The MAWS Graduate – Expanding the Operational Capability of Staffs throughout the Fleet
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The Maritime Advanced Warfighting School (MAWS), formerly the Naval Operational Planner’s Course, was stood up in 1998 to provide officers of all U.S. military services with specialized advanced warfighting education while studying at the Naval War College’s College of Naval Command and Staff. Over the past 20 years, MAWS has developed highly capable, warfighting specialists from all armed services, designed to be force multipliers on the Fleet or another service Operational Level of War operations centers, Combatant Command staffs, and MAWS prepares students for future operational level of war command. Over the years, senior leaders have praised the quality of officer that MAWS produces and put forth the demand signal for more MAWS officers in the Fleet as the Navy matures the Maritime Operations Centers (MOCs). The maturation of the MOCs in all Numbered and Major Fleets demands the highest quality personnel who have studied Naval and Joint operational art theory.

Three specific points help to illustrate the value a MAWS graduate brings to a staff. First, officers who graduate from MAWS are more than just planners – they are educated Operational Level of War (OLW) warfighting specialists who should be put in positions to advise senior leaders during all phases of operations and campaign execution. Second, MAWS selects Navy officers from many different designators, and regardless of background, every one of them is well educated and trained to hold key planning responsibilities on a flag staff. Third, they are often the "go-to" officers on the staff, who can handle a more significant workload, and with more serious implications, often executing above their pay grade. Lastly, there are some specific institutional ways that the Navy could help to improve the already exemplary way that these graduates support Navy operations and warfighting.

The MAWS Grad as an Advisor

In *The Armed Forces Officer*, Richard Swain and Albert Pierce write, “Commanders at every echelon have the unique responsibility to make sense of the situation in which they find their forces and take all necessary actions to achieve their superior’s assigned or implicit ends.” The Navy selects commanders from an extraordinarily talented and competitive group, but they can't do it by themselves. Their staffs are vital to the success of the commanders’ decisions, and the MAWS grad is the anchor of that team. The military often views advanced warfare school graduates as critical planners on the staff who guide operational planning teams (OPTs) to solve a problem or develop a plan to address a potential future problem. MAWS grads should not just be employed as planners, but as warfighting experts and advisors to the Commander; the person that the Commander should lean on as the primary owner of a problem set to plan against and to lead the staff in a shared understanding of that problem.
Yes, the MAWS grad is trained to lead OPTs and does so with vigor and from a position of expert knowledge. As the operational art and warfighting theory expert on the staff, these officers can offer more to the Commander and his decision cycle than just the analysis required of the Navy Planning Process (NPP). These are the officers who should be reviewing the OPT’s work if they were not in charge and evaluating the soundness of the plan from the standpoint of operational art. Their evaluation should include topics such as how the factors of time, space, and force are taken into account and how the theater geometry affects the plan, among other considerations. Even if the problems are challenging to solve, commanders must demand this type of analysis from MAWS officers not before the briefing, but at the table to ensure that shared understanding necessary for the staff to support the commander’s decision cycle.

A MAWS Grad’s Designator Does Not Matter

Advising a seasoned commander in all operational functions requires intensive study of operational art (OPART) and doctrine, which the MAWS curriculum indeed provides – a master’s level education in OPART and warfighting theory. Each student brings unique perspectives based on the specific community background, but the community or designator doesn’t matter upon graduation and employment at the operational level. The goal of MAWS is to create a warfighter at the operational level that can lead a team or teams to analyze a situation and synthesize a plan through the lens of all aspects of operational art. Commanders should expect to receive qualified operational level warfighters who can assist and advise the commander on how best to integrate the naval force into the greater joint construct.

These MAWS officers come from many different designators and communities within the Navy, to include Surface Warfare, SEAL, Submarine, Aviation, Intelligence, Logistics, and Cryptology, among others. They are coded by designator to specific directorates or cross-functional teams. There are two primary options for their employment on a staff. The first is to have each of these officers work in their respective directorates as the specific planner for that function. For example, the intelligence officer who graduated MAWS would stay in the N2 directorate. The second is to make all of the MAWS officers regardless of designator, key members of the command’s Maritime Plans Group or equivalent working group. Generally speaking, the practice is that this plans group is comprised of senior staff members but having these warfighting experts at the table will only enhance the group’s ability and role to advise the commander. The MAWS officers would no longer belong to an individual directorate, but would each be assigned a problem set or plan to require their full-time attention, developing shared understanding across the OPT and the staff writ large.

MAWS Grads are your ‘Staff Ninjas’ and ‘Iron Majors’

The mark of a good staff officer is that they become the ‘go to’ person on the staff, usually able to shoulder a large workload of important commander visible tasks, and demonstrate the ability to work well above their current paygrade. The Army calls this person the ‘Iron Major.’
Another title bestowed on those officers who grasp the necessity of good staff work and can navigate the cross-functional team (CFT) process is the ‘Staff Ninja.’ These officers immediately work to earn the trust of other directorates and CFTs to ensure good information flow between one’s organization and others to ensure personal, work center, and command-wide success.

The MAWS grad often exemplifies the Staff Ninja and the Iron Major. The Maritime Advanced Warfare School is designed to educate future commanders in operational art and includes much discussion on the functions of the Maritime Operations Center (MOC) and the Joint/Combined Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC). Since MAWS officers understand the MOC, cross-function teams, staff processes, operational art, and the Navy Planning Process, they are particularly well suited to be successful at all echelons. With the Navy’s focus on the MOC and MOC processes, MAWS remains a tool that Commanders should employ to continue the refinement of the MOC as the fundamental Navy Operational level of war warfighting system.

Even after a staff tour, an officer’s Staff Ninja skills are applicable, especially when employed in key positions down echelon. Subordinate task force operations may be better synchronized in combat when commanding officers of tactical units have expert knowledge of operational art and the operational level of war. Potential future combat operations may be conducted in a degraded communications environment. As such, understanding the basic principles of mission command, discussed by Gen Dempsey as "commander's intent, mission-type orders and decentralized execution" are crucial to winning every fight. There is great warfighting utility, and quite frankly, a decisive advantage in the fight to have officers who have the same advanced operational art education on all sides of the send button - the MOC, Navy Task Force Level, and tactical command - supporting the same commander’s intent at all echelons. The value of the MAWS grad at both the operational and tactical level again exemplifies the fact that this school and its graduates are force multipliers.

Recommendation

There are many times where the detailing process and career paths for a particular community do not match the timing for orders to an operational planning billet following MAWS. This situation should be the exception. Prioritization by each community to get their best and brightest to be key operational art experts at these staffs will enhance the individual community’s and the Navy’s capability in the maritime fight. Additionally, the selection process for MAWS and putting the best and brightest tacticians into the premier program for Navy operational level of war study is in line with the Chief of Naval Operations Navy Leadership Development Framework (NLDF) Version 2.0. In this updated document, ADM Richardson explains that character and competence development are required because “senior leaders are judged by their ability to consistently and sustainably produce winning teams.” If the MOCs are the primary warfighting tool for the Navy at the operational level, then MAWS can play a pivotal
role in developing officers competent in OLW analysis, and future commanders who would have operational art engrained at a much earlier point in their career.

Conclusion

The Maritime Advanced Warfighting School is a key enabler of maritime operations and warfighting planning. Commanders can be more successful if they carefully manage their MAWS graduates and place them in situations on their staffs to enable shared understanding, conduct warfighting evaluation, and provide operational level of war advice, regardless of designator, rank, or billet assignment. The Navy could help to capitalize on the warfighting skills of these grads with minor adjustments to the detailing process and career management to ensure key future leaders have the opportunity to work at numbered fleets to employ what was learned at MAWS, making them even better commanding officers and eventually becoming Fleet commanders. Regardless, the officers that MAWS develops will continue to be self-starters, grounded in operational art and warfighting theory, and able to make a difference in any fight in which they find themselves.


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