

Celebrating July Fourth Normandy Beach-style

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TOMS RIVER - It began two decades ago with a handful of people honoring veterans. As the years flew by, word of mouth spread, and now hundreds of people have joined in the July Fourth Flag Raising and Veterans Appreciation Ceremony in Normandy Beach.

Initially, event founder Robert Mrozek and a group of friends approached three World War II veterans, Marine Corps Maj. Edward Kirby, Army Maj. Edward Mrozek, and Army Capt. Michael Coyle. With those veterans raising the American flag to commemorate the Fourth of July, a tradition was born.

The Fourth of July Flag Raising and Veterans Appreciation Celebration in Normandy Beach event will be held at 1 p.m. on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Ocean Terrace in Normandy Beach.

According to Robert Mrozek, in the years after the ceremony's inception, some of the sons also put on their uniforms and joined their fathers. Over the next several years, more veterans from World War II, then vets from Korea, the Cold War era, and Vietnam joined in, and the audience grew into the low hundreds.

In 2000, the event further escalated with the Shamrock and Thistle Band, and in 2005 the Ocean Beach Volunteer Fire Department brought its ladder truck to Sixth Avenue. A volunteer climbed the 10-story-tall ladder to unfurl an American flag. The years 2006 to 2008 saw other war heroes, including Marine Col. Richard Rothwell and Army 2nd Lt. Leonard "Bud" Lomell.

Mrozek said that in 2008 the Ocean Black Sheep performed a flyover, and more than 500 people attended.

"There is not another event on the Jersey Shore than can compare to this grass-roots display of spirit, patriotism and emotion," Mrozek said in a release. "This is something special and it has taken on its own aura. No speeches are involved, it just 'happens.' "



Ocean Black Sheep members Mike Maino (left) and Rick Ewart stand in front of Ewart's Piper Cherokee 180. The Fourth of July Flag Raising and Veterans Appreciation Celebration in Normandy Beach features a flyover by the Black Sheep.

The event will be held at 1 p.m. on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Ocean Terrace in Normandy Beach. The flag will be raised at 1:30 p.m. in coordination with a flyover by the Ocean Black Sheep, Ocean Air Support Squadron. More than 800 people are expected to attend.