

# Air traffic controllers reach outside airspace to help save a Marine

CPL. DAVID H. COE  
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

During the last week of January, a winter storm dropped snow on much of Eastern North Carolina. The storm closed roads, schools and airports, and made saving the life of an injured Marine much more difficult.

On the evening of Jan. 25, a Camp Lejeune Marine fell through a plate glass window, nearly cutting off his left arm and severely lacerating an artery in his neck. Medical technicians at Camp Lejeune stabilized the Marine, however, his injuries were so serious that the Marine Transport Squadron 1 Pedro search and rescue crew on duty at that time was called for medical assistance.

The Pedro crew launched from Cherry Point shortly after receiving the medical call and headed to the Camp Lejeune Naval Hospital, where they were to pick up the Marine then fly him to Duke University Hospital in Durham, N.C.

Soon, problems began to arise.

While waiting for the injured Marine at Camp Lejeune, the helicopter started approaching a low-fuel level. Knowing that the hurt Marine's life may be in danger, the Pedro crew quickly went airborne to contact the air traffic control center at Cherry Point and explain that they would not have enough fuel to complete the flight to Duke after picking up the Marine.

Cherry Point approach control was the only control center open between the South Carolina and Virginia borders due to the heavy amount of snow North Carolina

had received. This unit is responsible for the airspace within approximately 40 miles of MCAS Cherry Point from ground level to as high as 18,000 feet. When the situation appeared grim for the injured Marine and Pedro crew, approach control stepped in to help.

That evening, Air Traffic Control was undermanned because of the air station-wide weather closing. Only Daniel J. Nowak, facility watch supervisor; Velvet K. Nichols, air traffic control supervisor; SSgt. Paul J. Pillow, control tower supervisor; SSgt. Aaron Buhler, radar controller and Cpl. Brandon Koon, radar approach controller had volunteered for duty. The ATC facility is normally staffed by 13 controllers.

The Pedro crew again landed at Camp Lejeune to pick up the injured Marine. When they were once more in the air, the crew reported they were in disbelief at what the Cherry Point ATC had done.

The ATC workers had quickly contacted all available agencies between Cherry Point and Raleigh to locate an open airport with fuel for the helicopter. They accomplished this feat by calling every general aviation airport from the air station to Duke, and maintained contact with the Pedro crew to verify the type of fuel the helicopter needed.

"Once we radioed Velvet again we were absolutely amazed at all they had accomplished," said Capt. Shane Hill, VMR-1 pilot. "In 10 to 15 minutes the ATC crew was able to learn that every airport in North Carolina had available fuel, and had even lined up three airports with crews

standing by to refuel us depending on the route we chose. In addition to the fuel situation, ATC had updated all possible weather information and gotten our VFR and IFR clearances approved for the flight path of our choice."

After first stopping to refuel and pick up more medical supplies at Cherry Point, the Pedro crew began their flight to Duke. And as Hill reported, the efforts of the three Cherry Point ATC workers did not cease.

"Once we were enroute to Duke, Velvet took over and again began to amaze us with her efforts," said Hill.

"She continued to provide weather updates, filed our scheduled route, spoke with all controllers between Cherry Point and Duke and helped guide us on our way."

Several factors made coordinating this mission difficult, according to Pillow, air traffic control crew chief.

"For us the hardest part about this whole situation was the coordination," said Pillow. "We were trying to determine the best course of action to take while communicating information from our installation, Pedro and all the other facili-

ties involved. The time constraints we were dealing with were difficult."

As the Pedro crew flew toward Duke, they eventually left Cherry Point air space and entered the Washington Center, N.C., controlled area.

Due to the altitude the helicopter was flying at, the crew was unable to make verbal contact with Washington Center, so Nichols cleared the path for the Pedro crew by calling the controllers and alerting them of the oncoming aircraft and critical situation. As she did this, Nichols continued to maintain contact with the Pedro crew and ease their concerns.

"There is nothing more relaxing to a pilot than speaking with a calm, experienced and confident controller," added Hill. "The ATC crew on duty that evening went far above and beyond the call of duty



Control tower supervisor SSgt. Paul J. Pillow (far left) establishes separations between aircraft, provides sequencing to the airport, and gives traffic advisories as air traffic controller Velvet Nichols, radar controller SSgt. Aaron Buhler and facility watch supervisor Daniel J. Nowak (far right) look on.

Cpl. David H. Coe

and was instrumental in saving a Marine's life."

To some, this action might seem like more than was necessary for the ATC crew. But as Nowak reported, this level of service is nothing new to the Cherry Point air traffic control crew he supervises.

"When I started in this business, I had good teachers and instructors," said Nowak. "You learn early that you can stay within the written guidelines or go the extra mile and do more than is basically required. I see that in this group and that's what we teach to our young Marines here."

The efforts of the Pedro and ATC crews paid off, and the Marine was successfully treated and is expected to regain full use of his arm.