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'Hero flight' brought wounded soldier home to Yonkers to see family

BY SHAWN COHEN • SPCOHEN@LOHUD.COM • SEPTEMBER 7, 2010

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HARRISON — They call it the "hero flight."

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On Monday, the "hero" was Christian Tolentino of Yonkers, an Army private first class who hobbled onto a single-engine plane at Westchester County Airport with the aid of a cane and his older brother, Johnny.

Their parents kissed their cheeks before pilot Andre Bohy shut the door. He took off at 4 p.m. headed to Washington so Christian Tolentino could get further treatment at Walter Reed Army Medical Center for injuries he suffered in an explosion in Afghanistan.

"I'll call you later," their father, Pedro Tolentino, shouted from the runway as he waved goodbye.

The flight marked the end of a joyous Labor Day weekend for the Tolentino family, who got to spend the holiday together at home in Yonkers thanks to Veterans Airlift Command, a national network of volunteer pilots who provide free transportation to wounded service personnel, veterans and their families.

"Just having the whole family there, it brought back memories of the old days, like Christmas," said the father, a custodian at Sleepy Hollow High School, reflecting on their Sunday barbecue where they served specialties of their native Dominican Republic.

The organization has provided hundreds of flights since forming in 2006.

Bohy, 51, has flown five missions for VAC, including one last month when he took a nurse who was wounded in Afghanistan from a medical center in North Carolina to Oklahoma so she could attend



Eunicia Tolentino hugs her son Christian before he leaves for Washington from Westchester County Airport. Christian, a soldier from Yonkers, was injured in July and was able to visit his family thanks to a flight service that transports wounded GIs. With them is his father, Pedro. (Joe Larese/The Journal News)

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her niece's wedding. Flying is his part-time pursuit. He also is president of Omni Financial in New Rochelle, a financial company that serves the military and donates time and money to VAC. The company's founder and owner, Fred Nives, 89, is a World War II veteran and retired pilot who said it is his public duty to continue to assist the military any way he can.

Christian Tolentino, 20, had served in Afghanistan for seven months, where he was responsible for transporting supplies to troops in the field. He was taking portable toilets off a truck July 6 when a mortar explosion sent shrapnel into both legs.

He was flown to a hospital in Germany before his return to the United States, and has spent the past several weeks at Walter Reed, where he has undergone surgeries to repair nerve damage. His 22-year-old brother, a security guard for Consolidated Edison, left his job to help out.

"I knew he really needed somebody," said Johnny Tolentino, who has spent his time filling out paperwork and getting his brother to daily medical appointments.

"We've always been close," Christian Tolentino said. "He's been really helpful."


The brothers couldn't take a regular commercial flight home for Labor Day because Christian Tolentino needs special medical assistance. That's where VAC came in.

"Most people don't know what military families go through," said Bohy, who didn't serve in the military himself. "This is our way of giving back."


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