ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE: GEORGE RICHARDS - 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE – SECOND WORLD WAR

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE RICHARDS

INTERVIEWER: RICHARD RAXWORTHY

SUMMARY: 9TH FIELD AMBULANCE - BEING CALLED UP FOR MILITARY SERVICE IN 1940; BEING SENT TO NEW GUINEA; ATTACHED TO SIGNALS POST AT KOKODA; DUTIES AT KOKODA; FLEW BACK TO PORT MORESBY AFTER 10 MONTHS; DUTIES IN PORT MORESBY; RETURN TO SYDNEY; POSTED TO KENMORE HOSPITAL AT GOULBURN NSW; WAR ENDED WHILE AT KENMORE; DISCUSSION OF OTHER PERSONNEL WHO SERVED AT RAPs ON KOKODA TRAIL; EXPERIENCES ON KOKODA TRAIL.

DATE RECORDED: 7 JANUARY 1992

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: This is the 9th Australian Field Ambulance, AIF, Oral History Project - George Richards - 7 January 1992.

Do you remember your old service number?

Yes, NX104033.

Right. You never forget it do you?

No.

What were you before you joined the 9th Field Ambulance?

In a work capacity?

Yes.

Labourer.

Did you grow up around the Newcastle area, did you?

Yeah, born and bred in Wallsend.

And you went to school there, did you?

Yes.

You were first in the militia?

Well, in the age group call up. The first ones were twenty-one years old and the next group was eighteen, missing twenty-one to twenty-four. I was in that one, the second lot, about 1940 I think.

And where did you get your first training?

We were at Rutherford in the 1st Field Ambulance. Newcastle ... we were in the 1st Field Ambulance at Rutherford.

Where did you go from there?

After around different camps in Newcastle, A Company from the 1st Field Ambulance was transferred to the 9th Field Ambulance in Sydney out at St Ives I think it was. Then that made the 9th Field Ambulance complement up, the full complement.

Did you get any medical training in the 1st Field Ambulance, did you?

No. A Company was a working company. I put it done to a working company. We did all work. A bit of stretcher-bearing which wasn't that much.

And did you get any medical training in the 9th then?

No. A Company, we done all the work when we went away. That's what I put it down to at any rate - a working company.

Were you headquarters or which ...

No, A Company.

A Company of the 9th too.

A Company transferred the whole company from the 1st Field Ambulance was the A Company in the 9th Field Ambulance.

Right. And where did you go from St Ives? Were you there at the bushfires, were you?

No. Then we went up to Queensland and we were on our way to New Guinea then.

Where did you go in Queensland?

First stop was Grovely camp. And we stopped, oh, I wouldn't like to say how long. Then we went up on the Tablelands.

Did you go up on the train, did you?

We went in the train from Innisfail and from Innisfail to Atherton by motor vehicle.

And did you get held up by the floods at Rockhampton?

Yes. By train to Rockhampton and held up there for probably a week or ten days.

And who was your officer in that Company at that stage?

Major Thomas and a Captain Sands.

Right. Did he come down from Newcastle with you?

Yes. They were officers in the 1st [Field Ambulance]. Yes, I think so. Then we went to various places on the way down to - where was the staging camp outside of Townsville?

Oonoonba?

Yes.

Did you get into any trouble with the Americans?

No, no. Great fellows for us.

Some of them did I understand. Not so much with the Americans but with some of the locals over the Americans.

I don't know what happened.

What do you mean you did all right out of them?

They were pretty free with their shouts. The we went - I couldn't tell you what ship we went over to New Guinea in, I wouldn't have a clue.

Right. I have a record of that. Your name is on the list.

And when we got to New Guinea we weren't there very long at Moresby before they ...

Where at Moresby?

Oh, I wouldn't know.

Rigo Road?

Could be there, I couldn't say for sure where it was.

Lux Lane, Rouna Falls?

No, I couldn't say.

Right, and then where?

Well, they split half a dozen up to send them up on the Owen Stanleys. I was one of them, Jack Harvey and a fellow by the name of Campbell and Kilkeary.

Oh, Jack Kilkeary.

There were two brothers, one of them - Moss and Jack. And I was - I was an RAP for the twenty-four line section and nine line maintenance.

So yours was the twenty-four ... What was the outfit? Signals, was it?

Yes. Sigs. They were twenty-four line section.

Of what signals do you know?

Oh no, no. I wouldn't know. And the nine line maintenance. See they had the telegraph line running from Moresby to Popondetta and various - about one day's walk apart - they had these little stations with two signalmen in them. The maintenance, that was nine line maintenance. Any disruption to

the line, they'd go out and fix it up. And Jack Harvey was stationed at Myola and ...

Where were you stationed?

I was stationed at Kokoda.

Where was Jack Kilkeary stationed?

I don't know. He went up further on. I wouldn't know.

He was beyond you, was he?

Yes. He wasn't there very long. I believe he got sick.

Yes, he did too.

Yeah, that was the only medicine we ...

No, what about the other bloke, what was his name?

Campbell. He was further down, closer to Moresby.

Did you hear anything about something that he had to do in the way of getting somebody back?

No.

You didn't hear anything about that?

No. And Jack Harvey and I were in communication, Jack Harvey at Myola and myself at Kokoda where we were in touch with each other but never got in touch with anyone else in the unit for ten months. They just left us for dead. No communication, no nothing. Jack and I were there for ten months.

How did you get in there?

We flew in in an old Dragon, an old Dragon plane with three of us and our gear.

A Dragon. A De Havilland Dragon was it?

Oh, I'd say it was. I'm not a ...

That's a flamin' bi-plane.

Yeah, that's right. Two engines, one in each wing and I thought each one was going to fall off. I think it was its last trip too.

Oh, my goodness.

And one thing that always stuck in my mind: they just left us there and we had no communication whatsoever.

And had you had any medical training at that time?

No. Just a bag of iodine and a couple of bandages and thank goodness nothing happened. For the ten months we were there, bar a couple of cuts and bruises, nothing ever happened.

And nobody got malaria or anything like that?

Well one fellah did. There were two signal officers, Lieutenant Christmas - I'll never forget their names - and Nuisance, because he was a nuisance. And one had his batman and something went wrong with him and they took over and they took over and bundled him back to Moresby. So whatever was wrong with him ...

So, Lieutenant Christmas was the one who was in charge of the signals, was he?

He wasn't there permanently. There was a sergeant when we got there, a Sergeant Boyd was there, and he left and then a Corporal Richardson was in charge of the sigs from then on.

You never heard of ... one of the other fellows who was in charge. He recommended the other bloke for mention in dispatches.

From the unit?

Lieutenant-Colonel Donney.

No. Lieutenant Johnson come there for a while, to the sigs, and the Nuisance and Christmas.

Right. So you didn't really have to do much dosing of people.

No. It was a most boring time.

Were you high up there?

No. Kokoda, at the end of the trail at Kokoda, it's only just over a thousand feet high and twenty-five miles from sea level to Popondetta, that only rises a thousand, it's flat all the way from Kokoda going towards Buna. But going towards Moresby, well you rise - I think Myola was 6,000-odd feet up. I have figures there somewhere.

Yes. So they wouldn't have any malaria up there.

No.

But you might down where you were.

We got it when we come back to Moresby. We weren't there very long then we come home.

Did you come home from Moresby, did you? Then what happened to you?

When we got relieved by I don't know who we went back to Moresby.

How did you get back to Moresby?

Flew back.

What sort of plane was it coming back?

I don't know.

And then you went straight back to Australia, did you?

No. We stopped at Moresby for ... it might have been a couple of months.

What were you doing there?

Oh, general workforce, patrolling around. We didn't do much I don't think. Just looking after a couple pickets, you know, picketing the nurses' quarters or something like that - general duties.

And when you came back to Australia, where did you go then?

We come back to the Sydney Showground. And they split us all up again. We come up, most of the Newcastle, and Scone, and Maitland boys come up to Rutherford again, back to where we started from. And then we were a workforce there and up at Greta, worked around Greta. And then they split up again and a contingent of us went down to Kenmore, the AGH at Kenmore.

And what were you doing there?

General duties. We were allocated different jobs. Some were in the wards and general duties. I was general duties. And then the war ended down there. I got out of the army as from Kenmore to the Showground again.

There was another man whose name that comes up, I don't know whether you've heard it. I believe there were actually five people involved at different times. Who replaced Jack Kilkeary on that job by the way?

I couldn't say.

I wouldn't have been ...

I never heard no more. I didn't know where he went to or ...

He went back to Australia actually, he was very sick.

That's what I mean. When he got up on the track, I don't know what part he was. I often thought of that because I don't know where he went to because I used to go ... I could go from Kokoda towards Popondetta, you know, Oivi, Ilimo, Wairopi, all them places, but going towards Popondetta and he was not down that way. To me he wasn't on the track at all.

Well he was there somewhere, I don't know where. And there was another blokes name that I've got here which I don't know whether he was around, Ronnie Robinson, have you heard of him?

No, don't ring a bell.

He got mentioned in dispatches but we don't know where or how. I can't track down his citation, although he had it. But he's dead now and I can't find it.

I couldn't recall anyone being mentioned or doing anything.

Well, in actual fact, the other bloke was as well.

Campbell?

Campbell was mentioned ... was recommended for mention but he didn't get it for some reason. He carried somebody back on his back.

He was the first, whatever station was first on the track, xxx Creek or one of them further down.

But one bloke fell down a mountain and they actually had to pull him out of some trees.

That does ring a bell.

And then they didn't have carriers available and he had to carry him apparently.

That's right. There were no carriers there, they were all up the front. This was 1943-44, I mean the fighting was well up the coast by then.

Did you help the signallers at all to do any of their work or ...

Not really. You know, you could go out, they were only patching things up.

And those signal lines, the twenty-four line. What does that mean? There were actually twenty-four lines.

That was who they were; that was their unit.

Twenty-four line section.

Twenty-four line section. But they'd go out and they had two lines. They had the GI, the galvanised iron. They would communicate between each station on that, and then they'd go over on the copper and that would be a direct line from Moresby to Popondetta, the next sig station, and be relayed from there on.

And was that running a teleprinter or not?

No. Not then. A ten line UC.

Sorry?

Ten line UC - ten line universal carrier. What's all this?

Well Tom Kelly ...

Yeah, I remember Tom Kelly. Tom come up here one ...

That's right.

And it was unfortunate. I was tied up. Terry come around - I'm in touch with Terry.

Terry Callinan, yes. By the way, Captain Jack Elliott also lives up there.

That's right. I've never met him. They're always talking about him and Lester Rose and all of them from Scone.

Yes, they were at Wau.

And Joe Clark. But the Newcastle ones, Terry and ... I can't think of anyone around there now.

Terry Callinan.

He only lives around ...

He's at Merewether, yes.

He used to tell me he used to get the mail from Tom and come around and tell me, even for the reunion when they went down there.

Well, what happened has happened at ...

I couldn't make it. The same when I think Tom come up here ...

Yes, with me. I came up with him.

What did you say your name was?

Richard Raxworthy. I'm not in the unit but I'm a historian you see and I go around recording people for the National Library. I've done some work for the outfit which Tom has been connected with in the Credit Union movement and he got me into this. He said, 'We'll get a grant', you see. We never got a grant of course but once I promised to do it, I'm going to do it, you know. I'm still working on it. I've been working on it ...

Did Tom give you my ....

He gave me your name and number, yes.

Because Jack Harvey and I, we were away from them, like I said, ten months. We were in a different ... in fact, I'd say half of them wouldn't know where we were or who we are.

Well that's right. That's why I phoned you up particularly. Have you got any stories you can tell about up there?

No. Things were very quiet.

So what did you do all the time?

Most monotonous, you know, go for a swim and walk around and walk up the track and back a few times and souvenired.

No Japanese around?

No, not then. And, you know, then the war graves fellah come up looking for graves. You'd go out and help him out and he'd have information where someone was buried and moved the Japs from the Jap graves from the top of the hill down to the bottom of the hill. Of course they only moved their sticks and didn't dig anyone up, I know that. Oh well, I'm pleased to have been a bit of assistance anyway.

Thank you very much. I'll leave you my phone number if you think of anything.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A - END OF INTERVIEW