

Once secret Beach Jumpers return to Ocracoke Island

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Former beach jumpers gather at the historical marker on N.C. 12 outside of Ocracoke. Photo courtesy of the beach jumpers.

Editor's note: We meant to post this in September of 2019, but Hurricane Dorian hit on Sept. 6 and upturned everything.

By Rita Thiel

Clothed in military secrecy, Ocracoke Island was once home to a top secret, advanced amphibious training base during the years immediately preceding and following World War II.

Navy Beach Jumpers, as they were known, were stationed on Ocracoke from December 1943 until January 1946 as part of the naval base here at that time.

Not so top secret was the group's national reunion held on Ocracoke in May (2019). Thirty members from across the country attended, said Roy Havekost,

chairman of the board of directors for the National Beach Jumpers Association, based in St. Johns, Florida.

This was a time for recollections of a period when most people didn't even know the beach jumpers existed much less their critical roles in wartime engagements of distracting the enemy while crucial attacks were being made in alternate locations.

This special Navy division was only recently declassified and information about their operations on Ocracoke and other locations across the country became known.

The concept of using deception as a military tactic was suggested by Lt. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., the Hollywood actor, during his service with the WWII British Commando units. In January 1944, the Ocracoke Section Naval Base was converted to an amphibious training base to train "personnel in the use of new secret equipment." These "Beach Jumpers" were trained to set up mock or dummy invasions, using such tactics as setting off firecrackers and smoke pots to simulate battle. After their training they were sent to battlefronts of the Pacific. The Beach Jumpers were active from 1943 to 1946 and again from 1951 to 1972.

Admiral H. Kent Hewitt organized the first units of beach jumpers, which were stationed across the United States. Ocracoke was chosen "because of its remote location, accessible only by boat, plane or mail boat," Havekost said.

Havekost was a beach jumper himself, stationed on "shore duty" at the Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Virginia during the Vietnam War.

"They didn't tell us a lot," he said about the special group. "We knew our jobs; we knew what we had to do, but I don't think we had the whole picture. We knew we existed, (even though the Navy would not admit as much.) I didn't learn most about the beach jumpers until I was out of the Navy."

The beach jumpers meet in Dajio during their May 2019 visit.



Due to secrecy, beach jumper family members were given little, if any, information on what their family members were involved with during their service.

"I have family members of living and deceased beach jumpers from across the country contacting me who are just now finding out that a family member was a beach jumper," Havekost said. "They're looking for other beach jumpers and families."

So, he started the National Association of Beach Jumpers in 2002 because former beach jumpers wanted to meet each other and share stories.

With the advances in computer technology, they can more easily find and connect with others. Even so, connecting with others can be difficult as records were classified and there were no public records.

"I saw how difficult it was for my dad, who served in the Coast Guard during WW II, to find and connect with his fellow servicemen after they retired from the military," Havekost said. "It was important to him to find the people who shared those years' experiences with him. I knew how important it was for them all to stay connected. Beach jumpers are no different. We need to share our experiences."

At the height of its membership, the NBJA listed over 500 beach jumpers. Now, with the advance of time, there are about 300 members, including those from WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

The name "beach jumper" has evolved and was replaced in 1972, and again in 2018. In some groups, beach jumpers are considered the precursors of the Navy Seals. The records and history are now held within the Naval Information Warfare Training group.

The name "beach jumper" has evolved a few times since and its incarnation today is the Naval Information Warfare Training Group.

The late island historian Earl O'Neal was responsible for getting the permissions needed for the group to erect a memorial on Loop Shack Hill in October 2009.

"We can't officially call it a monument, because it's on Park Service land and that declaration requires an act of Congress," he had said. "So, we call it our memorial

marker.” Although not a beach jumper himself, O’Neal was made an honorary associate member of the Beach Jumpers Association.

The marker was dedicated in 2009, with over a dozen WWII beach jumpers attending the ceremony. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.’s widow also attended.

At this time, there are two surviving WWII beach jumpers, one of the men having served on Ocracoke. Neither were able to make this year’s reunion.

Anyone interested in connecting with other beach jumpers and their families, please visit the U.S. Navy Beach Jumpers Association website: beachjumpers.com.

A marker, unveiled on Oct. 23, 2009, near Loop Shack Hill, commemorates the Beach Jumpers. Photo: P. Vankevich.

