

“A Marine Came For Me”

David J. Danelo

On 30 August, the day after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, shattered two levees, and flooded New Orleans, a local television station ran footage of a Marine on a jet ski zipping through the floodwaters guiding rescue boats to safe evacuation routes. Corporal Ross Craft, a 21-year-old fire team leader with Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines, also had a personal mission. His aunt and uncle, Diane and Richard Angelico, were missing.

Craft has black hair, brown eyes, and an aggressive Cajun drawl. His maternal grandfather, Edmond Dupre, and uncle, Matthew Dupre, both served in the 2nd Marine Division. Craft describes himself as “a lousy garrison Marine, but good in the field.”

After his 2002 high school graduation, Craft enlisted in the Corps, maintaining the family tradition of serving in the 2ndMarDiv. Although he performed well in training and combat, a drunk and disorderly incident in 2003 prevented him from sewing on corporal stripes until this past year.

When Katrina hit, Craft was on leave preparing for his second deployment to Iraq. Having served with Task Force Tarawa in 2003 and seen action in Afghanistan and the Philippines, he had been relaxing prior to another foray into a hostile fire zone. As it turned out, his fourth combat tour was in New Orleans, not Fallujah.

During the response to Katrina, the Joint Operations Command assigned the Louisiana Air National Guard security and rescue duties. The CO, Lieutenant Colonel Scott Tyler, and his deputy, Major Rick Pierce, heard about Craft’s use of his jet ski to find rescue routes and were impressed with his improvisational skills. They told the corporal they would like to “use him again” if the situation called for it.

While Craft was looking for his Uncle Richard and Aunt Diane, the Angelicos, along with their neighbor, Charmaine Knickmeyer, were cut off from civilization. Because Diane and Charmaine were nurses, they stayed behind during the initial hurricane evacuation. Also staying back was a neighbor whom Charmaine knew only as Harry who had recently had a stroke. He lived with two parakeets.

After the hurricane, Charmaine, a widowed 52-year-old grandmother with white hair and a placid face, tried to walk to the hospital to report for duty. While wading through the water, she fell into a storm drain and was sucked under. She survived, but the collision with the drain left her with cracked ribs and a bruised face. Devastated by her injuries and the thought of leaving her five small dogs, Charmaine could not be persuaded to leave her home.

On Thursday, 1 September, the Angelicos were picked up by an Army helicopter at Mercy Hospital and dropped off at a chaotic refugee center west of New Orleans. The scene of people commandeering buses, screaming at authorities, and crying hysterically for family members left an indelible impression on Richard. “It was like the escape from Saigon,” he said.

Diane Angelico’s cell phone had not worked for days. Frantic, she and Richard took it apart, wiped it dry, reassembled it, and dialed their relatives. Corporal Craft answered. He told his aunt and uncle to stay put and wait, that his father would be there soon. An hour later, Craft’s father arrived with a bucket of ice water and a case of beer. “I have never been happier in my life,” Richard said.

Craft had been watching the news reports. After Diane’s phone call, he decided he should go back into the city. He donned his green digital camouflage utilities, grabbed an AR-15, the civilian version of the M-16 service rifle, and a 9-mm pistol from the family gun cabinet, and stocked necessary military supplies for a long mission, including a Rhino GPS.

He linked up with his father and the Angelicos outside of New Orleans. After tearful embraces, Craft looked around. “Where are the dogs?” It seems the Angelico’s, like Charmaine, had five dogs.

“We couldn’t bring them. Charmaine and Harry were also left behind,” Richard said.

The young corporal didn’t blink. “That’s okay, Uncle Richard. I’ll go get them,” he said.

Richard was dumbfounded. “I don’t think you can get back in there,” he said.

“I’ve been studying my GPS for a couple of hours and checking some maps. I think I know a way in and out,” Craft said.

Craft drove his truck to Zephyr Field, a minor league baseball stadium that had been converted into a staging area for rescue operations. He met with the Louisiana Air Guard’s Tyler, Pierce, and a first sergeant, Pat McDonald, to discuss logistics for his mission to rescue Charmaine, Harry, and the dogs.

After Craft arrived at Zephyr Field, civilian rescue helicopters attempting to evacuate Charity Hospital – where Diane Angelico worked– began taking gunfire from adjoining buildings and from looters on the streets below.

Tyler asked Craft if he could get airborne and “take out” those shooting at the choppers.

“If I can get a stable shooting platform,” Craft replied.

Pierce diverted a Blackhawk helicopter for Craft into Zephyr Field, which dropped Craft on the roof of the Tulane University Hospital parking garage. He removed the door from a civilian helicopter and loosened the harness straps from the passenger seat so he could stand on the skid. The bird took off, Corporal Craft, USMC, on airborne patrol. Over the next hour, he took sporadic incoming, and returned fire, with unknown results. But his presence seemed to quell the shooting.

The next morning, Friday, 2 September, the Tulane hospital was evacuated. Craft and an Air Force emergency medical technician directed the landing and takeoff of the helicopters. Craft was the last person to leave the building, boarding an Army Chinook helicopter after ensuring no one had been left behind. The helicopter dropped Craft off at the refugee center, which was about two miles from Zephyr Field. He headed back to base on foot.

As Craft neared Zephyr Field, a vehicle carrying a squad of Alabama State constables pulled over. From the Houston Drug Enforcement Agency to the Georgia Wildlife and Fisheries, anyone with a badge and a gun had begun converging on New Orleans to help restore law and order. Compared to post-Katrina New Orleans, a frontier town like Dodge City was Pleasantville.

The senior Alabama constable introduced himself to Craft as Jamie. Like many out-of-state law enforcement officials, Jamie had arrived in New Orleans and promptly gotten lost. Jumping into the vehicle with a forlorn chocolate Labrador retriever he had picked up along the way, Craft offered to guide the Alabama crew to Zephyr Field. As they swapped stories, Craft asked the men if they wanted to join his team, which at the moment consisted of Craft himself and the bedraggled Lab. Sure, they said.

With a squad suddenly under his command, Craft began developing his scheme of maneuver for finding Charmaine, Harry, and the pooches. At dusk, Craft and Jamie departed Zephyr Field in the truck he had left there the day before to recon access routes into the Angelico's neighborhood. They made it to the New Orleans Convention Center and encountered a crowd of desperate and angry men, women, and children.

The crowd began beating on the truck. "Get out! Get out and help us!"

After wending their way through the crowd, Craft and Jamie finished their survey of the terrain and completed the route analysis. The next morning, they briefed their improvised squad and First Sergeant McDonald of the National Guard on their plan.

With a truck and a boat trailer, the team weaved south through the dry sections of New Orleans, then east down cobblestone streets. They reached the water's edge and launched the boat.

The water in New Orleans was ten times as fetid as the adjacent bayou. Within it, sewage and gasoline mixed with various forms of debris, while the oddly sweet stench of decomposing human remains hung over it. During the night the water had receded, leaving it too shallow to float the boat. Craft and his team waded several blocks, dragging the boat behind them. When the water deepened, they climbed in and rowed towards the Angelico's neighborhood.

Charmaine Knickmeyer was losing hope. Then she looked around the corner of her house and saw a United States Marine sitting in a boat amid four Alabama State constables.

"He looked at me and said: 'I've come for you, Harry, and the dogs.' He said it like it was the most normal thing in the world for him to be doing. He was so calm about it," Charmaine said.

Craft and the troopers loaded Charmaine, Harry, her five pets, and his two parakeets in Richard Angelico's green Chevy Z-71 truck, which was parked next to the house. Then Craft retrieved valuables from the Angelico house. Next they loaded the Angelico's five dogs into Richard's truck. A stray dog wandered up, so they loaded it, too. The truck's passengers now included Charmaine, Harry, eleven dogs, two parakeets, and a Marine armed to the teeth.

Charmaine did not understand why they were in the truck. "How are we planning to get out of here?" she asked.

"The water's gone down a bit. I think I can drive us over to the railroad tracks and then out from there," Craft said.

"Ross, I don't think we can do this," Charmaine said.

Craft's response was calm, polite and decisive. "Don't worry, ma'am. I'm trained. I can do it."

Earlier, as they entered the neighborhood, Craft and the troopers saw several families begging for food and water. Now, as they were leaving, Craft's ad hoc squad waved down a Blackhawk and gestured for the crew chief to dump a case of MREs and bottled water on the levee. He missed, and the pallets plunged into the bayou. Craft jumped in and swam out to the pallets, pulling the MREs and water over and stacking them on the levee for the parched and hungry men, women, and children.

Craft waved goodbye to his Alabama comrades, who left the neighborhood on the boat. Then, the corporal did precisely what he had planned to do. He used the railroad tracks and levee service roads to escape from the flood zone. Adjacent to the railroad was a flooded cemetery; coffins and caskets floated by in the water as Craft drove on with his entourage to safety.

The Angelicos moved in with the Craft family while Harry joined relatives of his own. Charmaine Knickmeyer flew out to her daughter's home in Maine. Before she left, she said this:

"Ross Craft risked his life for two people and a bunch of animals he had never met. While other Americans were terrorizing us, Ross saved us. While the mayor was crying, and the rescuers were taking their time, a Marine came for me. If this is the kind of person a Marine is, the United States of America is in very good shape."

Mr. Danelo, a freelance writer, is a 1998 graduate of the Naval Academy and a former Marine captain who served in Iraq.

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DAVID J. DANALO

The odyssey of Marine Corporal Ross Craft (center) began with his hunt to find his aunt and uncle, Diane and Richard Angelico, who were missing in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

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DAVID J. DANALO

The area around Tulane University Hospital remained flooded five days after Craft flew an airborne patrol on the night of 1 September. The next morning, he was the last person to leave the hospital when it was evacuated.

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U.S. MARINE CORPS (BRANDON M. GALE)

Lance Corporal Noah G. Dunagan, Marine Corps Air Station New River combat videographer, helps a child onto the ramp of a CH-53E Super Stallion during an evacuation of New Orleans residents on 2 September.