

Developing future military aviators in Annapolis

By MIDN 3/C Michael Martin, The U.S. Naval Academy Aviation Squadron

Photos by MIDN 3/C Cameron Thornberry

Annapolis, Maryland, is home to one of the nation's premier officer development programs: the United States Naval Academy. Once midshipmen are accepted into the Academy, they embark on a four-year journey that will develop them morally, mentally and physically into the next generation of officers in the United States Navy and the United States Marine Corps. One of the most important curriculums on the "Yard" is professional development. To this end, the Naval Academy Aviation Squadron (VT-NA) prides itself in being

one of the major programs that seeks to develop midshipmen into knowledgeable and professional leaders. VT-NA is comprised of 25 staff members, over 350 midshipmen, and five officers who provide oversight. Led by MIDN 1/C Emma Mattson and MIDN 1/C Josh Mann, the squadron is bringing aviation to the Brigade of Midshipmen through guest speakers, soaring programs, ground school, and flight simulators.

The newest program within VT-NA is the development of a soaring team. Soaring is an inexpensive alternative to powered flight that orients pilots with the fundamentals of aviation. Currently, VT-NA is awaiting the delivery of five new gliders. These gliders, all donated by the United States Air Force Academy, include one L-23 Super Blanik, one Caproni A-21, and three L-33 Solo Blaniks. Until the gliders arrive in Annapolis, the midshipman-run squadron is paying for flight time in sail planes owned by the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association (M-ASA) at a private airfield in Fairfield, Pennsylvania. Soaring provides an invaluable opportunity for VT-NA to bring the aviation community to the Brigade of Midshipmen through weekly movement orders to go flying at the soaring site. As the soaring program further develops, the squadron will expose more of the Brigade to soaring and get additional midshipmen inspired by aviation at a low cost. The soaring program and partnership with M-ASA has flourished and has allowed many opportunities for professional development.

Beginning in the summer of 2009, the Naval Academy offered a summer training block dedicated to soaring. Over 150 midshipmen participated in the two-week course,



Midshipmen taking advantage of VT-NA simulators for a summer soaring ground school lab.

which included a basic ground school curriculum and at least three flights in a glider. During this summer training, over 500 training sorties were flown equaling around 250 hours of flight time. This was coupled with over 200 hours of ground school and flight simulator training. As a result of the summer program, five members of the Naval Academy Soaring Team were able to solo and many other midshipmen were able to get stick time in the gliders. The participants experienced a large variation in soaring conditions, with the highest

altitude reached during the summer marked at 8000 feet above mean sea level. During this training evolution, there were no incidents, safety violations, or any other mishaps. This is a testament to the way the program was conducted by Commander Brian Randall, Ensigns Sean Noronha, Mike Wolff, Steve Dorman and Paul Dixon, MIDN 1/C Chris Polhemus, the other midshipmen staff members, and the members of M-ASA. The summer soaring option allowed midshipmen to see whether or not aviation is a service they are willing to pursue after they are commissioned. "It was an eye opening experience for those midshipmen who have never been at the controls of an aircraft before," recalled MIDN 2/C Casey Swift, one of the midshipmen chosen for the training.

If midshipmen are looking to get a head start on flight school, VT-NA also offers a ground school course. Taught by two FAA-certified ground school instructors, MIDN 3/C Patrick Tucker and MIDN 2/C Casey Talbot, this semester-long course trains students on the basics of aerodynamics, aircraft systems, weather, and cross-country flight planning. Ground school is one of the most valuable assets that VT-NA offers to the Brigade of Midshipmen because it provides midshipmen with all of the information needed to pass the written FAA Private Pilot exam, a mandatory requirement for completing IFS. Once midshipmen pass this exam, they are on their way to becoming a successful, FAA-certified private pilot.

Another core program of the Naval Academy Aviation Squadron is midshipman training, coordinated by MIDN 2/C Scott Voigt and other midshipmen pilots. As a



Top photo – Two midshipmen prepare a glider for flight during the summer soaring program hosted by VT-NA and the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association.

Bottom photo – A M-ASA glider prepares to take off with two midshipmen at the controls during the VT-NA summer soaring program.

supplement to ground school, VT-NA has acquired 12 flight simulators previously used at NAS Pensacola, Florida. These simulators are instrumental to the training VT-NA provides to the Brigade, and they are used as a hands-on complement to the ground school course in order to emphasize concepts such as basic flight maneuvers, operating in the vicinity of airports, and simple navigation tasks. The simulators are open to the Brigade during specified Saturday morning training evolutions.

All aspects of VT-NA are made possible through countless volunteer hours by the midshipman staff, Commander Brian Randall, ENS Sean Noronha, ENS Mike Wolff, the squadron's officer representative, Lieutenant Pat Anderson, and the Director of Aviation Programs, Captain Morgan Jones. As the number one commissioning source for aviators in the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps, the United States Naval Academy is dedicated to graduating leaders who are prepared to join the fleet. A leading contributor in this effort is the Naval Academy Aviation Squadron. By means of soaring programs, ground school, and flight simulators, VT-NA is preparing midshipmen for successful careers as military aviators. ⚓