ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: RAY McPHERSON - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: RAY McPHERSON

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

SUMMARY:

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START OF TAPE

Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance, AIF, Oral History Project, Tape 21A, 5.6.1991, Mr Ray McPherson.

Where were you born and when?

I was born in Morpeth, 30 June 1921.

Did you grow up around there?

Around Morpeth, that is right, yes. On a farm.

Did you go to school there?

Only a few miles away at Maitland.

When did you leave school?

I left fairly early, because it was pretty tough times. I left when I was 15 year of age and I went as a messenger boy and then I graduated as being a plasterer.

Where?

The best known place I went was J. A. Crocket and Sons of Newcastle.

When did you come to the 1st Field Ambulance? Were you called up there?

I was called up in the 1st Field Ambulance on 10 June 1940. I was 19 years of age, 20 days before my 20th birthday. I thought it was a shocking thing. That is by the way, of course.

Where did you go?

Only to Camp at Greta in Rutherford Camp.

What do you remember of Rutherford, when you got there?

Not really good. No shoes, I think I went through the first three months with a pair of shoes of my own. I didn't have any gear at all. Didn't have a uniform. All we got was a giggle suit, as you know, Australia was very unprepared for war.

Do you mean there were not enough uniforms to go around?

No uniforms at all.

That is really amazing.

It was. I went through the first three months without a pair of shoes, without boots I mean, I wore my own two pair of shoes out.

Who was the commanding officer at the time you went to the 1st Field Ambulance?

Major Connelly from Cessnock.

Did he come to the 9th Field Ambulance with you?

No. I don't know where he got to. We just left and as far as I was concerned he was forgotten.

Who else went to the 9th Field Ambulance with you?

Quite a contingent, of course. I would say, at a guess at least 100.

Were you all volunteers?

Wait a bit. Before this happened we had done our three months training, then we got caught when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbour, say on 7th December 1941, we were called back in. We knew that we would have to go overseas, so we volunteered for the RFM.

So you all volunteered together?

Yes. One day type of thing. It doesn't matter. We were still only 20-year-olders.

So how long was the unit as the 1st Field Ambulance before you joined the 9th? Did they call for volunteers to joint the 9th?

No. We were just put over there to strengthen that unit. To build up that unit.

Where did you go when you first joined them?

St Ives.

Where next?

We were only there three or four weeks and we got transferred to the 9th, to build their stocks up. I think I've got that right.

The 1st Field Ambulance went to St Ives, did they?

I think they did, yes. Then, bang, in about three weeks over to the 9th. That was when they knew we were going overseas.

You were sent to Narellan up to Queensland.

That is right. I remember going by train but I wouldn't know the dates.

I've got the dates, out of the war diary in Canberra. I got it from the War Memorial. What did you do? Did you go to Brisbane?

Went to Brisbane, Ascot Racecourse, Eagle Farm as you know it now.

And then?

From there we went to Ravenshoe, the Atherton Tablelands.

You didn't go to Grovely?

Maybe for a fortnight or three weeks, a little time anyway.

Then you went north with the train, did you?

Yes, that is right. Then to the Atherton Tablelands. I don't know how long we were there, but we came down.

Were you one of the ones that were held up with the floods, or did you go up with the trucks?

I was one of those held up, yes. Others complained, but I had a good time there, for about four or five days, ate in the station. For the 20-year-olders it was a great thing.

Where did you go in Townsville, was it? Or Ravenshoe?

In Townsville, Oonoonba. I was getting out of town all the time. As the boats were coming in to take people overseas they were coming in - this was just about the time of the Coral Sea battle. They were coming in and every bloody boat that came in had a big hole in it type of thing. I suppose, us being an ambulance unit, we weren't number one type of thing to get away. They probably put others before us. I realised this. Then we finally got away in about three months in a camp at Oonoonba. Then the Coral Sea battle happened, about March 1943 or something. That was the turning point of the war, really. In fact, I have reservations whether half the time the New Guinea campaign, the Guadalcanal, the Hiroshima and MacArthur going back there as if it was unimportant anyway. The Japs were sort of buggered, they were just starved out. We went over to the other side, we seen a Jap plane covered us one day but nothing happened. We would see an air-raid but we'd never see any planes.

So when you went to Moresby, where were you camped?

In the first place, Rigo Road.

Which unit were you with? Which company?

B Company.

Who were your officers?

Can I pass that?

Can you remember any sergeants?

Sergeant Armstrong. I wish I had had a thought about this. I can tell you a lot of things, but I can't remember you that.

What training had you had, by that stage in the proceedings? Were you in the transport? Were you stretcher bearer?

Stretcher bearer, yes. Medical, just anything. We did learn a fair bit of medical knowledge.

Did you have any first aid training?

First aid training, yes.

From whom?

From whoever was around and how keen you were, that is the point - I was an outdoor person myself. You strike the other fellows that wanted to work inside, they went to the inside jobs, of course. I was just one of those who would rather clean something out like the wardsroom, type of thing.

Can you remember any stories you can tell about your time at Rigo Road?

One sticks vividly in my mind. As we went over there, the New Guinea natives were very immature, medical-wise. I remember a fellow coming in one day who had been bitten by a snake. He was cut to pieces, they cut him with glass to let the evil spirit out. They had no chance of saving him, he just bled to death. That is just one thing I remember.

Were you in the football team there?

As far as I can remember. I went away in June, I don't know whether we had a football team then really, no.

So where did you go from there, from Rigo Road?

Up further to little posts.

Lux Lane?

I can't remember Lux Lane. We might have gone there really, but I can't remember with any degree of certainty.

Was it further up than that?

Further up, yes.

What were you doing?

I was just in little MDSs, medical dressing stations. That is all.

You weren't up towards the Kokoda Trail, were you?

No. The Kokoda Trail had finished by that time, if you understand what I mean.

We had five of your men on it, running individual posts.

Yes, but the Japs had been pushed back by then.

I know, but there were still five of your men on it.

Yes, there could have been too.

This was long after the Kokoda battle had been. But there were signals men still running through that area and they had five posts, I understand.

I wasn't on them no. You're bringing back more bloody memories than I want to care for.

I have been looking at the war diary. It didn't say who was where, it just said how many.

How many, that is right.

I don't know where individual people were. I just know how many were in any particular place at any time. It's trying to match people up with places, in that sense.

Places, that is right, yes.

And stories, of course, which is something that you would never see in the war diary.

When I was young dates didn't mean a thing to you. In fact, only something like this, Tom has to give me some dates, when we went away, what dates we came home. People ask me and I don't know. When you are young it doesn't mean a thing to you.

It doesn't matter what age you are, it is very, very peculiar if you can remember all the dates. That is not the purpose of oral history, the purpose is to get the stories. Where did you go after Moresby?

We went to Nadzab. We went from Moresby to Nadzab.

How did you go to Nadzab?

We went round by boat. It was straightaway, you know.

Where did the boat stop first?

I don't recall going to Milne Bay at all.

You don't remember?

No, I don't think we did. If I can recall. The Japs had Nadzab. The 7th Division, we even watched the fellows being loaded on the planes at Moresby. They were paratroopers. They had never had a drop in their life, and they took Nadzab. Almost immediately we were sent round by boat.

You said you watched the paratroopers being put on the plane. Do you remember an accident at that time?

Yes.

Did you see it?

I didn't see it but I was young and impressionable. You know how stories fly around, a bit of fifth column - good God, all this sort of thing. Just that little bit of doubt in your mind. How are we going, are we winning? and this sort of thing is happening, but it was an accident, as we know now.

So you reckon it was right after that that you were put on the boat to go round.

Within a very short time anyway. But even when we got to Nadzab, we weren't game to go out at night as there might have been snipers around. But even the negroes, they had tractors in there almost immediately, levelling off the strips and making strips, like, bang, okay, the Yanks they were just entrenched straightaway.

When you went round on the boat, how many of you were there?

About 12 of us, 12 or 14.

Was there an officer?

When you ask me this, I don't think there was really. We were attached more or less to the Americans. Our evacuation unit used to hop in the plane, the American pilots would wake you up in the morning, it might be 5 o'clock and then went up to Dumpu to pick up any wounded. I don't think we had an officer, really. We had a sergeant, Sergeant Seaborn, Corporal Smith - very good friends of mine. I can find out, but it will not suffice.

Was there anybody else from Newcastle amongst the group?

Yes, a fellow by the name of Sergeant Price, Charlie Price.

Any others that are still alive?

Fred Seaborn, he was a sergeant. He is alive in Sydney.

That is interesting because I've never heard anybody else talk about this. So if you went round by boat, where were dropped off with the boat?

At Lae, of course.

Lae must have been captured by that time.

It was captured by that time, yes. But I cannot relate to it myself.

How did you get from Lae up to Nadzab?

Transport. Lorry, of course, yes. It fills in a little thing that I had doubts about myself, whether the Lae was captured. Lae was captured before Nadzab, of course.

No. Nadzab was captured before Lae. That's neither here nor there, it's only a matter of hours.

We went around by boat.

The first party that went into Nadzab went in by air. They waited ages at the airport.

The 7th Division, yes.

No, the first of the field ambulance group that went in with Major Holcombe. They waited from the 6th to the 13th at the airport to go, for it to be captured.

That is something that I didn't know about.

There is a mystery here. Possibly you can help here because, this is the problem. There are a number of problems here. The first is that Major Holcombe and eight men went and it says that 12 went. That is the first thing. The other thing is that then another 12 were sent, and I didn't know how they were sent and then another 10 were sent and I don't know how they were sent. So we have a number of mysteries here.

Yes. It is a bit confusing really. Until I was talking to Tom here earlier, I thought we were the first. But Major Holcombe ...

He was the first, yes.

Okay, I will grant that.

They came in by plane the day after they had the things secured.

I didn't know about that. I just thought ...

Mind you, six days they were waiting at the drome.

It is all these things when you are a 20-year-old. You just forget about it.

But it is a mystery that you can help me solve.

I would say that you can bet London to a brick now that Major Holcombe was in there first.

I think that has to be so. But on the other hand we still haven't found out how the others got there. You were helping there.

We went round by boat.

When you got there - can you remember what sort of boat it was?

I couldn't tell you really. It was only an old one anyway. I remember that.

It wasn't a landing barge.

No. We went right round from Moresby.

Like a little coaster.

A coaster, yes, with lascar seamen like, I remember that. We were just amazed because in the showers they wouldn't take their lap lap off. They wouldn't even shower themselves.

When you got to Nadzab, what was the job there? Were you working at the evacuation post, or were you on the planes?

We were virtually camped with the Americans, because they were there and they had beautiful kitchens and good food and we were eating bloody bully beef. Anything that they had over we used to go and scrounge it off them. We were virtually in the same two blocks of ground, if you can understand what I mean.

Do you remember where the MDS was there?

We had our own MDS, evacuation station.

The MDS and the evacuation station were separate. But the question is, which field ambulance were running the MDS at that time, do you know?

It would have to be the 9th of course, I would say so.

They didn't run a field ambulance. They were always attached to somebody else. So the question is, who were they attached to?

As I saw it, we were attached to the Yanks. We didn't have a unit. We were what were called corps troops really, I thought. We went there without an officer, I would say.

With Fred Seaborn in charge.

Fred Seaborn in charge, yes.

But you must have been attached to some MDS or some CCS. The next unit there was 111 Casualty Clearing Station. Does that ring a bell? The 2/14th MDS. Does that ring a bell?

They may have joined and went up there later. When I went back Wau I don't think Shaggy Ridge had been - Shaggy Ridge was the big ultimate captured Shaggy Ridge, and Dumpu, Madang.

Had they already moved up to Dumpu had they? They must have done.

Yes.

The first party that went to Nadzab, they got sent to Dumpu. Then another group had come in from somewhere to relieve them at Nadzab, then another group from the 9th Field Ambulance came in and relieved the people that relieved them at Nadzab and they became the 111th Casualty Clearance Station.

Well, it could have been after we left and went back to xxx.

So the question, to my mind is, who was actually operating the casualty clearing station or the MDS at the time that you were there, as opposed to the evacuation post?

Well, I should have done my homework on it, but from my memory no-one, we were just attached to the Yanks as more or less ...

Were they cavalry, or who were they?

I don't know what they were, whether they had an official name. We were virtually a little area evacuation unit that was attached to the Yanks.

Well can I ask you to do something? I didn't bring the book with me but I actually bought the book. It's called the Medical Volume of the History of the Australian Forces in the Second World War. It is a medical volume and it is called the New Guinea Campaigns. It is by Allan Walker. Now in that it has got all the references in there and I have them marked and they have all the names of all the different outfits in there you see. Now the question is which outfits were you attached to at any given time, and it's got the Americans in there too.

We had our name.

What was the name?

It was 15 corps troops, maybe attached to the Americans.

So what was the name?

Corps troops maybe attached to the Americans like.

Which Americans?

The unit used to go by 152 or 752 Flying Squadron.

But what were they? They were army?

They used to look after the fliers. We had a lot of mostly they were DC3 pilots. I don't know what you would call them, the flying corps.

So the ones you were talking about was not their army, it was their army air force.

Air force, I suppose, we used to have some mad ones.

There was a air cavalry unit around there as well. Did you actually used to go on the planes, with the evacuees.

Yes. Some of them you didn't like. Some of them were mad pilots who were fighter pilots. They were just grounded and most of the time they used to try to dip their wings to see how close to the ground they could go. Half of them were mad.

Did you used to go with the planes evacuating the casualties?

Not back to Moresby, we only went up and down the valley.

Did you go down to Lae.

No.

Did you go by road to Lae?

They must have gone by road to Lae. The American girls would come in with the pilots and get you up at 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning and just go up there, and you wouldn't see them any more during the day. They would land back on the strip maybe, if there was someone to go to Lae, not as serious as the others, who needed to be evacuated to Lae.

Did you have your owning messing arrangements there? Did you have your own cook, or not?

Yes.

Who was the cook, can you remember?

I wouldn't have a clue.

Do you have any idea, roughly, of how long you were there?

I would say a couple of months - two months. Then, as you say, as the war went up to Madang and Shaggy Ridge, possibly a further station MDS or even a hospital unit came and established there. I will put it this way - there was no hospital there, AGH when we were there, of course, but they may have come in and consolidated after. The troops, instead of the AGS back in Moresby it might have moved up to there.

So roughly how many evacuations were going on, people were evacuated from that evacuation post during an average day when you were there?

Most of them, their nerves gone.

How many a day? How many plane loads?

Two or three some days.

What about the malaria cases? Were they going back to Lae.

Malaria, scrub typhus were going. I remember striking a few of them; scrub typhus was the worse, of course. The ones with malaria were going back. I have seen a few injured, of course, a lot of injuries. One fellow with his eye shot out ...

So where were you getting these people from? Were they coming in in ambulances?

We were going up to get them at Dumpu.

How were you getting up to Dumpu?

By plane. The Americans.

I understand, right. So they were picking them up at Dumpu and bringing them back to Nadzab.

Yes. Then from there they could be disbursed to Lae or back to Moresby.

That sounds like a casualty clearing station.

Probably a very low key casualty clearing station.

I begin to get the picture. Can you remember more about the unit that was there? Can you remember being busy there?

Not really.

Did anybody get malaria?

I didn't. A few of them may have. Actually we had the Japs fairly beaten by then. After a month there we had John Wayne come out and they used to have an air-raid, but then again it was nothing. We saw about two or three Jap planes all the time we were there. They were buggered.

Did you go from there to Wau?

I went back to Wau. The whole unit didn't go back. I went back because I was lucky enough that I was in the football team.

Were you in the football team in Moresby?

I can't remember playing for Port Moresby. I'll have to ask them upstairs.

How did they know that you were a footballer?

It must have been, it was yes, it must have been. You are right. Yes, we did play at Moresby. I remember now. My moments of glory playing football were across the other side.

So when you got back to Wau, it was all football, was it.

We had it very easy, of course, yes. I suppose I shouldn't say that.

Why not?

This off the record, of course, but when the Coral Sea battle started, they could have starved them out. I thought to myself that it was useless. Lives were lost at Dumpu, Nadzab and Madang. They could have starved them out. This is just my idea, looking back. The two boys from Muswellbrook are just going.

What can you remember from Wau, other than that?

It was a great climate.

Was there gold?

Yes, I went there one day with Scottie, Scottie was Western Australia. It was out of bounds but three or four of us decided to go and we got an ounce and three quarters. How do you divide an ounce and three quarters when you have little chips and a little stone. So we tossed for it and he won it. I think he took quite a lot home. But it was an experience.

Did you get searched when you got back?

No. No-one was searched.

Somebody said they were. I was told that he was stripped.

I didn't know about that. I don't know anything about that.

Do you remember any other stories of Wau, before you came back?

A great climate; had it fairly easy there; that is about all. Nothing really to write home about.

All right, thank you very much, Mr Ray McPherson.

Thank you very much.