

The Father of Bridge Day

A Korean War Army veteran was posthumously honored with a memorial capturing the story behind a renowned West Virginian annual tradition of parachute jumping

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The Fayette County Chamber of Commerce in West Virginia posthumously honored a Korean War veteran on July 16, 2022, for his maiden, 876-foot parachute leap more than four decades ago.

The memorial, which immortalizes the story of Army veteran Burton Ervin's groundbreaking jump off a then-new New River Gorge Bridge near Fayetteville, West Virginia, honors the founding father of what has since become a prominent annual tradition.

Known as Bridge Day, the event has welcomed thousands of jumpers, helicopter rappellers, vendors and spectators each year since becoming an official single-day state festival in 1980, a year following Ervin's then-illegal jump.

"For the chamber and for Bridge Day, I think it means a lot," Executive Director of the Fayette County Chamber of Commerce and Chair of the Bridge Day Commission Becky Sullivan told the *Register-Herald* in Beckley, West Virginia. "It gives us something to explain the origin of Bridge Day and talk about the father of Bridge Day, Burton Ervin, who had such an impact on BASE jumping, the bridge, the creation of Bridge Day and how it impacted the community."

The memorial in Oak Hill, West Virginia, about 7 miles south of Fayetteville, recognizes Ervin as the father of the Bridge Day festival for his jump off the New River Gorge Bridge on Aug. 17, 1979, at 10:20 p.m. in front of more than 200 spectators, according to the *Richwood News Leader*.

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With minimal lighting utilized to guide Ervin's jump that night, the Korean War veteran ended up in the slithering New River, a successful jump applauded by those in attendance and pioneering BASE jumping as a sport. BASE is an acronym for building, antenna, span and earth — the fixed points from which participants jump almost always at night.

The now-renowned Fayette County event has remained a staple in the community since Ervin's jump, an annual tradition with the exception of a brief two-year halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

Among the many in attendance during the unveiling ceremony on July 16 was Ervin's family, which included Mildred Ervin, Burton's wife of 62 years and a former jumping partner.

Mildred told the *Register-Herald* about her experiences jumping alongside her husband, who passed away two days before Bridge Day in 2017. From injuring her back to seeing her husband in agony with a broken leg, Mildred recalled all the experiences, beginning with her doubts about the fateful lone jump by her husband in 1979.

"Oh, yes, a lot," Mildred said when asked by the *Register-Herald* if she tried to talk her husband out of jumping. "He just always thought that whatever he wanted to do, he could do it. That was Burton's outlook on life. Whatever you want to do, you set your mind to it and you just do it."

Recognized for his jump into local lore and the creation of Bridge Day, Ervin also advocated to local officials in Fayette County about the creation of BASE jumping from the bridge, which is now allowed during a six-hour window on the third Saturday of October each year.

Bridge Day is slated for Oct. 21 this year on the New River Gorge Bridge in Oak Hill, West Virginia.

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