



## WAYNE CLARKE

Member of Gawler RSL

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

Wayne reflects on his time in the National Service. He was conscripted in 1965.

Interview Number 7, May 2018 “**More Reflections of the Tan Son Air Base, Vietnam 1966**”

Recorded by Barry Neylon

Transcript as follows:

**Wayne:** While we were at the base ... Tan Son Air Base, any spare time that I had, I would make my way to the edge of the airstrip and watch the jet planes taking off. It was absolutely awe inspiring. The fighter planes, ... the Phantoms and the other jets were lined up in groups of two at the end of the runway ... and there were probably about 20 planes lined up at the end of the runway. What used to happen is that the pilots would sit there with the canopies up, because obviously you are in tropical weather and it is very humid. What would occur is that they would wait at the end of the runway in pairs and they would wait for an order to come ... to go and support some military operation.

The Phantom fighter pilots would then lower their canopies. They would get a directive to launch their bombs and they would then take off in pairs. They would take off and almost go up vertically ... and certainly the Phantoms always went up vertically. The pilots would fly up and would reach the area of the atmosphere where the ailerons would not be of any use, and they would then tumble out until they reached the atmospheric area where the ailerons and the controls of the aircraft would come back. By this time the area where they wanted to go would have been programmed into the computer and the pilots would then fly almost on automatic pilot to the general area where they were required.

The pilots would then look around and try and get radio contact with Cessna spotter planes which were always in the air ... from daybreak to dark. These people would pinpoint a spot where they wanted the bombs to land. The pilots of the Cessna's would see the spot required because the infantry on the ground would have launched a smoke grenade ... which used to change quite regularly in colour but most often would be red. Then the pilot of

the Cessna would know, and he would wait until the Phantoms would arrive, and he would then fire an incendiary rocket into the spot where he saw the red flare. And, of course, all good infantrymen would be a fair way away from where the phosphorus rocket had been launched. Then they would come in, ... and jets obviously don't have the same accuracy as the Cessna's, and they would aim their bombs at the phosphorus left by the Cessna's. I thought this was fantastic because later on in later operations when I was Section Commander we had to call in for aerial bombing on odd occasions, and I often had to throw the smoke grenades and then get out of the road .... because when the 500lb bombs from the Phantoms came down they used to take a lot of jungle with them. It was interesting to know how the whole operation of air support was undertaken.

Some of the planes that I used to see at the Tan Son Air Base were a large number of unmarked silver planes. These planes had the words "Air America" on them ... and I'm talking about 15-20 planes and they were always in a little section on their own. But, of course, in later years I was to find out with the benefit of hindsight that they were operated by the CIA. And they were the planes that Mel Gibson made a movie about. It's just interesting to note that I had seen them. Funny thing is that the pilots of those planes all used to live in the hotels that I mentioned earlier. They lived in the hotels put up by the Americans. I did meet CIA operators and many helicopter pilots when on leave at those hotels.

---