

## **I CAMO Marksman Pro Hidden Deck Fastener System Review**

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Product: **CAMO Marksman Pro Hidden Fastener Installation Gun**

Manufacturer: **National Nail Corp**

Value Rating: **10**

Performance Rating: **9**

**Pros:** Fastens boards directly to the joist, Allows for easy board removal, Simple to use, Fast setup, No routing or fancy clips required

**Cons:** Premium fastener cost, Requires 3/16 spacing between boards

- 1-7/8" and 2-3/8" lengths
- ProTech coated or 316 stainless steel
- Requires CAMO hidden fasteners (driver bit included)
- Adjustable for all 1x6 decking board size variations
- Dual-sided fastener
- Exceeds ASTM Uplift Resistance
- Exceeds ASTM Thermal Cycling standards
- Lifetime limited warranty on fasteners

We're not easily impressed with hidden decking systems. While they offer a really excellent finished product, many of the systems require clips and extra work that causes the job to take longer, involve more training and generally increase your costs to deliver the finished product. With the CAMO Hidden Deck Fastening System, however, our concept of what was possible with hidden deck fastening systems was redefined. The CAMO system, which uses a Marksman or Marksman Pro installation tool, eliminates the need for clips and routing or cutting the edges of the board, and simplifies the method of deck board installation. In a nutshell, they devised a method to fasten the boards by driving screws at an angle along the board's edge - directly into the joist. In this way, the boards are secured and the entire process is simplified. In short - it's fast, and it's impressive.

With this review, what we did was try out the Marksman and Marksman Pro tools. But really, they work with the CAMO hidden deck fasteners in a way that causes this to be a review about the fasteners as well. To ignore the fasteners is to review a gun without any bullets. And really, it's the *fasteners* that hold everything together and make the systems work - the Marksman tools simply hold the angle steady so the screws drive in at the right angle and to the correct depth. The system is, in that way, somewhat holistic and inseparable.



## Build Quality

Both the Marksman Pro and Marksman tools will get the job done, but only if you had a small one-time only job would we recommend the standard Marksman (Model #345005). For the up-charge, the Pro model offers a lot more durability and confidence. It's not that the Marksman isn't a decent product, but it simply doesn't have the flexibility or the metal bushings and surfaces that make the Marksman Pro a confidence-inspiring tool that will last for many deck projects.



Notice how robust the marksman Pro is (left) compared to the all-plastic Marksman (right)



The way the marksman Pro works is that the tool literally allows you to create the required 3/16 space between decking boards, be they pressure-treated lumber, composite, IPE, or hardwood. This spacing is exactly what's needed in order to drive a CAMO hidden deck fastener through the side of the board at an angle that all but hides it from view, creating the seamless look of a deck with no top-side fasteners. While it spaces the board, it also provides the exact alignment for the fastener, so that the included driver bit can send the fastener through the wood. The tool has a built in stop that works with the CAMO bit to drive to the exact depth every time. While this stop is metal on the

Marksman Pro, the standard Marksman relies on plastic to do the same job. It worked in our testing, but it's not something I'd want to trust to use over and over again.

Mechanically, the tools differ as well. The Marksman's trigger activates a simple spring-loaded mechanism that closes the plastic gap, essentially gripping the wood while the handle trigger is pulled. Both the trigger and corresponding spacer are made from the same piece of plastic. The Marksman Pro, however, uses a more complex spring-loaded lever system to open the front spacer. What this means is that you can use the trigger to clamp the tool onto a piece of decking board, and then let go of the pressure, allowing the tool to hold itself to the board. Now your efforts are all in aligning the board, rather than holding onto your grip. We also liked how the spacer teeth are made completely of metal on the Pro model. It looks and feels like it will last a good long time.



On the side of the Marksman Pro is an adjustable thumb dial that lets you tweak the tool for making it the perfect fit for whatever decking board widths you are using, even if they vary by an 1/8" or so. At bottom are metal "tool feet" which set the tool precisely to the board and give it the exact height that, together with the angle of the spacer teeth and the screw guide, give you a perfect fastening drive every time.

## Using the Tool

We waited quite some time until a decking job came around where we could use this tool, but at the last minute it fell through. Eventually we simply had to move forward on some decking repair work that we ironically did initially with a competing hidden fastening system.. I have to say, the repair work was just as impressive as it allowed us to use the Marksman Pro to crank down on boards that had popped out of a clip-based system due to wood shrinkage. With the CAMO system, we simply pushed down on the board with the Marksman Pro and drove in a screw on each side to pull the board back into place and secure it tightly down to the joist. It was a pretty cool way to retain our clean fastener-free surface look while eliminating the popped boards that had sprung free.

The process of using the tool is very simple. Here are the basic steps:

1. Secure your starter board. You can do this by face fastening it, using (underneath) L-brackets, or a combination of the two.
2. Lay your first board and set the Marksman Pro in place by squeezing the handle until it perfectly grips the board. Release the handle.
3. Maintain enough pressure on the tool to push the board snugly into the starter board, making sure that it is perfectly parallel across its entire length. If needed you can use a board stretcher to make the alignment better.
4. Load the Marksman Pro with two screws, one on each side of the tool.
5. With a standard cordless drill/driver set to high speed, drive the screw on the outside edge, pushing the board against the starter board so it is tight against the spacer teeth. You can keep the speed of the drill at maximum for the entire duration of the fastening process (you shouldn't need to force the screw, it does most of the work itself).
6. Stop drilling when the CAMO bit's shoulder reaches the Marksman Pro's screw guide.
7. Drive the other screw in from the opposite side.
8. Repeat for each joist and lay the next board.

What's especially cool about this system is that you can actually back out the screws to replace a board in the middle of a deck. All you need to do is take the bit and reverse out the ProTech or stainless steel fastener and you're ready to drop in a new board. The accurate spacing and angle of the screw makes this possible - and it's got to be the coolest feature of the entire system in terms of maintenance and upkeep.



We also used the marksman Pro to correct for some popping wood on a children's play swing set that we had constructed a few years ago. The results were the same - the system beautifully pulled the boards into place and restored the integrity of the decking.



The real hero in the CAMO system have got to be the fasteners, however. After all, the Marksman Pro just lines them up. The CAMO fasteners are actually pretty cool - and surprising. The heads are small, much like trim head screws, but requiring a star drive bit. The threads drive down and terminate in what looks like a clipped end - as if they simply took a bolt cutters and separated tow end-to-end screws from each other. CAMO calls this a "reverse rake tip". In reality, this abrupt end tears through tough IPE or composite decking and pulls the fastener through the material without so much as a hiccup. No pre drilling required. We would have taken their claims with a grain of salt if we hadn't witnessed the fasteners at work during the 2011 International Builder's Show. The way they drilled through all sorts of material was uncanny - and quite impressive.



At the top of the fasteners is a nice design in the form of a reverse thread. There are about three rows of reverse thread that actually draw the board tight to the fastener head and also ensure the screw doesn't back out on you over time once it is sunk into the wood. These threads are shallower than the main threads, so they don't interfere with the driving force of the screw, but they serve as an excellent deterrent for the screw loosening up over time as the wood or composite material ages. The screws come in 316 stainless steel or ProTech coated versions - both of which are warranted to not rust (stainless steel is always recommended for coastal environments).

Available lengths:

- 1-7/8" - perfect for use with any 5/4" deck board (ProTech coated only)
- 2-3/8" - designed for use with nominal 2x6 decking boards

## Conclusions & Recommendations

Overall, we loved using the CAMO decking tool. It's wonder is in the simplicity of the tool. You can just grab it, the bit and a box of CAMO fasteners and you're off to the races. I found that we could work in record time, even when just using the test pieces of decking material and seeing how fast we could fasten pieces of lumber to the test joist. When we handed the tool to novice users, the results were also just as fast and consistent. There's very little learning curve and the boards are spaced perfectly by the tool every time. This has got to be our current favorite hidden deck fastening system for all of the reasons mentioned in this review. For that alone, we gave it a 9/10 for Performance and Value came in at a rare 10/10 - because CAMO's fasteners don't cost any more than traditional coated deck screws - and that makes this entire system all that much more accessible to the masses.

### ***About National Nail Corp***

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