



# Pure Stoke

**For the men and women of Operation Beachhead, surfing is more than a sport.  
It's a source of hope and strength.**

BY MOLLY MECHLER



**I live every day in wonder. I look outside the window,  
and I am in awe that I'm still around."**

*-Michael Ricci, founder of Operation Beachhead.*

**AT 22 YEARS OLD**, while serving our country in Vietnam, Michael Ricci was seriously wounded by a homemade grenade. He spent several months in an induced coma, followed by extensive rehabilitation. He returned from service in a state of emotional devastation, and with shrapnel permanently embedded throughout his body.

But even in the face of his overwhelming injuries, Ricci refused to be defined by trauma. His passion for sports and adventure led him to an adaptive ski program in Aspen, Colorado, where he eventually learned

to ski on one leg

In Aspen, Michael asked his ski instructor for advice on how he could stay active during the summer months. The instructor suggested surfing. Ricci had no prior surfing experience, but once he tried it, he was inspired to bring adaptive water sports home to the Jersey Shore. Immediately, Ricci realized that the thrill of the ocean had the power to change lives.

In 2011, Ricci launched Operation Beachhead with a single surfboard, a kayak and a few friends. From this simple beginning, Ricci and his

team were united by a mission to provide adaptive, adventurous and safe recreational sports and social activities for veterans and individuals with disabilities. Over the past fourteen years, this incredible program has grown into a community of hope, healing, humility and plenty of humor.

## **STORMING THE SURF**

The name "Operation Beachhead" is an homage to Ricci's days in the military; it means to establish a secure ground or, in other words, to control the beach. Participants face a range



## SUMMER SURF

Operation Beachhead's event dates are posted on Facebook and shared through word of mouth. Volunteers are always needed and appreciated, whether it's to surf alongside participants, assist on the beach or offer words of encouragement and smiles.

### Operation Beachhead Summer 2025 Surf Events

**Location:** Pitney Avenue, Spring Lake

- June 7
- June 21
- July 5
- July 19
- August 2
- August 16



**Top right:** OB founder Michael Ricci.

**Left:** Heidi Plummer (left) with Michael Ricci.

of conditions or disabilities, including PTSD, MS, autism or in some cases, the lingering effects of a serious injury. Through careful instruction and encouragement, staff members help participants learn to catch and ride waves—even those with no prior experience. And the results are often moments of pure bliss.

The therapeutic benefits of surfing are well documented for both mental and physical health. The rhythmic motion of paddling can function as a moving meditation, calming the nervous system. The physical challenges of the sport release endorphins and dopamine, while lowering cortisol (the stress hormone). Direct sunlight exposure is proven to increase serotonin, which is key for stabilizing mood and fighting depression.

Furthermore, the confidence and resilience that comes with overcoming a wipeout cannot be overstated. It's a hard sport to master, but an easy one to fall in love with. With every new wave, participants reclaim their joy, strength and independence.





**Top right:** Michael Ricci with friends CJ and Lynsie at an OB event. **Bottom:** Charlotte rocking the surf at an OB event.



## A SWELL OF SUPPORT

Operation Beachhead and its events are 100% volunteer-run and funded entirely through donations. Volunteers include local surfers, friends and pre-med students, some of whom have no previous surfing experience, but who bring keen medical awareness and compassion.

Steve Stillman, a Manasquan resident and active board member, has been working with Operation Beachhead for fifteen years. “I was approached by a friend about helping at the first event, and I’ve been helping ever since,” says Stillman. “We are powered by volunteers but fueled by heart.”

Events typically run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. with snacks and lunch provided. “Participation is completely free. All that’s required is a ‘good vibe’ and a willingness to enjoy the day,” says Stillman. Each participant completes a waiver and a brief questionnaire, with the help of an experienced volunteer to ensure safety and personalized support. The environment is flexible, welcoming and focused entirely

on each individual’s comfort level. If surfing isn’t right for a particular individual, Operation Beachhead also offers paddle boarding, boogie boarding and kayaking.

Experienced surfers and swimmers serve as catchers, securing participants as they ride waves toward the shore. Others stay further in the water, guiding surfboards and stabilizing riders. Volunteers also assist participants in kayaks or on paddleboards, while land-based volunteers form enthusiastic cheering squads, making sure every participant feels celebrated and safe.

In the winter months, the organization shifts its focus to modified sled hockey, adaptive skiing and ice skating, continuing its mission to bring adventure and connection all year round.

## “THE BEACH IS MY HAPPY PLACE”

Heidi Plummer is a Jackson resident who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 14 years ago. When her friend and “fellow ‘MS’er” Suzanne first



## THE BOARD

### Operation Beachhead, Board of Directors

"Our events wouldn't be possible without the tireless dedication from our board of directors, who give up their time to support the participants, organize events and ensure that every experience is unforgettable."

- Michael Ricci, Founder
- Bruce Boyle
- John Ricci
- Steve Stillman
- Pat Lackey
- Rich Smith
- Alex Branch
- Hap Auch



**Top:** Beth catches a wave, off the coast of Spring Lake. Charlotte rocking the surf at an OB event.

**Bottom:** Spring Lake's beloved Donny, making it look easy!

invited her to an Operation Beachhead event, Heidi was initially hesitant. But after attending her first session, she never looked back. "It means so much to me," says Heidi. "I love nature, but I had never experienced being out in the water. The water brings me peace. The beach is my happy place."

From that first day, Heidi found a place where she could feel strong, connected and supported. "When you ride a wave in, they make it a big deal. Everyone cheers for you. Without the volunteers, none of this would happen. They have big hearts and big smiles."

With the support of volunteers like Steve Stillman, Heidi has ridden waves and kayaked alongside dolphins. Even though MS affects her balance, she's set a bold personal goal for herself.

"This year, I'm going to stand up on a surfboard for the first time."

During the winter months, Heidi also participates in Operation Beachhead's sled hockey program. "It's more than sports," she says. "It's about joy, courage and community."

This month, Michael Ricci celebrates his 80th birthday. Decades after Vietnam, he continues to battle mobility issues from the shrapnel lodged in his body. But he's still refusing to sit still and personally attends and photographs every Operation Beachhead event. The images he captures help to inspire new participants and to generate support for the organization's fundraising efforts.

Meanwhile, the Operation Beachhead community has become stronger than ever. Participants travel from across

New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and beyond. For many local families, the program has become a summer tradition. Each event is a testimony to the power of human resilience, and the healing wonders of the ocean. "At the end of the day, you will feel it" says Stillman. "It's impossible not to."

**To get involved, follow Operation Beachhead on Facebook or visit [operationbeachhead.com](http://operationbeachhead.com). Special thanks to Jeff Rataski for contributing his photography to this story.**

*Molly Mechler is a dedicated mother, seasoned educator, avid reader, recreational runner, thrifty shopper and local beach lover.*