



Marine Corps photo



Tom Tangney

Tom Tangney was something of a golden boy during high school — standout football player, track star and president of the student body.

Tangney's life got grittier when he joined the Marines at age 19 and headed to Korea. He served with a regiment that launched mortars. After almost a year, Tangney learned his 21-year-old brother Clarence had died fighting nearby in the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge. Clarence became one of 33 soldiers killed on average each day of the 1,125-day conflict. Tom was pulled out of combat as his family's sole surviving son. He got the job of identifying his brother, who had lost the left side of his head in the blast, as well as his dog tags.

Tangney, now 85 and active in Pendleton's Let 'er Buck VFW Post 922, wrestled with the war experience. PTSD hadn't been invented yet, he said. It was either combat fatigue, shell shock "or you were crazy as hell." He said he "stayed jittery" and drank too much for about six months before he calmed down, married his high school sweetheart, Maxine, and started work at a sawmill. The couple later owned and operated a milk company.

Aney: Listening to you Bob, I was thinking back to our conversation last week, and I was wondering if you could describe what you did up in the air and some of the challenges?

Stangier: Well, when I graduated from flight school, I was in the Class of '44 airmen. I graduated in April of 1944 and then the normal course of events after you graduate and get your wings, you go to a training program called "transition" where you spend six months to a year and a half learning to operate the aircraft you're going to fly, and you acquire 250 to 500 hours flying time. When we graduated from flight school, 100 of us immediately went overseas.

When we got deployed to the outfit we flew in, we were gathered by the aircraft airfield just north of Naples, Italy, and they told us to get in the airplane. We didn't even know how to open the hatch to get in the airplane. Here we were replacing 100 pilots that were retired and we couldn't even fly the airplane. We were not met with open arms.

Flying in formation was a very strenuous thing because you had to concentrate so heavily on your position, and we had to fly in as close as we could so that our bomb pattern would be better. You could fly for 15 or 20 minutes. And then when I was co-pilot, I'd do that, and then the pilot would take over because it was stressful to fly in a tight formation. When I was a young co-pilot, I don't know, it was probably my 10th, 15th mission, we had an engine shot out. It's not working, so the other engine pulls better, so you immediately turn into the dead engine. In your mind, the problem is the left engine, but it's the right engine that's causing all the problems, so a lot of people feather the wrong engine. The pilot was screaming at the top of his lungs 'cause in a B-25, you had to scream. You couldn't hear each other. "It's the engine. It's the right engine." I'm reaching up for the red button. "It's the right engine." We got it feathered and got home. Normal flying is not stressful. It's just like driving a car. In formation, you have to be so alert and so conscious of your position that you're really concentrating.

Aney: How did you stay in touch with your families?

Bob Stangier: We had what they call not email, but V-mail. It was a little piece of paper about six inches wide and eight inches tall and you could write a message on it, and then it was sent to headquarters and they would photograph it and then radio it to the states. And then it would be re-transferred to paper and then they would mail it from the States.

Aney: Do you know how long it took to get one of those to your family?

Stangier: Oh, a week. No more than 10 days.
Aney: J.D., you're at the opposite end of the spectrum, what did you do?

J.D. Lambert: We had telephones — we could directly call our family. We had email. We had more of a permanent station, kind of a permanent home. We had mail come in regularly. The only times we couldn't ... I was there at the front of the Iraqi conflict, and it took awhile for internet and that type of stuff to get setup. But the only times that we couldn't use that over the phone is if someone is hurt or worse, and they would wait 'til next of kin was notified. There was some blackout times. Other than that, we had pretty good communication with all.

Jardine: In Vietnam, I wrote letters. They would be picked up possibly about once a week. Strictly mail.

Tangney: It was about the same way as that in Korea. The only thing is if you wrote a letter to your folks at home, you'd get the answer to that letter in about a month.

Aney: Wow. It's quite a difference as I assume with J.D., you could get answers within the same day.

Lambert: Yeah, there were times. We did send letters and that type of stuff, and we got care packages. The actual mail getting there was still an extended period of time. It was probably a month, but instant gratification of speaking with someone, or hearing their reply was pretty nice.

Aney: Since you're the only one who really had instant communications, was that ever distracting at all thinking about stuff going on on the home front?

Lambert: For me, it was not. I didn't have a lot to worry about at home. My wife had things under control, and that was very nice. I had friends that dealt with some distractions that they were aware of throughout the whole time. You know, this friend would talk to this friend, and her wife did this, and so that was a distraction for some people. In my experience it was more benefit than not.

Aney: Every war had a mission, but when you were actually in-country and fighting your war, was that your mission? Or did you have another, more personal mission? I hear a lot about our country's wider mission isn't what soldiers think about when they're over there. They say they're fighting for the guy next to them. Is there truth to that?

J.D. Lambert: For me, absolutely. On social media, everyone's got their opinions on this and that, but it was really preached to us that our opinion doesn't matter. We're going to do what we're told. I focused on getting home and taking care of my buddies. That's really it.

Jardine: That's it right there: taking care of your buddies. That was our mission, watch this person's back all the time. It was always in the back of my head, "I've only got five months, six days to go." You had to serve one year. I was just counting down the days.

Stangier: With me, it was very impersonal. We're 20,000 feet above the enemy, two miles away, and we never saw them. We didn't bomb personnel, probably no more than a dozen times. We were mostly bombing bridges. The only time it got personal was when they were shooting at you and you could hear the shells exploding and feel them hit the airplane. You couldn't do anything for them. It was pretty impersonal. We could've been delivering gravel. We were in and out.

Tangney: It was probably a little more impersonal than if I had been in a rifle company, or been on machine guns. But with 60mm mortars we were set up a little behind, so we were lobbing over. We were very protective of those riflemen and machine gunners because they were what was keeping the enemy from coming in. When they called for complete support, we put as many rounds up as we possibly could in as little time as we possibly could. I happened to be in charge of the mortar section, so I had always felt a lot of responsibility for all of the men in my unit. If they had a problem, they'd come to me and probably didn't get it solved, but they got it off their chest anyway.

Aney: What was it like coming home after a year of service and readjusting to life in the United States?

Jardine: In '68, '69, there were Vietnam War protests, saying get out of that place. I had some of my Army buddies and Marine buddies saying when they got home people would call them names and call them "baby killer" and that. It never happened to me.

Tangney: When I came home, a lot of people didn't know anything about Korea. It wasn't a war. It was a conflict or a police action and so there was very little written or said about it. When we came home I think one of the things we heard most that hurt the worst was: "We won our war." We had no say in that. It was negotiated with a settlement and it hadn't been a declared war till after I was discharged. Then I became a war veteran. Before that I was a conflict veteran.

Aney: You told me some pretty mind boggling statistics when I was talking to you earlier. How many people died per day in that war?

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— Ron Jardine, on his time in Vietnam