

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

“Benny” Bass and the U.S. Navy Olympic Rope Climbers

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A Super Coach at the U.S. Naval Academy led to domination of the 1932 Olympics Rope Climbing event. The Medalists that year went on to serve with distinction in WWII. Bring back the event!

Colorado Springs is the home of the US Olympics effort, so please forgive my Olympic moment on the occasion of the January 15th (1910) birthday of Admiral Raymond H. “Benny” Bass.

Olympic events have come and gone during the “Modern Era”; one example is rope climbing, which was held only four times (1896, 1904, 1924, and 1932). Competing in the 1932 Games, Bass took only 6.7 seconds (!) to ascend an 8-meter rope and win the Gold.

That was the last time rope climbing was an Olympic event. I don’t know why it was dropped, but one reason could have been that it [wasn’t particularly competitive](#), especially in 1932. Apparently, [Lou Mang](#), the gymnastics coach at the Naval Academy, had developed the ideal technique for climbing ropes. All three medalists that year were midshipmen or newly-commissioned ensigns.

Benny Bass went on to a stellar career in WWII subs, [sinking 11 ships](#) in *Plunger* and [another one](#) in *Runner II* late in the War. Bass and *Runner II* were one of the twelve US subs present at the Japanese surrender ceremony. [He was fairly short, but really strong; his nickname has been attributed to his resemblance to a boxer of that era, Benny Leonard. It is possible that the nickname was (also) influenced by another boxer of that era, Benny Bass, who was similar was similar in physique].

The Silver Medalist was [William Galbraith](#), who was on the *USS Houston* when she was sunk at the Battle of the Java Sea early in the War. He spent the duration as a [POW](#), enduring extremely harsh conditions, and had a commendable career after the War.

Bronze went to [Thomas F. Connolly](#), who later became a three-star admiral who was instrumental in the establishment of the [Naval Officer Test Pilot School](#), commanded two aircraft carriers, served as Deputy CNO, and was important in the development of the Grumman F-14 fighter. So *Top Gun* fans, next time you watch the exploits of Maverick and his buddies, know that the Tomcat fighter plane was, in fact, ***named for Admiral Connolly!*** [Sidebar: The [Wikipedia entry](#) for Admiral Connolly states that the F-14 was named in honor of

Thomas Moore, CNO at the time the F-14 entered service; however, Connolly's *New York Times* obituary contains a much more detailed, and IMO, compelling story....

<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/09/us/thomas-connolly-86-top-gun-admiral-dies.html>].

Lou Mang was quite a coach, and he's in the US Gymnastics Hall of Fame for good reason. Bass in particular was impressed with him; see his remarks in the link cited above and here:

https://usghof.org/files/bio/l_mang/l_mang.html.

With records of accomplishments of officers like Bass, Galbraith, and Connolly, maybe the Academy might consider suggesting the USOC push for reinstituting a competitive rope climbing in the Olympics?!

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