ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: CLARRIE SMITH - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: CLARRIE SMITH

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

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START OF TAPE

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Where were you born?

Temora, 1922.

Did you grow up around there?

No. I left there when I was five and went to live in a place called Carrathool. Have you ever heard of that?

No, you have got me there.

About 35 miles down the Murrumbidgee from Hay. I went to Newcastle to live when I was eight.

Did you go to school here?

Yes.

In Newcastle?

Yes. The Junction Primary School and Newcastle Boys High. Then I went into the army.

Did you get a job before you went into the army?

Yes. I worked in the Commonwealth Bank. I joined them in 1939.

Were you called up for the army or did you volunteer?

I was called up.

Where did you go?

To the 1st Field Ambulance, at Raymond Terrace.

Do you remember who was there at the time? Officers or non-commissioned?

The CO was a Lieutenant Colonel Dave Brown. I would be struggling to think of others.

How long were you there?

At Raymond Terrace, until we joined the 9th, I think. I went into Raymond Terrace in February '42.

Did you volunteer and join the AIF after that, or not?

Yes.

When from?

Before we went away, I think, yes, it must have been.

To the uninitiated, I am uninitiated in this - I haven't asked anybody else, it just suddenly occurred to me - why did everybody suddenly volunteer, if they had already been conscripted?

I think a lot of them wanted to join the AIF. I suppose the easiest way to do it, if they all did it, was to stay with the people you were with and the unit then became an AIF unit instead of a militia unit.

What difference did it make? They both went overseas, didn't they?

Yes. I think there was a pretty strong feeling that to volunteer was the thing at the time.

I always thought that in the army you shouldn't volunteer for anything.

That is a general rule of thumb, that is right too. (laughs)

So when you were sent down to the 9th Field Ambulance, where were they?

Narellan. Actually, I wasn't amongst the 1st Field Ambulance blokes that were to go over to the 9th. One of the fellows that was going, he and I were driving a truck, taking some of the gear and stuff away and on the way back he pulled up at a corner and said, 'I'm not going', and hopped out and said, 'You take the bloody truck, I'm off'. So I went back to our camp and told them that that was what had happened and I said I wanted to go in his place and they agreed with that. A lot of my good mates were going.

That's an interesting story, that one. So when you got there, where was it?

Narellan, I think.

Not Wallgrove?

I am pretty sure it was Narellan.

So you were just ready to go to Queensland.

Yes, getting ready to go.

Do you remember going to Queensland?

Yes. We got to Brisbane and we were there when the Battle of Brisbane was on, no, we weren't, we just missed it, the famous Battle of Brisbane, with the Yanks and the Australians. Of course, there was a very packed city then with thousands and thousands of troops.

So were you at Ascot or Grovely?

Grovely.

Then you went up to Townsville.

Yes, most of us went up by train, with the trucks on them.

Were you on the detachment that went by truck from Rockhampton, or were you one of the ones that waited for the floods to go down?

No. We were caught at Rockhampton, yes.

You waited until the floods were over, did you, over Christmas.

Yes. We were there for about a week, I think, from memory.

One company got in trucks there and went from there.

I suppose I remember that we continued on these flat top rail vans all the way up.

Were you in the trucks?

Yes. I was in transport, yes.

What I mean is, were you actually sleeping in the trucks?

Yes, they were open flat tops and we were sleeping on the trucks, yes.

How did you go for cooking?

They used to provide a meal at various stations but they didn't always and we weren't always at stations either. We had one stage we had two meals in three days, which didn't impress us very much. That was just the luck of the draw though, you had some arrangement with some local people to feed the troops on these trains, but we spent a lot of time being shunted to sidings to make way for more important rail traffic than what we were.

So when you got to Queensland, whereabouts were you stationed then?

Ravenshoe.

What was that like?

It was virgin country really. They had only just started clearing it. We were there for the wet season which was not much good for the trucks. There weren't enough made roads at that time and the trucks were sliding and getting bogged everywhere.

Do you remember John Rainbow joining you round about that area?

I remember John Rainbow, I just don't remember when he joined. I remember him, yes.

He was transporting a whole lot of stuff through to Darwin at one stage and then he got on to this other unit. I don't know why.

No, I don't know either.

So where did you go from there?

From Ravenshoe we went to Townsville. We were camped just out of the city, not far.

At Oonoonba.

That is right, yes.

Did you manage to go swimming at what they call the blue lagoon?

No.

No such luck.

No, I didn't crack that.

Did you get into any strife with the Americans, or over the Americans in Townsville?

I almost got into a bit of strife on account of one. This Yank was so drunk he couldn't stand up and there were a couple of blokes - not blokes from our unit - but they were going to roll him, which didn't seem to be a very fair arrangement to me and I intervened, which was probably silly, but anyway they just went away and it didn't come to anything.

When did you go overseas then ... weeks, months?

We were there for three months, if I remember rightly. We put our gear on one ship.

Was it an American ship?

No. It was an Australian ship.

With a name like West Cactus?

I think it was West Cactus. I think it might have been, yes, because I know we had to take our gear off again.

Was it a liberty ship?

I don't remember it being that, but I remember that there was a lot of fuel on board when we loaded it because we were putting our stuff on top of that. We worked all night on this and the civilian wharfies were all asleep around the back of the shed, guarded by provos because we were going to throw them in the harbour. But, anyway, we got it all on and then the next day they said for us to come and take it off again, which didn't please us very much, but we were very pleased when we found out that the boat had blown up after that, on the way to New Guinea.

So when you got to Moresby, where did you go?

Rigo Road, that is the Seven Mile camp.

What was that like?

It was primitive out in the bush and that sort of thing. It was enough miles out of Moresby to have nothing there.

Was it tents or native huts?

Tents at that stage.

The transport that you were working on, was it ambulances or trucks?

Both.

So where were you working?

What was the name of that place I mentioned before?

The drome?

No. Lux Lane. We used to go up there. There was a convalescent depot up there and we used to drive the ambulances up there a lot and a lot of them had to come back to hospital in Moresby.

Did you were at any of the dromes?

No. Not permanently, no.

Back and forth with the ambulances, at all?

Yes. But not on a permanent basis. I think we were just rostered on to do this and that but a trip up over that Hell Fire Pass wasn't our favourite.

Where was that?

Between Moresby and Lux Lane. It was a little narrow track. In fact there were two of them, one way traffic up and one on the way back. But they were only just over a truck width wide. It had a nice solid wall of rock on one side and about 1,000 feet of fresh air on the other. It was raining like hell all the time, so slips didn't go over. But still that's what we were doing most of the time, up and down there.

Were there any bad accidents?

No. We didn't lose any trucks or any blokes. A few got knocked about but fortunately they slid into the rock side instead of the open side.

Do you remember any accidents when you were in Queensland?

From our own blokes in Brisbane? Yes, we lost a bloke there. We were going to get ...

That was an accident to a tram. Do you remember an accident involving your own vehicle?

No.

There was one, though. There was a driver who used to be known by the name of Jimmy Stewart, I don't know what his first name was properly, do you?

No.

He was the driver at the time of this accident. The truck rolled over and over.

No. I don't remember that. When we were up at Ravenshoe we were driving ambulances there across to the Atherton Hospital. I think the 7th Divi that had just come back from New Guinea and they were going down like flies with malaria and stuff. So we were running backwards and forwards there all the time. I rolled an ambulance on to its side. She got the skids and I rode it out until it almost stopped it just flopped over on to its side. But other than that I don't remember anything. No-one was hurt in that because the stretcher patients ... it rolled over on to the side where they were and so they just rolled into the wall and the other four or five blokes were just sitting around and they didn't come to any harm either.

Right. So can you think of anything else in Moresby, before you went from there? Were you involved in football or anything like that?

Not in Moresby. I was involved in football later on, yes.

The mad mile?

Yes.

In Moresby?

Yes.

Where was the mad mile in Moresby?

I can't tell you now. Even if I thought about it I don't think I could tell you. It had gone out of my head until you said that. Yes, I remember that. I don't remember anything special about Moresby.

What about going to Wau then?

Yes. Wau was a beautiful climate. It was well up in the air. It was different all together from the steamy heat of further down.

Do you remember going there? Do you remember the trip? Were you driving?

Yes.

On the Bulldog Road?

No. I am just trying to think how we did get there. We went to Lae, but how we got there I can't remember either. We drove up from Lae to Wau.

You drove up from Lae to Wau?

Yes.

You didn't go up the Lakekamu River and through Bulldog and Terapo?

No. Maybe I remember driving from Wae and down to Wau and back again. But I'm not too sure if that is what we did when we first went there, but there certainly was a road there.

Did you go to Wau by plane, then?

I don't think so. I am just trying to remember if we went to Lae by ship, but I don't think we did that either, to Lae. You get a bit mixed up with these things. I called into Lae on a ship when I was going to Rabaul. I might be getting confused with that.

Did you come back to Australia with the rest of the unit?

Yes.

You did. And then go afterwards to ...

xxx, yes, 10 days after the war finished.

The query is, how did you get to Wau? You don't remember going over the Bulldog Road, through the mossy forest?

No. I don't remember doing that, no.

You're a puzzle because everybody else reckoned they went along the Bulldog Road or either that ...

Maybe I did, but I can't remember it. It was a lot of years ago now. I can't remember.

There must have been another way, then. You could have come in by plane. Did you go on leave?

Not from Wau.

From Moresby?

From Moresby, yes.

But you see they could have gone while you were on leave and then you could have gone in by plane to Wau, or some other way, I don't know. You know how it is when you were coming back from leave, it was a matter of hitching your own way, virtually, isn't it. You're on your own anyway.

Yes.

Did you go on leave?

Yes. I went on leave, I went on AWOL for a week.

That's a standard, isn't it. Did you let them know where you were?

Yes. I gave myself up and all I got was remanded to go and see the CO. Eventually you face him when you get back.

How did you get back?

I was supposed to get on draft from Brisbane to Townsville. They put me on the wrong one and I finished up in Cairns. From there I went back - I must have gone by ship I guess - to Moresby again, I think.

Was the unit still in Moresby?

No, I think you're right. I think they had gone to Wau.

So how did you get back to Wau? You must have hitched your way.

I must have been still full of mainland grog, I can't remember. I can't remember that at all.

You can't remember how you got to Wau. Can you remember facing the boss when you got back?

Yes.

What did he give you?

He forfeited the seven days pay, nothing else. He was a pretty understanding bloke in his own right. He was a tough old coot but he was good to his own men, really, very good to his own men. I still don't know how I got to Wau. I certainly got there.

Do you know how they got the name Reggie's Rabbits?

No.

Why rabbits?

I can't answer that. I can't remember hearing it even. But I know I got to Wau because they had a party for me when I got back and they were all on the jungle juice.

Who was making it, do you know?

No. I don't remember who was making it but I was just pouring it out as they gave it to me. Gee, there were some sick men around the next day.

Were you involved in the gold trade in Wau at all?

No.

So what are we up to? Playing football when you got there. Do you remember the mad mile in Wau?

Yes. I played football up there, yes. I played with their unit team up there.

Do you remember who was the coach?

Jack Elliott.

Did you ever get into trouble for kicking the ball?

No, I was the full back and I wasn't allowed to kick.

Were you the one who got charged, got charged five pounds for disobeying an officer and kicking the ball?

No. I don't remember that. He coached us on no kicking. But I don't remember kicking. I wouldn't have been game to I don't think.

So what does a full back do if he hasn't got anybody around him.

He had to bloody well run with it. That's what you had to do with it. (laughs) That's the name of the game. His theory was, while you got the ball the opposition can't score and you can't get beaten. So I did a lot of running and got a few beltings too.

You didn't score any tries as a full back did you?

No. But I nearly did. I set up the winning try when we played this 19th Battalion that hadn't been beaten for four years and I set it up for full backs. I could say that. I didn't actually store it but I set it up.

Do you remember any stories you can tell about Wau?

You have probably heard about that football match, have you, when we played the 19th Battalion? Have you heard about it?

Yes, but you tell us your version.

I was only going to say how the military police reckoned we couldn't use the road, so we went down in a convoy of ambulances, the teams in the back of the ambulances. The match wasn't supposed to be on but our CO believed in doing what was good for his men. Other than that I don't remember anything special.

Do you remember getting a film shown in Wau?

Yes. One of the few odd things I can remember is that for some reason or other we got some meat off an aeroplane and it was rank and rotten but we ate it. We hadn't had any fresh meat for months.

Do you remember John Rainbow being sent down to Lae for meat and coming back with nothing?

No. I don't remember that, no.

They closed the road on him, you see. But he said, 'But I've got a load of meat for up the road'. So they said, 'We can soon fix that'.

I don't remember that, no.

He told me the story about it. The CO was mad when he got back.

He would be.

No butter and meat, because apparently they had things going down in Lae and there was butter and meat and he sent him down for it and he came back with nothing.

I don't remember that, but I can believe it.

Did anybody catch scrub typhus?

At Wau?

John Rainbow did, for a start. So did Bob Sidoti.

Yes, Bob Sidoti died.

Jack Brett.

He is the one that beat it. He was - I don't quite know how he did that, but he ...

Jack Elliott reckons he bled him.

Did he? I didn't know that, but I know he used to pile the blankets himself. How he ever survived it I will never know. But he did beat it, yes. Jack bled him, did he?

And then he had to give him some blood back later on.

Go on. No, I don't remember hearing that.

He just told me today.

He'd remember it.

He doesn't know whether that did any good, but that's what he did.

One of those old remedies, was it? I suppose anything would be worth a try because not many fellows got over scrub typhus.

I'm telling you more stories than you're telling me, come on. Think, think, think.

No, I can't remember anything else at Wau that was particularly brilliant. We had a while there when things had moved on and we were just waiting then to come home, that was all.

You were in the transport. Weren't you driving around the place? Didn't you down to Wampit, Sunshine, Zenag? Up to Bulldog?

No.

What were you driving then?

Anything. Ambulances, jeeps, trucks. They didn't make you a driver of a thing, whatever was there, just jump in and away you go. But I don't remember going to those places, no.

You didn't go down to Lae even.

Yes. I reckon I went down to Lae, I did yes. I remember while I was down there I brought a dead bloke back. I was driving a jeep and had a little bracket put on the top and brought him back to his unit. He was dead. I was driving along and, you know, you get a feeling sometimes that someone is looking at you - there are eyes on you. I was just driving along and I thought that can't be right, I'm out in the middle of bloody nowhere and there is no-one around. I finally looked up and of course this dead bloke - the rack had moved forward a bit - and he was looking down at me. So the eyes were on me. He wasn't seeing too well though.

That would give you a bit of a turn wouldn't it?

Yes, it was a bit of a shock. I don't think I can think of any more for you.

All right, when you came back, did you come back to Australia with the unit?

Yes. I went to Rutherford then.

Then you were sent to where?

To Goulburn. To the psychiatric hospital.

What were you doing there?

I went down as a truck driver, but I finished up working in the wards. They were short of staff there and they had a few truck drivers there.

So what were you doing in the wards?

Just general duties - patrolling. They used to do a lot of putting people into deep comas and all sorts of funny things used to happen.

Insulin shock treatment?

Yes. They'd do all sorts of things. They'd leap out of bed and bark like dogs or run at you and chase you, want to kill you. So that was the sort of thing, just trying to keep things a bit quiet down there, that was all.

So when you went from there?

I went back to Sydney briefly, to Punchbowl. Then I was there for VE Day and then 10 days later I was on the ship to Rabaul.

When you got to Rabaul?

There wasn't anything there. There was only one thing standing in Rabaul and that was one of the walls of the vault of the Bank of New South Wales. So everything was pouring in by ship and they were rebuilding things as fast as they could. Us truck drivers used to work three shifts a day, revolving shifts like they do in industries that are here. The trucks never stopped, but it didn't take them long to get things built.

So that was the end of the war for you.

Yes.

Did you go back to the bank then?

Yes. I went back to the bank. I wanted to come back to Newcastle but the closest I could get was Tamworth, so I went back there, seven years there.

Is there anything else you can think of?

No, I think that is about it.

Thank you very much, Mr Clarrie Smith.

Pleasure.

END OF TAPE - END OF INTERVIEW