

August 17,2020

Re: VAL-4-BUNO 155460

From: Wendy Lange Sternberg

I am the widow of Tom Lange, USNA Class of 1967, and victim of the OV-10 crash at Coronado Island. My daughter, Keely Lange, who was not yet born at the time of the accident, found this site, blackpony.org, and sent me the Navy Report and the eye witness letter from a man named Jim Hunter now (hopefully) living in Everett,WA. I would appreciate your forwarding this note to Jim and thanking him for his emotional and heartfelt account.

I do have a few memories of my own, of course, but first some background. Tom had just finished jet training in Kingsville, Texas. The Vietnam war was winding down and there were fewer and fewer postings for attack fighters, which Tom preferred to fly over the F-4's. As a last gasp attempt to show his zeal for flying only jobs, he listed last on his "wishlist" OV-10, a Marine photographic jet prop plane never to that date assigned to a Navy jet pilot. I was 22 years old, the daughter of a Navy Captain, surface warfare, and at the time of the accident, we had lived in our newly purchased house in Lemon Grove, California, 3 weeks. Before beginning flight maneuvers, Tom and a fellow Marine graduate from the jet program, went through intensive familiarization with the aircraft. I have a strong memory of the two of them in our living room, denigrating this aircraft – how poorly constructed it was, how poorly engineered it was, how they felt as though they were going to be flying a soda can compared to the old but tight jets they had flown in flight training. That meeting was about a week before Tom's death.

Tom always suffered from sinusitis. He blew his nose dozens of times a day. He always carried a red bandana hanky even though it was against uniform regulations, but he was a bit of a rebel that way. In Texas, he was totally miserable with all the wildflower pollen. He called his condition "post NATAL disorder"! I have no memory of him getting a prescription medication for it, and if he did, it certainly didn't hamper his performance during jet training. Tom was so gung ho flying, I cannot imagine him even reporting to Balboa or a clinic to obtain a stronger medication. At any rate, he never told me about it.

Jim Hunter was correct about how glorious a day that August 7 was. Tom kissed me good by while I lay in bed, and then kissed "the Duck" which is what we called our unborn baby, not even knowing its sex back then. When I saw the corner of a khaki uniform sleeve through the crack of the curtain on my front door, I knew immediately that something was wrong, that a bad thing had happened to Tom. That's the way I had lived for months both in Pensacola and in Kingsville, waiting for a knock on the door.

Here is what was told to me in the week afterward, and what else I came to learn:

He and his instructor (whose name was never revealed to me until I read this report) were on the fourth day of doing different maneuvers. Tom had told me after day two that there was a lot of manual activity involved in flying the OV-10; like being a one-armed paperhanger, he described it. Tom's IQ was a tested 180+ (I've seen the actual test form). He was beyond

brilliant, a true genius, almost unsuited for a mundane life. And his resting heartrate was an incredibly low 33. The man was in partial hibernation even when awake! As a jet pilot, he was physically made for fast thinking and few physical maneuverings, unlike the demands of the OV-10. I was told after his death that his instructor was actually concerned about Tom's adaptation to this prop plane and had mentioned it perhaps THE DAY BEFORE to the command chief.

I was told that witnesses thought the final stall out maneuver was started a bit low, thereby demanding faster physical response from the student to raise the nose, accelerate to maximum, and level the plane. I was told that the instructor, probably panicked, and ejected while still in a dive thereby not permitting his chute to open. However, the thrust from HIS ejection seat levelled the plane for Tom, who I know would never have ejected in a dive because he mentioned it not only to me in jet training but even stressed it to my mother, who remembered him saying it to her! So, then what happened if the plane was level? It was going very fast still, and hit, by his commanding officer's personal oral description to me (only oral and once, though I'm sure he would have permitted me more visits if I had been so inclined) a 3' high sand dune and flipped over breaking apart. I was reassured that Tom died instantly, of a broken neck, with nary a scratch on him (in case I wanted to view his body or have an open casket funeral, neither of which I wanted). Somehow, this commanding officer thought I wouldn't be the least bit outraged that a low mound of sand was sufficient to kill my husband, but then he didn't know that I had heard Tom complain about the construction inadequacies of the aircraft.

But why didn't Tom eject when the plane was level? If he was so smart, so well trained in almost instantaneous processing, then why didn't he pull the D ring between his legs and eject? He must have known that the ejection seat contained a 0' height parachute since he had just gone through ejection seat qualifications at Miramar NAS. THE OV-10 DID NOT HAVE A D RING EJECTION SEAT HANDLE, only a face curtain method of ejection. Tom Lange FAILED the ejection seat qualification because his arms were too short to reach the D ring between his legs! He had ALWAYS practiced pulling the face curtain. Men in the ready room at both training bases ritually practiced their preferred method of ejection again and again, until it was unconscious and second nature to them. What if Tom had taken the split second to reach IN THE WRONG DIRECTION when assessing his opportunity to eject? That is all the time he would have had before hitting the 3' high sand mound.

The medical doctor assigned to Tom's case shared this information with me. I was assigned some lovely Lieutenant to help me thread through all the estate issues and funeral preparations, but I was never even offered any assistance from JAG Corps. Unfortunately, my father's complete loyalty to the Navy and his satisfaction with the thoroughness of the investigation prevented him from suggesting either then, or even a year later, any legal consultation.

So, despite Jim Hunter's emotional and really quite accurate memory of the events taking place at the time of the crash, what he did not know, nor did anyone ever put all the facts together for the investigation, find out, is that a Navy jet pilot, a first and I believe EVER selection for the

OV-10, who was not physically comfortable with the mechanics of flying a prop aircraft and whose very experienced instructor knew it, had not qualified for the only mechanism for ejection from that aircraft, and was still permitted to fly it. Medication was their cover up, which until today, I never even knew about.

Seven years after the event, while finishing my college degree at the University of Central Florida, I took a law course. I had a flash of insight about the crash and consulted my law professor. He felt it was an excellent case to take against the Us Navy, not normally something that is done lightly or easily, but, alas, the statute of limitations on the suit had JUST expired!

For thirty-six years I have been married to an Army vet, a bemedaled Special Forces Green Beret who is now 100% disabled from walking through the jungle sprayed with Agent Orange. The daughter I had with Tom Lange, with an "almost" as brilliant I.Q., is now a top analyst with the Federal government's intelligence service. I love the Navy, and most of my lifetime of memories from being a Navy Junior and a Navy wife are simply wonderful. But the Navy did wrong by Thomas Paul Lange.