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Men of the Ninth – A history of the Ninth Australian Field Ambulance 1916 - 1994 ¹

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ALL MEMBERS OF THE ADF will be aware that 01 July 2003 marks the Centenary of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps. One of the new books to be published on this occasion is Men of the Ninth - a History of the Ninth Australian Field Ambulance. This book traces the history of the 9th Field Ambulance from 1916 until it's final disbanding in 1994.

The book is really the history of the four field ambulances, which have carried the number 'Nine' since the original unit was raised to support the 9th Brigade in Sydney in 1916. This unit served with great distinction on the Western Front, and took part in the Battles of Messines, Third Ypres, Villers-Bretonneux, Amiens, and the Breaking of the Hindenburg Line. In 1921, when the AIF was finally disbanded, the 9th Field Ambulance became a CMF unit based at Victoria Barracks in Sydney. It survived the end of compulsory military service in 1929 and the Depression, and many of those who served in the unit between the wars went on in WW11 to senior and command positions. In all, five former members of the unit have reached General Officer rank.

On the outbreak of WW11, those members of the unit who were young enough volunteered for the AIF They were replaced by Universal Trainees, most of whom later became volunteers themselves. Thus the Ninth Field Ambulance AIF came into existence and was sent to New Guinea in 1943. As Corps Troops, they supported the Markham and Ramu Valley campaigns by manning Airfield Evacuation Posts at Nadzab, Dumpu, and in Port Moresby.

In 1940 another unit, the 2/9th Field Ambulance, was raised in Melbourne with many of its members drawn from a militia unit, the 16th Field Ambulance. The 2/9th went to Malaya with the rest of the ill-fated 8th Division and, after bitter fighting on the Peninsula, its soldiers became POWs in Singapore. The book describes in detail the fate of those who were sent away from Singapore to labour camps in Thailand, Borneo, and Japan, and also the dedicated medical work per- formed by the others who remained at Changi.

In 1952, the unit was re-raised in Townsville as part of the 11th Brigade. This section of the book describes the vicissitudes of the CMF/Army Reserve over a period of 42 years and includes the issues of National Service, the Vietnam War, and the impact on the Reserve Forces of changing societal values and changeable Government policies. The Ninth Field Ambulance remained an integral part of the Army Reserve strength in North Queensland until it was disbanded in 1994 following the restructuring of the Australian Defence Force.

The author of this encyclopaedic work is LtCol Robert Likeman (Retd), who was the unit's last Commanding Officer. He unfolds the narrative through the diaries, letters and first-hand accounts of ordinary soldiers, yet makes his analysis through the eyes of a doctor and a former Commanding Officer who has himself been on active service. He is critical of the decision to disband the Field Ambulances, which he claims has eviscerated the Medical Corps at a time when increasing demands are being made on it for the support of overseas operations.

Biographical information on many of the central characters has been carefully researched and is provided in footnotes. The author has visited all the sites of action himself, including walking the Kokoda Track and penetrating the inside of Changi Gaol. More information about the book can be obtained by visiting www.Slouch-hat.com.au

1. Likeman R. *Men of the Ninth - a History of the Ninth Australian Field Ambulance 1916-1994*. Rosebud: Slouch Hat Publications; 2003. Published by Slouch Hat Publications, PO Box 174, Rosebud, Vic 3939. Hard cover, containing 224 pages with over 100 photographs and maps, including Nominal Rolls and the Roll of Honour. RRP \$50.00.