

# Summer staple soars over Shore

By Kimberly Mollo — *Published in The Ocean Star, July 25, 2013*

The view this year is markedly different.

In Manasquan, large crowds can still be seen gathering on the sand on a hot, sunny day, but they are joined this summer by still-devastated properties, as well as construction and repair work on other homes, along the beachfront macadam walkway.

Further south, in Mantoloking, bulldozers and construction cranes dot the shoreline where homes and sand dunes used to be, working to remove debris, normalize the beach and rebuild and elevate properties. Many buildings still stand, but many more have vanished from alongside their neighbors, leaving holes like missing teeth in the rows of oceanfront properties.

The change in scenery is, of course, due to the devastating touchdown of Hurricane Sandy on Oct. 29, 2012.

As any Jersey Shore resident will attest to, the effects of the unprecedented storm are still felt nearly one year later in the dog days of summer, the constant stream of construction work and the sight of still-ravaged properties — an ever-present reminder of the superstorm's long-reaching consequences. These changes will be seen far beyond even the one year anniversary of the natural disaster.

Although the view has changed from last summer, one familiar sight can still be spotted cruising the coast up among the clouds — the Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey [BCBSNJ] Blimp has returned once again for its summertime tour.

## A COMPANY TRADITION

The 132-foot-long, 36-foot-wide airship has toured the Shore for 16 years bearing the health insurer's logo, according to pilot Terry Dillard. It launches out of Monmouth Executive Airport in Wall Township, as well as Solberg Airport in Readington and Atlantic City International Airport in Egg Harbor Township.

The blimp is maintained and operated by Lightship Group, an airship advertising company based out of Orlando, Fla. The company maintains 11 additional airships, which are flown over cities across the world emblazoned with



*Photo by Sueanne Goss*

the logos of brands like Budweiser, Aquafina, DirecTV, and, famously, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company.

Mr. Dillard, who kept his cool last Friday afternoon in the pilot's seat despite the sweltering, 97-degree temperature outside, said because Horizon BCBSNJ is a New Jersey-based company, he cannot fly the Horizon Blimp over state lines. However, the blimp runs on a schedule similar to that of a snowbird.

Pilots like Mr. Dillard fly it around New Jersey each summer, and it spends its "winter" season — from November to March — down in Florida. The aircraft cannot be flown in snow or ice, he said.

Deciding where the blimp will fly each day depends on the company. Horizon will present Mr. Dillard with a "wishlist" comprised of different events the company is sponsoring; these can be anything from concerts at PNC Bank Arts Center in Holmdel to 5K races around the state, he said. Mr. Dillard will then work out a route to make sure the blue-and-white blimp appears overhead wherever it needs to be.

In addition to sponsoring community events, Horizon also has a history of using the airship itself for charitable purposes. A person cannot buy a ride on the Horizon BCBSNJ Blimp — rather, a ticket to ride must be won, Mr. Dillard said. The insurance company turns blimp rides into raffle and auction prizes for various fundraisers, with the proceeds going toward the good causes at the core of such events.

Mr. Dillard said the average auction price for a ride among the clouds ranges from \$300 to \$500.

The highest bid he ever heard of was someone who spent a whopping \$4,000 for the airship tour.

The blimp gives about 12 rides every weekend — an average of 48 rides per month, or 192 flights every year.

#### HOW IT FLIES

Passengers who manage to score a sky-high seat in the blimp ride in a cabin, or gondola, of about nine feet in length beneath the blimp's helium-filled structure. The gondola can seat a maximum of five people, including Mr. Dillard.

The ship stays afloat using the massive amount of helium within the balloon itself, which holds approximately 70,000 cubic feet of the gas. The ship is powered by twin 80-horsepower engines and utilizes air flow, as well as a yoke and rudder, to steer.

To operate the aircraft, the pilot must use two foot pedals for the rudder, and wheels on either side of the pilot's seat to maneuver it up and down. On Friday, Mr. Dillard cruised over the Atlantic Ocean at about 25 miles per hour, 350 feet above the waves. When flying over land, the blimp must fly at a loftier 1,000 feet.

Mr. Dillard flies the blimp with the help of a GPS system. The device provides both directions and up-to-date weather conditions, so he can take appropriate steps if there are any signs of impending storms.

#### THE MAN BEHIND THE PEDALS

Mr. Dillard, a Jacksonville Beach, Fla., native, was working at Disney's Contemporary Resort in 1972 when he first laid eyes on a blimp.

"I saw [the blimp] in the sky when I was 19 years old, and I was mesmerized by it," he said.

He pulled over to the side of the road and spent some time talking with the pilot, and could not believe the man was getting paid to do such a fun job, he said.

"The cool factor was way off the chart," Mr. Dillard added.

From that day forward, Mr. Dillard has been flying. He saved up and bought a hot air balloon, learning more and more about flying airships. He worked for a hot air balloon company in Orlando for 18 years, giving rides to tourists, before making a change and piloting blimps instead.

He has been flying the Horizon Blimp for 14 of the 16 years it has been touring the Shore, he said. Mr. Dillard, who said he could "never have any office job," explained that his job with Lightship Group has afforded him opportunities to travel across the country and around the world, cruising over Europe and countries like Brazil and Australia.

He said he enjoys blimps more than hot air balloons because "there are lots of balloons," but only 20 or so blimps in the world.

"You get more excitement" piloting a blimp rather than a balloon, he said, noting that he has been flying them for 22 years and counting.

These days, Mr. Dillard divides his time between New Jersey in the summer and Florida in the off-season. He said that routine is less taxing than the constant cross-country travel of his younger years. He doesn't seem to be slowing down anytime soon, though — Mr. Dillard flies blimps five days a week, six hours a day, all year round, racking up 20,000 miles in the pilot's seat every year with 14,000 flight hours thus far.