ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: GERRY SEYMOUR - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: GERRY SEYMOUR

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

SUMMARY:

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START OF TAPE 23B

Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance, AIF, Oral History Project - Gerry Seymour.

What is your full name?

Gerry Seymour.

What rank were you?

I was the orderly room sergeant for the last couple of years.

Where were you born and when?

In Sydney in 1910.

Where did you grow up and go to school?

I went to Woollahra Public School. There were only public schools. Woollahra and Randwick, they were the two main schools.

Did you get work before the war?

Yes. I was with my father and a couple of brothers. We had a small furniture factory which more or less disappeared when the war came.

Where was that?

In Waterloo.

What sort of furniture did you make?

What they used to call occasional furniture. Tables and traymobiles, that type of thing.

How did you come to join up? Did you volunteer or were you called up for compulsory military service?

That is a complete story on its own. I am virtually the man that never was. I was called up twice. The first time I was called over to Randwick depot they said, 'We've got two of your brothers, we don't want you, go back'. I was called up again. They said, 'You've got a factory. I think you'd better go back and see about getting some war work', and gave me an exemption. I thought, we have a factory and we'll see what we can do. I put in a tender for bedside tables, wooden ones. I took it down to the tender office and they said, 'That's been filled', I said, 'It doesn't close until tomorrow', but they said it had been filled. I walked out and I said, 'That's the bloody end of it', and I went down and joined the Air Force. I was accepted there and at the same time I get a call up to go to report to

the Air Force Depot and to report to the showground. So I went to the showground and they said I had to go to Cowra. So they bunged me on a train that night and sent me to Cowra, put me in a uniform. I got to Cowra and showed them my call up for Tuesday for the Air Force and they said they would have to send me back. So they sent me back to report to the showground to hand the stuff in. They then said, 'You can't go, you've got to go back to Cowra'. That sort of thing went on and on. To cut it a bit short, eventually, I was sent down to Liverpool, [Darwin's] Detail Depot.

What was that again, sorry?

The DDD, Darwin's Detail Depot. So they examined me and said that I had to go back because I had a perforated ear drum, unfit for the tropics. So back I went, told them the story. It was never ending. No-one owned me.

How did you finally get into the 9th Field Ambulance?

When I got to this Liverpool depot, there was a South Australian battery wanting to get to full strength to go to New Guinea. So an officer from there came down and picked six of us out. We got on a train, we were on our way to New Guinea. We went to the Gold Coast, Townsville, Sellheim out near Charters Tower before we got there. Up there I had the pleasure of falling down a shit hole. It was empty, it was 10 feet deep. I landed on my two feet and said, 'Jesus, my head'. They said, 'Get out, you bludger, you're lucky it's not full'. Sometimes I think I'd have been better off. So it went on and on.

When we got to New Guinea they wanted a war establishment for desert warfare, trucks running around mad everywhere.

What unit were you with?

The 13th Field Regiment, the 48th Battery. There was nowhere for trucks to run around mad over mountains. So I became the real odd and sod in the unit. I had to do all sorts of odd jobs. Eventually, we joined the main unit and we got back to Helidon near Toowoomba. So I wrote to my brother who was in the medical service, Lieutenant Colonel Seymour, he is now. The next thing I get is a letter, would I be prepared to join the ambulance train. I said yes. I thought what the hell is this. When I got to speak to my brother Aub he said, 'When I made inquiries about your records they had one document on you, one document, and I'd been moved all over the place'. They kept paying me.

That's the main thing, isn't it?

So eventually I landed on this ambulance train.

How did that happen?

When I said yes, they just simply transferred me from this 48th Battery to the 2nd Ambulance Train which became the 3rd Ambulance Train.

But were you ever actually in the 9th Field Ambulance?

No.

But you were the orderly room sergeant on that and you had some 9th Field Ambulance people with you, did you?

Yes.

Was this later or at the beginning?

Some came later and some were there before me.

Do you remember who was there first?

No, I don't. It was only later that I found out from Les that there was quite a group from the 9th Field Ambulance.

What was the train like?

We had a reunion, as you know, and Les managed to pick up one of our doctors, Major Geoffrey Vernon Mutton. He was a good bloke and he told us - there were 12 of us there - he said that he had been in England, he had been in the Middle East, he had been in Bougainville, he had been in New Guinea, he'd been everywhere. He said he'd been with all sorts of units but without a doubt this was the most efficient unit he had ever seen. He didn't have to give orders. Everybody knew what to do, when to do it, how to do it and why to do it. He said he had never seen anything like it. In fact he said, 'My son asked me what I had to do on the train, Dad?', and I said 'I only had to find documents, they all knew what to do'. It was a fact. When you come to consider, there is a history in the ambulance train on its own that we were carrying anything up to 350 blokes at a time.

Was it a written history?

It is a history in itself but no-one has ever written it.

You said 350.

300 to 350, plus our staff. When you come to think that we had six cooks that used a wood fuel stove to cater for them, three meals a day, morning tea, afternoon tea and supper. That would be a very efficient unit.

Yes, do you remember Stan Loon? He was a cook.

No.

Do you remember any of the other cooks? I have a whole lot of names already.

I think there was a Cec News.

Right, we know him. I'm interviewing him next Wednesday.

He became my orderly room clerk. We got on pretty well. I might tell you that they never missed a pay on the train. We were on the north side of the harbour so the North Head pay office handled us. Even when we were out on the road, it would pick us up in the Clyde marshalling yard, give us our pay and I would pay them on the way to Albury, go and put the change in a bank at Albury and back to Hornsby. Les O'Sullivan said, 'When you came on there things changed all together, they got better and better'.

So what exactly did you do? You were responsible for paying people.

All the office work.

You had an orderly room. Which car was that in?

It was only a little cabin in a car, not a car.

Was it in the baggage car?

On the train.

It wasn't in the baggage car?

No, we had a special baggage car in which there was also a diesel engine for power. Would you remember the carriages that had a passageway down. You would make a turn and there was another passageway down with little compartments off the carriageway.

Yes.

We had one of those little compartments, Cec and I.

Cec News?

Cec News. And as these patients were brought on with their records and baggage, the baggage went to the baggage car and their records came to me. From those records we had to sort them out into all the different hospitals that they could be allotted to. There was the general impression that they all went to Concord but they didn't. Ear, nose and throats and general ones went there. There was a special one at Baulkham Hills for bones, there was a special one at Kenmore, outside Goulburn for psychiatric and skins and so on. Bonegilla over the border had TB patients and then there was the interstate patients. Then we had from the time that train left until we

got to Rosehill to have that all sorted out. Rolls for the outgoing patients and their hospitals already typed out, given to Ces. And the only station that they could put us into was Rosehill Racecourse because it was the longest one in Sydney. The train was some length, as you might imagine. That was how I came to be on it and that is how we worked. But in itself a historian could make a lot out of it. I was with Major Stan Bonnette in his office one day when we were in Sydney and the General of the LFC of New South Wales came aboard, I remember his name, it was Major General Plant. He said, 'Stan, I didn't know we had anything like this in Australia'. You wouldn't believe it, we got to Albury and I think it was General Whitehead, the Victorian officer came on. He said exactly the same, 'Stan, I didn't know we had anything like this in Australia'. We won the war. The other mob must have been crook mustn't they. When you get the inside stories of this it's amazing.

Do you remember the 3801, the engine?

Yes. I got in touch with the man who was in that group that was ...

Professor Gladstonbury.

Yes. Unfortunately he was ...

He had been in the accident.

Unfortunately he was on his way when I rang to an overseas trip.

He was in that accident that they had a little while back. Fortunately, he survived but a lot of the others didn't.

I told him that I could not believe that the train, that 3801 could not go up the hill. I said usually we had two 36s or a 36 and a 32 to push us up. But I said never would the 3801. I said that there was something else astray, it wasn't the engine. I was defending the engine.

Can you remember any incidents that happened during the time? How long do you think you were on the train?

Two years. Yes, I suppose, when you come to think that the Sydney Brisbane, Brisbane Sydney, Albury and back to Sydney was 2,013 miles. We would be out a week, get back, scrub the train up inside ready for the next trip. Then the war actually finished and it was decided that everybody had to get back to their home States, the patients. In six weeks we went out five times, that gave us 10,000 miles in six weeks.

My goodness.

We hear railway blokes whingeing about doing 100 miles.

Ten thousand miles in six weeks!

I might tell you we were wobbling when we got off with the bumping of the train.

Just like being on a boat.

Yes. Us blokes never batted an eyelid, never whinged, never said boo, just went and did the job.

And they were cooking with wood fires, were they?

Yes. We used to get a load of firewood, the country blokes used to love chopping the wood up. It was stacked under tables, anywhere that they could. I think if we were light on for wood we would get a load at Brisbane and they would chop that up.

I thought you were going to say that you stopped somewhere and chopped a tree down.

Just about.

Just as long as you didn't start chopping the furniture up in the carriages.

We were going north at one stage to Werris Creek. I don't know whether it was generally known but there was a special hospital opened at Tamworth for malaria patients from the 9th Division and the people from the Middle East that came back because they wouldn't adhere to the local rules of collars done up and sleeves down and everything covered up at night. They got rotten with malaria. They opened a special hospital at Tamworth, stationed us at Werris Creek for a few weeks and we would go up to Wallangarra to meet the Queensland train to bring them back to Tamworth. That was a bit of unofficial history.

The 9th Field Ambulance - this is a bit of a mystery as yet - manned another train, apparently another train, before this train that you were talking about, with Major Heffernan. He is dead now, of course.

That would probably be the one that was called the 2nd Ambulance Train. This one was established for the Yanks.

That was called the 3rd in the first instance, wasn't it?

That became the 3rd Ambulance Train.

So where was the 1st one? Was that a Queensland one?

Probably it was. The first ambulance could have been a Queensland one.

I will have to solve the problem of who those were because they weren't on it long. I think they did two or three trips and then they were taken off and they went on to New Guinea with the unit.

I think then that probably became the 2nd Ambulance Train in Sydney and that was stationed at Punchbowl. They joined us at Punchbowl and immediately we became the 3rd Ambulance Train and went to Hornsby.

And you mentioned coming into Rosehill Racecourse. Did the train always come into Rosehill races when it came to Sydney?

There was one occasion when they made a holy bloody mess of it. When the POWs were coming back by boat and plane and so on, some smart bloke in the barracks decided we would put on a show. So they brought the hospital ship into Circular Quay. So the ambulance train then had to be put into Central. There was only one thing wrong, Central Station couldn't cope with the length of it. So they took three carriages off us. They left us with a load of patients, including Jap POWs, English patients that were going to Moss Vale to a rest home or something and three carriages short which meant the best part of 100 men. So instead of giving everybody a bed we had to seat a lot of them on beds until we got to Moss Vale and got rid of some of the patients. But they never gave us any inkling that they were going to put any Jap POWs on.

How did that go? Did the Jap POWs cause any trouble?

A couple of Australians I caught going in there and I said 'Don't go into those poor bastards, they've got no arms and no legs', which they hadn't. So that was calmed down very quick. There was a lot of unofficial history on there. Stuff that has never been written.

Such as?

Things like this, you didn't know we had a train.

That's right, yes.

We had a couple of fires on it, but we handled them all right.
How did the fires start?

The Red Cross gave us some kerosene heaters. But when you have an 800 tonne train doing 60 miles an hour going round bends they don't stand up too well. We had what we call a little waiting room and over went the kerosene heater. As it went round the bend the fellows at the front of the train were looking out and seeing smoke coming out of the back of the train. It was in the little compartment at the back of me. So they handled that all right. We got out towards Wallangarra for these other trips, this special trip business, and the

continual heat had mucked the fibro up at the back of the stoves. It had to burn the woodwork, so the cooks handled that all right and did the cooking out on the railway tracks.

There was another occasion where we were sidetracked going out through to Maitland at a little place called Minda River. Alongside us was a troop train coming the other way. They'd been scheduled for breakfast at 8 o'clock at Gosford and it was now 12 o'clock. Those blokes were starving. So they told us they were hungry, seen the engine driver and our catering bloke. We had an empty milk can, the big milk churns. A packet of tea, packets of biscuits, the water from the engine and gave them their breakfast before we moved off. All little incidents like that kept us busy in any case.

And you were responsible for all the paper work for two years.

Yes.

That's very interesting. But most of the time when you got to Sydney you used to come into Rosehill Racecourse, did you?

That was with patients only because of the length of the train. They could drive the ambulances up on to the platform and drive off the other end.

Where at Albury? Did you just used to go into the yards there did you, the break-of-gauge yards.

I don't know whether we went into the yard, just to the Albury Station and then just pulled straight out.

Yes, train on one side and train on the other. And what about in Brisbane?

They used to put us into what they called Clapham Junction. It was the same thing, run in there and the engine would be on the other end and pull out.

There was no break-of-gauge on that, on the Wallangarra was there, or was there?

No, we could go as far as Wallangarra and then we would come back to Werris Creek.

But you did go to Brisbane sometimes, did you?

Clapham was just on the outskirts of Brisbane.

That was the same gauge, was it?

Yes, into Clapham Junction was the same gauge.

Clapham Junction is south London. Can you think of any other instances? Do you remember the operating theatre being used?

No. There might have been an odd job or two with our people. There was never any occasion to because as Geoffrey Mutton said they were most efficient, they know what to do.

Was he a surgeon, Geoffrey Mutton?

I think he was.

I've got his phone number off Les O'Sullivan and I might ring him up tonight.

He's a sheep farmer at Albury.

But he was a doctor during the war, was he?

Yes.

He's not at Albury, he's at Orange now. But he was a sheep farmer at Albury, was he?

No. Not as far as I know, he was at Orange.

Are there any other stories you can think of?

Not at this stage.

That's been a great help anyway. That fills out what Less O'Sullivan says he remembers. He could actually name a whole lot of the nursing sisters and such like.

Yes. There was Mamont, Sisold, Ryrie, Millard, Meaney.

That's one he didn't mention.

Dorothy Meaney. She gave me a very old medical dictionary. It was a 1917 one, I still have it. She said, 'This will help you sorting out the patients', and it did too. Another thing that happened when Mutton was on the train was that he arranged to get a phone put into the Clapham Junction. It was plugged into one of the posts. The engine would stop us right alongside that post and I could plug in and ring him back at Sydney and say I've got this, this, this, because they fly the nominal role down to him. I would go over it with him and tell him where I would allocate them to and he would give me hundreds, right, good, that'll do us. That's what I think Les meant, things change when you came there. My brother was in charge of medical staff throughout the State.

Was he. What was his name?

He was Major then. He retired as Lieutenant Colonel Seymour. He was in the black blitz in London and Tobruk and Syria. He finished up in the DDMS as chief of the medical staff there for staff.

> That's very interesting. The business of the different ambulance trains. When they swopped over with the Americans, did the American train become the third ambulance?

The one that was made for the Americans, I think it was, became the third ambulance.

> Was it actually built for the Americans?

As far as I can ascertain it was.

> Where was it built do you know?

I don't know.

> Was it built in New South Wales?

I just don't know, but you might have heard about the Brisbane line which was never supposed to exist. From what I can gather this train was specifically built as an operating theatre behind the line for the quick removal of patients. That's another bit that's not known.

> Has any of that train left, do you know?

I don't know. It would be interesting to see it.

> I'm involved in the railway heritage business. I can find that out. As a matter of fact, at the present moment it looks as if we are actually going to get a New South Wales railway heritage trust. It looks as if it is actually going to happen finally. It will be very interesting to find that out.

My brother Aub, he's mixed up with the museum they have at the barracks.

> Is he still alive, your brother Aub?

Yes. I asked him if he had anything in his museum about the ambulance train and he said they had nothing. It was one of those things that no-one wanted to know anything about, except it was there.

> Have you got your brother's phone number, so I might ring him?

It is in the book, A.F. Seymour, Lieutenant Colonel, Beauchamp Road, Matraville. You can tell him you were talking to me about

the train and refer to Geoffrey Mutton because it was through him that the doctors were allocated to the train: Crawford, Callen, Bonnette.

Wait a minute, I didn't get all those names.

Graham Crawford. I think it was Austin Callen - I didn't meet him.

I have got Austin Callen, yes.

John Thomson Anderson. He was also the cricket association's doctor. He wouldn't tell me his age when he was to be discharged so I could get the points for him. He just said say somewhere about 60. He was also the bloke who heard me refuse a cricket match. He was in the next room. He said, 'Sergeant, sergeant, take that cricket match and I'll umpire'. 'We had no staff, how can we have a cricket match?'. He said, 'We'll get a staff, I'll umpire'.

Were there any other doctors?

Stan Bonnette, he died recently. Then there was a series of relief ones, Frank Lynch - he was the doctor from Bondi Junction; Miles Seaton - he was the doctor out in the Cronulla area from what I can gather. Keith Kline from Morpeth near Maitland. That is what I can remember off hand.

You're complimenting what Les has told me, you know. What Les O'Sullivan had told me, he mentioned all the nursing sisters, and now you've mentioned all the doctors and so on, and your brother and what have you.

There was another one, Daisey Ruse. You might have heard of the sheep family, the Ruse's.

His first name was Daisey?

Mmm.

END OF TAPE - END OF INTERVIEW