm not just sure. I think we moved from there after a few weeks and we moved to Narellan and within a few days we were on the train going north.

Is there anything particular that happened during that time on the train?

Not on the train, it was just a train trip. But a group of us had gone to the showground to stamp new meat tickets for us - identification tickets - and on the way back, our transport didn't call for us, and on the way back we were involved in an accident and Private Jack Woods was standing next to me and was killed and I was injured and I was sixteen weeks in hospital.

An accident on what?

We were on the tram and an American truck crashed against a car that was parked and slammed up against the side of the tram.

And where exactly was this?

It was in front of the Valley Funeral Parlour.

In Brisbane?

That's Fortitude Valley if I remember rightly. And of course I missed the unit. I was sixteen weeks away then. I went down through the lines. I was only a short while at Greenslopes because there were a lot of casualties coming back from the islands and I spent, if I remember rightly, four weeks in Greenslopes, five in Baulkham Hills and nine in Goulburn.

You had quite extensive injuries then.

I had a badly damaged leg which I couldn't walk so I couldn't go anywhere. I was on crutches for most of the time.

So where was the unit when you caught up with it?

I caught up with it at Oonoonba in June '43 and they were there for a short while and then we sailed for Moresby.

Right. When you got to Moresby where did you go? ... Incidentally, the day you got to Moresby, can you remember what it was like there? Did you see the air-raid?

No. It was nothing that I can recall. It was unusual. It was just a new settlement, a new area.

And where did you move in?

We went up to, I think, Lux Lane. Rigo Road, we were at that for a while but we were camped well out of town.

What was Rigo Road like?

Oh, the usual bush army camp. Make your own beds. Tents with beds on stilts, you know, and that sort of thing. Forks built up to make it more comfortable.

What about Lux Lane, was that different?

There was less at Lux Lane. It was duck-board type of thing and we didn't have too many amenities there. We didn't expect too much either I suppose.

I had heard that Lux Lane had been a dysentery camp hospital. Did you know anything about that?

No.

Was there any sickness around up there?

Nothing unusual, no. A bit of malaria and those sort of things. There was always a bit - I wouldn't say dysentery - diarrhoea occasionally but nothing ...

When you came from the 1st Field Ambulance to the 9th, did you bring any of your officers with you? Any of the doctors?

Yes, I think John Elliott. I can't recall any others.

John Elliott came along later. He was in the 15th and a number of other field ambulances.

Yes. Look, I can't recall any doctors that ... there were. I've got an idea John Sands might have gone but he died after.

And when you went to New Guinea which company were you in and what were your officers then, and your sergeants if you remember?

John Elliott was our company officer.

That was at Wau.

Yeah.

But before that, in Moresby?

I'm not sure. Fred Seaborn was our sergeant.

Were you A Company, B Company or Headquarters?

I don't remember to be truthful.

Were both you and your brother together at that time?

Yes. In the usual army tradition, I claimed him from another unit just before we went away.

Right. I wasn't in the army myself, I was in the air force and also I was in the air force in England and there the rule was the opposite: two of the same family couldn't be in the same unit.

Well, you could claim a younger brother. As far as I know you couldn't claim an older brother sort of thing. But I don't know what ground it was.

No, they had a rule there that you couldn't be in the same unit.

Go on. Well, we had two sets of brothers and a friend of mine had his brother come to the same unit too.

So can you remember anything more about Lux Lane or Rigo Road?

Not really.

What about the movement to Wau? Can you remember going ...

That was very interesting. We went down the coast - a good number of us - down the coast on an island trader, a thing that drew ... a short draught thing so it could get in close. We had an interesting experience getting over the bar to go up the Lakekamu River. The thing hit bottom, hit the sand, so everybody was ordered down the back so the front could ride over and then everybody up the front so the back would come over. And we stayed in a staging camp along the side and the mosquitoes were an inch long, I know that.

We went up the river in barges, extremely hot. And when we got up into the higher country, we got there very dirty from the dust and so forth ... no, that was after we got into the trucks. After the first day it was extremely dusty because we were in a convoy and the only water we had was running off the side of a waterfall down the side of the mountain and it was freezing cold. There were some very quick showers that night I can remember.

And then we continued on over the high Bulldog Road which was a bit hair-raising but it was very interesting because there's not many places you can look straight down or straight up and we did plenty of that and with two forty-four gallon drums of petrol in the trailer behind us and one forty-four in the jeep. One passenger to each jeep, a forty-four of petrol and two in the trailer behind.

No accidents?

Not to speak of, no. Of course they were not trying to break any records, it was just a matter of getting there.

What about the Mossy Forest, do you remember that?

Yes, yes. We got warned not to walk away from the vehicle because we might walk on moss that was only covering a hole up. But it was, it was extremely interesting.

So when you arrived down the other side, do you remember any other incidents before you got to Wau?

Not of any consequence, no. We went down long the river and, I don't know how they knew, but there was alluvial gold and we were quite interested in getting a look at that and I finished

up with a dress ring made from Bulolo gold which I've still got.

How did you get that?

One of my friends moulded it and filed it off with a ten inch file. (laughs)

And who was that?

Keith Smith. Keith has since died actually but he was handy at that sort of thing.

He wasn't one of the ones that was selling it to the Americans, was he?

Not that I know of, no. But he might well have been.

Did you hear of any plans to sell them phoney gold rings?

No. (laughs) I must be too honest for that.

I've heard stories.

I wouldn't be surprised.

I've heard stories that they threatened to bomb you.

No, I didn't hear that, no.

You heard no stories, no. Well, when you got to Wau can you remember what it was like there?

Yes. We went into camp not far from the ANGAU official buildings on a slope off the end of the airstrip. It was pretty rugged country. Except for the airstrip there wasn't much flat country about.

Was it mentioned why you went by the Bulldog Road rather than by plane?

Not that I recall. It was just the way we were told to go actually as far as I'm concerned.

Had the road been built long when you got there?

Not a great while, no.

Did it remain there open for long after you got there?

Oh yes, yes. To my mind it was still operating when we left really.

And what about at Wau, what do you remember about that? ... football, fitness?

There were a lot of units about there of course. Further down at Bulolo there was one very interesting thing. We were a fairly successful football team and our CO challenged one of the battalion teams down the river and we got word that we couldn't go down because the road was closed. But our CO sent a load of patients down-river that day and we were able to play our game of football. Just as well if it hadn't happened really because my brother and I bet rather heavily on ourselves and foolishly we let the other fellow hold the bet and we never saw him again.

Were you in the team?

Yes.

Can you remember who was the coach?

Well John Elliott would have been I would say and Fred Seaborn was the captain.

He was the sergeant and John Elliott was the captain.

Yeah.

Captain coach and captain.

John Elliott was heard to say up there that eventually we would go down to Lae and we would challenge anybody at Lae and we would come back and have a game on the ... I think he said the Sydney Cricket Ground. He was Newcastle of course. It could have been the sports ground at Newcastle but it was going to be a very select game, but we never got around to that anyhow. Things stopped us but he was very keen on our prowess as footballers and he had great things planned for us but that didn't eventuate.

Can you remember his coaching method?

Only that he made us run a lot.

The Mad Mile?

Yes, yes, I'd forgotten about that quite frankly. The Mad Mile was an obstacle course. We were fortunate though because if any of us got hurt at all or appeared to be hurt on Sunday we could have a couple of days off to recuperate and very often some of the boys recuperated from Monday to Friday and then played football again on Saturday or Sunday.

When did they do their washing because Sunday's ...

They'd do that when they were recuperating of course.

Sundays was supposed to be washing day, wasn't it?

Oh well yes, but still, one of the boys in the cookhouse had a fairly good ... he borrowed a bucket and he'd boil some clothes in the cookhouse and unfortunately he'd gone away somewhere and they boiled dry and the cook was heard to look into the bucket and remark, 'Ah, dry cleaning I see'. The CO made us all play some sport, participate, and the Chinese cook was not in very good condition but he went out to play and he put on such a turn for the CO's sake that he was exhausted and collapsed in the kitchen when he got back. And the chap who did the dry cleaning walked past and looked down at him disparagingly at him and he said, 'Die you bastard, die'.

That's Stan Loon I take it.

That was Stan.

What were the cooks like there?

Good cooks, yeah, in the main. I mean you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but they were pretty good. None of us look too badly these days so ...

What was the food like?

Mostly baked beans and quince jam. Still they could brighten it up a bit.

Tinned cabbage?

Yes, I didn't like tinned cabbage so I didn't mention that one.

What about M and V?

Yeah, we always got a bit of that. A bit of bully. I remember that when we were going up the Lakekamu River, I was pretty good on the tooth, my food didn't worry me too much, and it was an extremely hot day. We had our few tins of bully and our biscuits and it came lunchtime and I opened my tin and tipped it out and it ran out into the dixie and I grabbed a biscuit and whipped up some of this stuff and went to put it in my mouth and I said, 'By gee, I feel like this', and Butch Roland said, 'You'd make a bloody dog sick, you would'.

And then we had leave from Wau, a few of us.

What do you mean, back to Australia?

Yeah. Came back. We had thirty-two days actually because we had a bit of accumulated leave and for some strange reason they didn't count the leave that I had after I was in hospital so I got a second bite at the cherry. We had thirty-two days and we took a few extra and we finished up, we didn't go back to the unit ... to the staging camp in Brisbane. It was fifty days - we were about twenty days overdue, eighteen days overdue.

Fortunately we were remanded to our own CO at Wau and he treated us very leniently. Confined us to barracks at Wau for fourteen days. Having just come back from leave himself and he said he realised how hard it was to get away and go back.

They didn't post you as AWOL or anything like that?

Well, that was the charge we got there but we were given the choice of going before the CO at Ascot Staging Camp or be referred to our own CO, which we chose fortunately and it worked out to be the better option.

Did you have much to do with your CO?

Well, yes, a lot because he was very sport-minded. He attended every sporting event and encouraged us and went out of his way to provide sporting activities for us and provide the means to participate.

What was your job in the unit and how did you get trained?

I was a stretcher-bearer and we had lecturers and so forth. I've forgotten most of what I learnt but still.

Thomas splints?

Yes, Thomas splints and, what do you call the ... slings and so forth. Several of us were tied up in slings and Thomas splints and you might as well have been in leg-irons as far as that goes. It was all very interesting. We didn't have a lot to do. The unit was split up actually. You'll find from interviewing other people that a lot of our boys were sent out into isolated areas. One fellow was away ... we didn't see him for nine months.

Do you remember who that was?

It was Jack Harvey who is supposed to be here today. You'll probably interview him later on. But he was in a first aid camp, he was the only white man there looking after the boys on the Kokoda Trail. Anybody that went over that was in trouble at all, there was an RAP there in stages over that area and I think they were disadvantaged a good deal because they were isolated from the rest of us.

There was also the crowd at Nadzab as well and Dumpu. However they were with another unit. They were in the 2/4th there.

Yeah, well as I say they weren't isolated. I know Khaki Campbell was another fellow.

Khaki Campbell, that's a duck!

Well, that's where he got his name I suppose. I couldn't tell you his name but he was Khaki Campbell and he was another one that was away like that for a lot of the time that we were over there.

So when you got back to Wau, you were there for a while before you finally went back to Australia?

Yes, I don't remember exactly how long but it was, you know, a month or two.

And can you remember any other things about Wau? Can you remember home brew for instance? Do you remember anybody who was distilling or ...

Well I do remember that another fellow and I happened to find a full gallon of pure spirits and of course it was pure and very strong. But we managed to find some lemon juice to break it down and we had a tottie every night before we went to bed for a long, long time, just the two of us and any very privileged friends but they had to be very privileged because the supply wasn't limitless.

But some of the supplies of spirits were advertised in the 'Bully Tin'.

Oh yes. It was a very good brew. It was made from many and varied ingredients and ...

Did you contribute any of the ingredients?

Not really, no. I mean I didn't want to be a bootlegger so I just sampled the product when it was free.

Can you remember anything else about Wau that ...

I remember I had my first drink of rum at Wau. I was wounded playing football and I visited John Elliott's quarters the next day and quite frankly I had never tasted rum. And I went in to have a yarn with him because there was no-one else in camp, they were all out in their various duties, and he asked me would I like a rum. I of course accepted in haste. And he said, 'What would you like in it?' and I said, 'Nothing'. And I found rum is a very strong drink but it was very good.

So when you left Wau did you go straight down to Lae?

Yes, to Lae and embarked from there and came back fairly quickly. On one of our trips, I'm not sure whether it was coming home eventually or on leave but we had a lot of tobacco because it was very scarce at home and a lot of cigarettes and we forded the Lakekamu River in what wasn't much more than a canoe with an outboard motor. It took about ten chaps and their gear and there was a train either side of that flooded river and it was transhipped and a friend and I, because we

thought we might like a bit of town across the other side we got on the head of the line, and when we saw what we were being transported in we took a couple of steps back to such an effect that we were on the end of the line by the time we woke up what we were doing. I mean, it was a pretty hair-raising ... there was a chap in the bow of the boat pushing logs away in the flooded water and I'm sure none of us would have survived because we had our full army gear and clutching our bags of goodies and the river was in full flood and if I remember rightly it was the best part of a mile wide. But the got them across and back without any mishaps. I still don't know to this day how, you know, an awkward log I think would have capsized the thing.

As a matter of fact I think I've got a picture somewhere of the Bulldog ferry. Is that what you're talking about?

No, this was at Home Hill here in Queensland, the Burdekin River, as we came back down the coast by train. And it was, it was a hair-raising experience.

So where did you go when you got back?

We came back strangely enough to Rutherford for a few months and then ...

Did you go back to the 1st Field Ambulance?

No, no, the 9th went back to Rutherford and then it was broken up from there. We were transferred to the 1/14th AGH at Goulburn. And we won the football competition that year.

Did the whole team go there?

No, a good few of them did but the team from the AGH that we joined and we were successful in the '45 that would have been.

What were you doing there at Goulburn?

We were wardsmen at the AGH and it was originally a psychiatric hospital but it was transferred to an army hospital but they were handling psychiatric patients who were affected to the extent that you would think it was shell-shock but it was a psychological problem and they were given insulin treatment each morning. Most of us were commandeered to hold them down while they went through their convulsions and so forth when they were coming to. It wasn't the happiest of moments but it was something that had to be done. They were fed insulin in the very early hours of the morning, about four o'clock and they were revived with the sucrose around half past eight or nine.

It's insulin shock treatment.

That wasn't shock treatment ... well I suppose it was insulin shock ... They had electric shock treatment as well but this was insulin treatment. I suppose you'd call it shock treatment.

Some of them refused to do this work.

Yes, but still, it had to be done according to the treatment of the day and I suppose somebody had to do it so we did it. We were busy keeping people confined to rooms and that sort of thing. Some people were locked up in individual rooms. It wasn't a very pleasant part of the army experience but it was something that had to be done I suppose.

So where did you go next?

From there for a short while ... the unit was broken up there and for a short while at AGH at Punchbowl where I was employed in the linen store there and then we were discharged from there. I told you about the accident in ...

Yes. When you came back you went back to grocering and eventually got your own shop.

That's right, yes. Fortunately I was advised by the doctors from the unit that I should apply for a pension because my leg was rather badly damaged and because I'd heard so many tales about taking a long time to have these things considered I reluctantly agreed that perhaps I could do it. They said I'd only be there a day and I was only there a day and I was granted a ten per cent pension which ... I was advised to do that because they said that the leg would very likely come against me eventually and it has. Not to a marked degree but it's a very touchy thing. If I kick it or bump it it causes me severe pain. So I haven't felt the need of applying for more pension, I'm covered if something happens.

Did you get malaria at all when you were in New Guinea or anything else?

No. No, I didn't have any illness at all except for appendicitis.

Where did you get that?

That was in the AGH at ...

END OF TAPE - END OF INTERVIEW