



Wayne Clarke

Member of the 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 1 _____ **“National Service 1965. The First 12 Weeks”**

Recorded Barry Neylon in April 2018

Transcript of interview is as follows:

Wayne Clarke: “Well, in the latter part of 1964 I was working as a young stock agent and as a trainee auctioneer for Farmers Union at Snowtown. In the latter part of 1964 the Federal Government at the time decided to reintroduce a national service scheme, which was much more elaborate than the one that was first undertaken after WW2. That was really a 6-month duration, and then you had to be a part time soldier for the next two or three years. The scheme that the federal government proposed this time was to have a two-year full time national service and also three years on reserve afterwards. Now this scheme was very controversial and .. many people for it .. many people against.

My father had served in the Second World War and he came home with malaria and things from New Guinea. I was born in 1945, predating even the war finishing. So, I was one of the first .. what they called .. bulge babies. Most of the returning soldiers, sailors and airmen decided to get down and busy and having babies after the Second World War. If my father had been much more active and got into action 15 days earlier I would have been ineligible to be in the first National Service scheme, because my birthday was the 14th January. Anyway I wasn't at all upset about being called up for National Service. I was also a member of the Gawler Air Cadets ... been a member there since I was 14 years of age. And I sort of had been brought up on lots of WW2 stories from my Dad and his mates. I was a little bit upset that it wasn't universal, which the earlier schemes were, ... but it was selected on birthdays. Anyway the time came, and I was at Snowtown when I had to

register and in due course the names came out and I was selected. Now, I'm quite sure that in the early part of this National Service scheme, whilst there were very big concerns about the communists in Indonesia, and Vietnam and Malaya at the time, there had not been any commitment

There had not been any commitment made to going to Vietnam and it was essentially a national service call up. I can remember after having received my call up I had to attend two medicals at the nearest big town which was Port Pirie and I can remember going to have my medical which I passed .. obviously. While I was there met two chaps. One was Trevor Turner and the other was Jeff Kenyon. They were to later serve with me in Vietnam.

My parents were fairly concerned about this .. my Mother particularly. However my Dad seemed to take it in his stride ... and in due course I had to present to Keswick in Adelaide .. which I did. In addition to doing the medical there was an interview by some people from the National Service call up team. I can remember being asked whether my parents .. or whether my father had served in WW2. Obviously I said; "yes". This was later to have some bearing on my thoughts of this matter because I sort of found out that the National Service call up ... particularly the first four of five ... because it was a new scheme ... they actually called up a lot more people than they needed to fill the quota that they had to fill. And therefore I believe there was an interview process where if you made a statement that your father had served in WW2 you got a helluva lot more points to getting called up. And to bear this out there was definitely a selection process in addition to just being the birthdays. This is refuted by the authorities. However in later years I found out that when we were in Vietnam the troops that were in my Company, which was a hundred odd men, we had birthdays on innumerable dates and I found out by talking to servicemen in the later call ups that they would have probably only eight or ten days where the servicemen would have their birthdays and they would have a special you know everybody knew exactly when these days happened. So, consequently I believe that there was definitely a quota system where sons of returned servicemen were eagerly taken in.

Another thing that happened in the first call up was that there was a fairly intense period of English migration at the time and many of the people that I served with had only been in Australia for five, six, or seven months. And these people invariably when I got friendly with them and talked to them ... the defining factor seemed to be that they were the sons of parents who served in WW2. Some of these English migrants had only been in Australia ... some of them for a matter of three months ... were pretty miffed at only being in the country for a few months and getting called up for national service ... and I don't blame them for that.

Anyway that's my experience with that.

Another thing that happened was the day I actually joined ... I got a free rail pass ... everything in those days ... if you were called up in National Service they sent everybody

around by train .. most places. And we got a free .. and I got a free train ticket from Snowtown to Adelaide. And I always remember .. it was a funny day ... because my Father was most insistent that he met me on the train trip at Salisbury station, and we had never ever stopped at Salisbury on our train trips. But anyway Dad was most insistent to meet me there and we went and had a beer in a Salisbury hotel before I left to go into Keswick. And I think that was a very emotional time for Dad ... looking on it now from many years later.

When we were called up we obviously had to swear the oath and get our names ticked off. One of the friends I met on that day was a chap called Chris Kitchenmaster and his father was a sergeant of police. I became good friends with Chris and met his father a few times. Being the very first intake there were newspaper reporters and photographers around taking photographs and the sergeant, Chris's father, he made the observation at the time that when we were all lined up to go away to the airport .. he said in his own words that it was a "stitch up" because ... he said he's never seen a group of young men who were as well presented and neat and tidy just as a random selection. And he was most observant, and he said it was definitely a selected bunch for the cameras. After going to the airport we were put on a plane that was my very first plane trip and they flew us from Adelaide Airport to a place called Nagambie which was a country town, which obviously had an airport, and which was only a short distance from Puckapunyal, which was the main army base in Victoria.

We went by bus from Nagambie to Puckapunyal. Where we disembarked, there were enormous numbers of Press again and they were obviously taking photos and, because it was such a controversial thing, the government had organised chaplains, army chaplains to be available and there was a row of about 6 - 8 tents on the side of a hill and they had little flags out in front of them. They had a Roman Catholic sign, and a Presbyterian one, and a Baptist one, Church of England, and it was the very first time I had seen the Star of David. Anyway there were Chaplains for everybody else except the Star of David and I never saw a Jewish person there on the day, and I never saw a Jewish person ever in the National Service. I have asked somebody, and he said that after the second or third intake Jewish people could abstain from the call up because of their religious convictions. I don't know whether that's true or not, but I've had that from senior people in the RSL.

We then arrived, and we had to have our names taken off and we had call up papers with us and our names were all checked off and then we were issued with our uniforms and our bedding and everything. I can remember that I thought we were very lucky because there were only about 6 brand spanking new huts which had just been built for the new arrivals, and I managed to score a billet in one of those. there was room for roughly 50 in each of the national service barracks at the time. Anyway our training started. We met our sergeants and our drill sergeants. I was pretty lucky, because having been in the air cadets for quite a few years I was up to speed on drill and military protocol in lots of ways. I found it quite good. The meals and everything were very good. I didn't find the training very hard.

I thought it was very interesting. There was a particularly interesting time when a truck rolled up with a whole lot of wooden boxes and we had to prise them open and there we found brand spanking new SLR Rifles which were in grease proof packets. And we had to undo them, rip them open, and wash them in diesel to get all the grease off the weapons and of course we were then allocated a rifle each, which we had to keep clean and look after and have it within arm's reach for the rest of our time in the National Service.

I remember this National Service basic training usually takes about 12 weeks and probably about 8 weeks in to the course ... we were all assembled and marched off to a big group to a ... a big hall in Puckapunyal, which was actually a picture theatre and ... there were probably 12 - 18 very senior army people. They took up their position on the front stage. They were all wearing red officer caps. Obviously these were the top order people. And I can remember listening to them and wondering what these people were on about. Anyway it seemed to me that these army people were there and making a very big apology for this National Service scheme, and, they were saying things like; "this is all the fault of the government". At that time ... I reckon some 8 weeks into our basic training there had been no commitment to Vietnam and we were all being trained ostensibly just as a national service ... but ... there was an undercurrent all the time that we were being prepared for some fighting ... which was not made apparent. And I always remember these generals and brigadiers, and everything were very apologetic about it. There were probably 600 of us in this hall and I think they were just trying to ah! ... relieve their consciences. As it turned, just about the time we finished our national training .. lo and behold! .. the government made the big announcement that the Government of Vietnam had asked them for our help. Well ... obviously ... we were the ones that had to provide the help.

And then we proceeded to go to what was called infantry training at, in my case, Holdsworthy in NSW. They gave us options as to what military corps we would like to be in, and I can remember my father giving me the very strong advice that I was not to go in infantry under any circumstances, and duly did what I was told. I put in for the tanks corps, the artillery corps, or light aviation ..because prior to this I'd done quite a lot of gliding at the Gawler Aerodrome and I could actually fly gliders. This was duly noted ... I can assure you this was noted on my records ... but when the postings to the corps came out ... we were all lined up probably 400-600 on the parade ground ... and our names were all read out ... and lo and behold! ... they assigned me to infantry. Well! remembering what Dad said, I wasn't going in the infantry.

So then they decided if you weren't happy you could line up and make an appeal and try to get it changed. Well, anyway our notices were given around about 12 o'clock, just before lunch. Obviously about one third of the people that were happy with their corps postings decided to go off and have dinner. Then there was possibly three or four hundred of us that weren't happy, and we decided to line up. They came out with two little desks and a sergeant at each desk. Well we lined up and you can imagine it just went on and on. They were very very slow in processing our requests. By the time tea time had come around at

about 6 o'clock it was obvious that they weren't going to be finished in daylight. Obviously I was starting to get a bit hungry. Anyway with about a hundred to two hundred people in front of me I decided well! ... Dad survived infantry ... perhaps it was alright for me.

A very fateful decision .. and one never to be taken lightly."

End of Interview.