

MEMBERS OF VMM-266 HONOR A USMC WOUNDED WARRIOR

By Colonel Paula Penson



Col Paula Penson, DCANG, and
CPL Marcus Dandrea, USMC,
at Joint Base Andrews Air Show,
18 May 2012

I should not have been surprised. Both my daughters married Marines. I should have known better. But, still, I was surprised and humbled by the Marines on 18 May 2012 at the Andrews Air Show.

I was amazed by the unconditional and spontaneous reaction by the members of the VMM-266 Osprey flight crew from MCAS New River, Jacksonville, North Carolina, at the Joint Base Andrews Open House on 18 May 2012. Of course I've known that Marines are a very special breed who honor their own--especially a Marine who lost both legs while serving in Afghanistan, but I had never seen it first hand before that day.

Corporal Marcus Dandrea, along with his wife (CPL Vicky Dandrea, USMC) and their two sons were my guests at the Open House. I had met CPL Dandrea and his second son, Micah, at Bethesda Medical Center about a month ago and thought he and his family might enjoy the air show.



CPL Marcus Dandrea and his son, Micah, named
after the Navy Corpsman who saved his life in Afghanistan.

Who can resist the unconditional joy and love
these two people (father and son) display to the world?
Marcus is a true inspiration to all who see and talk to him.

We spent hours walking around the various aircraft and displays and watching the air show overhead. At 1645 hours, it was time to head to the car. Marcus noticed the Osprey and said he had always hoped to become an Osprey pilot someday – before the IED in the mountains of Afghanistan removed both his legs from the knees down. CPL Dandrea was a member of the 2D Recon Battalion at the time of the explosion.

As we approached the aircraft, I noticed it was all buttoned up; back end hatch already secured. The crew members noticed Marcus as he wheeled near them. I said, “Gentlemen! This is Corporal Marcus Dandrea, United States Marine, serving his country.” All 19 members of the crew gathered around him to ask him questions and to hear his story.

Before I knew it, without being asked, the crew had “unbuttoned” the Osprey, allowing Marcus to roll the wheelchair inside and ask all the questions he wanted. The crew helped him out of his chair so that he could “crawl” into the cockpit and make his way into the co-pilot’s seat.



Marcus and Micah at the doorway to the Osprey cockpit with DJ at the controls with his M16!

The members of the VMM-266 never hurried away; they never seemed bothered that it was past “quitting time.” One of the crew members took an aircraft poster and 19 members silently made their way over to it, one at a time, to sign the poster to give to Marcus.

Three times a security guard came by to try to hurry us away and all three times they were sent away by the Aircraft Commander with just the quiet words, “wounded warrior.” (Kudos to the Air Force security guards, by the way, for simply moving away without any questions.)

As I watched Marcus crawl all over the Osprey and climb into the co-pilot’s seat, I could barely choke out the words, “You made his day.” The aircraft commander quietly replied, “Ma’am. He made ours.” That was so evidently true as we spent 45 minutes with this crew. At least four members asked to have pictures taken with their cameras, and each member hung patiently on Marcus’ every word and answered all his questions.

This was one of the most awe-inspired days of my 38 years of military life. I couldn’t wait to call my daughter, married to a Marine, and the FRO to VMM-365 at MCAS New River, and tell her all about it.

Did I happen to mention I was impressed and humbled by the members of the crew of VMM-266 that day? Well done! Ooh-rah! Marines! Ooh-rah! You made **MY** day!

I was proud to stand in your presence and just watch you graciously care for your own.



All 19 crew members of VMM-266 insisted on posing for a photo with CPL Dandrea and his sons.



VMM-266 members ask questions.



CPL Marcus Dandrea gets to “fly” the Osprey.



Corporals Vicky and Marcus Dandrea with members of the VMM-266th Osprey aircraft crew.

The silent hero of this story is CPL Vicky Dandrea, a US Marine in her own right, and spouse to this wounded warrior. She quietly stands in the background, carrying diaper bags, pushing strollers, and letting Marcus hang on to the stroller handle when his arms get tired of pushing. Vicky is one of the strongest women I've ever had the pleasure to meet. ... literally and figuratively. She man-handled that wheelchair in and out of the family SUV, loaded the baby stroller, diaper bag and shopping bag, and helped Marcus into his seat, buckled in the children and then prepared to drive her precious cargo home.

I've always known that military wives were a special breed too – required to endure much with little recognition. Vicky carries the double burden, and deserves a double dose of recognition – as a Marine herself and Marine spouse -- caring for her special family. Ooh-rah, Vicky! “Semper Fi” (*always faithful*) never meant so much to me until I met **YOU!**



Corporals Vicky and Marcus Dandrea pose outside the Distinguished Visitor tent.



Corporal Marcus Dandrea gets to “fly” the Osprey!



Marcus and Micah – inseparable dynamic duo!

Micah is happiest when he rides inside the seatbelt on his “Dada’s” lap!