

Tray Ardese

Interviewed by Dr. Scott Ketchum, Sarah Osborne and Delanie Seals Feb 9, 2023, 2pm, Choctaw Community Center conference room.

I am collecting stories with Choctaw Veterans as part of a memory keepers series. I am here with:

Tray Ardese

Col Tray Ardese, USMC retired -- collected by Scott Ketchum

Born 1968 McAlester, then moved east of Wilburton near Panola. Lived in McAlester until I was 17. Graduated from high school and walked on to play football at SOSU. When I graduated from there I went to Officer Candidate Class (OCC) and kept going. 26 years later I was spit out the other end back here. If you qualify you pass physical, mental and moral test, you can get a spot at OCC. At the time, the Berlin Wall had just come down and the Soviet Union had just collapsed.

Over 1000 people applied for 140 slots, and 68 of us graduated. It was 1989 when I got my slot. They basically told us they didn't need any of us. So they didn't care if any of us graduated.

Any instructors who really stuck out in your mind?

Ret MSgt Lamon. At that time he was a Staff Sgt and one of the drill instructors at OCC. He was one of first leaders in the Marine Corps I looked to and saw someone I wanted to emulate. He was super tough on us but you could tell he loved us. He demanded more than you ever could do, no matter how much you did it was never good enough, but when you reached some standard you didn't know what the standard was, he would love on you.

Family?

One ½ bro and three ½ sisters. I was the oldest.

My mother's side is my Anglo side. My great-grandfather and grandfather were baseball players. My Great-grandfather was AAA ball, I think for St Louis. My Grandfather was in minors also before he went to WWII

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 was more suited to baseball.

Football positions:

Quarterback on offense. And a Strong Safety on Defense. As I kept growing, I was a linebacker.

Did you know the military was something you wanted or what led you to the military?

My Grandfather (mother's father) 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.

When I walked on at SOSU in Durant, I had an academic scholarship for one semester. So 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 MSgt 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.

What is your fondest childhood memory?

Just in the 70s, all that was going on in the country, upheaval, Vietnam, inflation going off the gold standard, and just being a country kid and not knowing any of that was going on. Being able to go lay along the creeks, in the woods and shoot 22 rifles as a young man, just carefree times.

There were many days that we would leave when the sun came up and be back at dinner. Did more hunting than fishing.

Stories passed down?

Didn't meet my father until I was about 15, and then we forged a strong relationship. My mother was never married to my father.

Proud of the work ethic of my grandfather who I never knew. He worked in the coal mines since he was 12 years old and he was a golden glove boxer. I had all these things to aspire to, and it made me proud to be Choctaw.

Get Athletic ability from father's side of family?

I grew really fast. I have been about this size since I was 16-17. Evidently my grandfather was a great athlete and passed a little on to me.

Describe yourself?

Going into military?

Divine intervention from the very beginning. I had an undiagnosed case of dyslexia – couldn't read until I was in 4th grade. I was in special ed classes until 8th grade.

When kids say look at you Col and what you've done. I tell them I am just like everyone else - they can do this, too.

I hate to lose.

As I looked at it, it was those coaches along the way (High School football and College Football) who were really surrogate fathers to me. I tell folks that I am standing on the shoulders of giants.

Everybody has people they are standing on their shoulders. Somebody taught you in school, somebody helped you,

When enlisted in military, what was your process for getting into military.

We are an all-volunteer force since the end of the Vietnam war.

(Inspired by then-current culture film to join the military)

I remember I was standing on the left side of my old Ford truck. I talked to people about different paths to do that (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 on being here today.

When you joined did you foresee going into the Marines?

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 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.

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. (Tray was finally convinced to put in for Ground in addition to Aviation).

I started out on ground contract and actually got selected for Aviation after I had been in the Marines for a while.

I did some time as a Heavy Machine Gun Platoon Commander on the ground

Then was a

Weapons System Officer

Went on ground and became forward air controller on ground,

Then went back to the air

Then on the ground 2 tours with special forces in 05 and 06 in Iraq and Afghanistan

Where all been stationed?

Made 17 moves with family and about half a dozen by myself.

List places:

Stateside, I have been at

Quantico

Pensacola

Beaufort, SC

Camp Lejeune, NC

Miramar in San Diego

El Toro in Orange Co

Camp Pendleton

And I have been all over the world on top of that.

First deployment outside US was in Italy in support of no-fly zone over Bosnia.

Then came home for one year rotation. Train six months, deploy six months, train, be gone.

Was there a plane you wanted to fly?

At the time when I picked up a naval flight officer spot, (be 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.

What was the feeling first time fly patrol?

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 on, and when on the ground would have body armor on. And you would have your rifle and radio and your 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.

I love being out and camping and stuff, 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 the fun out of everything.

Where was your longest deployment internationally?

7 months one of those Italy trips and once deployed in Japan during the first push into Iraq in '03.

Basic Training, what was most vivid or fondest memory?

Fondest memory– just the caliber of individuals I was with at OCC. There were people from Harvard, Yale, Penn State.

They were the strongest, fastest, smartest people who were incredibly talented and had phenomenal character.

I was humbled to be there.

How did you find your place with that group and find your own way to shine?

You just always have to be yourself. God makes us the way we are for a reason. I have had the gift of leadership since I was young. Just coming out of 4 years of college football, our coach was doing crossfit and all these things that weren't being done everywhere else.

He trained us hard, by the time I got there (military), I was always gifted to have another 'gear.' Even when I was on the ground and was wounded, I always had another gear. I was like a six speed transmission that usually ran in 4th. I always had a couple more gears.

Coach would tell us, tough times don't last, but tough men do.

Hardest part of Marine career?

Losing friends – I stopped counting at fifty. Escorting widows at funerals.

Escorted one of my young captain's widows (he was killed in Afghanistan). She told me she was going to pass out, I told her to reach down and find another gear. She shook it off, stood up straight and made it.

Best part?

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.

No other organization can take a 150-pound kid out of Stigler, Ok and turn him into a killing machine. And put him with a bunch of other Marines trying to outdo each other.

There is a sense of unity,

Semper Fidelis – Always faithful.

I didn't know I was joining the biggest fraternity in the world. A brotherhood/sisterhood that transcends your time in (the military). It is a lifetime thing.

Do you stay in touch with soldiers under your command?

Yes, I talk to one of them at least every week.

I was Lt Col and commanded about 300 Marines and 600 civilians in Japan. I was there over 2 years as Commander.

Came back to Army War College and got a Masters of Strategy, then was sent to Strat Com in Omaha, Nebraska.

I was qualified as a Battle Watch Commander in nuclear command and control.)

There were two phones – one was for admin 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.

Based in Joint Reserve Base Ft Worth – retired after that.

What was the last day like when you retired?

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, my buddies from 26 years.

When on leave, what type of things did you do?

We did a lot of camping, tasting of local cuisine. What a time in the 90's to be a young 23-24 year old.

Some of favorite places?

Outback of Australia. At one point I was out there with some folks and we were two air hours from medical care. Probably six driving hours from med care. Having a great time camping and stuff.

I like Europe – although I wouldn't want to live there. I like the history in Europe. You can walk up to a building, look at a cornerstone and see it was built in 1295. It is just the way they do their architecture. It is permanent. They built out of concrete and steel and stuff that is going to stay.

When retired, did you know OK was the place you wanted to be?

I had planned to go to Montana, Idaho or Wyoming. I remember talking to a guy who said, 'You are from one of the best states in the country. It is much less expense than Idaho, and has all the goods. It is a little hotter, but not quite as cold.'

My dad had died and I had bought his house and refurbished it. My wife and I talked about where to retire and decided Oklahoma was a natural choice. I could work remote from anywhere.

Readjustment coming into civilian life?

My first year of retirement was the worst year of my life. There was a way things were supposed to work. 26 years – over half my life had been a certain way. The Marine Corps way. When I got out, nothing worked the same. All the rules were different. People weren't on time.

I was just lost the first year. I was working remote and used to be around people. I had to become my own administrative person, my own IT person.

It made me much more appreciative of the people I had worked with. I was always appreciative of them and always thanked them, but this put me at a whole new level of appreciation.

What was one of most humorous event that happened?

One would have been when we decided to go camping in while we were in Italy. We had gotten a weekend off, which was unusual.

One of my buddies had drank a lot the night before. We were razing him that he would not make it. We were going to hike up the Alps to about 7,000-8,000 feet. When he wasn't looking we put a 20- pound rock in his pack. I remember him moaning and hurting. He made it all the way up. He said that may have been the hardest thing he ever had to do. We started making camp and when he opened his pack he found that rock. I would give a month's salary for a picture of his face holding that rock.

Do anything for good luck?

I had a sequence of events. I would pray that the blood of Jesus would cover every body before we stepped off, or before I would get in an airplane I would pray that I would be protected also. Anyone who tells you they are not nervous or a little on edge before they step off to fight, they are not telling the truth.

It was like a football game, when we were getting ready to go out, I would get anxious and have to go to the bathroom one more time.

I didn't necessarily feel nervous or anxious, but it was the same feeling as before a football game.

When the fighting started, you are doing your job. You never rise to the occasion – you fall to the highest level of your training. When people start shooting at you, and when you get scared, it is the fight or flight response. You get tunnel vision and you have to breathe through it and open back up and not focus on one thing or you are going to get killed. You have to keep your head moving to see who is shooting at you. You are about to drop a bomb and someone is shooting a surface to air missile at you.

I didn't consciously know I was nervous, but my bladder always knew. It would tell me it was almost go-time.

Proverbs says, "As a man thinks in his heart, so it is."

What was your best experience?

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."

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 get a masters from the (this kid who was in special ed up to 8th grade) 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.

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.

It has been real easy the past 3 or 4 years just to check out. Since the Coronavirus pandemic it would be easy to check out. We have seen alcohol abuse, suicide rates, everything bad go up. By being present we are able to help somebody change their future.

Chief Batton has been phenomenal. I sit on the Choctaw Ethics Committee so I talk to him every once in a while. He is a phenomenal leader and visionary and has people around him helping shape the path for the next 100 years.

Chief Batton gives mission type orders – the end state is we need to get "here".

Phenomenal people working for Choctaw Nation who are really propelling the Choctaw Nation forward.

Advice for Choctaw people in the future?

Dream big. You can do way more than you ever think you can.

Have faith that there is a plan and God has your best interest at heart, and follow him..

Message to leave family generations?

I tell my 4 sons and daughter, and young men who want to follow me, I tell them to follow me as I follow Christ. I am a mortal man and fail daily, so I ask God to forgive me.

Biggest life lesson learned in Military?

You are one bullet away from being in charge. Always train your replacement.

I am always training a replacement. I am training my son. I train my #2 at work. You are one heartbeat away from them being in charge

A great leader will make everybody around them better.

We get ahead by boosting others up. Then when they get ahead they will put their hand down and pull you up.

Other info about military?

Some of the ground time I did with special forces. They were super athletes, super professionals, some of the most awesome people I ever met.....