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CIA training base in Hertford, CT [news]

From: **Steve Douglass** <webbfeat@arn.net>

Date: Wed, 1 Apr 1998 09:16:37 -0800

The New York Times
Friday, March 20, 1998

Is That Base a C.I.A. School For Spies? Base? What Base?

By TIM WEINER

HERTFORD, N.C. -- Nine miles out of Hertford, a town as tranquil as an old dog on a porch, the road ends at a sign that says Harvey Point Defense Testing Activity.

Officially, Harvey Point is some sort of Pentagon post. But everybody around Hertford says the official version is fiction. "We felt it was a CIA base from the beginning," said Paul Gregory, the county manager.

In fact, Harvey Point is the place where, for the last 37 years, the CIA has run secret paramilitary and counter-terrorism courses for thousands of its officers and select foreigners -- most recently, the Palestinian security forces, according to intelligence officials.

Established weeks after the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, this school for spies has been shielded by secrecy, security fences and cypress trees festooned with Spanish moss ever since.

But it makes its presence felt. Black helicopters thud over the treetops at dusk ("They scare the soup out of you," said Deborah S. Reed, the local register of deeds). Buses with blacked-out windows roll by, ferrying mysterious passengers. Trucks haul in old limousines and haul out bullet-riddled blackened hulks.

Then there are the bombs.

Harvey Point sets off powerful explosions to recreate terrorist acts. Lots of powerful explosions. They resound for many miles around. In Hertford dawn can break with a bone-rattling bang.

Some folks roll over and go back to bed. They know it's only the CIA setting off bombs. But some never quite got used to it.

"The explosions would almost throw us out of bed at 7:30 on a Saturday morning," said Gregory, who presides in the 18-century county courthouse in Hertford, the seat of Perquimans County, population 11,000. "The explosions rattle the windows a little, but more than we

would like. One or two people said their houses shook so bad they had cracks."

Word filtered out to Harvey Point a while back that some of the locals were peeved. So the base commander, Roger L. Shields, invited Gregory, the county commissioners and other local officials out for a chat.

"They were real nice folks," Gregory recalled. "They said they would show us around the base. Well, they did NOT show us around the base. But for the most part, they told us the truth as to what they gave us and showed us. Basically, they explode things down there. They blow up cars. They blow up safes. They blow stuff up. They try to reconstruct an explosion that took place somewhere in the world."

The visitors asked flat-out if Harvey Point was a CIA base. No answer came.

In a thank-you note to Shields, the Perquimans County commissioners wrote: "When we hear an explosion from that general direction or feel the ground shake due to the same, we will, from our experience, know, in some degree, what it is for. We will now be able to explain to our people why we have the Base and what it is doing for our Nation."

Over the last decade, the CIA has given counter-terrorism training to more than 18,000 foreign intelligence officers from 50 different countries, including Russia, Israel and Egypt, according to agency officials. Some of that training took place abroad, not at Harvey Point. The agency does not discuss its training installations -- ever.

Shock waves notwithstanding, Harvey Point is a good neighbor, Gregory said. For one thing, the base employs more than 40 local people as cooks and guards. All are sworn to secrecy, even to their families.

"My son works there as security, but he don't tell me nothing, and I don't ask," said Julian Broughton, a retired sheriff known as "Little Man," who says he has not visited the base since investigating the death of a man found drowned in a fishing net many years ago.

The sign outside the guardhouse at Harvey Point used to say "U.S. Navy Supply Center." The claim is noted with deep skepticism by Stan Busted, a retired Navy officer who lives nearby. "They have to live under this damn-fool veil," Busted said. "It's common knowledge that this place doesn't exist."

All manner of aircraft fly into the base over Busted's home, "but if you ask them if there's an airstrip there, they'll deny it," he said. In fact, Harvey Point boasts a 4,000-foot airstrip, a lodge, a gym, a conference center and other amenities for traveling spies, in addition to five different varieties of poisonous snakes, according to a handy brochure it gives to visitors from CIA headquarters.

The base stands on 1,600 boggy acres surrounded by Albemarle Sound, where Blackbeard the pirate once ruled. It has a spokesman who prefers that his name not appear in print. "Our mission is to test conventional ordnance and ballistics in a real-world environment," he said. "The type of testing is where you get into the classified things."

Pentagon records show that the Navy tried to build an enormous seaplane out on the point in the mid-1950s. The jet, the Martin P6M SeaMaster, was a big boondoggle. Three of the six test craft crashed. In 1959, the project was abandoned. So was the base.

Then, in July 1961, as the Cold War reached a zenith, the base was reborn as the Harvey Point Defense Testing Activity -- and disappeared from the public record.

But at the Perquimans County courthouse (perhaps the only such place in the old confederacy with a graven image of a Yankee -- Catfish Hunter, who hails from Hertford and pitched for a Bronx ball club some years back), the traces of Harvey Point stretch deep into the past.

The point was occupied in the 1670s by the Harvey family, Irish and British emigres who produced many of North Carolina's first politicians, including its first native-born governor, Thomas Harvey. Harvey's grandson, known as Bold John Harvey, a local hero in pre-Revolutionary days, was buried in a 20-ton tomb on the banks of the point.

The courthouse books show that in 1942, four families living on the point were evicted when the Navy seized it for an aircraft base. No

land records for the point exist after that. Officially, it has disappeared, as ghostly as the Harveys, whose family graveyard remains at the secret base. The last of their line, the governor's great-great-granddaughter, Emily Skinner, died in Hertford in 1946.

Perhaps it is best that the base retain some mystery, like the land and the water around it. Blackbeard's booty is supposed to be buried somewhere nearby, beneath the waters of the sound, which long ago took Bold John Harvey away. The Harvey Point brochure says Bold John's tomb was last seen, covered with barnacles, during a low tide in 1908.

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Created: Apr 1, 1998