



## Sidney Ey

**Member of the Gawler RSL and a veteran of the Australian Army 9<sup>th</sup> Division World War Two.**

**Interview No 2 ..... “The War Years”**

**Interviewed as part of the Gawler Oral History Project in February 2018**

Interviewed by Barry Neylon on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> February 2018

Sid was interviewed in the presence of his friend Wayne Clark of the Gawler RSL who was able to contribute to the conversation.

Sid was 101 years of age at the time of this conversation.

---

The transcript of interview number 2 is as follows:

**Sid:** Well originally there were quite a number of us who enlisted in Gawler. And then we had to go to Wayville to get fitted out and that sort of thing. I had been to the Quartermaster's Store to get my uniforms and I was walking back to where we were camped ... behind the grandstands at Wayville in the sheep pavilions ... but I was walking along there, and I met a Major Hutton and he had been in camp at Gawler with the Mounted Rifles for several years prior to the war. As I was walking back who was coming in the opposite direction but Major Hutton. I had met him at our house because Dad had entertained both he and Colonel West on numerous occasions over those years. And he said; " Gooday Sid. What are you doing here?" I said; " I've just joined up". He said; " What unit are you going to?". I said; "I've got no idea". I had no idea of army units at that stage. And he said; " Well I and Colonel West are forming a Field Ambulance Unit. Would you like to join?" I said; " Well I suppose that is as good as anything." And he took me back to the

Quarters and introduced me to Major Burns and that's how I ended up in the Field Ambulance.

**Barry:** And you stayed in the Field Ambulance.

**Sid:** I stayed in the Field Ambulance. Yes.

**Barry:** Can you talk to us about your basic training.

**Sid:** Well we did basic training at Wayville and then we went to Woodside and continued our basic training. It was mainly stretcher bearer work that we trained on .... managing injuries and that sort of thing ... bandaging. That was in 1940. On the 28th December 1940 we were in camp at Woodside .... and they put us on a train ... and next day we were on the Port Melbourne wharf .. and there was the Mauritania berthed there .. and we embarked on the Mauritania for a trip to the Middle East. Well I didn't go to the Middle East. It only went to Colombo. It was too big to get up the Suez Canal. We disembarked there .. had a day's leave .. saw all the filth of red spittle on the footpaths in Colombo .. and we got on the Rohna, which was only a 6000-ton boat compared with the 35000-ton Mauritania. That took us to Ismailia on the Canal. We disembarked there ... got on to some railway trucks ... and took the ship to Gaza. I think it was Hill 69 .. or something or other .. at Gaza that we were encamped. We were quickly supplied with trucks and transport. It was soon after that we travelled back over the Canal to Ismailia .. skirted Alexandria .. and headed up the desert. After we had gone through Port Kabutsa and Mersa Matruh and Bardia, thousands of Italian POW's were being marched back to Mersa Matruh to get on the train to Cairo ... thousands of prisoners. They had been taken ... the 6th Division captured them, and the 7th Division had gone off to Greece. We replaced the 6th Division in the desert and went on past Tobruk, past Derna, past Benghazi, Agedabia .. which is right at the bottom of the Gulf of Sirte ... and we were 60 miles west of that .. and established an Advanced Dressing Station there. We used to have to send a truck back 60 miles to Agedabia every three days for water.

**Barry:** That was very rapid progress wasn't it?

**Sid:** Yes, we went very quickly from landing in the Middle East to where we were engaged in combat.

**Barry:** Can you describe a typical day. Did you get a chance to sleep? What did you eat etc?

**Sid:** Oh! When we were up past Agedabia there was not any great action going on at that particular point. It was only when the Germans had landed at Tripoli and had tanks and that .... that the Benghazi Handicap as they called it .. started. As we moved back in stages we would camp at night ... get up at daylight ... and move on again. Unfortunately, we lost 41 of

our Headquarters ... mainly nursing staff ... behind Derna. The instructions were not to go into Derna. But somehow, either by parachute or by motor cycle, some Germans had crossed the desert and set up a point which led into a wadi .... and whether they had killed an Australian Military Policeman or not we don't know ... but they set up a point there where they diverted traffic into this ... and our instructions were to bypass Derna completely. We lost 41 of our Headquarters nursing staff there and that put a big load on the ambulance. When we got back into Tobruk we had to man the Hospital and the Casualty Clearing Station down on the wharf .. and also provide A.D.S.'s to service the battalions.

**Barry:** Can you describe that Hospital.

**Sid:** It was quite a big building. They had big boards. There were corridors at the end and they had been sandbagged as a shelter for patients who could move. There were some nurses there for the first couple of days, but they were soon evacuated ... and most of the Hospital staff were evacuated back to Alexandria and the Field Ambulance had to service the Hospital ... and service the Casualty Clearing Station which was situated in tunnels ... concreted tunnels down on the wharf ... they were manned day and night .. and the only way we could get ships in was certain periods of the month when the moon was in the right position ... and they could quickly come in ... bring in reinforcements and supplies ... and take out patients and that sort of thing. It was a pretty hectic thing. The hospital .. we were either day duty or night duty .. and it was during the day we would be transported down to an area where there was a long defence ... 6 or 7 feet wide and quite long ... along the edge of the peninsular there. There were rocks there ... and cavities in the rocks we could sleep in ... and at night time when we were on duty you would have to be on the job most of the time.

**Barry:** This is at the time when Tobruk was under siege.

**Sid:** Yes. Tobruk was under siege. There was plenty of bombing and that sort of thing going on ... particularly at night time. we didn't have any air defence for the first two or three months that we were in Tobruk. And the Iti's and Germans just had a .. virtually .. well we had anti-aircraft but that didn't stop them night bombing and all the rest. But .. I can remember one night .. and I had a patient there with a broken leg and of course he couldn't get to the shelter when the air raid siren went .. so, I had to stay with him to try to stop him from trying to get to the air raid shelter. It was nerve racking and that sort of thing. However, we survived it.

**Barry:** How big was the Field Service Unit? How many men?

**Sid:** With A Company, B Company, Transport and Headquarters .. about 200. There were about 40 in A and B Companies. Headquarters were more than that. We had three medical officers. Ours were Captain Viner-Smith, Captain Reggie Mottram, and Major Dudley Burns.

Yes. Three doctors. A Company would have had three doctors too and I can't just remember who they were now.

**Barry:** And Nursing staff and Stretcher Bearers?

**Sid:** Mainly stretcher bearers .. but we all became nursing staff after we lost all our headquarters .. and we were stranded in Tobruk looking after the Hospital and the Casualty Clearing Station. The Germans had a long-range artillery piece called "Bardia Bill" ... and he was on a peninsula way down the other end of the Bay ... and he could range in on the wharf. Periodically he would "open up"! .. and of course, that would stop any activity happening.

**Barry:** How long were you under siege?

**Sid:** About 6 months it would have been. it was from April 41 to December 41 when we were relieved and taken out by boat and went back to Palestine.

**Barry:** Eventually they coined the term the "Rats of Tobruk". What do you think of that?

**Sid:** It's adequate. Because the Italians had built a whole series of concrete bunkers as a defence line around the whole arc. The battalions' used those and we would use one as an Advanced Dressing Station. That's where they got the name "Rats of Tobruk" ... from living underground in these bunkers.

**Barry:** Can you tell me what you did for food?

**Sid:** The food was reasonable. A lot of bully beef and biscuits. Each unit had a cook and where it was possible to provide hot food they would provide it ... otherwise you just had your emergency rations.

**Barry:** You were under siege for a long period of time, did you have any means of getting letters out to family?

**Sid:** There was a mail service available and we received letters periodically. You see they could only be brought in once a month because of the restrictions on shipping.

**Wayne:** Water, I believe from that book on the 9th Division ... you were allowed one quart a day, which is two pannikins a day ... that was for shaving and drinking ..

**Sid:** Yes. it was rationed. We used a little bit for shaving and we had to shave. That was another thing we had to do.... shave every day.

**Barry:** In that very difficult time are there any amusing stories that you can recall that people got up to.

**Sid:** Oh! I don't think we had any time for frivolities and anything like that. I think some of them got up to all sorts of stunts when they were on leave.

**Barry:** When did you end up leaving Tobruk and how did that happen?

**Sid:** I'm not sure of the exact date. Early December I should imagine. We went out by boat. We assembled on the wharf. the boat came in .. we loaded .. and as soon as we were loaded away we went .. and we were weaving all over the place avoiding submarines and that sort of thing .. and arrived in Alexandria the next morning ... disembarked there and went into camp in Palestine again.

**Barry:** How long were you in Palestine for?

**Sid:** We were in Palestine for about 12 months before we went to Alamein. We went up into Syria and Lebanon as garrison troops.

**Barry:** That was against the Vichy French?

**Sid:** Well they had fought the Vichy French. I think that was the 7th Division and we took over as garrison troops. We went up almost as far ... well we could see the Turkish border up there from Lebanon.

We were up in Syria and we got a request to proceed back to Egypt and proceed to Alamein. It was a very quick trip. We established a main dressing station close to the coast. There were salt marshes along an area there. And one night there was a bombing raid, and next thing there was a swarm of mosquitoes came. The bomb had landed in the salt marshes. However, there was a strong wind blowing and they only lasted a short time ... were blown out to sea. It was a hectic period ... the number of casualties that were passing through .. we were kept pretty busy.

**Barry:** So you were working mainly as a nurse?

**Sid:** Working mainly as a nurse at that stage and ... Oh! It was a long time ago.

Where were we.

**Barry:** We were just thinking about the Battle of El Alamein. You were working as a nurse during that and it was a long battle ..

**Sid:** Yes. It went for several days. It might have been 10 or 12 days, the Battle of El Alamein. There were a lot of casualties and our unit lost some good fellows in the Battle of Alamein. It eventually finished, and we were sent to come back to Australia. We travelled down through Egypt to the port of Tewfik, I think it was. Out in the top of the Red Sea was the Queen Mary. And we pulled alongside to board .. and we were down here ..

**Wayne:** So you had a trip on the Queen Mary.

**Sid:** So we came home to Australia on the Queen Mary. Nine of us to a cabin, three bunks here, three bunks there, three bunks there. I don't recall how long it took us to get home but, we eventually landed in Sydney and boarded straight on to a train to Melbourne. We were in Melbourne a day. Then a train to Adelaide and home. It was great to hit Australia again .. after the Middle East. It was good to get home. And we were given some leave. I've just forgotten how many days leave we had .. might have been a week or a fortnight.

**Barry:** How did you meet your Mum and Dad?

**Sid:** I got off the train at North Gawler and it was only a couple of hundred yards to where Mum and Dad lived in Light Square. I just walked there. They didn't know I was coming. I surprised them a bit then. But it was good to get home.

After leave we went up to Queensland to camp on the Tablelands and prepared for New Guinea. We did some training at Cairns. Then when we went to New Guinea. We called in at Milne Bay and did a bit more embarkation and disembarkation training. Then we went to Lae and landed at Red Beach ... went ashore .. unopposed .. followed jungle tracks .. a lot of marshes .. narrow tracks to follow. I remember one night one of the chaps had rigged up a bunk between saplings on the track and ... during the night there was one unholy scream. And a Jap who was trying to get away from Lae bumped into him. And the next morning out in the marsh there was a bloke up to his waist in water .. was this Japanese .. I won't say what happened to him.

**Barry:** This was a very different type of war.

**Sid:** Oh! Totally different .. you know .. the scrub .. the forest. But then it opened out into kunai grass and more open country. The 7th Division, I think it was, landed in the Markham Valley. They must have parachuted in there I think. The combination of the 9th and 7th Division .. they captured Lae. And we assembled at the mouth of a very fast flowing river, and landing ship tanks came in and picked us up and took us to a landing at Scarlet Beach near Finschhafen. And we proceeded towards Finschhafen and eventually captured Finschhafen. But, it's a long time ago and the memory is fading a bit.

Eventually I got Dengue Fever. I was put in the hospital for a fortnight to recover from this Dengue Fever and then I went to convalescent camp. I was in that for a fortnight before I re-joined the unit.

After New Guinea we came back to Australia and we were on the Tablelands again for about 12 months. Then I injured my knee playing football. So I was taken into hospital and given rehabilitation treatment to try to fix the knee. And eventually I went to a convalescent camp and that was situated between Lake Barina and Lake Eacham, I think it was. I was in convalescence there when I was recalled to the unit. The next day we were shifted to Townsville and re-embarked on board and we made our way to Morotai. Went ashore at Morotai. We were there for two or three days and we were reloaded on the boats and made our way round to the west coast of Borneo. We went into Brunei Bay and we landed there .. no opposition. And after we had been there for a few days we were able to get transport down to where the Japs had set alight to the Shirai and Mirai oilfields. And that was a huge sight .. a terrific glow .. yellow or white depending upon the quality of gas that had been set alight ... and they were in the process of trying to put these out. And they had sort of sealed clamps and long arms to try and turn the valves off. They eventually got them out. Both Mirai and Shirai. After that we moved on to a private house which had belonged to one of the British people who had settled there ... was there house. We moved there. We didn't see a Jap the whole time. We were lucky that side. Because the other side of Borneo was Tarakan, and that was a terrific battlefield. And that waged for some time .. that battle on the other side. When you think back ... we were very lucky .. very lucky to survive.

I eventually went to the Board with my knee and I was given a 50%pension. When I got home I wanted to do something. I joined my Father in the business and I decided I was going to take up tennis again .. because I was a reasonably good tennis player. I joined up with a chap by the name of Wally Woods and we were playing in an Easter tournament on the Daly Street tennis courts, which no longer exist now, and, who was up on top!!, .. there was a Dr Rice, and he was the doctor I shortly after had to go and see to get a reassessment. He said to me; "Are you really in need of this?" (laughter) Because he had seen me playing tennis. (laughter) So, I lost my 50% pension (laughter). But I eventually got 10% pension back. In 2004 I had an aneurism of the aorta and if it hadn't been for Dr Deland taking a scan or something or other on a Tuesday ... and then on a Thursday he rang me .. I was at the service station when the call came through .. "can you be in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital by 2 O'clock. So Mum drove me down to the QEH and I was admitted on the Thursday. On the Friday morning they operated on my aorta. They said I was lucky because it had grown in size from when it was first taken, and, I managed to survive that too. I'm here today. (laughter)

**Barry:** Just going back to the war years; you finished in the Australian Army as a Sergeant. And I'm assuming you started as a Private. Can you talk about how the promotions came.

**Sid:** Went from a Private to Lance Corporal, then to Corporal, and then to Sergeant. Over time it evolved.

**Wayne:** Did you have to do courses Sid? Training, education?

**Sid:** Well we were getting it on the practical side. (laughter) In Tobruk we lost 41 of our Headquarters staff in the "Benghazi Handicap" ... mostly nursing staff and we had to go into the hospital and we were shown how to give a morphia injection of a quarter or an eighth .. whatever it might be. And we had to do that straight away. From that time on you learnt these things.

**Barry:** Sid, it has been wonderful talking to you, and I really appreciate you giving us your time to record your story.

**Sid:** Ok. Thank you.

---