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I Am a Navy Corpsman

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[December 2014 \(17\)](#)

[November 2014 \(11\)](#)

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[September 2014 \(20\)](#)

Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos, Marine Aircraft Group 24, was recently selected as Pacific Fleet's "Hero of the Fleet" for his actions in combat three times — twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy)

A 16-year-old picks up a magazine and flips through the glossy pages. He stops at an article about a heroic sailor — a Navy corpsman — who ran through a minefield to save the Marines he served with during Operation Desert Storm.

For some people, the story would be something they forget about as quickly as they read it – just another news article. But for one boy growing up in Guam, it was the catalyst to his career.

Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos enlisted in the Navy a year after reading that article and moved to the United States in 1999 to begin what is now a 13-year life in the Navy. The corpsman, who is stationed with [Marine Aircraft Group \(MAG\) 24](#) at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, is a Purple Heart recipient and was recently selected as [Pacific Fleet Sea Sailor of the Year](#).

Seeking Adventure

Santos, the youngest of nine children, was the only one of his siblings to join the military and did so because he craved something different from his life on the island nation of Guam.



Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos poses with his family next to the ocean. The heroic story of a Navy corpsman during Operation Desert Storm inspired Santos to enlist in the Navy become a corpsman. (Photo courtesy of Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos)

“I needed a change of life,” Santos said. “I needed better job opportunities. I wanted to grow up. (Life in Guam) was simple. It was laid back. It was the same old stuff. Just a slow life style — a beach life style. But I wanted more adventure.”

While the Navy would provide the adventure he was seeking, he knew the job of Navy hospital corpsman would provide something greater than adventure.

“I wanted to help people,” Santos said. “I wanted to save lives. I thought about how much I wanted to do a job like

that.”

From the Battlefield

Throughout his 13-year career he would find himself deployed beside Marines in combat three different times – twice in Iraq and once in Afghanistan. In 2004, while deployed to Fallujah he earned his Purple Heart.

“I received wounds and shrapnel to my hand and wrist on March 26, 2004 during an ambush in a firefight in Fallujah on the streets,” Santos said.

But it was later that same year when Santos played a vital role in doing what he became a corpsman to do – save lives.

“On Sept. 6, 2004, a large convoy got hit by a vehicle-borne IED (improvised explosive device),” Santos said. “It hit the second truck, which had the platoon commander, about 14 Marines and 12 Iraqi National Guard. The IED hit the truck and we had a mass casualty. We had about 10 mortally wounded and the rest of the guys were just scattered throughout the zone.”

Santos would be the only corpsman on-scene for the first ten minutes after the attack.

“I was in the third truck,” Santos said. “We pulled up to the scene. We started pulling our guys out. We pulled a bunch of guys out and set up a casualty collection point. We went to work. We were running out of supplies. I was using guys’ individual first aid kits and a lot of tourniquets.”

August 2014 (14)

July 2014 (13)

June 2014 (8)

May 2014 (11)

April 2014 (9)

March 2014 (14)

February 2014 (7)

January 2014 (7)

December 2013 (7)

November 2013 (12)

October 2013 (7)

September 2013 (14)

August 2013 (13)

July 2013 (11)

June 2013 (22)

May 2013 (15)

April 2013 (14)

March 2013 (14)

February 2013 (14)

January 2013 (12)

December 2012 (11)

November 2012 (11)

October 2012 (7)

September 2012 (9)

August 2012 (12)

July 2012 (13)

June 2012 (17)

May 2012 (22)

April 2012 (14)

March 2012 (13)

February 2012 (14)

January 2012 (13)

December 2011 (13)

November 2011 (20)

October 2011 (22)

September 2011 (12)

August 2011 (16)

July 2011 (10)

Soon, other medical personnel arrived to assist and bring more supplies.

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“We saved a lot of guys that day, and unfortunately a lot of Marines didn’t make it,” Santos said. “A lot of close friends were lost.”

For Santos, the respect he has earned from serving beside his Marine brethren isn’t something he takes lightly.

“It’s a great honor to be trusted like that,” Santos said. “It’s something that’s earned from your guys and being there. It’s earned through trust.”

Mother, Mother Ocean

Outside of serving as a corpsman, Santos has another passion — the ocean. Growing up in Guam gave Santos a unique connection to the blue, salty waters that surround his childhood home, and the place he now calls home — Hawaii.

“Growing up around the ocean, it’s everything,” Santos said. “It’s a food source. It’s fun. It’s my happiness.”

His love of the ocean isn’t something he keeps to himself.

“I take guys out and teach them how to surf,” Santos said. “I make them understand what surfing is all about and about the ocean. I coach paddling for beginners and kids.”



Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos, Marine Aircraft Group 24, catches a wave in Hawaii. Santos finds respite from his busy life as a corpsman through surfing and spending time at the beach. (Photo courtesy of Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos)

Success and Respect

In order to be successful as a Navy corpsman, you have to be a leader — someone who can be trusted.

“HM1 Santos is a sailor’s-sailor,” said Chief Hospital Corpsman Frank Dominguez, lead chief petty officer for MAG-24. “He shows pride in everything that he does. He leads from the front and by example. Part of what makes him a great corpsman is how he treats other. He makes everyone feel like they are family. He is well respected by both Marines and sailors.”

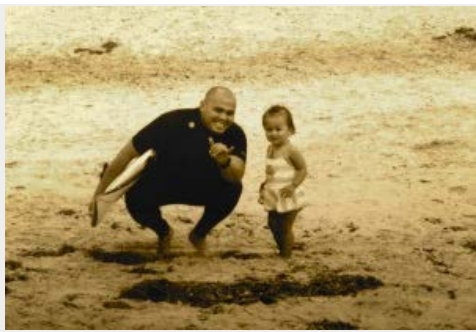
The sentiment is shared by the Marines he has deployed beside.

“Doc Santos is one of the best Navy corpsmen I’ve had the pleasure of serving with,” said Marine Staff Sgt. Joshua Noel, [CH-53E](#) crew chief/flightline quality assurance representative. “He always maintains a very high level of professionalism, while at the same time has a very approachable demeanor. No matter how busy he was, he would always take the time to follow-up with his patients and ensure they were receiving the care they needed.”

The Extra Mile

Part of the reason some choose careers in the medical field is because of their unrelenting willingness to help those in need. This was the case when some Marines in Santos’ unit showed signs of suicidal ideation.

“Doc Santos did an incredible job handling those situations,” said Noel. “I feel he went above and beyond with



Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos, who grew up in Guam, has a unique love of the ocean. He teaches others to surf and paddle board from his current duty station at Marine Corps Base Hawaii. (Photo courtesy of Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Joseph Santos)

those Marines. As those Marines were getting separated from the unit and sent back to the States, Doc Santos gave incredible amounts of his personal time to see to it that they left Afghanistan on as much of a positive note as possible.”

There were no “working hours” for Santos as he stayed committed to his Marines — it was 24-hour responsibility.

“He gave up his personal space, privacy and time by allowing them to bunk above him during their last days in

country,” Noel said. “This enabled him to be able to be there for them at a moment’s notice and I believe it showed those Marines that there are people who care and will go the extra mile for them.”

Love of the Job

But for Santos, this is the precise reason he continues to serve. The relationships he has forged are the reasons he loves being a Navy corpsman.

“It’s the camaraderie we develop,” Santos said. “It’s the friendship and the brotherhood.”

If he had it his way, his life would always be the Navy. But what else would you expect from someone who lives to serve others?

“If I can promote and stay in longer I would,” Santos said. “I’d definitely do this for my entire life.”

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