

Physical Education At Its Best - The Naval Aviation V-5 Pre-Flight Program

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In the late spring of 1942 the U.S. Navy initiated the naval aviation V-5 pre-flight program at the universities of Iowa, North Carolina, Georgia, and St. Mary's College in Moraga, California. A fifth center started a year later at the Del Monte Hotel in California but closed within a year. The V-5 program was 12 weeks in length and required of all cadets prior to flight training. It was conceived and directed by Lt. Comdr. Thomas Hamilton until he was detached for sea duty in June of 1943. Lt. Comdr. Frank Wickhorst was his successor.

This paper is written as living or oral history because the author was a V-5 instructor at Iowa Pre-Flight and subsequently at three other naval air stations. It is his contention that this was the best program of physical education ever developed in this country, if not the world.

The V-5 program was evaluated on the basis of eight criteria: clearly stated objectives, time allotment, curriculum or program, students, faculty, equipment and facilities, safety and health, evaluation and testing.

The major purpose was to develop aviators who were stronger and tougher, both mentally and physically, than the enemy. It was to be the most intensive, rigorous and comprehensive program of physical and mental training that the world had ever seen. Two hours of each day were devoted to the activities of swimming, boxing, wrestling, hand-to-hand combat, soccer, gymnastics and tumbling, military track, football, basketball, mass exercise and calisthenics, and labor engineering. An additional two hours were spent in a compulsory program of intramural sports or practice for a varsity team.

The cadets were all high school graduates between the ages 18 and 27 who had passed a thorough medical examination. The 2,000 instructors were the best of the nation's physical education teachers and coaches selected from 25,000 applicants by Hamilton and a blue ribbon advisory committee. Equipment was supplied in abundance for use in the best of facilities. Physicans and athletic trainers carefully supervised the cadets in their activities and treated injuries and illnesses. The Harvard step test was one of half a dozen fitness tests administered to all cadets upon entrance and exit from the pre-flight schools.

An evaluation of the program was obtained from 11 former cadets by a questionnaire. The overall opinion of their pre-flight experience was very favorable. However, there were some instances cited of abuse and excessive punishment. One platoon had to do jumping jacks for 45 minutes with the result that only 20 out of 200 were still standing at the end. Another respondent recalled that "to pass out from heat prostration or over-exertion was considered (in the classical Georgia summer) just part of the game. Today we'd probably sue someone. "

In reviewing this program after 39 years of teaching, observing, and reading about other physical education programs all over the world, the author firmly believes that the V-5

pre-flight program was the best. Some might quarrel with the objectives, or deplore the lack of carry-over sports, or criticize the occasional instances of harsh discipline. But the program must be evaluated in its war-time setting, and thus the objectives, the selection of activities, and even some (but not all) of the harsh techniques of the instructors made some sense.

Much of the credit must go to Tom Hamilton for his inspirational leadership, his extraordinary administrative ability, and his personal example. The whole substance and spirit of Tom Hamilton and the V-5 program was summed up by a respondent cadet who wrote: "The cadets who made it, left Iowa City trim-hard as rocks - alert- coordinated - eager - aggressive - in short, physical and mental TIGERS!"