

# Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Remarks

at the

## Centennial of Naval Aviation Gala

National Building Museum in Washington, DC  
December 1, 2011

Good evening, it is a privilege to be with you tonight!

Naval Aviation and Commitment. How do you explain the connection? I am a sailor, not an aviator – so the best way I know is to tell you a sea story.

Everyone knows about Wilber and Orville Wright – and the history they made on December 17, 1903, in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

But, what is lesser known is that Kitty Hawk was also the home of the Kill Devil Hills Life Saving Station – part of the U.S. Life Saving Service—a Service that merged into the Coast Guard.

Life Saving Service crews—referred to as Surfmen—were a tough breed. The story is told that one night a schooner grounded offshore in a howling storm – the Surfmen knew attempting a rescue in their small pulling boat would take all they had...and perhaps, even their lives. The Station Keeper, sensing their fear, reached beneath his cork life preserver, into the pocket of his oil skin rain slicker and withdrew a thin book...holding it up for all to see, he yelled above the wind and surf:

“Boys, these here are the Regulations. It says here you have to go out, but you don't have to come back.”

The men launched. Those words of commitment quickly became the Surfmen's motto...and Service legend.

What has been largely forgotten by history is how these Surfmen applied this same legendary commitment for saving lives to assist with the birth of aviation itself.

You see, even in 1903, not many people visited the Outer Banks in December. The Kill Devil Hills Surfmen and their families were some of the very few year-round residents. When two bicycle mechanics from Ohio showed up and said they were building a flying machine, they were scoffed at...but then they built a glider that actually flew.

Immediately, with the Station Keeper's blessing, the Kill Devil Hills Surfmen became the Wright's willing assistants. When the Wrights needed an extra hand, they would hang a red flag from their work shop to alert any off-duty Surfmen. Soon, Surfmen were assisting the Wrights with everything from delivering their mail to sewing the fabric onto the wings of the Wright flyer.

On December 17, 1903, it was the Kill Devil Hills Surfmen who carried the fragile Wright Flyer up the sand dune and placed it on the monorail. And the most famous picture in all of aviation history...the one of Orville lying prone as the Wright flyer first powered man into the air...was taken by Surfman John T. Daniels.

This picture was critically important not just historically, but to the future of aviation, because without it, no one would have believed such a remarkable feat had actually been accomplished!

Indeed, while I'm not trying to re-write history, it is my firm belief that the Kill Devil Hills Surfmen were the first ones to put naval into, and in front of, aviation!

Later, Coast Guard Naval Aviators and Air crews would go on to pioneer innovations like the first lifesaving helicopter flight, the first rescue hoist, and Coast Guard Aviator #1 Elmer Stone piloting the first trans-Atlantic fixed wing crossing...

Their contributions to naval aviation have saved countless lives...

But we must never forget that it was a few Surfmen from Life Saving Station Kill Devil Hills, that first helped to give us wings...

Wings that make what we know today as Naval Aviation possible...

Possible, because of commitment, a commitment in the Surfmen's motto, "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back." Today, we disavow this motto – we like all our aviators and shipmates to return after every mission!

But, the Surfmen's spirit and commitment lives on in our heroic rescue swimmers, and their motto – "So Others May Live."

This is the story of how "Naval" was first put in front of aviation. This is the connection between Commitment and Naval Aviation. Now you know the rest of the story.

Semper Paratus!