ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: BOB MAXWELL - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: BOB MAXWELL

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

SUMMARY:

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START OF TAPE 25A

Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance, AIF, Oral History Project. Tape 25A, 23.8.91 and I'm talking to Mr Bob Maxwell. This is side one.

Mr Maxwell, where were you born and when?

In Waterloo in July 1921.

Did you grow up around there?

For a year, and then we moved to Mascot. That is where I have lived since 1924.

In what area did you go to school?

Yes. I went to King Street Public School, then I went on to Gardeners Road Technical School and then I left to go to work. I would have been about 15.

Did you have any likes and dislikes at school?

No. It was all right. I used to try and stay there but half the time I would miss out on things but other than that it was all right.

Were you interested in sport?

I didn't play much sport but I used to barrack and go and look after their gear and stuff like that.

Where did you work when you went to work?

I worked in the Strand Arcade in the city for a furrier, then I went into the Army in 1941.

When you worked for the furrier, exactly what were you doing?

They had a cutter machine that cut the patterns out and the machine would just sew them up. I'd wet the pelt and tack it out to a pattern on a big board and let it dry. That's all I did, tacking out the patterns.

After or before it was sewn?

After it was sewn. It was all sewn up and then you would tack it out to a pattern. When it was all dry, say the next day, I would take it off and the cutter would put the pattern on and cut it out to the shape and then the machiners would sew it up into a jacket or coat. Then the other girls would finish with a silk lining and things like that and finish it off.

Were you called up in the first place to go into the Army?

I was called up to go to six months duty but when I got in they said I was in for good.

So where did you go?

I went to Narellan and did the infantry training there. I was there for about two months. When Japan came into the war we were down at the beaches. I was at Maroubra Beach putting the barbed wire barricades up and we swapped over at Malabar, or Little Bay, as it was called then, putting the wire netting up. Then we went back to Narellan to do training and then on to the 9th Field Ambulance from there.

Did you volunteer for that or did it just happen?

I volunteered for it, but in the first place ...

Why? Why did you volunteer for the 9th Field Ambulance?

I had a first aid and home nursing certificates and things like that and I was going into the RAP Battalion. But the trouble is when you volunteer for the 9th, the 9th Field Ambulance wanted recruits and the message sent around from divisional headquarters, I presume, and of course the battalion sent all the dead heads. When they got them there they sent them back because they didn't want them. So they said they asked for volunteers and those that volunteered either had first aid or home nursing certificates.

How did you get those certificates?

I went to the St Johns Ambulance at the Mascot Town Hall, when it was all voluntary work, not the set up it is now to join the brigade. You used to go to sporting fixtures and things like that when they wanted people there.

What about home nursing?

We didn't do any actual practical work, just theory exams and things like that.

What got you in to the St Johns Ambulance in the first place? Can you remember?

My father joined it and then when I was old enough I joined the cadets as I went into the higher part.

You are the first one who has told me that sort of thing. Some people were on the railways and they did first aid and that sort of thing, but you are the first one who actually volunteered for the 9th Field Ambulance who was already in there. Did you have any objection to being a combatant, rather than being an ambulance person?

No, none at all. I was called up and I had the time. I mean, Australia wanted you to do your duty and you did it.

You had already had the training, so you thought you would do it.

Yes. I thought I would be more use as a medical than the light infantry. If you are in the infantry and something happened, you would leave that and do something else, save someone's life or something like that.

Where was the 9th Field Ambulance when you joined them?

Wallgrove camp.

What was that like?

It was a better camp than Narellan; it was an older camp.

Was it huts?

No. That was all under canvas, even the hospital wards were canvas, but they had the cookhouse was in buildings because it had the hot water furnace and everything like that on the end of the wards.

Which company were you in?

Company B.

Who was the officer in charge?

Major Heffernan.

Can you remember any of the other officers or NCOs?

I think Dunlop, Ken Payne, Jack McKellar.

What were their ranks?

They were sergeants. I can't remember the names, I can only remember some of them.

If you were a private, who was your corporal then?

You've got me there.

What was your job when you joined the unit?

Just ordinary duties. You'd do your training, then you were rostered to do either day or night shift in the ward that they had in the camp hospital.

Were you a medical orderly?

Yes.

What training did you get as a medical orderly? Did you get into a formal course at all?

No. They did teach like going through all the bandages and things like that. We didn't go to any special course or anything like that.

Did they teach you to give injections and things like that?

When we were going away they did. Because when you went to the base camp they had nurses and sisters. They used to do a lot of that.

Did they teach you?

Yes, they showed us how to do it.

Do you remember any nurses at Wallgrove?

No, I don't remember them.

Where did you go next? Was it St Ives, Frenchs Forest or what?

We went to St Ives. The main unit went to St Ives. We were there for quite a while and then some went to Frenchs Forest.

Where were you living at St Ives?

At the place called the Green Toad. I think it was in Stanley Street. The whole unit was there.

And then you went to Frenchs Forest, did you?

Yes. We were there for several months.

How did you get there?

They took us out in trucks.

You didn't have to march there?

No. I did do route marches from St Ives down Deep Creek. We went for miles, Narabeen and all around the coast.

Who was the commanding officer at that time?

Colonel Bretherton.

Do you remember Major Holcombe?

Yes. He was in the other company to us. I know more about Heffernan because he was the actual CO of our company.

What was he like?

He was quite a nice man. The funny thing was, after the war, when I came back, I went to the Commonwealth eye hospital to have my eyes done and he was there. They checked your eyes, you had to do exercises and things like that.

Do you remember the bush fires at Frenchs Forest, did you fight them?

No, we weren't there at that time.

So where were you at that time?

I don't know.

Did you go to Bondi Baths at that period?

Bowling Club, yes, we were there for quite a while. Also at Pennant Hills Golf Club.

What were you doing there?

One of the local units would go out in the ambulance and take them to hospital or whatever. We didn't have any beds or hospital there, it was just sort of an outpost, an RAP.

A regimental aid post. What about Bondi Bowling Club?

They used to have a local medical officer who used to live in the block of flats opposite. He used to come and do the sick parade every morning and afternoon, because we were there to do whatever treatments there were to do, and that was it.

What sort of treatment?

Put bandages on or swab with triple dye or give them medicine or whatever. The sergeants used to do the injections and things like that.

Can you remember the sergeant there?

Sergeant Ken Payne.

Right. How long were you there and where did you get your patients from?

They used to come from local units that were billeted at different areas and from the beach, like Bondi Beach, and different areas around there. Other than that all local posts.

Where did you go from there?

We went to Brisbane then.

From Narellan?

Yes.

Were you on leave when they sent you off to Brisbane?

No. I would go to sleep before we left and then we went to Brisbane then.

Do you remember anything about the train to Brisbane? Was there anything special about it? Was it an ambulance train or not?

No. It was an ordinary troop train. I think there were a few civilian passengers on one covered carriage but there were nearly all troops on it. We would stop for breakfast at different places on the way.

Where were you stationed in Brisbane?

At the Ascot racecourse.

Was that under canvas?

Yes.

Did you go to Grovely as well?

Yes. We went to Grovely. We were on a train at the time we went to Grovely, but we were stationed at the Bundamba racecourse, against the ...

Ipswich.

Mmm. Wait a minute, I'm getting mixed up. Grovely, the camp, we were there for the Christmas 1942. Then when we were on the train and went to Bundamba, in between trips.

So that is a racecourse, Ipswich.

Out that way, yes.

Did you take patients there? Is that where the train came from?

No. It was just stationed there, in between trips.

Can you remember what the train was like?

It wasn't a full hospital train. It was ordinary sleeper carriages with several hospital painted cars, like the dining car and the main car were painted white with a red cross, or something like that.

The sleeper cars, were they in compartments, or was it an open car?

Just a normal sleeping train, but the double seats were made into bunk seats beside the carriage. Other than that it was all open. Because when the bunks were down and made into beds it was just like a hallway with beds up each side.

Did they have curtains in between?

No. They didn't need curtains; they were all stretcher patients, except one lot.

In the ambulance cars, was that open as well?

No. The ambulance car was more or less a dining car. The main car where they used to do treatments if there were any treatments to be done, just to identify the train it had a couple of cars. The officers and the other ranks had first class sleeping cars and the privates had second class sleeping cars, which meant the bunks were six to a cabin, but they were crossways of the train, not lengthways of the carriage.

Were they two high or three high?

In the second they were three high, in the first they were only two high.

Did you have any arguments about who wanted to go to bed and when?

No. They were all more or less bed patients. They had their meals brought to them; every casualty had his meal brought to him from the dining car.

Were you sleeping in a six berth cabin?

No. The medical orderlies didn't have a bed, they had a mattress on the floor at the end of the carriage. The carriage had a wash basin and a toilet and that is where you slept so that you were on call. There were two orderlies to each car. At the night time there was one orderly there and the other orderly had a sleep in the second class carriage provided for them.

I suppose you were up all night.

We did try to get a bit of sleep during the day.

Did you get any serious patients with whom you were up all night?

No. But if they were, they were put in the car next to the main car where the sisters and the doctor and the sergeants were, so

they could pop in and out. We didn't have many serious problems. They were serious enough but not life threatening.

Nobody died on the train.

No, not while I was there.

How many times did you go up and back with the train?

I should imagine we did about five to six trips from Townsville to Brisbane.

Where were you unloading the patients in Brisbane?

At Redbank General Hospital. That is out near Greenslopes way.

When a trip was over, did you get any time off?

We got maybe a couple of days leave. But we were with the train all the time and you had time to do your washing at Main Junction Depot. We would pull up there every time.

Where's Main Junction Depot?

On the Ipswich Road, just past the exhibition ground, opposite the Brisbane General Hospital.

Did you have to scrub the train out there?

We had to clean it up and sometimes you had to wash outside the carriage and polish them with polish that the railways would supply you with to keep it nice and clean. You would also reprovision everything and get clean linen and blankets every time you pulled up. Every time you came back you got it all reprovisioned and re-equipped.

Did you have cooks on the train?

Yes, there were two cooks. We had to do our kitchen for tea type of thing, at odd times we were off.

Can you remember any of the cooks?

I think there was a Vince Chambers and Stan Loon was the other one.

A Chinese cook, yes.

I don't think there was third one, but Vince Chambers was the cook.

What were they like? What was the food like?

It was all right. It was ordinary Army food. But in a dining car in a train, they only had one big stove and they had to

start cooking an hour or so before the meal so you could have everything done to do all the carriages.

Were they wood or oil stoves?

They were wood and coal. When they would give you rations for your carriage you would go and take it into the dixies and you would serve it up in the carriage. Then you had to take everything back and wash it all up.

It would be continuous almost I would suppose.

Yes.

How long did it take to get from Townsville to Brisbane?

Around about three days. It would all depended on whether you had a straight run through because you are sidelined a lot for trains going up and you had to wait for them to pass. It was only a single track most of the way. The first trip we did, on the way up we were held up at Bowen because the Burdekin River was in flood. In a car we lost a roof of a carriage. We walked the next day and we couldn't find it anywhere. On the way back, we couldn't come back so we went to pick up our patients at Townsville and we went through Longreach down through Charters Towers, right out to Longreach and back into Rockhampton. The train had to be broken up in half several times to get over the hill, because there were that many carriages on it for the engine. They would take half away and you would be sitting there and walk beside it and pick up coal and wood for the fire.

Did they have a generator for the train, as well as the power from the engine?

No. The only generators we had was what the carriages were equipped with when it was running. The generator would recharge the batteries because he was stopped over for a week or so. If the batteries run out you would have to be hooked up to an outside source.

It wasn't like the New South Wales one where they had a special generator in the baggage train.

No.

The New South Wales ones had a generator in the baggage car.

These only had the generator under the carriage. As the train ran it kept the batteries topped up.

The New South Wales one was a proper ambulance train and it had diesel generators.

This was only a made up one. Ordinary brown carriages and a couple of white ones, just to identify it.

All right. About how many trips did you do with that, do you think?

About five or six.

Did you take many Americans during that time?

Yes. The first trip I was in a carload of American officers. The majority of them were carried on to the train on stretchers. This time we had to detour around through Longreach. The Red Cross at Longreach put a big do on at the Town Hall, right opposite the station. The boy scouts looked after the train when everybody went. All the stretcher patients got up and went over to the hotel and had a good dance and came back. When we got to Brisbane they were carried off on stretchers. It was quite a lark. Not only the Americans, the officers, they wouldn't wash their own things up, you had to collect them and take them and wash them up. They were all like that.

Were there many malaria cases coming down from New Guinea at all?

There were quite a few. You had to watch their medication. A few injuries, not life threatening, because anyone who was really serious went down by hospital boat to the southern States.

So when you finished on the hospital trains, where did you go then?

When we had finished running up and down we were split up. Some were left at Tolga, near Rocky Creek.

What did you do there?

We just sat there and did our training, and route marches down to Rocky Creek hospital. One carriage was left at Atherton for local troops on leave in a town in case they wanted anything done. Then from there we went to Ravenshoe.

What did you do there?

Jungle training, the same as before. Harder training than in the infantry. Then we went from there to New Guinea.

On the boat?

Yes.

Which boat?

On the Duntroon.

When you got to New Guinea, where did you go?

We went to Rigo Road, about 12 miles up out of Moresby.

What was that like?

We took over from the 3rd Field Ambulance. We took over from some field ambulance and we were there for a while like a hospital.

Was it tents or huts?

Tents. The hospital ward was like a wooden structure.

Not a native hut?

No.

What was the water supply like, and things like that?

They used to have a water tanker that would go down to the water place and they would put whatever purification in it, so many cups of stuff, and when it came back they had to put the hypo in to take the taste out because if they wanted to use the water before the taste was taken out it was vile. Have you ever tasted tea with chlorinated water, have you?

So was there a hospital there?

Yes, just one ward, it only had about 20 or 30 beds in it, it was just local units, the local minor stuff.

So where did you go next?

A few of us went up to Lux Lane for a while.

What was that like?

It was a holiday resort. Just training.

Holiday resort! That was a dysentery camp originally.

Originally, yes. When we were there it was more or less on the edge of closing down. We were just put there to do our training before we went away. We did more jungle route marches to Koitaki and those places.

Do you remember the mad mile?

Yes.

Whose idea was that?

I don't know. One of them did it to keep you on your toes, sort of thing.

An obstacle course, was it?

Yes.

So what was it that they had on this obstacle course?

We had to jump over fences and ditches and we had to carry a stretcher with medical panniers on it or a tent or something, just to weigh you down, to see how you would stand up to the trouble.

How did you go?

We staggered around for a while until we got used to the heat. The heat was something vile up there. It wasn't so bad at Lux Lane because it was higher up and the air was cooler.

Something I forgot to ask you, when you were in the Townsville area, did you get down to the beach at all?

At Townsville itself?

Yes. Did you get down to the Blue Lagoon or something like that?

No.

Did you have any trouble with the Americans? Did you get into town and cross swords with any of the Americans?

No. We didn't have much trouble with the Americans at all. They just kept to their place.

What about having trouble with the locals over the Americans? Did you hear anything about that?

No. We heard rumours, but personally I didn't see anything.

I just wondered if you had anything to do with that.

No. That would be right up at Charters Towers, when the 9th Divi came back.

There was also a bit of a do in Townsville, I believe, when one of the local shopkeepers was rude to one of the fellows and refused to serve them.

The American Red Cross had two setups, one for the whites and one for the negroes; one at each end of the town so that they didn't mix. The negro one was on the outskirts of town whereas the white one was right in the centre of town.

Were you allowed to go in any of those?

Yes. We could go to either. If we were in town on leave you could go and have a meal or whatever at either one. If you went to the negro one you were made quite welcome. There was no confrontation or anything like that.

How long were you at Lux Lane?

I would say about two and a half months, something like that. We were recuperating and getting ready for up further.

Where did you go next?

From there we went to Nadzab.

How did you get there?

By boat, cargo, one of those liberty boats. We went from Lae to Nadzab by truck.

Can you remember the officer in charge at that time? Heffernan was somewhere else, wasn't he?

Yes, he wasn't there. We worked with the Americans there.

At Nadzab?

Yes. The big mess hut, we were on one end and they were on the other.

You mentioned earlier that you had been evacuating, unloading planes in Moresby. Where did you do that from?

Mainly Jackson's airport.

Were you living at the airport?

No. We used to go out every day. You might do two or three days and then another group would go and do two or three days. You weren't there all the time. You might be there just two or three days at a time.

What were you exactly doing?

When the planes would come in, you would go out to the ambulance and help load them on to the ambulance. You would sort their tickets and you would send them to the hospital and say ward so and so, surgical or medical. They mainly went to the 2/9th AGH, very few were sent to the 2/5th.

You mentioned earlier that some of the nursing sisters that were on the train were up in Moresby as well. Do you remember who they were?

Sister McCullam, she was at the 2/5th AGH in Moresby. I think Sister Kelly went to the camp hospital at the exhibition ground. From there I don't know whether she went away further or not. That's when we went off the ambulance train.

Did you see them in New Guinea?

Yes. I have seen Sister McCullam several times in New Guinea. I went out to the hospital and saw her. You couldn't fraternise with them. You would just visit and that was it. You would just say hello. It was just for the news of the different ones that they knew on the train.

Were you friendly with them on the train?

Yes. They were quite nice and friendly. You had to do as you were told.

They were in charge.

Yes. Some of the sisters were what they called battleaxes, but these were very nice and they explained things to you and helped you out when they could.

So when you got to Nadzab and you were working with the Americans, what exactly were you doing there?

They would bring the wounded in from various areas.

Where, do you know?

Sometimes local and sometimes they would come in from Dumpu. They would drop them there and then put them on a bigger plane to take them to Moresby.

Were any of them going down to Lae at all by truck?

Only maybe the walking wounded, but not many. We used to send a lot mainly from Nadzab to Moresby by plane.

At one time they were sending the really serious ones down to Lae to hospital. Did that happen in your time?

Only a few, not many, because the roads were very rough and it was as easy to fly them out as to take them out by road.

Were there a number of seriously wounded during that time? Did you get any deaths?

No. What we had weren't that serious; not death threatening. I think sometimes we had to keep them overnight or if the plane had already gone or if there were too many on the plane, we would keep them overnight.

So what did you do when you kept them overnight? What sort of arrangements did you have there?

They had a special hut, built up stretcher beds on them so they could put them into bed there.

Was that a native hut?

It was a native hut with half sides, with a grass roof. Half sides, because they had slit trenches built in the huts, but you weren't allowed to dig a slit trench in that part of New Guinea because of the mosquitoes and water seepage.

END OF SIDE A

START OF TAPE 25B - SIDE B

Identification: 25B, 23/8/1991, Bob Maxwell, side two.

In Nadzab when you were there, one of the things I wanted to ask you was on the way you got there. Did you have any difficulty getting round? Bad weather or anything. You weren't the group that pulled into Milne Bay, were you?

We went to Milne Bay early on the way up and we also called at Madang. We stayed at Madang for about three or four days. It might have been a bit longer, before we got to Lae. When we arrived in Lae it was real wet, you know, rain. They unloaded the boat and several slings slipped and put all the stuff over on people who were working on the wharf below. But on the way from there to Nadzab was really rough. The road was all bogged with mud and we slid all over the place.

Do you remember the doctor who came with you being on the boat? Do you think it was Captain Biddle?

It could have been. The name sounds very familiar, it could have been Biddle.

But you don't remember him on the boat.

No.

You don't remember him on the truck.

No. There were two or three truckloads of gear and stuff we were carrying.

So, when you got to Nadzab, was there a hospital there?

No. On the strip, where we were camped beside the strip, near the control tower, they had a big hut for the mess and a separate hut for any wounded or sick people to put them in while you were waiting or overnight, sort of thing.

Did you have a hut for yourself?

No, we were under tents.

Was that close to the airstrip?

We were right on the airstrip, right behind the control tower.

How far from the hut where you had the wounded people and the planes?

It would be about several hundred yards. They would pull up on the apron of the strip as near as they could.

How did you transport the wounded or the sick across?

The Americans had a couple of ambulances and a jeep. You would take them to the hut or vice versa. If you had them in the hut you would take them out to the plane to load them on.

Did you have any New Guinean native labour at all?

No.

So it was all you people doing the work?

Yes, we did the work.

Both carrying and looking after patients.

Yes. There wasn't that much carrying to do. You only had to carry them from the truck or jeep into the hut or vice versa.

What sort of walking wounded and stretcher cases were there?

You get more walking wounded than stretcher cases. You might have six stretcher cases, but you might have a dozen walking. It was that sort of ratio between them.

And what sort of planes?

The ordinary Dakota, what we know as a DC3, they had the Dakota 33 or 53 or something.

What about the C47s? Did you have any of those?

No, we mainly had the old Dakotas.

I thought they were a C47s.

Yes, that could be the number, but that was the American number.

They were the ones that had square windows.

Yes, with a hole in them so you can stick a rifle out if they wanted to. The Americans call them one name and we call them ... but the DC3s were after the war. But the Americans used to call them some other thing.

Did you ever fly with the planes to look after people?

No, generally the crew used to do that. Early in the stage the plane crews wouldn't take back any wounded. They wouldn't take them back and you had to bribe them with Japanese helmets or swords and stuff like that in the early part. Then they got around to it. When they came home to unload they would take a load all the way back.

Do you mean they didn't have to take the wounded.

No. When they first tried it they refused to take them, or they wouldn't take them unless you talked them into it. They used to bribe them and things like that.

Do you remember any arguments between the Americans and the Australians?

At Nadzab no. As a matter of fact they were really good. The Americans used to get fresh bacon issued to them and it was too salty, and we used to get tinned stuff so we used to swap over. We used to swap different rations that they didn't like and we ate and they liked the other sort so we used to swap over. We used to pass it through the wall.

How long do you think you were there?

About two months or so, before we went down to Busu.

Why did they send you to Busu, have you any idea?

No. I think when we went there we had to set up the whole show down there. There was a hut built for the first aid part and the reception, and there was a tent. But we started off more or less from scratch.

While you were up at Nadzab can you remember any home brewing or distilling or anything like that?

Not around where we were.

What about down at Busu?

It was like Toohey's brewery at times, the smell of the hops and stuff like that. But it was quite a good drop.

What about Kevin Ryan, was he a brewer?

Yes, I think he used to do the main lot.

Was he at Nadzab?

I don't think so. I don't know how they came to be with us. I don't think we had any trucks up there in Nadzab.

He got down to Busu somehow. I mentioned Captain Biddle and you thought that rang a bell.

Yes, it sort of rang a bell.

What would the doctor be doing at Nadzab?

Mainly he would supervise treatment or any patients who came in he would check their treatments and things like that, give instructions of what to do.

Was there an MDS at Nadzab when you were there?

Not where we were. We used to receive them from RAPs or whatever, and they would bring them to us to be put on the planes.

Did you get any on planes that you were keeping for a while and then putting them on other planes?

Occasionally, the plane would be full and you would keep them overnight till the next morning to go on another plane, but other than that they would normally come in a small plane and they would transfer them to another plane.

Can you remember what the name of the unit was at Nadzab when you were there working on it?

The American one, I couldn't say.

Was it known as a casualty clearing station?

No, air evacuation, air evac.

Right. So was your post known as an air evacuation post or was it known as a casualty clearing station?

Air evacuation. We didn't have anything to do with treatment, unless we were received them in the morning and the plane didn't leave until the afternoon. That was when we looked after them, but other than that it was nothing. We didn't start anything of, we would finish or carry on.

What sort of proportion of cases do you think were American and Australian?

The Americans used to move their own. They would help us and we would help them. If they were overloaded or if we were overloaded we used to help each other. But they used to look

after their own at the strip. We only looked after the Australians.

Did you know of any other part of the unit that was at Nadzab at the same time as you were?

No.

I have a bit of a problem here.

As far as I know, we were the only one there at the time.

There was another group that were there. There were three groups there, to my knowledge. The first group they flew in direct from Moresby and they were waiting for the strip to be taken at Nadzab. They flew in straight afterwards and they were working there.

They would be there after the paratroops landed.

Then they went up to Dumpu. When they went up to Dumpu there was one group that came in by plane straightaway and relieved them. It was a weekend and there was nobody there from our group, the group who went up to Dumpu handed over to somebody else. Then after the weekend was up another group came in by plane and they were there. The next thing was that there was another group sent around from Moresby by boat.

That's the one I was on.

Now, there was another group that was sent round by boat that didn't have an officer with them. They went up to Nadzab and they stayed at Nadzab, they didn't go to Busu, they stayed at Nadzab for the rest of the time. In actual fact, they were at Nadzab so long at the last affair that they missed the boat back to Australia and they had to find their own way back a lot later than the whole of the crowd.

That must have been after us because we went from Nadzab down to Busu.

Were you relieved by another group?

At Busu?

No, at Nadzab when you went down to Busu?

I think we were relieved by a group, not as many as were in the first group like our lot because they were expecting more to come back. But when we left everything was there, it was left behind.

But you didn't hand over directly to another group.

No.

Why were you sent? Was it still busy there when you left or did it get quiet?

It started to get quieter then because we used to get some from Dumpu but as they moved up further they would fly them over further to some other areas.

So it's still a baffler. Down at Busu you had to establish that as a camp.

Yes. There was a hut built for us, a kitchen and mess hut. That was about all that was there. We just put up our tents and like everything else like that.

Do you remember who were the doctors, the officers?

I don't know who the first one was. I remember Captain O'Rourke. He was there when I left there.

He was the one who organised the materials for brewing.

Yes. And it wasn't to be tasted until he took it to be tested up at the pathology department at the AGH. It was a really good brew too, it was strong. I think it was somewhere around about 12 per cent alcohol.

The brewer, Kevin Ryan, amongst others, were you in a tent with him?

Yes. I was in a tent with Kevin Ryan and Jack Daniels. I think Ken Stonehouse was the other one in the tent. I think there were only four to a tent.

Did they brew it in the tent?

They brewed it and when they had bottled it they put it under the bed so that it matured or cured or whatever they call it.

Did you have a go at it?

Yes, it was quite good. You couldn't drink a lot of it at 12 per cent alcohol. You would be seeing things if you had too much of it. When they opened a bottle they would have to open it into a kerosene tin so when it came out you caught it all and you didn't lose any of it.

Did you get refrigeration? Did you have ice there?

No. We used to dig a hole, cover it with earth and pour petrol over it. The evaporation of the petrol would chill it. That's a good idea as a chiller. If you put petrol on your hands, you

feel it evaporate and it's really chilly. But the aircraft petrol is the best because it used to have a real bite to it.

But there was a danger of fire.

It was well away from anything like that. You would have a selected area, it was just a mound, like one of these bush bird turkeys. They build a mound and they'd pour it on and just leave it.

Do you have any more stories about things up there? Do you remember anybody finding gold around the place and selling gold rings and things like that?

No. They used to get propellers and make rings and souvenirs out of propeller shafts and things like that, but other than that we didn't find any gold. We weren't up in the gold area anyhow.

You weren't up at Wau. Can you remember anything else that happened at Busu?

No, not really. Every day work. We had RAPs from the different units coming every morning and things like that and the afternoon.

You were transferred from the 9th Field Ambulance at Busu were you?

Yes, to the MAC and went up to Aitape and Wewak.

What is an MAC?

There is the 2nd MAC and then they changed the name to the 3rd MAC.

But what is an MAC.

A motor ambulance convoy company. They had about 25 ambulances to each platoon, plus a three tonne truck and a couple of three hundred weight trucks. That was about it.

What is it? A mobile hospital as a matter of fact.

No, just an ambulance. They didn't do any medical work at all, but there was a driver and a medical orderly who went out on every trip in case it had to be looked after or anything like that. In case he had to ride in the back with the patients.

And where did you go with this?

I went up to Aitape and then worked our way down to Wewak. I was at Cape Moem when they signed the peace surrender.

When you were with that ambulance there, who was in charge? Was there an officer or a doctor?

No, they were all officers. His name was Whitford, I think, he was a Sydney detective in civil life and after the war. There were only lieutenants and sergeants and corporals and things like that.

How many of you were there in the convoy?

There were 25 ambulances in each platoon. There were two platoons plus three tonne trucks and a couple of three hundred weight trucks.

Who were your casualties? Were they picking up casualties?

We were only transferring them from one place to another, like from AGH to the airport or AGH to a hospital ship, and things like that, just to carry and dropping and picking up.

Was that in a battle zone?

No, behind the battle zone.

Did you ever get bombed?

No, only a few air-raids at Nadzab, and that was mainly up further they had their blackouts and things like that. The only other thing when we were with the MAC, we were detached to different units along the coast. We were at [Yakamul] Mission and bringing wounded back down from there. Several times they were scared that the Japs had broken through, you would just have to sit and wait and see what happened. You would get up in the morning, got to say three or four trips, over bridges, when you come in the afternoon there might be two bridges missing, they have been swept down with a storm in the mountains and they had been swept out to sea. You either had to wait until it went down or try to get across the best way you could. We got bogged in the middle several times but the Americans there, the big sixes, towed us out.

Were there any other 9th Field Ambulance men in that group?

Not when it transferred. They were all over the place. I was in the medical wing.

So how did you come to be in that? All the rest of them went. If you were the only one, how did that come about?

I think they wanted someone in there to make up the number before they went away and I just volunteered I suppose, because I believe a fair while after I had left and then they came back. I think they joined up with some other unit and I think they came back in the same area up Aitape way when I was up

there. I think it would be the 18th or something that they joined up with it.

> I don't know who it was. It was broken up. The unit was disbanded at Rutherford. The people went in all directions. Tom Kelly went to Balikpapan.

I thought they would merge with some other unit because some of them came back up there. I think it was a double barrelled number, 3/18th or something like that, 9/18th or something like that.

> I don't know. Doug Dunlop went to Bougainville and Tom Kelly went to Balikpapan in Borneo. I think they all went over the place. Some of them went into various hospitals in Australia, all over the place. Len Bostick went to the mental hospital, Kenmore in Goulburn, and he hated it. What I meant to say is: did any of the officers that you knew before, O'Rourke, he didn't go?

No.

> So, you must have been up there a fair while if you were still up there at the end of the war.

Yes. We came back about three or four months after the war finished. In 1946 I was discharged.

> So you were there over a year.

Yes, there for a fair while. We were attached to the 6 Divi, the MAC. I could say the two ambulances were at different places with different battalions. You would go from there up to pick-up and bring them back, back to the CCS at Aitape.

> Right. Did you go over to Bougainville?

No, we came back from Wewak to Cape Moem and then the police was turning in up at Wewak Point I established a big hospital up on the point because people were fixed up there, there was more to just clean up around the place.

> So when you got out you didn't go back to the furriers?

No, I went out for a while. I got another different job because it was a dead end job. So I went to Bennett and Woods Speedwell Bikes and from there I went to the cinemas.

> Right. Can you remember any stories you can tell about times you at Nadzab, Busu or anywhere?

No, not really. I have nothing else to add.

> Do you have any Kevin Ryan stories, he was known as a ...

Yes. They go in one ear and out the other. If you told me something now, I'd go home and I would forget about it and I wouldn't know what I was talking about.

He was known as being a fairly good mechanic.

Yes. He used to do all his own repairs and things like that on the trucks. When we were back with the unit he was one of those first class mechanic, or whatever they are, when you are out on your attachment you look after your own.

What about the Pearson brothers?

Yes, Lennie Pearson, and blondie his brother. He was a sergeant, but I didn't have much to do with him. But blondie, he was in the same group as we were, he was quite good. Him and Lennie Bostick used to be really good mates.

What about the Kilkearys? Do you know anything about Moss and Jack Kilkeary?

No, I don't know much about them. I just about know their name and that's about it.

Were you in any place where a number of them caught malaria or scrub typhus? Did you get malaria?

Just a slight bit of it up further. But I remember Jackie Brett had scrub typhus, I heard about that, but we weren't there. We were up further. We had a lot of trouble with our own and stuff like that.

What about John Rainbow? Did you hear about him?

No.

So nobody around you caught scrub typhus?

No.

What about malaria?

Several of us did but not the bad type, just the light one.

So were you living in reasonable conditions during the time you were over there? Were there any bad conditions?

It was reasonable enough. The only time it was really crook was when we went to Aitape and there was nothing there. You had to sit up in slosh and mud there until you're shifted from there on the other side of the road to build a tent-like camp. It raised up floorboards about three feet of the ground. But other than that it was fairly good.

Did you do your own building, or were there were any good carpenters around?

We did our own, between ourselves we built up the framework and we took all the floorboards from Lae up to there with us packed in the ambulances. The only funny part about it was when we got to Aitape there was a Christmas tide and to get off the boat you had to climb down a rope ladder. You looked down the rope ladder and I think it would be 20 or 30 feet below you, the boat. By the time you took two steps you would be flat on your back in the middle of all the rope because the swell was that high. You were up and down. You would go to step off and you'd be on your back in the middle and get all tangled up the rope before you had to get out before it went up again. You went in the landing barges. They take them away from the boat. To go down to the beach you had to swap from a landing barge into a dukw. You'd be like the Bondi surf boys, you're all lined up waiting for a big wave and when the big wave comes you all go together. When you hit the beach the water would go back and you'd be about 20 or 30 feet up the beach and the water would be behind you. The Christmas tide would be about 12 or 20 foot swell.

How did they get the ambulances out?

They swung them over on to the barges. They had quite a few casualties in that. The chains would break and tip everything out or they would hit the bottom of the barge and put holes in them and stuff like that. It took about three months to get them all repaired. They had bit holes in them and when it rained the rain would come in.

Where were you living then?

Now?

No, on the barges.

No, on the beach. We would set up a camp a bit further out.

Holes in the ambulances.

Yes, in the ambulances, yes. It was only like a cane-ite with a canvas over them. They only needed a solid whack and they would go through it. But you'd be lying in bed of a night on a stretcher and you could feel the vibrations of the surf breaking on the beach and you'd be easily four or five hundred yards away from the beach and you could feel the vibration every times the wave would hit the beach. It must have been horrible, but they used to travel like that.

Did you need to travel up and down the coast much, on the landing barges?

No, we didn't go in the landing barges. Once we had landed we went by road on the roads that they'd built. You would go as far as they were. It would be a jeep head. They would bring the patients down from the mountains in the ambulance jeeps and then they would swap them over into the big ambulance. They would go back and usually you had to walk across the river. It wasn't a bridge and it was just a rikki rakki and you had to go back and carry them back. Several times we went up there and we had to carry the patients about three miles between two bridges because they couldn't get across the first bridge and the second bridge was down too, so you had to carry them between the bridges. The transport officer of the unit we were with, thought we'd got lost or something because the search party had to find us. They found us still carrying these patients between the bridges. They had wondered what we were doing all day. It was hard work carrying four stretchers.

Two of you carrying a stretcher.

You only had the ambulance and it would be the driver and the orderly who would go to pick up from a jeep. Presumably you have to walk from one to the next one.

And no native labour?

No, not for us. We had to do it the hard way.

I see, so you had four people on stretchers. So you had to take one between two of you and then carry that so far ...

We had to take one and then go back and walk all the way back and carry the next one up. If any of them had to have medication between time we would have to give it when we arrived back or whichever. It took us hours to do it, a couple of miles I think between these two rivers. You couldn't just keep carrying them, you had to have a bit of a rest every now and again. They thought we were lost and they sent out a search party for us. They wanted to take over but we said we were going to take them to the CCS because we wanted to get to our unit headquarters to pick up any mail and stuff like that. We even got paraded on the Sunday morning. The unit had a parade on Sunday mornings and they called us out the front and wanted to know what we had done. Their own drivers would have done the same thing. I suppose, being an attached unit they made a big fuss of it. But their own drivers would do the same, their own ambulance drivers would do the same thing, so I don't know what all the fuss was.

Right, is there anything else you can think of?

I can't think of anything more.

You've done very well, haven't you.

Better than I thought.

Thank you very much, Mr Bob Maxwell.

That's all right.

END OF TAPE - END OF INTERVIEW

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