Editor's Note: The following is an expanded version of a recent Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) publication with Cmdr. Glenn Rioux, Commanding Officer, U.S. Naval Test Pilot School (USNTPS). In the question and answer feature below, Rioux explains what it takes to be a test pilot and how to apply to USNTPS.

USNTPS in Patuxent River, Maryland, has always played an integral role in Naval Aviation. Why is it so important?

We have the world’s finest test pilots, flight officers and flight test engineers. We do that by bringing the tactical and bringing the missions relating side of the tactical operators into the acquisition process. The test pilot school is important because we ensure that the folks who are designing and producing the equipment we need understand the mission impact and design the equipment accordingly. We have a rich heritage of test pilot and a culture that fosters large teams of smart, professional, motivated people who are working in the same direction—it’s a great place to be.

What makes a good test pilot?

A good test pilot knows their platform and mission and is able to draw from a highly technical foundation to design, execute and communicate test events, while implementing appropriate risk mitigation and building to take a potentially dangerous event inuched territory and make it appear to be routine. In short, test pilots have a special combination of gut feeling and technical knowledge that enables them to bring significant benefits to the acquisition process.

What separates a test pilot from other naval aviators?

Grit, Perseverance. Self-discipline. Vision. There is definitely an element of animal, counterbalanced by a keen ingenuity. Who can apply, and what qualifications are required?

We are here to educate the world’s finest test pilots, flight officers and civilian engineers, all of whom graduated from a test pilot school. They are knowledgeable professionals who usually hold at least three different aircraft qualifications, and they often fly two sorties a day.

How competitive is the admissions process?

There are several different admission criteria. The recommendation letters are an element of the selection process. It’s all about the test pilot. The selection board looks for those aviators who achieved the extra qualification. The selection board then looks for an officer with that particular experience.

Over the past two years, we’ve participated in at least a dozen recruiting events. Many of these events involve pilots in their test tour returning to their flight test squadron or a fast center contractor. We are recruiting in major metropolitan areas all over the country. How are these officers recruited?

We have a rich history and heritage at the test pilot school. Founded in 1945, it marks its 75th year of operation. In that time, we have graduated more than 4,400 students in 355 classes. We have one of the nation’s automatic graduate numbers of test pilot graduates from USNTPS, including Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, John Glenn and Adm. James Stockdale. We also have other graduates at NASA, such as Maj. Gen. Charlie Bolden, the recent director of NASA, and Maj. Gen. James McChesney, who is in the International Space Station right now.

I want to be a test pilot; how do I apply?

First thing to do is read the naval message to figure out the timing for the selection boards. While you are on a flight squadron, the selection criteria drive your qualifications and your performance toward meeting those requirements. The boarding system has changed. As a general rule, each of the squadron boards has been moved up by two months. We found that in order for our test pilot students to safely execute, we need to provide them pre-arrival training in specific aircraft and space vehicles. This is a great opportunity for the engineers and the technical pilots as well. How many astronauts were USNTPS graduates?

Corps officer to the Air Force’s school. We also have an Army officer every class, and we send one Navy or Marine Corps officer every class, so for example, we have one candidate who did not meet the first three criteria, but if a candidate doesn't meet the first three criteria, academic performance is also a consideration in the selection process. But if a candidate doesn’t meet the first three criteria, then grades don’t matter.

What is the USNTPS curriculum like?

There is a short course and a long course. The short course was designed specifically for NAVAIR engineers because there is simply not enough capacity at USNTPS to send all of the engineers through the long course. We have several offerings each year and graduate 200 short course students a year. The Short Course Flight Test Scholarship Program is designed to allow junior officers an opportunity to see what flight test is like without making a career shift that applies for the long course. In short, the USNTPS class is made up of 20 to 22 Navy and Marine Corps aviators. We have four or five Army pilots since we train all the Army test pilots. We have an exchange with the U.S. Air Force Test Pilot School based at Edwards Air Force Base (AFB), California. We take one Air Force officer every class, and we send one Navy or Marine Corps officer to the Air Force school. We also have an exchange program with the United Kingdom’s Empire Test Pilot’s School, which is the British training school for England, and CINESP, the French test pilot school in France. In addition, we usually have two or three NAVAIR engineers. It’s a very close class make-up, and there are 30 students of the school—the variety of backgrounds.

We have 12 academic instructors, all of whom are government civilian engineers or contractors, all of whom graduated from a test pilot school. They are knowledgeable professionals who usually hold at least three different aircraft qualifications, and they often fly two sorties a day.

We have 24 flight instructors who are active duty military, government civilian engineers or contractors, all of whom graduated from test pilot school. They are knowledgeable professionals who usually hold at least three different aircraft qualifications, and they often fly two sorties a day.

We have 44 airplanes—14 different model series—and each squadron has at least one of each. How do we stay on top of all these airplanes? We have a rich history and heritage at the test pilot school. Founded in 1945, it marks its 75th year of operation. In that time, we have graduated more than 4,400 students in 355 classes. We have one of the nation’s automatic graduate numbers of test pilot graduates from USNTPS, including Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, John Glenn and Adm. James Stockdale. We also have other graduates at NASA, such as Maj. Gen. Charlie Bolden, the recent director of NASA, and Maj. Gen. James McChesney, who is in the International Space Station right now.

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