ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: LES O'SULLIVAN - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE - SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: LES O'SULLIVAN

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

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START OF TAPE 23A

Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance, AIF, Oral History Project - Mr Les O'Sullivan.

I have pressed the button, the recorder's running and I've got to ask you the question again. Do you mind my recording what we are saying now?

No, not a bit. There was one link with the two that there was a chap by the name of Lance O'Keefe, he is still alive and he lives in Balgowlah. Lance and I transferred from the 9th Field Ambulance to the ambulance train, it was the 3rd Ambulance Train at the time. When the 9th Field Ambulance came back from New Guinea ...

Just hold on a minute, just briefly, would you state your full name and if possible your service number.

Thomas Leslie O'Sullivan.

Do you remember your service number?

NX126414.

Sorry to have interrupted you.

That's all right, no worries. We had to link with the ambulance train subsequently because the 9th Field Ambulance, if I remember rightly, was disbanded when they got back from New Guinea and they went all over the shop. There was quite a - there would be up to twenty of them at different times I recall - lot came on to the ambulance train. That is the link between the two units.

What was your unit?

I was in the 9th Field Ambulance to start with and then I transferred with Lance O'Keefe to the ambulance train.

Which ambulance train, do you remember?

It was the 3rd then because there was an American train at the same time which was the 2nd.

Can you remember who was the commanding officer, if there was one.

Of the Americans?

Of the train.

You'll have to distinguish between which one we're talking about.

All right, all of them then.

The 3rd Ambulance Train was the Australian, it gets a bit confusing. The 3rd Ambulance Train was the Australian one and the two ambulance train was the American one. Captain Austin Callen who had also been in the 9th Field Ambulance, was the CO of the 3rd Ambulance Train.

At some stage later on the Americans pulled out because, as you could well imagine, they had a superior set up to the Australian one, they had everything in it that opened and shut including operating theatres and God knows what. They disbanded the 3rd Ambulance Train and all the Australian crew were transferred to the 2nd. That was the link between all the things and the field ambulance and everything else. But I think quite a few of the guys that subsequently came on from the 7th and the 9th. I don't remember any other commanding officers that were in the 9th Field Ambulance.

But when you joined, where did you join in the first place? Where were you born and when?

I was born in Paddington in 1918.

Did you grow up around there?

I did, until 1951.

Did you go to school there?

I went to school at Paddington, Christian Brothers.

Did you like it?

I enjoyed it.

Sorry, asking you things like that.

I left school in 1934 and I started work in the Australian Gaslight Company in 1935.

Doing what?

I was junior clerk then. I became their first computer operations manager and then chief accountant for part of the time. I retired in 1979.

So you spent your whole working life, apart from the Army at the AGL.

With the one company.

Yes, that's good.

Yes, 12 years.

Also, did you get called up for compulsory military service?

Yes. I was tempted to join up at one stage and I was physically all right, but when they came to my eyes the bloke said, 'Where's your dog?. Go away' he said. 'I'll call you up some time later on, no doubt, when they run out of people'. At that stage it was useless. Lance and I made a couple of attempts to be on standby to go to Borneo, Balikpapan at one stage but that didn't eventuate. Then we both ...

But that would be late on.

That was towards the end.

How did you get into the 9th Field Ambulance?

I just drafted into it.

When and where?

At Paddington, the Victoria Barracks.

Do you know George Warneke?

I know George well. I saw him recently actually.

Do you know Geoff German? He lives at Paddington still.

The name rings a bell. There's a lot of names that ring a bell but I can't put faces to them.

So you joined up at Victoria Barracks. Can you remember what year that was?

No.

It would have been pretty early wouldn't it?

1941 I guess.

So then where did you go next?

I was with the 9th for a few years.

Where at?

Ingleburn, Liverpool and Wallgrove.

Where was in the middle, sorry? Ingleburn, St Ives, did you go down there?

Ingleburn, Wallgrove and Liverpool.

But you didn't go down to St Ives or the Pennant Hills golf course?

We went to Pennant Hills golf club and I went to the Green Toad. I left from the Green Toad to go on to the ambulance train. Lance and I both went at about the same time actually.

That first ambulance train you were on there, that was the 3rd, was it?

That was the 3rd at that time.

And the officer was an Austin Callen?

Like 'Jake and the Fat Man'.

Right. So what was it like working on the ambulance train?

It wasn't real good because the facilities on the thing were not real top hole and there wasn't much work in the early stages. It was a rather monotonous existence but once it got going and there were casualties in the New Guinea area then it started to roll a bit then. Gerry Seymour can possibly fill you in on some of these details, but we carried thousands and thousands and thousands and it was wrongly named. It wasn't an ambulance train, it was a hospital train, because it had the facilities of operating theatres and we fed everybody three meals a day and all those sorts of things. We had six cooks working around the clock.

Can you remember any of the cooks?

Yes.

Was Stan Loon on that train?

He was.

He can't remember it, would you believe.

I'm sure he was.

Yes, I know. Lots of people say he was.

He was. There was a fellow named Alec Crawford, Stuart Lowe, Harry Harlin, Phillip Wheatley. How many's that?

Five. If you count Stan Loon.

Stan wasn't there at that stage, he was earlier on than that. Never mind.

Laurie de Belle. They worked in pairs, three shifts. I don't think there were too many ambulances serving 450 people three

times a day sort of thing. It was little known. I recall sending a signal to somebody, some brigadier or other seeking to get some repairs done in the kitchen at one stage. I can't be quoted verbatim on this but the signal I got back said, 'You don't serve any meals, what the devil do you want this for?', and we had six cooks working around the clock. It was little known.

Until you mentioned it, I had no idea. And an operating theatre too?

Yes. You can imagine even the logistics of handling the baggage, going to three or four or more different hospitals.

Where did you pick up the wounded people?

Normally we plied between Sydney to Brisbane to Albury.

All right. So you went to Sydney to ...

We were stationed at Punchbowl electric car sheds for a little time and then it was moved to Hornsby electric car shed. The procedure was that we would take a small number of patients usually from Sydney to Brisbane. You would load then at Clapham Junction in Brisbane. They were brought to the train by ambulance. The cars were all numbered and you directed them to various ones, whether they were walking patients or bed patients, whatever the case might be. We carried a whole host of psychiatric and special cars there that had barred doors and windows. In later years it was one of the carriages was set up to carry females. We had everything. And the car that contained the operating theatre, the other half of that was used as a ward for officers. We had the lot.

Often there were two doctors. There was only one CO, of course, but there was quite often a second or third doctor attached just for the trip, depending on the nature of the casualties.

Can you remember a surgeon? Anybody who was attached to the operating theatre?

I don't think it was used much as such. It was certainly used for first aid, but all the facilities were there. There were minor things that were done but no major operations. I don't think we ever lost one. Nobody ever died on it. I guess a few did when they got to hospital, but that wasn't our treatment. Nobody died on the train from my recollection. I don't think we lost too many of the psychiatric patients. Some got away.

What about Albury? Where did that come in?

The gauge finished at Albury at that time. It was a different sized gauge from Albury to Melbourne.

I see, so Sydney Brisbane ...

Sydney - Brisbane, Brisbane - Sydney, Sydney - Albury.

Right. Then you handed them over to a Victorian train there.

A Victorian train and then they transferred, yes, that's right. We often picked people up then to bring people back to Sydney at the end of the trip. That would be the normal journey.

How long would a trip take, do you think?

About five days. I think we used to leave, I am guessing a bit now, we used to leave about 3 a.m. on a Monday morning and we'd get back about 5 p.m. on a Friday, everyone working like slaves.

What time, 3 a.m. on Monday was it?

Three a.m. Monday morning and back about 5 p.m. on Friday.

Did you ever get the weekend at home?

I had to work like hell on the way back from Albury, of course, so I could go on leave on the Saturday. At one time I think we went for about 19 days straight on that circuit. I think we went for 19 or 20 days without a break. Then we all fell in a heap.

I suppose you would. What was the accommodation like for you on the train? Where did you sleep? Was it just ordinary sleeping cars?

There was an ordinary railway first class sleeping car and half of it was used by the officers like the CO. We had an adjutant in latter years, we didn't have to start with, and we had three nursing sisters. Then the NCOs had the other half of it. There was another car then which was set up in ordinary seating compartments which had been ripped out and there were three bunks on either side. Each one slept six. It was pretty tight, as you can imagine.

So you had a third class sleeping car, did you?

No, I was in the first class one.

Then the nursing sisters and the adjutant and the officer.

There were about six cabins on either side. We had about twelve cabins. I think two of the sisters shacked up and the senior one had a cabin on her own. The CO certainly had a cabin.

Can you remember any of the sisters or any of the other people?

Yes. Initially there was Molloy and McCall. Then following them, this might not be in chronological order, there was Moore, Shepherd and one of nature's gentlewomen Barbara Millard. She was on the Manunda when it was bombed in Darwin and she got on to the train at some stage or other. I think her father was also a fairly high ranking officer. He was a medico. Then after that we had one whose name I cannot recall, then Mamont, Ryrie.

She's contacted me.

I thought she was dead.

I'll check that out. Three nursing sisters have contacted me, but they're not all ambulance trained. Some of them are places like Goulburn hospital and things like that.

There was Mamont, Plimsole and Ryrie, the last three. There was one named Ruse in the middle there somewhere. She's still alive, she's up outside Orange. But Merv Wheatley was one of our cooks. He was at the last reunion and he told me that Ryrie had passed away.

That may be since she contacted me, then.

This was in April. She came from somewhere up in that direction.

What was this fellow's name?

Merv Wheatley. He was one of the cooks.

Right.

Cec News was in the orderly room, so he can add quite a bit more to the activities too.

Cec News was in the orderly room of the train?

Yes.

Right. I'll get on to him with that.

He was a good cricketer. Tell him I remember him being a good cricketer. He was in the orderly room so he'd be fresh all the time when he played cricket.

That must have been pretty packed in if you got 450 people on the train.

Yes. Each carriage held a maximum of 45 and there were eight of those. Then there was one that held about half that number. How's your arithmetic?

Eight 45-people carriages, yes.

What's that, that's 360, isn't it?

Yes.

Add 25 in the other one - 385. It might have been a bit much when I said 450.

So how many of them would there be?

There's 385 maximum, then there was the staff and there was also luggage people and diesel engineers.

So 25-people carriages, how many do you think there'd be of them?

There was only a couple of those. They were parts, they weren't full carriages. One was for females and one was for officers.

Part carriages, right. I'm making notes at the same time to save me.

Also there was one car, half of which was set up to handle the baggage and that was quite a lot as you can imagine. There was one bloke looking after that, one man looking after that.

Can you remember who that was?

Yes, Arthur Hawke. There were two fellows that looked after catchments from the AIME, Australian Institute of Mechanical Engineers, or something.

Yes.

They looked after the diesel engine which supplied the power and light.

Two engineers, who?

Joe Savage was a corporal and the other fellow was Clarke. He was known as Diesel Clarke and that's the best I can give you. That was a fair job for a train that size. It wouldn't fit into the Central Railway Station.

You can only get eight carriages in there, I think,

There were two sleeping cars, an admin car, that's three. A dining car was four, nine ambulance cars, that's 13 and a diesel car, 14 I think it was, carriages.

Two sleeping cars; nine ambulance cars ...

Two admin cars; That's 13 isn't it?

Yes.

And the diesel and baggage car.

Was there only one diesel?

Yes, the luggage van which they converted into the diesel engine. I'm not talking about the diesel pulling it, this is a compressor.

I see, a compressor and lighting.

Yes.

A generator diesel generator car.

Yes, my wording was wrong.

Generator and baggage car.

Yes.

Right, I'm with you. So they needed extra power for a train like that, yes I see that.

It used to be pulled by two 36-class engines. Henry, if he was still with us, he could give you all the detail of this. It used to be two 36-class engines. It used to get to Brisbane in about 20 hours or something.

From Sydney.

I'm guessing. The first real run, I think it was a trial run, was a 38-class engine, it's still around this one, 3801. It gets a lot of publicity.

I know it, I know the blokes that run it; 3801 pulled it.

The first job that it had.

But that was a steam.

Oh yes.

In 20 hours.

It broke the record. It pulled it on its own, instead of having two engines it took it on its own and it knocked several hours off the time.

Incidentally, this would be something that would help us market the book, too; 3801 took it on its first trip.

Gerry Seymour could add a bit more to this no doubt, because he was in touch with David Hill recently. 3801 has run around the countryside.

Brady is the main bloke behind it.

Gerry wrote to David Hill and told him that it pulled the ambulance train that did this and that and he never heard a word from him so he said, bugger him and that was that.

Brady, well, he will be really over the moon on that because they have had troubles lately, as you know, it crashed.

Did it?

You know that they had that business coming up the hill and they stopped and a train ran into the back of them and a number of bigwigs up in the back car were killed coming up the hill.

The Hawkesbury or somewhere, wasn't it.

Yes, coming up the hill. They stalled on the hill and the electric train ran into the back of them and killed all the bigwigs in the back car.

I recall that now.

As a matter of fact the president of 3801 is Professor Glastonbury. He was badly hurt but he escaped death.

That might ring a bell too. Gerry told me he had been in touch with a professor somebody or other.

Glastonbury is his name. I know him well. Mind you, he and I are on opposite sides of the fence. I'm trying to organise a railway museum at Eveleigh and he wants the land for the university technology park. They want to pull down all the old buildings which I don't want.

I think Nick's going to sell it for complete upgrade. He's talking about developing all that land at Eveleigh and other places.

They could develop some of it but as long as they don't knock the old buildings down. After all, they don't need all of it, do they?

No, not really. Do you know that underneath Wynyard Station there are some archives there.

Yes, I know all that. I wrote books out of that.

I believe that they have a number of photos of the ambulance train. I haven't been able to get down there yet. The number of photos we have got are few and far between. I have got a few

and I did manage when Henry died his sister in law rang me and gave me the book that he had of quite a few photos of it.

> I will put in for it now because the photos have been sent out to Kingswood and they're hard to get at these days. So I will put in for the photos from Kingswood and see what happens. It will give us plenty of time to get hold of them. As a matter of fact, that's another thing. I have been on about saving the archives, because they were going to do away with them, the railway archives. They were not going to destroy the material, they were going to send it all to Kingswood to the State Archives and there was going to be no Railway Archives, but now we just had a breakthrough. I heard about it yesterday. I put a proposal in to start a railway heritage trust and it has been accepted finally. What's more they are going to build up the Railway Archives again, so we have a chance of getting them back into Sydney again instead of them being out at Kingswood in a lot of sheds. Anyway, that's nothing to do with the Field Ambulance.

I don't know that I can give you much more really.

> That's how it began. It went on further than that, didn't you. How long were you on it?

I wasn't discharged until 1946 actually, in July, because when the number of patients dwindled down they broke the train, gave most of it back to the railway and kept about four carriages which they used to hook on to the back of the express, the Melbourne express. That was cut down to two I think and they were stationed up at Werris Creek. They hooked them on to the back of the express again and brought people down from Brisbane to the hospital at Tamworth. Finally, I had the task of winding up the unit, returning all the stores and getting all the people discharged and signed all sorts of statutory declarations and then I had to wait for the final paper to come back from Melbourne. That didn't come back until July 1946. I exited at that time and that was it.

> What unit were you in then, was it a separate unit by that time?

No, it was still the ambulance train.

> Were you still in the 9th Field Ambulance?

No, I severed with the 9th Field Ambulance when I went on the ambulance train. I don't know when that was. It was after the Green Toad. I think I went from the Green Toad, whenever that was.

> Right. Some of them went on the ambulance train and then went back to the 9th Field Ambulance, didn't they?

No.

It might not have been the same ambulance train. For instance, Fred Seaborn was on the ambulance train.

He wasn't on ours.

Right. There must have been several then.

There was certainly not in New South Wales, there wasn't. It might have been something else, but Fred certainly wasn't on it because as I said I knew Fred before the war. No way. I have a recollection of him being on the one I was on, but I could be wrong. There were about 12 or so people, there was News and Burtles and Sykes and Jack Smith etc etc, who came on to the 2nd Ambulance Train when the 9th Field Ambulance was disbanded or broken up.

After?

When that came back from New Guinea they disbanded it. The fellows went in all directions and about 12 or more of them came on to the 2nd Ambulance Train and finished their days there. Cec can probably tell you a bit. I can get the names for you. I can do that now if you want it.

Good. All right, yes. I'll turn the recorder off.

I won't be a tick. I might have to leave. My wife has to go out and I've got to get the car out for her. Hang on a minute. You mentioned where were you having your meeting next week?

It's in a studio down in the basement of the Bathurst Street Missionary Society. It's called the Church Missionary Society, it's down in the basement. It's 93 Bathurst Street.

What time are you there?

I'm arriving there about 9.15 and I suppose I was intending to get you to come there, but if you can't ...

I'll see. I won't make any promises.

Okay, Fred Seaborn is turning up at 9.30 and I'm interviewing him first. Cec News is the second and Arthur Stuart is third. That takes us through until about lunch time I suppose. I haven't got anybody else. I've got Bob Maxwell who can't come in that day.

Do you want to see me before the other ones?

Before? I can see you after.

What time's that? 12 o'clock.

Yes.

No, I couldn't do that.

Do you mean before Fred Seaborn?

Yes.

I suppose if they were both in there at 9 o'clock I should think.

I have got to leave here at eight o'clock or something to get in there by 9.30.

Yes, I don't think it's worth it.

Later in the morning's no good.

You come in and talk to them.

If I can, I will.

If you want to. What I've got on the phone is good for what I've got. I've been recording it.

Leave that and see what happens with the other two.

All right.

But when you said about them being on another train, there was only the one train in New South Wales and I couldn't imagine Fred being on a train in Adelaide or somewhere.

All right. But the other ones that I know of who have been on the train beforehand who can remember about it they were on the train right at the beginning. They were only on there for a while and then they went back to the unit and they carried on for the rest of the time with the unit.

That's absolute news to me.

Well, there you are. It's so.

I was on the ambulance train at Punchbowl when it made its very first trip which was up to Goulburn or somewhere.

Was that with the 3801?

No, not then. They had a couple of 36s on it then. That was the very first time it was pulled out of the shed. There were no ambulance people on it.

Was Major Heffernan ever the officer in charge of the train when you were on it?

He was never on the train.

Right, well there's another train then. It's as simple as that.

They might have had a Yankee train for some time.

Yes, it was in part a Yankee train.

But it could only be within the State because it couldn't go any further.

No, no, it went to Queensland.

It couldn't go beyond Brisbane.

The one we are talking about was definitely between Brisbane and Sydney. So I don't know anything about it as yet, but we'll soon find out.

I've never heard of that one.

Well, there you go.

It might have been seconded to help the Yanks get going, that's a possibility.

It might have been, I don't know.

They carried only American personnel.

There is a report exists. It was under the 9th Field Ambulance, this particular ambulance train, and there is a report written up by Major Heffernan on that train. Are you with me?

Yes. That's the only thing if they were seconded to help the Americans get going. I think some of our people went on it as one stage for a short time to give them a hand to get organised. But they certainly weren't on the one I'm talking about. Only those ten or a dozen I mentioned to you that came on after the 9th had disbanded. Anyway, we'll see how we go.

Okay, yes, we can always come back.

Yes. I think the chances are exceedingly slim, but I might get in there at 93 Bathurst Street.

As I said, it's not important now from that point of view and we can always ...

I think I might leave it and see how you go with the other two and if you have any further queries you can come back.

Right, sure, okay, thank you very much.

Goodbye.

END OF TAPE - END OF INTERVIEW