ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: ATHOL ROSE - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: ATHOL ROSE

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

SUMMARY:

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START OF TAPE

Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance, AIF, Oral History Project, Tape 20B, 5/6/1991. Mr Athol Rose.

Where were you born and when, Mr Rose?

I was born in Scone on 23 January 1923.

Did you live there all your life? Are you still living there?

Yes. I had a period of about 10 years away from Scone, from the time that I enlisted and after discharge I had four years in the GPO in Sydney. I went back to Scone in 1951 and I have been there ever since.

Did you enlist with your brother?

No. We were in the national service call-ups. He went in in October and I went in on 31 December, 1941.

Where were you working before the war?

In the Post Office.

You weren't out of work at all during the Depression?

No, never. I didn't start to work until after the Depression. I didn't start to work until 1938, 15 February, 1938.

When you joined up, what unit were you in?

I started off at Maitland Showground in the 16th Motor Regiment, which was a Light Horse unit. We didn't have any affiliation with horses or anything like that, but we wore the plumes in our hats. My first few days after rifle training in the unit, was spent learning the morse code, which I had already been operating while I was in the Post Office, so I had a few days rest for the first few days when I was doing that. And then we went from there to Tea Gardens and from Tea Gardens to a Sig school at Sydney Showground, back to Gresford. The unit had moved to Gresford. We went from Gresford by train to Gympie in Queensland in May. At this stage I'd reached - having done a Sig school in Sydney at Easter, I'd reached an instructoring stage and was not getting the recognition, not even the specialist pay of two bob a day so I got sick and contacted my brother and said you had better claim me. I was sent back to Raymond Terrace at the beginning and then from Raymond Terrace over to Rutherford and Rutherford into the 9th Field Ambulance at St Ives.

So your brother went with you over to St Ives.

Yes, we moved from Rutherford to St Ives together.

Where from St Ives?

Then to Narellan, to reinforce the 9th and from Narellan to Brisbane, to the Ascot Racecourse and we left Brisbane on Boxing Day by train, after he had had his accident he was in hospital. We left then on Boxing Day and were held up by the floods at Rockhampton and then from there on to Ravensworth [Ravenshoe]. Just one little side issue to that is we had another brother in the Engineers and he turned up while we were in Brisbane. His unit, when I went to visit him one weekend, it had disappeared.

We spent five days at Rockhampton, we travelled then to Innisfail and by truck to Ravenshoe and arrived at night time. Next morning when we woke up and lifted the flap of the tent up, the brother who had disappeared from Brisbane was building that camp. He was in the Engineers and they were building the camp 900 miles away. I thought it was quite a coincidence. But we had no idea of where he had gone to. It just happened that the unit had moved out.

You were up in Queensland there, up in Ravenshoe at the time that some of the fellows got in trouble in Townsville, weren't you? Do you remember anything about that?

No, not in detail anyway. If you got together and discussed these things it might prompt the memory. It was a very long time ago. We had six weeks at Ravenshoe and then we had six weeks at Atherton. I was part of the march that went from Ravenshoe to the outskirts of Innisfail and then they picked us up and shifted us. We went to Oonoonba and sat on our tails there for three months then. We weren't allowed our four days leave in Innisfail, we would walk to get it. But we were on a minute's notice but it lasted three months before we eventually sailed and went to Moresby.

What ship did you go to Moresby on, do you remember?

On the Duntroon.

Do you remember an air-raid when you got to Moresby?

Not specifically an air-raid, I cannot. But there was one of our own planes crashed not far from our camp, and wiped out the crew. Only about a mile or so down Rigo Road from where we were.

Were you at Rigo Road first?

Yes. That is where we went to. That was our first stop at Moresby.

What was your job at that stage?

We didn't have any specialist duties. We were rostered for general duties, whatever was going. If they needed somebody to go somewhere or to do something, we were just sent. I had missed out on all of the first aid training because I was doing signalling training at that time. By the time I had caught up to the unit, as I say, I didn't seek promotion because actually I was out of my field. I suppose I was more or less a general duties soldier for the rest of my life. So we went to Goulburn and became nursing orderlies, very much against our will, but we came to enjoy it because it was very educational to work in a mental institution, see the treatment. Over the years it's been quite - it was a revelation then - and it's something that you look back on. We saved ourselves perhaps from going batty, from the amount of entertainment that we had while we were there, and in particular football. We lived for our football.

Did you play football at Rigo Road?

No. We didn't play football until we got to Wau.

What about the mad mile? Was that at Rigo Road?

I can't remember the mad mile so much.

What about at Lux Lane?

No.

Were you in Lux Lane?

Yes. I was up there but I just don't know for how long. I remember being at Lux Lane. We had a river and a sporting field between our camp and our ablutions areas. When we got to Wau, they had the mountain climb which was the subject of a piece of prose by one of our scribes, as was in the 9th Field Bully Tin. I have that copy at home and it's still there. 'Get you even until the mountain tops and does serve penance while companions disport themselves by night'. I remember that little bit of side issue. That was a punishment, you had to climb that mountain. It was punishment.

Were you in the football team too?

Yes. I didn't start to play football actually until I got to Wau. I was a bit fleet of foot and much slimmer than I am these days. They were short of recruits so I started to play there and finished up going right through. I must have earned my keep.

Did Jack Elliott get you into the team?

Yes, I have played with Jack.

He was the coach.

He was the captain coach, yes.

I was part of the reserves at the famous match at Bulolo. I didn't get a run that day, but I was in my football togs on the sideline. I was the fellow that done the punting for them and the bloke disappeared, when it came time to collect, he had gone. So I lost the boy's money that I had put on for the match.

Did you have to fight your way out of that?

No. They helped me look for him and nobody could find him, so they understood, they were a pretty understanding mob. There wasn't a lot of money involved. We didn't have much - six bob a day.

Do you remember going over to Wau?

Yes, we went to Wau, via Bulldog and up the river by barge and then by jeep over through Edie Creek and then to Wau.

Did you go swimming there, at all?

Yes, we did our share of swimming, if you could call it swimming.

Amongst the crocodiles.

There weren't too many at Wau. No, I didn't do any of that swimming in that river. I remember we camped one night and there was a crocodile underneath the hut. It was up on stilts and there was a crocodile underneath the hut during the night but we certainly didn't do any swimming in that water.

Can you remember anything about going over the top, through the mossy forest?

The most noteable point about that was that we were at 9,000 feet, I think was the peak of the Owen Stanley where we went over - whether it was a road hold up or blockage or what, I don't recall the reason - but for some reason we stopped and along the road trudged a friend of ours, or a companion of ours, a townsperson from Scone, that I don't think I have seen since, but I saw him on the top of the Owen Stanley Range. He was in the Engineers and maintaining that road that we have travelled over. It was just a coincidence that you'd run into somebody from your home town in New Guinea and on the Owen Stanley Range.

So when you got down to Wau, what do you remember about that? Do you remember the home brew?

Yes. I remember the home brew, and I remember some of the stronger stuff of home brew too. It was 90 per cent alcohol that we finished up with, but it was very much broken down, of course, but we used to have a nightcap of that occasionally. We have been known to have one or two of those. It was pretty good stuff. The home brew I wasn't so keen on. It didn't attract me. I didn't have a great love for it. You sample these things but you think of your stomach before you think too much of them.

What about gold mining?

I've done a little bit of that. That is Wau gold that I've got on my finger. There was a lot of Sundays put into that, that was how we spent our recreation time when there was no football on. We'd go out and spend the day panning and mucking about out in the open cut, it was quite interesting too, except that it was a bad area to be. We nearly lost one of our fellows. He got the most gold, but he also got scrub typhus and malaria and things.

Who was that?

Jack Brett. We thought we'd lost him two or three nights in a row. The doctors in our unit slept alongside him and each time they thought he wouldn't see the night out but he did survive. Strange to say, when I was working at the GPO in Sydney after the war, I ran into him as a tram conductor on the trams.

What about Bob Sidoti?

I remember, I was at Bob Sidoti's funeral.

Where was he buried?

At Wau [Moresby Bomana Cemetery?]. Pretty close to the football field, actually. I remember being at the funeral.

When you were panning for that gold, what did you do with it then?

You pooled what you had. We did. There was somebody that had the facility, had access to the facility to mould it and then we would make it into our trinkets, you see. That is what I finished up with out of what I did.

Did any of them sell the gold?

Not to my knowledge. If they did, they didn't say anything about it.

None of them were selling it to the Americans.

That's possible, it's possible.

[Tom Kelly]: The dental bloke sold it. The sergeants and corporals had the facilities for moulding and they used to sell it.

As I said, I just didn't recall. Somebody had the facility to make the moulds, I knew that. But it was the dental mechanics. They might have sold a bit. That might have been where the rest of the ring went, Tom [Tom Kelly]. That might have been the price for making it, for moulding it for us.

So do you remember anything else about Wau while you were there?

At the end of that period, one of the features of our stop at Wau - we did have a trip home on leave - we were a couple of the lucky ones.

Were you AWOL with your brother?

Yes. Guilty, Your Honour! But when we ended up there, we had a sporting carnival and ran a tote on it and all this sort of thing and there was going to be great distributions of prize money. But after extending from one or two into about five or six days, something happened to the funds. They were canteen funds, but I don't remember seeing them. We were going to get them on the boat coming home, but I never ever saw my share of that.

Who was in charge of the canteen?

I would say Bulla Franklin was part of that, probably Ted Eckles. They were running the gambling side of things, and the prize money was supposed to come out of canteen funds, but I don't know. Keith Pearson was involved in it too, I would think, but I'm not too sure in that. You don't want to be quoted in these things because you might be falsely accusing some of these blokes. But it's all in good fun, we're not saying anything that's detrimental to their characters or anything like that.

What do you do for recreation, apart from sport, at Wau. What did you do for work, for that matter?

Once again, you were general duties. I remember on one occasion, I was half way up the range with a party of the fuzzy wuzzies from there. We must have been out to get firewood or something like that. I just can't recall what I was up there for either, but I know that we were a long way up there and it was very still and very quiet on the top of that mountain. I was quite relieved to get back to the camp because there was nobody else with us. I was there by myself with these fellows. Some of them might have been the kindest people in the world, but they certainly looked ferocious at times.

Did you have anything to do with the Kukukukus around there?

No, no Kukukukus, no.

They were very small, I understand.

I actually didn't see any Kukukukus myself.

They were tribal people, but they hadn't had much to do with European people at all. They were very small and were supposed to be fairly savage.

Yes. I had the good fortune not to run across them.

I understand that before they built the road there, they hadn't seen any Europeans, that particular tribe of people.

This must have come through from Edie Creek. You would have thought perhaps maybe the rangers. You would have thought that, with the settlement that was in New Guinea, and particularly in Wau, that if there was any obscure tribes in that region, you would have thought that they would have seen them.

No. They were above Wau.

Yes. Edie Creek. But then over on to the top of the ranges. I didn't see any in the trip from Bulldog to Edie Creek. I didn't see any then. They could have been there but I didn't see them.

So is there anything else that has stuck in your mind at Wau or after?

I can't just recall anything.

That's rain.

That's rain, yes. I said on the train this morning I thought we might get some rain down here today, but it doesn't look like it now, it's a beautiful blue sky, and there it is, pouring outside.

When I left home this morning it was pouring as well.

Was it? In Sydney. This has caught up. They said it might move up the coast, they expected a few showers.

So what happened to you after that? Did you go straight down to the coast and away to Australia?

Yes. We went from Wau by convoy to Lae. I believe we came back on the Duntroon too. I had a trip on the Kanimbla. I think the other boat that I might have travelled on was possibly the

Westralia. I'm not quite certain of that, but I know that I was on the Duntroon for two and the Kanimbla for one. When we got back to Townsville - I think we came through to Brisbane - but anyway we came to Rutherford and staged there without doing anything very much, from September to late January, before we went on to Goulburn, when the unit was disbanded. We were spread fairly widespread from then on. We suspected we might play a bit of football in Newcastle as a unit but it never came to fruition.

So you went on to Goulburn and that was about it, was it?

As far as the 9th Field Ambulance was concerned, yes. Except the detail that went to Goulburn. There were quite a few. As I say, we had six or seven of our football team from our unit joined in with the AGH at Goulburn and we were fortunate enough to win the Goulburn district comp[etition]. About the notable feature of that was that it was not uncommon to run on to the field at places like Crookwell, when it was snowing. It was a very cold place. I can tell you about Goulburn. We were there for VE Day at Goulburn.

Did you go back to the same job after the war?

Yes, I resumed work in the Post Office. I stayed there for about four or five years and then I went into private business for four years and then I became a Pastures Protection Board secretary and worked for 28 years and then I retired. I got out of the Post Office.

Can you remember anything about your mascot at Wau at all, a dog?

No. I don't know anything about Sheila. This is the first time at any of these functions that I've been to that I have heard the dog mentioned. I really don't recall much about the dog, but in those days if your interests were in - unless it was in looking after or tending the animal - it could have been one of the local inhabitants from the place and not something that we smuggled, apparently, from Australia to New Guinea with us. But I didn't know anything about that.

I suppose there is a sad aspect that might be broached as well as what happened to the dog, because it didn't go back to Australia.

We don't know. Apparently they don't know what happened to it, she just disappeared.

Thank you very much. Is there anything else you can think of, if not, I will say thank you, Mr Athol Rose.

It doesn't seem to be much, but it did fill in quite a large slice of our existence in those days, even though we really didn't get tangled up with the hostilities. Some of us did and

some of us didn't but personally I didn't get very much involved in it. That was either good or bad fortune, I suppose, in lots of ways, but possibly more good than bad. But we were there if we had to be and when we were required. We weren't in actual fact called upon to do too much of the fighting side or in the front-line service.

You were lucky.

I was lucky, yes.

Thank you.

END OF TAPE - END OF INTERVIEW