

Tray Ardese story

Interview gathered by by Dr. Scott Ketchum, Sarah Osborne and Delanie Seals Feb 9, 2023, 2pm, Choctaw Community Center conference room. Story compiled with assistance from Judy Allen. Interview Q&A available.

Col. Tray Ardese, USMC retired, said he graduated high school from McAlester, then walked on to play football at Southeastern Oklahoma State University (SOSU). After graduating from SOSU, he went to Officer Candidate Class (OCC) for service in the United States Marine Corps (USMC). "You qualify by passing the physical, mental and moral test, to get a spot at OCC. At the time, the Berlin Wall had just come down and the Soviet Union had just collapsed." Regarding OCC, Ardese said, "Over 1000 people applied for 140 slots, and 68 of us graduated. It was 1989 when I got my slot." He served 26 prior to retirement.

Ardese is the oldest of five children, having one half-brother and three half-sisters. "My mother's side is my Anglo side. Great-grandfather and grandfather were baseball players. My great-grandfather was AAA ball, I think for St. Louis. My grandfather was in the minors before he went to WWII." Ardese said he didn't meet his father until he was fifteen, then they forged a strong relationship. "I was proud of the work ethic of my grandfather I never knew. He worked in the coal mines when he was 12, and he was a golden glove boxer. I had all these things to aspire to and it made me proud to be Choctaw.

"I realized in 9th grade, if I was going to college, it would need to be on an athletic scholarship. We did not have the money to pay my way. I knew I had to pick a sport. My grandfather begged me to pick baseball, but I picked football. I had played baseball before and was a catcher and centerfielder, but I said, 'I think I will pick football.' We don't always realize our elders know better for us. Looking back, I wish I had stayed with baseball. My build, size and speed were more suited to baseball."

On the football team, Ardese played as quarterback on offense and a strong safety on defense. "As I kept growing, I was a linebacker."

Ardese said, "My grandfather was a WWII veteran. I was raised around him a lot and we watched all the movies. I always remembered that there would be a time I would serve the country, I just didn't know when or how."

He said, "When I walked on at SOSU in Durant, I had an academic scholarship for one semester. It was either make the team and keep going, or enlist in the service. I used to tell my Marines all the time – I am just like you and you can do the exact same thing. I could have just as easily been Sgt. or Sgt. Major Ardese instead of Col. Ardese if God had chosen a different path for me. It just so happens this was my path. If you want to get here, get some grit and come on! It is doable for anybody who wants it bad enough."

Ardese feels there was divine intervention in his life from the very beginning. "I had an undiagnosed case of dyslexia. I couldn't read until I was in 4th grade. I was in special education classes until 8th grade. When kids say, 'Look at you, Colonel, and what you have done,' I tell them I am just like everyone else – they can do it too."

Ardese said he was inspired by a then-current culture film to join the military. "There used to be a drive-in theater (in McAlester). That is where I watched the first Top Gun movie. I thought 'Is that possible, - do people actually get paid to do that?'" I remember I was standing on the left side of my old Ford truck. I talked to people about different paths to be a military pilot and

saying I wanted to do that. I remember people laughing at me. Now, I get to go to the same theater and take my youngest son to watch Top Gun II. I said, 'Right there is where I looked at a path that put me here today.'

Everybody in my family had always been Army. I talked to the Army first, and talked to the Navy recruiter. When I talked to the Marine recruiter, he was just a little bit different. They were all good, but the Marine was sharper, had been around the world, had fought. He seemed like a dangerous man. I thought I would like to try some of that," said Ardesse.

"I had gotten my private pilot's license at the SOSU Aviation program. Because it was so tight on selection – I think 150 out of over 1,000 – I tried the summer before to get selected for aviation." Ardesse was finally convinced to put in for Ground in addition to Aviation. "I started out on a ground contract and actually got selected for Aviation after I had been in the Marines for a while."

Ardesse worked as a Heavy Machine Gun Platoon Commander on the ground, and also served as a Weapons System Officer, Forward Air Controller on ground, then went back to the air, then was on two tours with Special Forces in 2005 and 2006 in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said he made 17 moves with his family and about a half dozen by himself. His stateside stations included Quantico; Pensacola; Beaufort, South Carolina; Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; Miramar in San Diego; El Toro in Orange County; and Camp Pendleton, California. He has also been many places outside the United States. "My first deployment outside the US was in Italy in support of the no-fly zone over Bosnia."

When asked if there was a plane he wanted to fly, Ardesse said, "At the time I picked up a naval flight officer spot (like Goose – the back seat), the Marine Corps had A-6's and they had just picked up the F-18Ds. Either of those were the ones I wanted to go into."

He said the first time of flying patrol was, "Kind of surreal. War doesn't necessarily feel like a war. It is just like you are doing your thing. We would have bombs and missiles, and when on the ground we would have body armor on. You would have your rifle and radio and helmet. Military has a way of taking the fun out of everything. Flying is fun, but planning a flight for four hours before the flight; briefing for two hours before the flight; flying for two hours; debriefing for two hours; then coming back and doing a four-hour ground job at the end - before you know it, there is no day left."

Ardesse continued, "I love camping, but it is not so much fun when you are carrying 70 pounds on your back and people are shooting at you. So, I say, the military has a way of taking fun out of everything."

Ardesse said the most difficult part of his USMC career was losing friends. "I stopped counting at 50."

The best part for him was leading Marines. "They are the finest folks on the face of the earth. They pull together in combat. You have never seen a fighting force like the Marine Corps. It is feared throughout the world. There is a sense of unity, *Semper Fidelis – Always Faithful*. The Marines is a brotherhood/sisterhood that transcends your time in the military. It is a lifetime thing."

While serving in Japan, Ardesse was a Lt. Colonel, commanding about 300 Marines and 600 civilians. "I was there over two years as Commander, then came back to the Army War College and got a Masters of Strategy. I was sent to Strat Com in Omaha, Nebraska. I was qualified as a Battle Watch Commander in Nuclear Command and Control."

Ardese said, "There were two phones. One was for administration and if the other one rang, it was either the President, Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or a 4-star General. There were a bunch of communication tools and if you said the wrong thing on the wrong tool, you were going to jail. I was terrified about saying the wrong thing."

Ardese was considering retirement, then was selected for command of Marine Air Group 41. "I was over 3,000 people, six squadrons, half a dozen states spread out all over the country. It was part active duty and part reserves and the most challenging, rewarding time of my life." He was based in Ft. Worth, and retired after that job.

"I had prayed about the right path for a long time. I knew it was time to retire. My last day I got to have a Change of Command. There were hundreds of Marines standing out there, and there was a parade and I got to thank all the folks who had gotten me to where I was. It is never really about us. It is about the folks who help. My head football coach was in the crowd, and my mentors from the Corps, and my buddies from 26 years."

Ardese reflected on his experiences, "When I tell people the path that I went in the Marine Corps. The first thing they tell me is, 'That is not true. That can't happen – that doesn't happen. You don't get to do all those things.' People say, 'You don't get to be a ground platoon commander, be a Weapons Systems Officer (WSO or whizzo) in F-18s, be a ground FAC, do two tours with special forces, then get turned into a C12 pilot as Lt. Col and get to fly; then (this kid who was in special ed up to 8th grade) get a Masters from the US Army War College, then get to be a Battle Watch Commander at Nuclear Command and Control and command 3,000 folks. It's just unbelievable. If I could tell anybody anything, it is don't miss a moment. Be present in what you are doing right now. These are the greatest days. Be present as a professor, be present as a student, be present as a bank vice-president, be present with your family. You don't know how you are going to change somebody's life by how you are pouring into them today. Don't let a day pass."

Ardese said, "It is almost too much to look back upon. I couldn't have planned it. God took me through it to get me here. I wouldn't wish my journey on anybody, but I wouldn't trade it for the world. Because had I not had to go on those crooked paths, I wouldn't be the same man I am today. If you are not present on every piece of the journey, you are going to miss something on the road."