ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: DERYCK (JOE) DAVIS - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

INTERVIEWEE: DERYCK (JOE) DAVIS

SUMMARY:

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START OF TAPE 26A

Identification: 9th Australian Field Ambulance, AIF, Oral History Project. Tape 26A - 27.8.1991. Talking to Mr Deryck (known as Joe) Davis who was a lance corporal in the 9th Field Ambulance.

Mr Davis where were you born and when?

I was born in Muswellbrook, March 31, 1915.

Did you grow up around there?

I grew at Aberdeen, Scone and Muswellbrook.

School around there?

Yeah, Scone District Rural School but from there I went to work.

Where?

At M. Campbell and Company, I was thirteen and ten months old.

What was M. Campbell and Company?

The biggest general store in the town, in fact they had branches in every town such as Denman, Muswellbrook, Aberdeen, Merriwa but Scone was the biggest.

It's funny going to Aberdeen it seems to be only one street doesn't it, the main street?

Well, Aberdeen is still Aberdeen, there is a main street and that's about all there is. They have a very big meat works there of course.

Yes, it's still going?

Yeah I think it's still operating.

Yes, I see their trucks in Sydney sometimes.

That's right, but I haven't been back there now for a good long time. My mother and father died in ... my father died in Scone, my mother died at Beecroft, sorry at a hospital at Hornsby from Beecroft Ladies Home. Then I went back with my brothers and sister to the funeral and I haven't been back there since.

And so where did you go after the funeral?

I came back to Sydney where I lived, I lived at Drummoyne. Then from Drummoyne I got married and went out to South Coogee.

What work did you do when you left Scone and Aberdeen?

It took me three months to get a job when I left the army and then I got a job working for a shipping company.

What about before the army?

I was a display manager, window dresser, ticket writer.

When did you join the army? Did you get called up first?

I joined the army 19 ... early '41 I was classified as home service only. Later I was called up then later transferred from the 1st Field Ambulance to the 9th and from then we all joined the AIF.

Where did you join the 1st Field Ambulance?

At Rutherford.

And how long were you there?

Approximately four ... four months, yeah.

And did you come out then?

From Rutherford we came down to Sydney, from then we were transferred to the 9th Field Ambulance.

Where did you go to in Sydney first and where was the 9th Field Ambulance when you caught up with it?

We were at Frenchs Forest when they came up and called for volunteers to join the 9th Field Ambulance or be transferred to the 9th Field Ambulance. From there we went to Narellan or Wallgrove, I'm not too sure which.

When you were with the 1st Field Ambulance you said you went to Frenchs Forest, were you there while the bush fires were on?

I don't recall them.

Right, so you can't have been. So you did transfer to the 9th Field Ambulance and you can't remember whether it was Wallgrove or how long was it before you went off to Queensland?

Well, I don't remember. We all left together with the 9th Field Ambulance.

That was from Narellan.

Well it must have been Narellan overnight then left next morning.

Did you go to Ascot or Grovely in Brisbane, can you remember?

I went to Ascot Exhibition Ground, I think they used to call it. And from there we went on to Rockhampton.

I think the exhibition ground is right in the middle of town, I don't think it's at Ascot?

Ah ... well it was a showground of some description, that's where Private Woods was encamped and got killed in an accident.

Yes, Athol Rose was with him I think, either that or one of the Roses was with him.

Lester Rose was on the same tram as I was, so was ...

So that was him, he got his leg ...

His ankle.

His ankle broken.

Yeah, he had his ankle broken, there was ... I was fortunate I dived in the middle of the tram. There was a chap called Joe Partridge was also standing on the side of the tram, Jacko Woods, myself and Lester Rose. I can't recall anybody else.

What happened to Woods?

He got squashed, he got crushed very badly and died on the spot. He was attended to by Captain John Sands.

Was he on the tram?

Yes, he was in charge of us because we had a job to do at somewhere or other, could have been the showground as I mentioned a minute ago.

Where did you go next?

From there we caught a train up to Rockhampton. We got held up with floods four or five days, slept on the train, ate at the station. And from there we went to Townsville and from Townsville we went from there to Port Moresby.

Were you with A Company or B Company at that stage?

I'd say it would be B Company, Colonel Noel Thomas was in charge of us.

And who was the bearer officer, do you remember?

No, I have no idea.

Not Tom Kelly?

No, I wouldn't know.

Not Doug Dunlop?

Well what do you mean by bearer?

Well you know as opposed to the doctors. As far as I know there were two bearer officers, Tom Kelly and Doug Dunlop, one for each company?

Oh that could be so, they were both lieutenants, so I would say that could be them.

There was another lieutenant who was a pharmacist and so on, was a Captain Shiner?

Captain?

Shiner I think it was?

Yeah, Captain Shiner, yeah I remember him, yeah.

And there was a dentist as well I think?

Yes, his name was ... I don't recall. I met him in the eye hospital at Commonwealth Street a long time after the war.

That's not, no he wasn't the dentist ... I was thinking of Captain Clipsham but he wasn't the dentist.

No, I'm thinking of Captain Clipsham, he was an eye doctor, yeah. No I can't recall the dentist.

Before you went up to New Guinea were you at Rocky Creek or were you at Tolga or what?

No ... we went to Ravenshoe if that's ...

Ravenshoe, right.

Yeah, we were at Ravenshoe for quite a while, if fact when we went there they were just in the progress of building Ravenshoe camp.

Were you a medical orderly?

To be quite frank I don't know what I was. I was always outside I was never inside.

Where did you get your medical training?

Through lectures by Colonel Thomas.

But you hadn't done first aid before you came in?

No nothing whatsoever.

So you don't know why you ended up in the ambulance, the 1st Field Ambulance, rather than in a combatant unit?

No, we had no idea where we were, where we were going, we just had to report to Rutherford to the 1st Field Ambulance and that was it.

Do you remember going into Townsville at all?

Yes, we used to go in there quite often, in fact, we used to go in there and some work digging up the damn footpaths, just to fill in time.

Do you remember having any problems with the locals over Americans or having any trouble with Americans?

Well one of our chappies unfortunately rolled an American down the riverbed, riverbank I should say, and did his wallet and took his wallet and watch but he was a nice bloke he was. But then the Yank came around town the next day looking for our unit and chaps from our unit but the person concerned was at home safely in camp because he told me to keep me mouth shut. And the person of course was poor old Jack Smith.

What happened to him?

Nothing happened to Jack, he was a very good footballer, extremely good footballer, he's a very nice chap but I suppose classified him as a rough diamond and unfortunately he's now passed on. But he was a really ... he could have been a really good army man. He had the chance to become a physical instructor and in fact he went to a school and I think at the stage Colonel Brown, from memory promised him two stripes but he told the Colonel he could keep his stripes.

When you got up to Moresby where did you go first?

Straight to Rigo Road.

And what was that like?

Oh well ...

Was it huts or were you living in tents or ...?

We were living in tents. We had to do a lot of cleaning and scrub up and we come across ammunition dumps and God knows what

else. But it was quite a good camp, it was attached to I believe some AGH but I'm not too sure.

Was there a hospital there at all?

Not where we were but wasn't far away.

What was your job while you were there most of the time?

I was outside all the time but I had spent two months on the airstrip unloading DC3s with patients and what have you.

Deceased?

Deceased soldiers and ... wounded soldiers and what have you.

Where did you take them, variously, I mean for instance the live people who were soldiers who were alive and needed treatment, which hospitals did you take them to?

I didn't take them anywhere, I was camped on the airstrip but they were transferred into ambulances then taken to the various hospitals.

So they weren't your ambulances, you were just literally taking them out of the planes and putting them on ambulances?

They were special xxx ambulances, ambulances from American force and also from the Australian force.

What about the dead?

They were transferred by ambulance to whatever morgue was available, that I wouldn't know.

What hours did you work on the drome?

Well, day and night; there was no set hours. It wasn't very pleasant with the roaring of the traffic, all the fighters taking off, all the big ones landing and taking off in the early hours of the morning.

And where were they coming from at that time, the wounded?

Well again ... be the other side of the mountain, the Kokoda Trail I should imagine, Finschhafen, goodness knows where, anywhere in the area.

Had some of your men already gone to Nadzab at that stage, could they have been some of them that were sending them over?

Not that I know of. They left from Rigo Road.

Vic Milburn was amongst them.

Sergeant Vic Milburn, yeah. Well Jack Smith he went to Wau with Lester Rose and Athol Rose. Nadzab I don't know.

Well Major Holcombe took them, was the officer in charge I believe and Vic Milburn was the sergeant.

That well, I don't know but of course we weren't told where they were going they just were told to go somewhere. Quite a few went to Shaggy Ridge.

That was the same people that went to Nadzab after they finished at Nadzab they went up to Dumpu and then you sent another lot over to Nadzab to relieve them. Can you remember the other people going?

No, no idea, whatever transfers were done they were done without the knowledge of the boys.

On that camp there did Colonel Bretherton have one of his mad miles there did he?

Yes, he certainly did and it wasn't up and down the straight roads, it was up and down mountains virtually and it was classified as the mad mile. It was all right, it wasn't bad but some of the ... what will I say, some of the officers weren't very keen on it. [laughs]

I take it it was an obstacle course?

Well, near enough but it filled in time, you couldn't sit on your backside and do nothing all day long.

Well I mean you weren't doing that were you? You were most of the time out at the aerodrome?

No, I was only there for a couple of months. I was around the camp, around the field digging slit trenches, whatever had to be done, maintenance all that sort of business.

You weren't actually looking after any wounded people or any sick people or on any aid posts or anything like that?

No. The only time I was in an aid post was Port Moresby proper in the RAP there and I think also there ... I think that Colonel Thomas was there too from memory. I don't know who the other boys were but we were there for a few weeks.

Was that before they went to Tsili Tsili or after?

That was before.

Do you remember them going to Tsili Tsili?

No, I have no idea where any of them went until after the ... virtually till after the war or unless somebody dropped the word that they went somewhere else, went somewhere.

So where did you go next?

From Rigo Road went up to Koitaki.

Which was where?

Well that was right up in the mountains, that was above Hell Fire Pass ...

Is that where they got the water supply for some of the areas further down or not?

No, I would have no idea. There was water everywhere, there was rivers good enough all over the place.

There's an area there that is known as the falls, is that near Koitaki or not, Rouna Falls?

Well, I don't know, I don't know.

Did you come across John Rainbow up there?

Yes, we came across them but we used to have visits from the camp from Rigo Road every day.

One of the things he said was that he spent several weeks actually, up at an area above the falls minding the water supply. All he had to do was make sure that the pump was going all right and it was pumping water and if it go jammed up they had to shut the pump off and dive in the water and go and pull the weed out of the bottom and then start the pump again and that was all he ... where was that in relation to Koitaki, do you know?

No, I have no idea. Koitaki, where one of our chaps died was not far from a convalescent home or convalescent camp. And some of our chaps used to go there and assist but I wouldn't know who they were.

Who was it that died while you were there?

He was a Victorian, he died of scrub typhus but I don't recall his name.

Wouldn't be Bob Sidoti would it?

No.

He was the first one to die, the next one was Jack Brett, the third one was Bevan, Slim Bevan.

No, I don't know. Bob Sidoti came from Sydney as far as I know, this chap was a Victorian.

Well that only leaves Jack Brett and Slim Bevan?

Well it could have been Slim Bevan, course I went and saw him in hospital and from memory he died the next day.

Slim Bevan was at Nadzab and he was sent back - he had malaria too.

Well that could be so too.

Wait a minute there is another one ... another one of your people died at ...

He's an Italian.

That's Bob Sidoti.

Well it must have been Bob Sidoti, that's the second.

There was another one who was with Vic Milburn there, that's Slim Bevan, no it's not it's ... Yes, that's Gerry Gilbert the other one who died of scrub typhus, so did you know him at all?

No, only from being in the army that's all, I didn't know him personally but just to ...

He was with Vic Milburn at Nadzab there and they went to Dumpu and then that's where he flew back from. When you went up to Koitaki, what was your job up there?

Well we were virtually ... we were just on standby really, we weren't doing anything in particular. We ... it was apart from hygiene or that sort of business and looking after the camp, that was it.

Right. Where did you go after that?

From there I think we came back to Port Moresby and then home.

What did you do in Port Moresby?

Again, where I was at Rigo Road, I was just on outside duties all the time.

Were you at Lux Lane?

Yes, yeah.

What was that like?

Oh a camp is a camp, I mean there's ... I don't recall much about it really.

When you came back to Australia where did you go first?

We went to ... from memory, Sydney Showground and then from there down to Kenmore.

That's at Goulburn, it's mental hospital isn't it? And it's also a skin disease?

Kenmore was mainly a mental hospital but it is also a big skin disease hospital at that time.

What were you doing there?

Ah, well again I was mainly outside tending just ordinary ground duties, nothing else.

So where did you go from there?

There I went ... I was transferred to the British Borneo and Civil Affairs Unit.

Where was that you were transferred?

I was transferred from Kenmore to the BBCAU, which I didn't know then, came up to Sydney Showground and then we were told then we were being transferred to the BBCAU.

How did you get there?

Where to?

You didn't go to Borneo?

We went from Sydney Showground ... to some camp out of Sydney I don't remember and we went from there to Morotai, stayed there for a few months and from Morotai to Labuan.

What was Morotai like?

Morotai was all right. The war was just ... I think the war had just finished at that stage because we were asked did we want to join the occupation force to Japan but they didn't get any starters. [chuckles] And then from Morotai then we got transferred up to Labuan and we were there placed on a supply depot right on Labuan beach. That's were Bede Avery was, Vic Milburn and a few other boys, I can't recall their names.

How long were you there before you got work?

We were there for a good six months and from then we came back to Sydney and discharged from the Sydney Showground. That was March 1946.

Were you still a lance corporal?

I was a sergeant at that stage.

Where did you get promoted?

I got promoted when I came up from Goulburn ... they apparently didn't have a full strength of officers and sergeants, so I was kindly made a sergeant from Ingleburn and from then we went to ... transferred to a 'Liberty' ship and from there on to Morotai then Labuan.

When you were at Morotai and Labuan can you remember was Vic Milburn still a sergeant at that stage?

Yes, Vic was still a sergeant, in fact, if I am correct we shared the same tent in Labuan.

What was he doing there?

Vic was sent up early, before I went up there, to ... well he had to ... wherever he went he had to carry a revolver with him and I think he went right through into Brunei and above Brunei up into the rough parts of Borneo. That's all I know.

What was your job when you were up there, were you doing any medical duties?

No, I was sergeant in the supply depot. I was 2IC virtually. There was a chap called Captain Ryan who was in charge of the depot, while I was next in line. And Captain Ryan was a Commonwealth Bank manager, I think, from Martin Place.

So, when you got back did you go back to the previous job that you had before the war?

I didn't have a job when I got out of the army. It took me three months to get a job in Sydney. I got married and I had to get a job. I went for this Seven Seas Shipping Company and from there I transferred after eighteen months to a large clothing company and finished up the sales service manager.

Was there anything from the army that you can remember that might assist us in compiling this history of the 9th Field Ambulance? For instance, did you know Doug Dunlop at all?

I knew him well. I don't know whether it was him or not, looks like him from the backside and his head, yeah.

What about Sheila?

The dog on the ramp in the river was smuggled by Jack Smith when we boarded the ship at Townsville. And eventually that

dog finished up with the 2/101 Transport Unit which my two brothers were in.

But they left it behind in New Guinea with them did they?

I don't know what happened to the dog.

Where was the 101 Transport Regiment?

When they came back from the Middle East they were transferred up to New Guinea.

And they got the dog somehow.

I think, I have an idea my brother might have knocked it off but I'm not sure.

Everybody was speculating as to what happened to the dog, you understand, they were thinking that it might have been put down by ... the CO might have arranged to have it put down. But apparently not, somebody ...

No I have no idea what happened to the dog. I know it finished up on the transport unit and it was the best dog I have known, he could roll an empty can anywhere ... with his nose.

Where did they get the dog from?

Well knowing Jack Smith he most likely picked it up from somebody's backyard in Townsville. [laughs]

Very popular dog anyway.

The dog was absolutely magnificent.

What about the rabbit?

I know nothing about a rabbit.

Reggie's rabbit?

Oh well that was all of us, all bunnies that was the word.

Why did they call that Bretherton's Bunnies then?

I don't know, that was ... that name was applied before we were transferred to the 9th Field Ambulance.

Yes, I don't know whether you could enlighten me on any more. The football, were you involved in the football team at Moresby at all?

No, I didn't play in the football team at Moresby. I played when I was in the 1st Field Ambulance and I had a knee problem but I do know that the 9th Field Ambulance football team was

the best team on the island. In fact, they played against several internationals up there. I can't recall the names ... one could be MacArthur, McCartney or MacArthur but I'm not sure.

Wasn't the General?

No, no.

All right, the sort of planes that you were loading and unloading people from in Moresby, what sort of planes generally?

To the best of my knowledge they were all DC3s.

Did they have the square windows with the rifle hole in the middle or not?

I wouldn't know. All I knew is that when they came into land they used to wave a coloured flag indicating whether you wanted a wagon, whether you would need a stretcher or what have you.

Where in earth did they wave the coloured flag from?

From the cockpit.

You're joking?

No, from up here.

Oh yes, yes indeed. No radio necessary in that case, you didn't have one anyway?

No, we didn't have a ... all we had to do was to hang onto our mugs to make sure they didn't rattle off the table when we had breakfast.

Did you have a camp at the drome at all?

No, we just had a tent, that was all. But there was a mess there, but all we had was the tent, that was our quarters.

Did you get the film unit come around sometimes, the entertainment unit?

I don't recall anything like that.

You didn't go to Bulldog so you don't recognise that photograph?

No, I didn't go to Bulldog. We had many concerts at Port Moresby area.

All right if you can't think of anything more I'll have to say thank you very much Mr Joe Davis.

Thank you for the opportunity.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A - END OF INTERVIEW

6/92