ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE:	JACK WHITE - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR
INTERVIEWEE:	JACK WHITE
INTERVIEWER:	RICHARD RAXWORTHY
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Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance AIF Oral History Project - Jack White.

... me driving. We were the ambulance orderlies. The ambulance drivers were separate, they worked with transport, I was with the nursing side of it.

Your name is?

Albert John White.

And your service number was?

128406, NX128406.

And you were with 9th Field Ambulance?

That's correct, yes.

And at that time you were at Jacksons Drome. Who were you attached to, have you any idea?

No, look I'm sorry I can't tell you that, I'm not terribly sure. But anyway we were there for quite some time, I suppose, a couple of months at least.

And have you any idea what month it was?

No, you've got me there.

What year?

The year ...

The end of '43, somewhere around ...

I'd say probably the latter end of '43.

Well that would be the time. Did you ever hear where the wounded were coming from that you were loading?

No, I didn't. All that happened that ... as I say our job was to go and get them off the plane or help get them off the plane, straight into the ambulance and stay with them if necessary or load up the next ambulance, you see, which had come in. And all we had to do was to take them or be present if necessary to take them to the various AGHs. But conversation was probably difficult most of the people we were talking to had no idea where they had come from or whatever.

So how did you know when the planes were coming in?

Well, as I said there was a constant watch but towards the one end of the drome we'll say, and our observation rule, whoever was on observation duty had to watch for a series of indications from the pilots such as daytime flags, white for one ambulance, green for three and red for as many as you could spare. And our job was then to go with the ambulance and follow the plane round till it taxied to the particular spot it was stationed at and help unload them and if necessary go with the patients to the AGH.

Were you on roster or did you have to work long hours?

We were actually on call apart from the observation and that was sort of you'd do a couple of hours, everyone sort of do their turn, a couple of hours of whatever it might have been. But the rest of the people were just there on call, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day virtually and if they needed anyone at whatever, well you went and that was it.

Were there times when a lot of planes came in together?

Now you were asking me previously about the time, now I came tell you one of our busy times when I was there was when the Markham Valley ...

Well that's what we're on about, yeah.

Yes, that was the time that we were very busy. And many times there'd be sort of a red alert as we used to say red ambulance alert and we'd take off and there were quite a few of those at times. I think about the biggest I can remember there'd probably be two or three come in at once but you sort of didn't know because you were involved with the one that you were sort of involved with and didn't know whether there was any others coming in or not, you know.

Were they seriously wounded?

Oh yes, quite seriously some of them, yes.

Were you around there when there was bad weather and they hadn't come straight through, they'd had to stop at some airport on way?

Oh well we sort of didn't know these things. All we knew was when they were landing on the strip. And some of them were quite ... they had been treated by the advanced first aid post ...

Oh yes, yes indeed.

... they had, depending on the seriousness of it - we were mainly involved with the more serious ones, you know.

Were you there at the time of the Kokoda Trail or not?

Ah, the latter end of it, yes the latter end of it.

Did you come across any of your people who were on the Kokoda Trail, I understand there were five?

Not off the top of me head but we sort of ... as you'll probably gathered from our conversation, there was people that I went up with and never saw till twelve months after we were up there type of thing, you know, we were scattered all over the place. And you didn't get a lot of information of what other people were doing because of security, I guess, you know, with hindsight.

Do you know who was keeping the war diary for your group?

Absolutely no idea, no, no.

So who did you come under, what officer did you come under?

Well, we were ... our particular officer was Major Thomas in A Company, who Tom knows ...

Yes, yes I've got to interview him, yes.

Yes, well but from there on I couldn't just tell you who it would be, you know.

Well he went to Tsili Tsili and they went then to Wau.

That's right yes, yes. But he was detached, we didn't see ... well I personally didn't see him for many many months, you know.

And that time after you had visited Jacksons Drome then you went to the camp hospital?

Yes, yes.

Okay, and what about the earlier time when you were at the 2/5th AGH at Bootless Bay?

Well we weren't doing nursing duties there we were just doing any ... I know I did a bit of sort of gate duty and this sort of thing and any odd jobs around. But I personally didn't do any nursing at all. It was a pretty run of the mill sort of jobs that was going.

Right, well is there anything else you can think of that might be ...

Just an aside ... when we got transferred to the 114th AGH at Kenmore, Goulburn - this was in '44 - then we were getting people again from New Guinea, we were again receiving them and

they used to come by ambulance train from either Townsville or Brisbane, I'm not sure. They'd arrive at Goulburn in the early hours of morning, usually on about a fortnightly interval, and there would be about 120 people who would be on that train and they had a range of mainly skin disorders and psychiatric people who were requiring psychiatric ...

And they were all going to Kenmore Hospital?

Well the train ... that was where it came to, to Kenmore. I presume that they were probably sorted in Sydney or somewhere or whatever because our main function at Kenmore was psychiatric people and skin disorders. We had from memory three wards of skin and the rest were psychiatrics or psychological problems.

I know this is the wrong way around I should have asked you in the first instance, where did you join up?

Ah ... from, let me think, Maitland, I think, we were in camp at Maitland.

And how did you ... you worked for the 9th Field Ambulance?

Yes, when we sort of joined the AIF we were transferred to the 9th Field Ambulance. Originally we with the 1st Field Ambulance.

You were in the 1st Field Ambulance in the first place?

Yes, and then we were transferred to the 9th when we went in the AIF.

Now, so when you were transferred to the 9th where were they? Where did you first join up with them?

Now, as far as I know we went straight to join up with them at Narellan.

Right, Narellan ready to go, yes.

Yes, and from Narellan we went by train up to Townsville.

Right, and when you got up there and all that sort of thing, did you take part in any of those ambulance train details?

No, no not really no. No this was after we came back from the second time. Like after we came back from New Guinea when I was involved in the ambulance ...

Yes, but I understand there was a number of the 9th Field Ambulance of your group who were actually crewing an ambulance train before they went over to New Guinea?

Yes, could we have been, yes, it could well have been.

And I believe one of them afterwards when they came back too.

I see yes, yes.

Incidentally, did you have anything to do with the warrant officer ... what's his name? He lives up the road here ... no I haven't got it handy I don't think, he just lives just up here?

Yes, yes.

Fred Summerfield?

Oh yes, yes I knew Fred, I knew him personally.

Was he in A Company?

I can't tell you off the top of my head, no, me memory's not functioning that good, I'm sorry. I mean you're sort of in the unit with them but I think at the risk of being proven wrong he might of been headquarters. I may be wrong about that.

All right. When you arrived at the unit at 9th Field Ambulance was it Colonel Bretherton that was ...

Yes, yes.

And Colonel Smith ...

I was involved with Colonel Bretherton at one stage, I don't ...

It was before that it was Colonel Smith, and what about you didn't have anything to do with Major Holcombe?

Yes, I knew Major Holcombe, yes, he was with the 9th.

Do you remember anything about the mad mile?

Yes, yes. Is this up in Townsville you mean?

Well everywhere?

Yeah well, I was sort of involved with it in Townsville, yeah.

And how did you like that?

Oh not particularly. Not particularly, no. But I had plenty of mates.

You weren't one of the ones who got himself into strife with the Americans in Townsville were you?

Well, the whole lot of the Australian troop - I wasn't personally involved with it - but a lot of them were barred from that particular cafe where it happened, yes. But not me, no.

Well it wasn't even trouble with the American troops was it, it was the cafe owner?

That's right, yes, yeah. Sort of everyone knew about it but I wasn't in the trouble.

Did you get malaria at all in ...

Not over there but when I came back after some period of about ten, twelve years I was sick and they decided that it may have been a sort of a residual effect from malaria that I had in New Guinea.

At the various camps that you were at were they all reasonable sort of conditions of were you out in tents and ...

Nearly all in tents, like ...

Rigo Road?

Yes, yeah.

Lux Lane?

Yes, yes.

Bootless Bay?

Yes.

Jacksons Drome?

Yes.

What about Rouna Falls?

Yeah, there was some units there but we were in tents, there were some buildings there but we were in tents.

And when you were back at Lux Lane when you were loading the hospital ship?

Yes, we went down from Lux Lane. We went down by our own ambulances to sort of took people to load and unload them, yes.

So for the year-odd that you were over there, you were living in tents just about all the time?

Yes, yeah I would say completely, yes.

And what about the food?

Oh, it was good. I mean I ... there were times when things were a bit crook but overall ...

Tinned cabbage?

Pardon?

Did you get any tinned cabbage?

Oh yes, (laughs) tinned cabbage and M and V.

What about bully beef and biscuits?

Oh yes, yes not so much of them, we ...

You were lucky apparently?

Yes, but we got a lot of M and V and baked beans and ... asparagus and all that, you know.

Did you see any of the people that came down, the two that died of scrubtyphus and various other people?

Ah, no I personally wasn't involved with them, no.

Gerry Gilbert was one, he was brought down to Moresby and he died there ... or was he Lae, I think he might have died in Lae.

Yes, I think so, I wasn't involved with him, no.

And the other bloke who was a driver, Private Bevan, he died of scrubtyphus too.

Yeah, well we ... there was one of our fellows buried at Bomana, I don't which one ...

It might have been that one I think, yes I think it was that one - Bevan.

Yes, yes.

And any of your mates get seriously ill at all?

Not that I know of, you know, really. Some of them could well have done but I wasn't personally aware of it, no.

All right. Well is there anything else you can think of?

Not off the top of my head but ...

Well give us a yell.

... maybe something will come to me, you know, when I start thinking about things.

Okay, well I'll pull that tape out of my answering machine and I'll put it away and if you think of anything you can give me a yell and I'll put it back in and we'll carry on if you like?

I'll do that, yes I'll certainly do that.

Thank you very much.

Okay, thank you.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW