

Ten Points

A mere ten points in the pistol qualification course was all that was going to prevent an otherwise qualified naval aircrewman (avionics) third class from deploying with her combat reconnaissance crew. After multiple attempts to qualify, her shooting skill left her below the required number of points, despite spending countless hours at the base range training with the range's instructors. After her fourth failure, her chief sent her to talk with one of the two U.S. Navy Marksmanship Team (USNMT) competitors on base. The competitor took the petty officer to a private shooting range, furnished his own firearms, ammunition, and personal protective equipment, and spent 90 minutes training her. At the end of the training, he tested her progress to find that she had improved her score from 170 to 236 (out of 240). She qualified at the range the following week, and successfully deployed to PACOM with her crew a few weeks later.

This sailor's struggle could be largely blamed on the Navy's focus on technology. This "technology first" mindset leaves skills such as small-arms marksmanship to fall to the wayside. The Navy has become comfortable with the mentality that making the minimum score in the qualification course is good enough to remain qualified for another year. Senior leadership cannot in good conscience ignore this problem any longer, as the potential cost of neglecting essential skills, such as marksmanship, could result in the loss of good sailors and Americans. It is crucial that the true subject matter experts in marksmanship are charged with training the fleet and that our sailors be given the tools to expertly defend themselves, other sailors, and the fleet.

In 1957, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke took steps toward ensuring that the Navy stayed at the top level of marksmanship skill by creating a small-arms training unit (SATU), staffed with competitive shooters and small-arms marksmanship instructors (SAMI) trained by SATU.[1] These programs worked on a simple premise: the best marksmen in the Navy should be in charge of training the rest of the fleet. Force restructuring in the mid-1970s and reduced fiscal support meant the end to SATU after a successful 20-year existence.[2] Small-arms marksmanship instructor billets still exist in the Navy, but they are rarely filled by USNMT competitors. Instead, the Navy's marksmanship proficiency is left in the hands of SAMIs, many of whom have only the experience of the SAMI school to justify their position. Even though there are better trained shooters in the Navy, regulations require that official training and qualification be done exclusively by SAMIs, not USNMT competitors.

The difference between a USNMT competitor and a SAMI is best explained by the comparison of naval strike and air warfare TOPGUN instructors and the FAA instructors found at small flight schools. Both are qualified to teach aerial maneuvers, but "qualified" has nothing to do with proficiency and proven expertise. USNMT competitors routinely compete at the limits of their weapon's capabilities.

They must shoot their pistols one handed, at distances three times that of the Navy's pistol qualification course. They shoot their service rifles at distances of 200, 300, 600, and 1,000 yards. By shooting in tougher conditions, at smaller targets, and at distances far exceeding those of the Navy qualification course of fire, the competitors develop a true mastery of marksmanship skills and knowledge of the weapon system. Unlike SAMIs, USNMT competitors do not learn from inside the limits of an approved course of instruction or a computer-based training lesson. They learn hands-on from the best marksmen in the service and nation, while competing against them. They understand that each person has the capability to perform at the highest levels with hard work and the proper training. This valuable emphasis on mastery rather than simply a basic level of proficiency would prove invaluable to the Navy's small-arms training program.

The Army Marksmanship Unit (AMU) is arguably the greatest team of marksmen in the world and includes Olympic medalists, world champions, and national champions in almost every shooting discipline in the country. These competitors travel the Army during their "off-season" to train soldiers and hold competitions to motivate those soldiers to develop their skills. The Marine Corps' Weapons Training Battalion (WTB) is made up of a competitive arms program (rifle team, pistol team, and combat shooting team) and a schoolhouse where competitors train the officers and staff non-commissioned officers who are responsible for operating Marine Corps ranges and teaching marksmanship to Marines. Like the Army, WTB competitors travel to annual division matches where they instruct Marines in marksmanship and test their abilities in competition. The Army and Marine Corps understand that competition breeds skill and knowledge. They have placed a priority on competitive marksmanship and have learned how to exploit the knowledge of their competitors for the needs of the service.

If the Navy truly cares about its own protection and that of its sailors, it must take action to reestablish a small-arms training unit staffed by USNMT competitors. If the Navy can afford an E-Sports team for recruiting purposes, it should surely be able to afford the best training possible for those who carry arms into harm's way for our nation.

Endnotes

[1] H. D. Barrett, "Taking aim," Naval Training Bulletin, NAVPERS 14900, "Bureau of Naval Personnel: 1964). https://books.google.com/books?id=Um3VAAAAMAAJ&pg=RA6-PP4&lpg=RA6-PP4&dq=taking+aim+training+bulletin&source=bl&ots=_dZp-VZVNz&sig=ACfU3U3PlyJV0si3zPH7adyWw8OqhCSxBQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiWysPGI63nAhURO30KHdgRDJgQ6AEwAXoECAoQAQ#v=onepage&q=takin

g%20aim%20training%20bulletin&f=false.

[2] U.S. Navy Marksmanship Team, "Team History," <http://usnmt.org/about/>.

AUTHOR: Ensign Jonathan McPeak, U.S. Navy
Ensign McPeak serves as an aviation maintenance limited duty officer at VAQ-138, NAS Whidbey Island. He competed on the 2016, 2018, and 2019 Navy Rifle Teams and has received the Navy's Distinguished Marksman badge.

ORIGINALLY POSTED at U.S. Naval Institute Blog
<https://blog.usni.org/posts/2020/02/18/ten-points>