

ATC Marine guides Harrier down from dark skies safely

By Cpl. N.W. Huertas | 10th Marine Regiment | February 1, 2016



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Cpl. Justin McDaniel accepts the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal during an award ceremony at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., Dec. 3, 2015. McDaniel was presented the award for his quick and precise problem solving skills that led to the safe landing of an AV-8B Harrier that had experienced navigational equipment failure. His actions on Dec. 1, 2015, were the product of McDaniel's extensive training and well-earned confidence in his own skills as an air traffic controller. (U.S. Marine Corps Photo By Cpl. N.W. Huertas/Released)



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Cpl. Justin McDaniel accepts the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal from Lt. Col. Jeremy Gettings during an award ceremony at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., Dec. 3, 2015. McDaniel was presented the award for his quick and precise problem solving skills that led to the safe landing of an AV-8B Harrier that had experienced navigational equipment failure. His actions on Dec. 1, 2015, were the product of McDaniel's extensive training and well-earned confidence in his skills as an air traffic controller. Gettings is the commanding officer of Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron. (U.S. Marine Corps Photo By Cpl. N.W. Huertas/Released)



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Cpl. Justin McDaniel assists a pilot over the radio with navigation at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., Dec. 3, 2015. McDaniel was presented the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal for his quick and precise problem solving skills that led to the safe landing of an AV-8B Harrier that had experienced navigational equipment failure. His actions on Dec. 1, 2015, were the product of McDaniel's extensive training and well-earned confidence in his own skills as an air traffic controller. (U.S. Marine Corps Photo By Cpl. N.W. Huertas/Released)

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION CHERRY POINT, N.C.

Hunched forward in the dark radar room of Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point's air traffic control, Cpl. Justin McDaniel focused on the small greenish symbol displayed on his radar screen and listened carefully to the disembodied voice in his headset. The voice calmly reached through miles of nighttime darkness from the tight cockpit of a 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing AV-8B Harrier, and the pilot needed help.

Returning from a mission on Dec. 1, 2015, the pilot had suddenly found himself without one of the primary features necessary for a safe return to the air station – his Harrier's navigation system was "inop" – a problem that was compounded by low visibility due to weather and lack of daylight. He was, for all practical purposes, flying blind.

This was just the sort of situation that pilots and air traffic controllers constantly train for, and one of the reasons that the two share a special relationship. The pilot's first job is to fly the airplane, regardless of the situation. The controller's first job is to help keep pilots safe in the air, whether it is by keeping them spaced appropriately apart to avoid collisions, or by guiding them through situations where the extra set of electronic eyes can make an important, even critical, difference.

According to Gunnery Sgt. Louie Cruz, the air traffic control radar chief with Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, the pilot had declared a state of emergency and required ATC guidance to safely land the aircraft. McDaniel's actions on Dec. 1 were the product of extensive training and confidence in his own skills.

Like his fellow air traffic controllers, McDaniel communicates with civilian and military pilots as they navigate through Cherry Point's 9, 145 square miles of airspace. Additionally, he provides verbal guidance to pilots to assist with a safe landing during training and emergency landing procedures. McDaniel is also responsible for training junior Marines on methods and procedures they must know as basic air traffic controllers.

"I joined the Marine Corps to deploy and help as many people as I can," said McDaniel. "I have not yet had the opportunity to deploy, but I have been given the opportunity to assist many Marines with their training and during times of distress."

According to Cruz, McDaniel has aided pilots in landing in both inclement weather conditions and during equipment failure. On Dec. 3 he was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal for his quick and precise problem solving skills that led to the safe landing of the AV-8B Harrier that had experienced navigational equipment failure on Dec. 1.

"Cpl. McDaniel took on the responsibility in a calm, but precise manner," said Cruz. "His relaxed tone while handling the situation helped the pilot make calm and logical decisions without panicking and diverting from protocol. The pilot had experienced a blackout of his navigational equipment under low visibility and relied on McDaniel's turn-by-turn directions to guide him directly over the runway to a safe landing."

If an air traffic control Marine fails, potentially hundreds of lives could be on the line. Confidence in the extensive training the Marines receive and the dedication to their practice are traits McDaniel has maintained and shared with his fellow Marines, said Cruz.

"The Marine Corps has allowed me to give back to others and live up to the beliefs I carry," explained McDaniel. "My grandfather taught me to never be afraid to give the shirt off my back to someone and walk away. He is the biggest role model in my life and I carry his teachings with me in what I do both in and out of the Marine Corps."

As McDaniel's active duty service comes to an end later this year, he has applied to continue assisting U.S. military and civilian air crews as a contracted civilian air traffic controller. His uniform may change, but McDaniel will still be one of the calm voices local aviators rely on when they need a guiding hand.