

NPS and TOPGUN Launch New Master of Warfare Operations Degree

Select TOPGUN naval aviators are piloting a new Master of Warfare Operations graduate degree program from the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS).

MONTEREY, CA, UNITED STATES, March 7, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In naval aviation, the best of the best attend the U.S. Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor Program, otherwise known as TOPGUN, where they hone their warfighting skills as combat pilots. Starting this year, some will also sharpen their critical thinking proficiency earning their [Master of Warfare Operations](#) (MWO) graduate degree.

The [Naval Postgraduate School](#) (NPS) in partnership with the Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center (NAWDC) at Naval Air Station Fallon, Nevada, launched the new MWO degree program available initially to a select cohort of TOPGUN students and instructors designed specifically to meet the unique needs of aviators in a very compressed career pipeline.

U.S. Navy Lt. Matt Haney, is an instructor at the airborne electronic attack weapons school HAVOC at NAWDC in the EA-18G Growler, eagerly signed up for the MWO program.

"I jumped on the opportunity as soon as it was announced that my experience as an EA-18G weapons tactics instructor would be considered for inclusion in the program," said Haney, who has been at HAVOC for two years. "Thus far, I can easily say that the content gives me a much-appreciated view on strategic competition, and I am looking forward to the other certificates in the program as well. From an accessibility perspective, I am optimistic to see how this goes as I rotate back to a deployable command, but the allowed timeframe of the program [5 years] does keep me confident that I will be able to finish even if I am forced to take a break."



U.S. Navy Lt. Matt Haney is an instructor in the EA-18G Growler at Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center (NAWDC) in the Airborne Electronic Attack Weapons School also enrolled in the new Masters of Warfare Operations degree from the Naval Postgraduate School.

Graduates of approved warfare/weapons tactics instructor (WTI) programs receive equivalency for up to 25 percent of course credits required for the MWO degree. Haney was appreciative of the WTI credit and said that he believes the program has the potential to benefit any interested military officer, "particularly those of us who need a more global perspective to support our very focused daily work."

Readiness requirements have rigorous demands, which limit operators' ability to attend NPS in-resident programs. MWO was developed by a team of NPS faculty as an innovative, asynchronous, distance-learning curriculum with stackable certificates providing flexibility and delivery at the point of need for warfighters – an objective of the Naval Education Strategy.

"This program was built to meet the educational needs of the Navy's Strategic Education Alignment (SEA) Plan," said NPS Department of Physics Professor Joseph Hooper, Ph.D., who was involved in developing the MWO degree. "As a pilot or as a surface warfare officer headed for command, you don't necessarily need a highly specialized technical degree. This is going to be something that would be a better, relevant fit for a warfighter needing an interdisciplinary perspective."

To accelerate educational availability for service members, NPS faculty and associates garnered support from Navy senior leaders in the Pentagon to develop the MWO program. With word spreading quickly, officials are looking for avenues to expand the program as awareness spreads and demand has increased amongst other warfare communities.



U.S. Navy Lt. John Hartsough, MH-60 helicopter pilot, is now at Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center (NAWDC), for warfare/weapons tactics instruction and is also enrolled in the new Masters of Warfare Operations degree from the Naval Postgraduate School.



A U.S. Navy E/A-18G Growler assigned to Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center (NAWDC) Fallon, Nevada takes off for a Weapons School Integration mission.

“The MWO program provides the opportunity we need to augment operational assignments with relevant knowledge, while gaining strategic insight necessary for effective command and senior leadership,” said U.S. Navy Vice Adm. Dan Dwyer, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Operations, Plans, Strategy, and Warfighting Development (OPNAV N3N5N7) who has oversight for shaping the Navy’s education system, managing the resources and the policies that support the professional development of Navy personnel. “NPS is right on target with the MWO program, creating an advanced education program with the flexibility for Officers to further their knowledge for warfighting advantage while balancing their operational commitments.”



An F-5 Tiger II from the Saints of Fighter Squadron Composite (VFC) 13 takes off from a runway on Naval Air Station Fallon. The F-5 and other aircraft are used to pose as adversaries for U.S. Navy aircrews coming to TOPGUN.

The MWO program complements what a WTI learns by adding context covering advanced topics such as strategic competition, combat systems analysis and statistics, naval tactics and technologies, and space systems fundamentals.

“Unrestricted line officers, particularly those who are WTIs, have a proven track record of excellence in the classroom and in their platforms and are trusted to provide academic and technical expertise and rigor in their communities,” stated Jennifer Barkley, a former naval aviator and current academic board member for the MWO program. “Many currently wait to obtain a degree until much later in their careers, or they pay out of pocket, sometimes with the help of tuition assistance, for other less relevant universities. I wish I had this when I was flying!”

Participants in the MWO program will also explore a range of critical topics, including unmanned autonomous systems, orbital mechanics, and U.S. space policy, while simultaneously gaining a deeper understanding of the political dynamics and strategic ambitions of key global adversaries effecting warfare planning and operations.

TOPGUN is not limited to fighter attack aircraft. U.S. Navy Lt. John Hartsough is an MH-60R helicopter pilot teaching at the SEAHUNTER portion of NAWDC. Hartsough is in the same cohort as Haney and agrees that once he saw the degree program contents at [NPS Online](#), he saw “how helpful it could be in our careers.”

Hartsough continued, "Being able to recognize geo-political events and tensions building between countries is appealing for a leader in our respective aircraft communities, and really any community. The other big piece is the space-based technology classes that are very relevant with where major conflicts with near-peer/peer adversaries would be fought over in the future."

Overall, Hartsough thought the MWO program provides a great foundation for WTI officers returning to the fleet with immense knowledge and expertise in not only what their tactical area is, but warfighting as a whole.

"There is an added benefit of getting to work and study with all the other weapons schools and understanding their piece as well, which allows the building of a more accurate bigger picture in the grand scheme of things," said Hartsough.

Graduates of the program will possess advanced expertise across multiple domains of naval warfare and be equipped to evaluate contemporary warfare from a multidisciplinary perspective, using cutting-edge methodologies.

"The MWO program is an example of how NPS is responsive to the evolving requirements of the fleet for graduate education," said NPS Vice Provost for Academic Affairs Dr. Bret Michael. "The demand signal for stackable certificate programs is high. NPS is working toward offering the MWO program for WTIs across the fleet with the added benefit of spurring along cross-domain dialogue needed to realize desired impacts on warfighting outcomes."

Vice Provost for Warfare Studies at NPS, retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. Randy Pugh was involved in the development of the original MWO concept and was very pleased to see it accredited and launched this year.

"Future wars, especially the highly complex and technical wars against peer nations that the United States faces, are ultimately going to be won by the side that thinks smarter and faster than the other side," Pugh said. "Complementing exquisitely skilled warfighter WTIs with NPS-provided relevant knowledge about strategy, operations analysis, and technical capabilities is going to go a long way toward preserving our traditional advantages of decision superiority and cognitive overmatch. Delivering this instruction directly to the Fleet ensures our operating forces are highly educated and ready to deploy on a moment's notice at the same time."

NPS, located in Monterey, California, provides defense-focused graduate education, including classified studies and interdisciplinary research, to advance the operational effectiveness, technological leadership, and warfighting advantage of the Naval service. Established in 1909, NPS offers master's and doctorate programs to Department of Defense military and civilians, along with international partners, to deliver transformative solutions and innovative leaders through advanced education and research. www.nps.edu

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