CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SERVICE MEN AND WOMEN

Name: Robert Syron

Date: 3 October 2013

Place: Tanilba Bay (place of White Flowers)

Interviewer: Fabri Blacklock

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **FB: This is an interview with Robert Syron, the 3rd of October 2013.**

So could you please tell me your name and who your mob is?

RS: Name is Robert Syron. My grandmother is from Barrington/Gloucester area. She is a Birpai woman and my grandfather, Robert J Syron, is from Nabiac and he is a Worimi man.

FB: So can you just tell me when you joined the armed forces?

RS: I joined in 1990. I did my training at Kapooka and I did my secondary training at the School of Infantry, Singleton, New South Wales and ended up being posted to Far North Queensland/Townsville with the 2/4th Battalion and finishing with the 2nd Battalion.

FB: So can you tell me what inspired you to join the armed forces?

RS: I was a butcher by trade. I started working when I was fourteen and I felt like I was stuck in a deep hole and I saw an ad on TV "Join the Army" and I joined the army the next day and was on the bus a week later.

FB: And so obviously you enjoyed being in the army. How long were you in the army or the armed forces?

RS: I was in the army for five years. I loved being in the army because I had never travelled outside of where I lived at that stage and I went to many places whilst I was with the army, travelled all over Australia and I loved the mateship and the brotherhood within the infantry battalion.

2.24 There was no discrimination within the battalion. It didn't matter where you came from; everybody was your brother, somebody that you could trust and rely upon with your life and know that they'd back you up in any situation.

FB: So you'd never experienced racism in the armed forces?

RS: I did for a very short time. We had some young fellows that had joined - because I'd joined when I was twenty five because I'd been butchering for ten years then – and they just happened to be skinheads and because I'm a lighter shade of an Aboriginal person they started talking about how they were going to bash the blacks within the battalion and so I dropped a bomb on them and said "Well, you know, I'm actually an Aboriginal person. My father's an Aboriginal person and my grandmother's an Aboriginal person". So I spoke to a few of the lads in the battalion and there were quite a few Koori boys in the battalion at that stage but it was the white boys that sorted out the skinheads and they were pulled back into line straight away and never, ever spoke about bashing blacks again after that.

4.06 That was probably the only time that I sort of experienced and witnessed that but, yes, they get sorted out straight away because there were quite a lot of indigenous people within the battalion at that time. Actually, one of my sergeants, Sergeant Ronnie, he was a Papua New Guinea guy and so, yes, he was a good man, he was a funny man and everybody loved him, everybody loved Sergeant Ronnie.

FB: And you were deployed to Rwanda. Can you tell me a little bit about why the Australian troops were in Rwanda and a little bit about your experiences over there?

RS: Rwanda was basically a genocide of two different religions/cultures. The Tutsis almost wiped out the Hutus I think around 1956 and so the Hutus who'd taken twenty years to regenerate and repopulate and they embedded into their children hatred towards the Tutsis and so the Hutus

were the shorter ones and the Tutsis were the taller race and so the Hutus came back with such vengeance and they were chopping up the Tutsis with machetes and chopping their heads off and chopping their legs off and chopping their arms off and they did that because they believed that that was bringing them down to their size because they were the shorter of the two, the Hutus.

6.08 Our role there was to go there and provide security for the medical support force for the United Nations in Rwanda and once we arrived there the first thing I noticed was the smell of decaying bodies jumping straight off the plane. Once we'd established a base camp and we set ourselves up and secured our perimeters and made sure everybody was safe and we moved around the country a little bit we ended up doing more than what we were supposed to do. Whilst we'd go out to the refugee camps we'd secure an area for the medics so that they could treat the wounded people and they sometimes would drive two and a half hours away again to places like Butare, Gikongoro and there was absolutely nothing out there, nobody out there to help them. So we were there to provide that security for the medics so that nothing would happen to them. We eventually ended up having to provide security for other organisations, I think Medicines du France [Medecins Sans Frontieres?], Red Cross.

8.02 We ended up providing security for hospitals because the Hutus were going to the hospitals and chopping people up in their hospital beds so they sent us there to put a stop to that. We were escorting medics, whether it be on foot, transport. We were also doing what they'd call a "ready reaction force" so whenever an incident would happen they'd send the Australians out to either rescue or extract the surviving members of a massacre. On one occasion I was told to go, my section commander, my machine gunner and myself we had to go to the bank and pick up a four wheel drive full of money and take it down to the border and exchange the currency because the French were resupplying the Tutsis with arms and currency so they could rearm themselves so they could come back and attack again. So we were sent around the borders to do an exchange on the currency, which was unexpected for us and quite scary at times with the amount of checkpoints we had to go to. The government forces of Rwanda, you know, you'd pull up at a checkpoint and they'd put guns to your head and threaten to shoot you, or they'd pull a knife out and put it to your face and threaten to cut your throat. So it was quite a lengthy process and I think when we got to the border we were surrounded by a hundred and fifty rebel soldiers and we pretty much decided to dump all the money there and just get out of there,

because it was a bit scary and there were only four of us and there was no one there to help us.

10.22 I remember we stood there in a circle when we were surrounded, Corporal Eckert [?], myself and Private McKivetty [?] machine gunner and we stood there in a circle back to back, saying “Well, if anything happens I'm going automatic. I'm not going to die not taking somebody with me”.

FB: So it was quite a scary experience and quite traumatic.

RS: Yes. I did a reconnaissance with myself and my section commander, Corporal Eckert, and I think we drove three hundred and fifty kilometres, just documenting and writing down incidences and checkpoints and making note of every movement and any sign of any enemy positions or anything military basically. And on that trip we’d seen hundreds of bodies floating down the rivers with their heads cut off and their legs cut off and their arms, some of them with their arms tied around their back so they're torsos. And I think in three hundred kilometres there wasn’t a patch of road where there wasn’t a dead body on the side of the road with bits and pieces had been cut off it.

12.08 **FB: So how did you cope with that experience?**

RS: In the end, because we were there for so long after seeing so much you just become numb and the emotion kind of goes away and it got to the point where the boys were sort of standing around, having a joke about how many dead people you would pick up today or how many dead people you would see today. I know it sounds odd but it’s just the way that the guys sort of deal with it because you can't be sitting around crying about that sort of thing and there was just thousands and thousands of people who had been killed and you'd have kids coming up to you with their hands cut off and an eye gouged out and big chunks of their skull that had been cut out and you could see their brain thumping away with every heartbeat and I'm talking holes the size of a tennis ball in their skulls and they ask you for something to eat, “S’il vous plait, bisque”[?], because they'd speak French over there and I lost count of how many times I'd give the poor little buggers my food for the day so I lost a few pounds when I was over there.

14.03 And off they'd go. They'd skip down the road with a hand cut off or an eye gouged out or a foot cut off and they'd skip or hobble down the road, happy as Larry. It’s just hard to explain, hard to sort of fathom. People would run up to you out of nowhere with their hands in the air like you were going to shoot them and kill them and they'd be so scared and their bodies would be trembling and shaking and you'd say to them “It’s O.K.

We’re not going to kill you. We’re here to help you”. I remember picking up this woman; we had to take her to get medical attention. And I learned to speak the language in three months over there; I could speak the native language which was the Rwandan language because they spoke Rwandan, Swahili and French. And I was talking to this woman in the back of the FFR, the four wheel drive, and she was so scared that she ended up just urinating and defecating where she was sitting because she was so scared of me. She thought I was going to kill her even though I was a white man. Like from what I say a “white man” because I was not from the African army.

FB: So obviously the fear in them that people were just going around killing.

RS: Yes. Like even back in Kigali itself people were coming in with stretchers on their chests holding their own legs because their legs had been blown off and people holding their own body parts as they came in on the stretchers.

16.17 And I remember a day when we were back at the hospital there at Kigali and we were out the front with my section commander, Corporal Eckert and they had this officer who was trying to show his dominance and his power. He’d shot one of his own soldiers in the chest three times and so my section commander, Corporal Eckert, got a couple of the other boys to go out and get the stretcher and pick him up and we carried him into the hospital. It was only like a hundred metres away or so and they carried him in on the stretcher and I sort of remember everybody sitting there and bubbles were coming out of his mouth and bubbles were coming out of his chest and he was sort of conscious, semi-conscious, wriggling around and they took him into the hospital and there was this big pool of blood just lying in the bottom of the stretcher and everybody kind of just sat there. We’d been there for so long at that stage and I remember some warrant officer saying “Hey, guys. So it somebody actually going to get up and clean that stretcher?” and then sort of everybody kind of clicked - it was like we were all in this trance and that was just one incident. And I remember we were walking around the hospital, making sure that everything was safe and that people weren’t getting chopped up in the hospital, killed in their hospital beds.

18.08 And I remember walking through the wards where the smell was so bad and you could smell the rotting flesh, the gangrene in the people and you wouldn’t have walked through the hospital wards, you'd pretty much run through them because you'd be dry retching, trying not to vomit from the smell. It wasn’t the sight; it was the smell that was making you dry retch. And I remember walking around, myself and my 2IC, we were walking

around one night around the perimeter of the whole hospital there and we walked past this fellow and we walked past him again within fifteen minutes, twenty minutes walking around the perimeter and this guy was dead, somebody had killed him, and he was only alive like fifteen minutes ago in the same spot. So it was just kind of like that but there were always landmines going off and people being killed outside of the perimeter of the hospital and just a constant moan of people in pain, crying and moaning and the smell. Yes, it was an eye-opener over there.

FB: And how did you find the local army that you worked alongside?

RS: You mean like the UN forces?

FB: Yes.

RS: Or the Rwandan Patriotic Army?

FB: The Rwandan, yes.

20.01 RS: Yes. They knew that we were there to help their people but we had this constant thing where there was Mexican standoffs where they'd be pointing their guns at us and we'd be pointing our guns at them and sometimes this would go on for an hour and you'd walk past them and they'd pretend to pull the pin out of the grenades and going through the actions of throwing the grenades at you or they'd pull their knives out and hold it to their throats, threatening to cut your throat and they'd come up to you and stop you in your tracks and do some threatening gesture to you. So it was a constant harassment by the people who we were supposed to be helping. And then you'd walk around the place and the kid's come up and say "Umbunda [?], umbunda, landmine, landmine. Don't go down there". So you'd walk in another direction and they'd go "Oh, no, no, no, umbunda, umbunda, don't go down there". So wherever you walked they'd say there was landmines so it was just constant toying with your emotions and with your fear and so in the end you'd just shut off from it all and you make your own decisions and it was crazy. And I remember a time we were driving down the road and because I was number one scout in the section I was up the top of the truck in the manhole there with my rifle, ready to shoot if we're fired upon and the Rwandan soldiers, they would drive at you, doing a hundred and twenty Ks an hour, sitting in the backs of these utes like something from out of the movie 'Mad Max', with rocket launchers, machineguns, you know, four barrel anti-aircraft weapons and they'd drive at your car, playing chicken with you to try and get you to run off the road.

22.27 And if I remember, I think one of the Australians was critically wounded from an incident that had happened because they ran him off the road

and his rifle went through his body somewhere – I can't remember exactly. But I remember these guys were driving at this big Unimog truck and there's no way that this four wheel drive would survive if it hit it and at the last second they veered off the road and just drove straight into the crowd and I remember seeing this old fellow riding his pushbike and he must have done somersaults and, yes, because we were driving all I saw was this body flying through the air and people being hammered by this four wheel drive in the crowd. But that's how it was. And you could tell just from looking at a soldier's eyes whether he was a soldier who enjoyed chopping somebody up or he enjoyed shooting them and you could see the difference between a chopper and a shooter. And the choppers, the guys that used the machetes, they had this look and it was called the "thousand mile stare", just no feeling, no expression in the eyes at all once they whatsoever. And they were even going into the refugee camps and killing people in the refugee camps.

24.07 And then later on down the track we were told that there were actually three different forces. So there was the RPA, Rwandan Patriotic Army, and then there were the Interahamwe which were a group of just rebel people who were just going around killing people for fun and then you had the other, the Rwandan forces – I just can't remember the name of them now. So there were three different factions over there that we had to deal with. Yes, it was just crazy, crazy. I remember being called out at two o'clock one night. My section was on ready reaction force and I think it was about an hour's drive or so and no electricity, no power and my section and the medics had left to go there and we met up with this Rwandan soldier and because I didn't trust this guy – he said "You go first down this track" and not so long before that there were some English soldiers that had been clearing a track for landmines and they'd left and come back the next day but for some unknown reason they didn't clear that track again when they'd left and the Rwandan soldiers were sitting there and these two soldiers have walked down this track and one guy stepped on a landmine again because they've planted it there and they found it quite funny that he had his leg blown off – so I was quite conscious of that and so I refused to go first and I made him go first down the dark track to this village that we were going to rescue these two survivors.

26.15 And we'd got there and couldn't see anything. It was just pitch black and I remember going through the huts to try and find these people and just about every hut that I've walked into they'd been mutilated and killed and, yes, just completely hacked to death in the huts and so that was a bit of a hair-raising experience, having to go through the buildings and to actually see that like close up. I mean, there were women, children. So

we found the survivors and the medics did what they did to help them and one of the guys had been chopped across the back of the neck so hard that the only thing that stopped his head coming off was his backbone. He had a massive wound to the back of his neck. His wife's jaw was pretty much hanging down on her chest and her tongue was flapping around but she ended up dying. But I remember coming back to Bitari and we all decided that we wanted to go and see the operation because we'd saved these guys. So we were watching and the sergeant told us to go away but I remember seeing the surgeon sitting there and crying while he was operating on these people.

28.14 So even the surgeons weren't immune to the effect and to the emotional torment, you could say, of those experiences over there. It was crazy.

FB: And does the army provide counselling?

RS: Well, the next day my section and the medics were called in – I think it was an English psych and I think it went for about ten minutes and he spoke to us and asked us what we'd seen and how did we feel and, like I said, we'd been there for that long then that we had no more emotions or feelings to give because we were all pretty numb by that stage and we just spoke about what we saw - it was thirteen people that were mutilated in that small village and that was that. And then we came back to Australia and I think, I can't remember for sure now, I think we had a few days off and then they sent us to the Tully Jungle up in Far North Queensland to do some training for a month and that was to wind down.

FB: That was your counselling.

RS: Yes.

FB: Your debrief.

RS: Yes. And the guys are cranky. A lot of them, boys, were cranky coming from there because Tully Jungle is what they call in the infantry battalion. Up in Far North Queensland I don't think that the boys from down south even go to the Tully Jungle to train and it's some of the harshest, meanest terrain that you could come across in Australia and it's hot and it's hard core training.

30.24 **FB: Physically demanding.**

RS: Yes. And so that was our wind-down. Maybe they did that to try and make us forget about what we'd seen overseas – who knows – maybe they thought that was good therapy. But I ended up discharging from the army and I went back to my old trade as a butcher and you can imagine standing there in a butcher shop and chopping up meat all day

and I just kept thinking about the things that I'd seen in Africa and it just kept triggering all those things and I just went downhill from there and I kind of just fell into this deep, dark hole and so I went and spoke to some doctors and counsellors and originally the DVA – I don't know who they were but people that hadn't even been to war were telling me that my experience wasn't really that bad and there was no way it possibly could have happened, some of the stories that I was telling them and so it's now that the system and public servants now realise and have a better understanding of what Rwanda was really about and what really occurred over there.

32.14 So it took the government ten years – like Korea, the Korean War – it took the government ten years to recognise that our experience wasn't peacekeeping. They made it "warlike" situation after ten years which was recognition for what we did over there and what really happened.

FB: And you've done quite a lot of research into your family history and you've got quite a lot of members of your family that have served in various wars and in the armed services. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

RS: Yes. My father, Gordon Syron, artist, Aboriginal activist, he would always talk about Dan and Dave and George from World War I and because I had nothing else better to do and I thought "Well, I'll start researching my family" and seeing how many soldiers had actually been to war and once I'd made all those connections, as far as I know now there was definitely thirty four of my family members, Aboriginal family members, all the way from World War I up to now that have been to war. I've been working with the Australian War Memorial and sending information as I find it to them and collecting photographs of those family members.

34.08 And I'm led to believe that my family is now the largest number of Aboriginal soldiers to come from one family in Australia and it's something that I'm pretty proud to say. There was another family called the Lovett family from Victoria. I think they had nineteen family members so we've smashed that record out of the park. And I have now recordings of some of those stories from those vets, live recordings from the vets themself and photographs on them. One's buried in France – that's George Syron – one died in a prison camp in Germany and there's another one – I just can't remember who he is now. There's too many to remember. What was that other question that you asked?

FB: It was just to tell me a little bit about some of the research that you'd done.

RS: Yes. So after going through that I decided that I'd do family research and find out more about my family and where it all started. And my grandmother's side, Jessie Cook (nee Brummy) and Jack Cook it's well documented, registered through the Gloucester Historical Society, photographs, journals, memoirs, stories from the local people and they were quite a well-respected family in the Barrington/Gloucester area and they were called the last of the Manning River Tribe people to live in that area after the poisoning with arsenic in dampers and cakes that the farmers would give to the people to try and wipe them out.

36.23 And Jessie Cook (nee Brummy) and Jack Cook, apparently the story that I've been told is that they would help Thunderbolt, the outlaw, and give him a feed and tell him where to go and where not to go because Jack Cook was a tracker for the government and he helped to catch quite a few outlaws in my grandmother's story that's been documented. Jack Cook, his real name was spelt Muligat, Mooloogat which stands for son of thunder. The story goes that he was climbing up a tree and the tree was hit by lightning and that's where he got the name. And then there's my grandfather's side from Nabiac. His father's name was Daniel Syron. He was an Irishman and he married my great grandmother on that side, Susanna Clarke. So with that the Irishman was a bit of a mean man, apparently, and they used to run a dairy farm but kind of kept everybody in line, I suppose, having the Irish grandfather. And because most Irishmen box a few of my uncles became well-known boxers.

38.04 Dad would always talk about fighting in the tents and he referred to it as being great days because it was the only way that he could get payback on the white people without being charged for striking somebody. I could talk about it for hours and hours about the family history.

FB: And just lastly, why do you think it's important that there's a memorial going to be built in Hyde Park that acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women. Can you just tell me why you think that's important that we recognise those people?

RS: With the research that I did, what I did find in the service records was that they were referred to as native Australians and the white soldiers were referred to as being British citizens and that was how they separated the two but it was originally thought to be said that there were only five hundred soldiers that had been to World War I and now I believe it's gone over one thousand five hundred soldiers. And on top of that it wasn't until 1917 or 1918 that the government then decided that they would allow Aboriginal people to join the services but apparently they had to have a little bit of white blood in them to be able to join the forces;

they didn't want full-blooded Aboriginal people in the forces - that's what I'm led to believe.

40.06 So a lot of the soldiers that had joined the military, they wouldn't disclose that they were of Aboriginal blood and now that things have changed and the system's changed people are coming forward and saying "Well, my great grandfather, he was an Aboriginal man" and people are proud to now say that they're of Aboriginal origin. And so that's helped with the research that's being done and I think the recognition's important because Aboriginal people can now proudly talk about being Aboriginal without worrying about being locked up or being discriminated against because of their Aboriginality and we can now move around as Aboriginal people and teach the children our culture and talk about our culture without any fear of that isolation and segregation from others. And especially for the soldiers, one thing I discover, and it kind of made me a bit cranky, was that Aboriginal soldiers when they came back from the First World War, from the Boer War, the white soldiers were given what they would call soldier settlement grants and they were given large parcels of land so that they could farm the land and live their life and that was their reward for their service for their country but the Aboriginal soldiers never got it.

42.19 None of my ancestors were given a piece of land. The white soldiers, if they were wounded or shell-shocked, were given a pension but the Aboriginal soldiers were never given a pension because Aboriginal soldiers don't experience those feelings. And another thing that I discovered was that on the death of an Aboriginal soldier – they were given like a lump sum payment for the death of that soldier so again Aboriginal soldiers weren't given a lump sum payment for the death of their soldiers or a family member and I think the memorial is just what I would call as a soldier a small start to reconciliation and compensation to the people.

FB: Excellent, thank you. Is there anything else you want to add?

RS: No. Did that make sense?

FB: Yes, that did.

Interview ends