



Wayne Clarke

Member of Gawler RSL

Interviewed as part of the **Gawler Oral History Project**.

Wayne reflects on his time as a National Serviceman. He was conscripted in 1965.

Interview 5: “ **Vietnam, 1966, 5 Battalion, Phuoc Tuy Province, The Full-On Business of War.** ”

Recorded by Barry Neylon

Transcript as follows:

Wayne: 5 Battalion landed at the area around Nui Dat in a massive air insurgence under the control of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. This airborne unit of the American Forces was in command of the operation to establish Nui Dat, and we were under their command. Our Colonel of 5 Battalion was under the command of the Americans for the first 3 months. The airborne assault on Nui Dat took place on the 24th May (1966). The Battalion then had to establish a base camp and defend and control the area. The Viet Cong lost a lot of face. They had a lot of troops around the strategic hamlet of Binh Ba and they planned to restore their loss of face with the residents of Phuoc Tuy Province and Binh Ba by attacking our base and throwing us out of the province of Phuoc Tuy.

The Viet Cong 274 Regiment began probing our perimeter lines and planned to attack us on the night of the 12th June. 6 Battalion had only just arrived and were only moving into their task force positions. 5 Battalion usually had one or two Companies out patrolling and in ambush positions on the country side. Therefore, we were always under strength at the Nui Dat base. The expected attack came with a very large force gathered south of Binh Ba on the highway number 15. They formed up on the highway north of our base and they commenced to jog and force march towards us estimated to be from 250 to 350. This was one occasion where military planning and tactics worked ... and this enemy force was reported by a small listening patrol ... a 6-man section that was located along the highway in the Michelin rubber plantation ... and they radioed the enemy's imminent arrival. Now forewarned, we all rushed to our defence positions. At that time, they were only shallow shell scrapes because we hadn't had time to dig deeper fire pits or erect proper barbed wire

obstructions. The Viet Cong were massing in the front of our positions. Two platoon's position was actually straddling this highway, and we could hear them out in front of our positions yelling abuse ... and the artillery then carried out a massive sustained barrage ... also with our battalion mortars providing illumination with star flares ... they brought the fire down in on our positions, on our perimeter, and there was shrapnel landing only metres from our positions. It was a most eventful night until the enemy called off the attack ... due mainly to being discovered and losing the element of surprise ... and also sustaining casualties from the artillery.

When dawn arrived, I found David Olroyd. He was in the shell scrape next to me, but his head was covered in blood from a shell shrapnel and he had lost a bit of an ear. I must admit we did actually give him a lot of lip and didn't give him any sympathy either, but it was only a flesh wound and he carried on didn't even have a day sick leave. The Viet Cong then left 5 Battalion alone. They never attacked us again in force until they had a go at the 6 Battalion in August at the Battle of Long Tan. I've often thought about those 6 men at the listening post who raised the alarm and had to remain in their positions hearing the massive artillery and mortar battle... and they remained there quietly as the many hundreds of Viet Cong retreated past them in utter confusion with their wounded.

After this episode 5 Battalion was engaged in the full-on business of war. We were patrolling continuously ... building the base camp ... and we returned from our operations and patrols ... some in company size ... and some often as a platoon. My platoon, 2 Platoon, was often tasked as a long-range reconnaissance patrol ... and we went around Binh Ba, the Long Hai Mountains, and Nui Tay Mountains.

In early August it became obvious that the Owen guns which were issued to our forward scouts which were WW2 vintage ... and some of the ammunition we were using was dated 1945 ... were useless against the firepower of the Viet Cong AK 47's. And we lost some very good men including one of my closest friends, Bob Lubke, who had been with us in New Guinea ... and we were then issued with the newest Armalite M16 automatic rifles ... from the US Army, which proved to be a great weapon.

By now three of my mates were killed and Pat Bunning, my original Section Leader, had been promoted to a sergeant and had gone off to another Company ... and I had been made a Section Leader of my 5 Section.

Shortly after, A Company was conducting an operation near the base of the Long Hai Mountains in dense jungle ... when several men had been wounded in an enemy contact ... and we had to create a "casevac" dust off emergency landing pad ... and we had to blow up some trees so that the helicopters could land. While this was happening the platoon commanders and the company commander conducted a O Group, which was to receive further orders from Battalion Headquarters. After this meeting my platoon commander, Michael Deak, approached me to advise that he had nominated me to go to Saigon and

attend a specialist Vietnamese language course, ... if I was willing to go. Once again, not listening to my father's advice, which was never to volunteer, I jumped at the opportunity and handed over my Armalite to my Lance Corporal ... and left the operation ... and returned to base on the "casevac" helicopters with the wounded.

With the benefit of hindsight, I found out that perhaps I had just jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. I then proceeded to the Saigon Language Course. I had to first return to the base and get my clothing and everything in a sausage bag and report to Battalion Headquarters. Eventually there was a group of 25 of us who joined together ... people from 5 Battalion, 6 Battalion, some from the New Zealand artillery, and a few other corp. Then we travelled by truck to Vung Tau.

We were then loaded on a military transport ship, which was a large military amphibious craft, which had only just arrived in Vung Tau having sailed from Townsville to Vietnam. I don't think it would have been very pleasant in that flat-bottomed boat. When we were put on the boat we experienced a wonderful thing. The cooks on the boat gave us a wonderful feed of bacon and eggs. It was absolutely brilliant after having been on ration packs for about 3 months. The boat then proceeded up the Saigon River when unfortunately, it was the first time the captain of the vessel had travelled up the Saigon River and he had been hearing all these stories about the Viet Cong shooting at the ships going up the river ... and the ship was manned by some troops with 50 calibre machine guns ... and of course every now and again they would start shooting at something ... I think it was probably buffalo or something like that! ... but, there certainly didn't seem to be any problem from our point of view.

When the vessel arrived at the wharves in Saigon the captain was obviously not very conversant with the procedure ... ships of similar size were not berthed alongside the wharves, they were turned in "end on" ... in fact they were ranked like vehicles and the ship had to execute a rotation in the middle of the river and then be put in frontwards to the wharf. Well, anyway, what happened! ... The captain swung his ship around and he misjudged a navy ship belonging to the South Vietnamese Navy that was berthed ... and we wiped the backside of this navy ship completely off! And there was a poor old ship's cook just there trying to chuck some stuff off the back and suddenly he found out he didn't have the back of the ship. Well there was a lot of consternation there and the Warrant officer in charge of us grabbed hold of some jeeps, and we vacated the scene very quickly ... before all the paperwork.

We then proceeded to the Army Headquarters in Vietnam which was obviously in Saigon. There we were issued with American PX cards and identity access cards to the Tan Son airbase. These PX cards proved to be very valuable.

The Australian task force arrival at Nui Dat and the Australian involvement in Vietnam was very controversial and it was here that we learnt that the Viet Cong had placed a bounty on

any Australian Serviceman that could be killed ... and I can't remember the actual amount of money but, I think it was \$500 or a thousand American dollars ... I can't remember. But at that time, we didn't realize it, but we were the only young 25 Australians in Saigon. So, obviously the only other Australians were the few at the Headquarters and they had a 24-hour guard. We then moved to the Tan Son Air Base and there we were billeted in large tents, similar to those you see on MASH (1970's TV Show) We found that to be absolutely magic. After sleeping rough on the ground, we suddenly had steel bunks, mattresses and we also had great meals at the American Mess. At meal times at the mess we were the object of much questioning by the Americans, who wanted to know what unit we were from and how come we were speaking such good English. We had to explain to them that we were not Americans we were Australians. It took a fair bit of convincing that we weren't marines or something like that.

Anyway ... we travelled with weapons to Saigon from Nui Dat but when we were taken to Tan Son Air Base the Americans decided to take all our weapons away and they were locked up in a secure building. Consequently, we were unarmed, and we were deemed to be under the watchful eye of the Americans.

The rules of the course were that we had to study in uniform and we were bussed out every day, five days a week, to a part of the Saigon University. On the weekends we were given leave, but we had to wear civilian clothes and provide our own transport. The main means of transport was a motorbike with a seat in the front of it which were called sia cyclos. We had a fairly interesting time in Saigon on leave. I had occasion to visit the local zoo in Saigon and also in the grounds of the zoo was the Saigon Museum, and it was while wandering around there that I suddenly found out that these Viet Cong were pretty use to war, because they had 3000 years of recorded conflict with the Chinese ... and occasionally they won one ... and occasionally they lost one. But they were very experienced fighters.

I think it's wise to talk about the Tan Son Air Base. It was definitely the biggest airport in the world at the time. There was every conceivable form of aeroplane available. I can recall seeing Phantom's, Super Sabres, and they were all jostling with civilian Boeing 707's, Hercules, Caribous, ... and scores of helicopters flying about from dawn to dusk. The Air Base was huge. There were enormous numbers of troops stationed there. The tents where we were billeted were on the western side of the perimeter of the Tan Son air base. Two tents next to our tent was the Koreans. They were working for an organisation called MACV, which stood for Military Assistance Command Vietnam ... and these Koreans were non-combatants in the sense that they were office workers that worked in the Headquarters of the Korean Army. But we were amazed at the physical expertise of these guys because they used to wake up before us and they would all be formed up in a group of about 60 and they would jog for about a kilometre and a half around the air base before 6am. Then they would all go off in the ablution huts and you could hear them cleaning their teeth from about a hundred yards away. And in addition to that, after their jog, they use to set up pieces of

wood and they would do karate chops ... and they were very good at it. it was exciting to watch.

As I said we were at the western perimeter of the base and just beyond the line of tents and our ablution blocks ... the perimeter of the base was a big paling fence and it had barbed wire on it. Every 70- 80 yards they had a great big American machine gun tower, similar to what you can imagine in the German Stalags and all of those German war movies that you see. They were always manned with some American soldiers there to protect us. And the other thing is that just on the other side of this perimeter fence, it's hard to believe, but we were next to a golf course where all the generals and all the politicians use to go and play. You could see it through the gaps in the wall.

One evening not long after we were there, we woke up, the machine guns were going off, and you could see through the fence about 40 or 50 Viet Cong charging towards us shooting at the towers. Anyway, the Americans prevailed thankfully, and they fought the Viet Cong off the golf course. I don't think it has been recorded as a battle anywhere, but it was fairly interesting to watch. But we were very worried about the fact that there we were with Viet Cong ... about 30 to 50 of them ... about 30 yards from us and we didn't have any weapons. Well! we were not to be issued with weapons. However, ... we decided to do something on our own. We took our PX cards to the PX shop, bought a heap of cigarettes, and then we proceeded to the black market where we sold cigarettes and purchased some 45 pistols from the black market, which we kept. Unfortunately, I had it for a long time and threw it out the window of the HMAS Sydney on the way back ... just out of Sydney. So that's out there in the briny somewhere.

After that when we went to go in the bus to the course we all had a little travel bag similar to the ones you had on an air flight, and of course we had our books for the language course, and we also had a 45 pistol in there with a few magazines.

Another thing happened which caused us a bit of drama. The bus travelled through the absolutely congested streets of Saigon. You have to see it to believe it. When we got to the gates of the University there was some Guard Posts ... sentry posts I suppose you would call them. They were all protected by sand bags and there were probably half a dozen South Vietnamese policemen there. In order to provide some restricted access everybody had to pass through these security gates and travel along a piece of road which was probably two car widths wide for about half a kilometre ... and it was just a mass of humanity ... our bus, an odd car, and most of them were on push bikes. Anyway, one particular day when we got to the gate to get through there ... it was absolute chaos ... the Viet Cong had decided to do an attack and blow up the access to the University ... and probably 30 - 50 people killed and a lot more wounded. That obviously was disconcerting and one of the chaps I use to sit on the bus with was a fellow called Noel Hexter and I must admit Noel was a person who was fairly serious and particularly after that attack he really kept his eye on everybody around the gate to the University. And he observed that there

was always one bloke standing by a post. He raised the matter with the people at the University and they said they would investigate. It turned out that he was a South Vietnamese undercover policeman and he was there to protect us. Anyway, the very next day we went along and as we passed the electric light pole the guy there gave us a wave. Obviously, he had been spoken to. His cover was obviously blown a bit, but there you go.

Saigon was a chaotic place. We were there when there were demonstrations. There were Buddhists burning themselves. They were trying to sort out this Vietnam conflict by negotiations which were not going anywhere. It was a very dangerous place to be. On one weekend Noel and I travelled into a hotel area in the centre of Saigon. Now this hotel was a ten or twelve story building and the top three stories were hired by the American Army and there was a hotel up there on one of the floors. The whole floor of the building was a hotel with poker machines and bars and things. We spent an enjoyable afternoon there. When we left the building, we went down and there were two sia cyclos. These are the little motor bikes with a little seat in front of them which were the best way to travel around Saigon. I hopped on one and Noel hopped on the other. This was about dusk on an evening on a Sunday and we headed back to the Tan Son Air Base. As we got to the airbase my driver went off to the left through the main gate and the driver with Noel immediately revved up his motor and he shot off on the right-hand direction into a very bad area of Saigon ... an area we were forbidden to go in the evening. Luckily for Noel the South Vietnamese police, who we use to call white mice because they had a white uniform on top, they obviously saw the guy deviate and race off into the no-go area and they raced after him. They eventually saved him because he was handed over they were stabbing him. He was stabbed 17 times. Thankfully enough he was taken to a United States hospital in Saigon where I visited him later.... found out it was a brilliant hospital ... well! better than most Australian hospitals of the time.

I felt that, although the Vietnamese language Course was organised with the best of intention, it had a very poor result. Only a few of the students who had basic French language skills became most proficient. The rest of us only achieved some basic greetings and some basic skills. Still I had some fun when greeting locals at several checkpoints later ... when they didn't understand and were very surprised when I started greeting them in Vietnamese ... and I was able to understand some of their sarcastic comments when we searched their belongings for weapons etc. But the funniest thing about the Vietnamese Language Course was that at a later operation we conducted what was called a cordon and search of a village where there were some known Viet Cong sympathisers and possibly some Viet Cong in the village. During the investigation we searched all the buildings and, basically, they were only huts with one or two rooms. And the roofing was somewhat interesting. It was obviously second hand galvanised iron but most of them were made by making small tiles out of used beer cans ... and a lot of the beer cans were aluminium, so the roofs didn't rust ... which was quite interesting. Each hut often had two very large pottery jars standing under the eaves of the roof, and they were there to store rice and the other one was to store rainwater for the household use. We checked one of these jars and

lifted the wooden top. Underneath the lid we found a young Vietnamese man hiding in the jar. Well we promptly busted the jar with the butts of our rifles. Anyway, the suspect was left there with his hands in the air with all the broken jar bits around him. It looked quite funny. The Vietnamese guy when I questioned him came up with a story that he was hiding from the Viet Cong. We later handed him over to the South Vietnamese police. I think his main problem was that he was a draft dodger. That was some of the funny incidents that I had ... having some knowledge of the Vietnamese language.

I was very glad to leave after the twelve-week course and I returned to the base where I waited for a day or two because the battalion was out on an operation on the Mount Nui Thi Vai. The next thing I heard was that they needed me very quickly and they helicoptered me out to the side of Mount Nui Thi Vai. There I was disembarked on one side of the helicopter ... and on the other there was one of my mates ... Trevor Lynch ... who was badly wounded ... totally blinded ... and he was loaded up on the other side and he took over from me on the helicopter.

This was where I suddenly found out I was back with my Section and, ... it was another 6 months of hard yards ... in Vietnam.
