
Warrant officers rated a salute, were called "Mister," and were difficult to categorize.

The In-Betweeners

By Bruce D. Callander

When the Army began graduating its physician's assistants with the rank of warrant officers, some Air Force PAs were irate. They were performing the same job--as noncoms. The Air Force sympathized, but it was not about to get back into the warrant officer business.

The service stopped making appointments to that rank in 1959. It spent another twenty-one years waiting for its last warrant officer to retire. When he did, the Air Force considered the subject closed.

The Air Force's official position was that it had no place for another rank sandwiched between enlisted and commissioned officer levels. In fact, the service had never really decided how warrant officers fit into the scheme of things. They held jobs at the top of the enlisted career ladders but were counted as commissioned officers. They rated a salute from airmen but were outranked by second lieutenants young enough to be their sons. The only time the Air Force had made warrant officer appointments on a grand scale turned out to be a disaster.

The Army, too, had had trouble with its warrant officer program. By the late 1950s, it had spent forty years trying to find a role for WOs. Much of that time, it had used the rank to reward noncoms not qualified for commissions and to compensate former commissioned officers not needed in their old grades.

By the time the Army worked out an effective program for its warrant officers, the Air Force had given up.

Long before this country was founded, navies used warrant officers to handle technical operations aboard warships while the more aristocratic officers were "commissioned" to command them. In 1775, John Berriman, chief boatswain on the *Andrea Doria*, was appointed warrant officer in the Continental Navy. He probably was not the first American to hold the rank.

The Army gave a similar in-between grade to headquarters clerks in the late 1890s, but it did not use the warrant officer title until 1918, when it got its own little navy. In that year, Congress approved a seagoing Mine Planter Service for the Coast Artillery and authorized the use of warrant officers as masters, mates, and chief engineers.

Clerks and Bandleaders

By 1920, Congress allowed the Army up to 1,120 warrant officers, and the service was giving the rank not only to mine planters and headquarters clerks (now called field clerks) but also to quartermaster clerks and bandleaders.

That same year, Congress voted another provision that was to muddy the status of the grade for several decades. It allowed the Army to give warrants to long-service enlisted members and to former officers, including some Army Air Service pilots, who lost their commissions in the demobilization after World War I.

The use of the rank as a reward for some and a consolation prize for others worked against the Army's efforts to develop an effective career program for warrant officers. In the late 1930s, Army officials were still telling Congress that, except for these purposes, the rank did not meet any organizational needs and did not fit into the military system.

Then came World War II. US forces grew explosively. Old rank structures went by the boards. From 1938 to 1944, the strength of the Army Air Forces alone jumped from 21,000 to more than two million. Enlisted men added stripes every few months, and new officers were stamped out like aircraft parts.

To keep the force from getting impossibly top-heavy, the Army invented whole new categories of rank. One was a technician scheme under which enlisted specialists received the pay of noncoms without the corresponding rank. Another was a new type of flying warrant officer for the AAF.

Socially Unthinkable

When Congress created the flight officer rank in 1942, the plan was to give it to enlisted pilots and avoid the socially unthinkable prospect of having NCOs command aircraft on which commissioned officers served as crew members. During the war, however, thousands of aviation cadets who normally would have been commissioned were made flight officers instead. They served as pilots, bombardiers, navigators, flight engineers, and fire-control officers. Some 200,000 men were believed to have held the rank. Even the Pentagon lacks an exact count.

The rank was equivalent to that of Warrant Officer, junior grade, and carried the same pay (\$150 per month), plus flight pay. Like more conventional warrant officers, flight officers were called "Mister." Both wore officer-style bars tinted with splashes of color (brown for WOs and blue for FOs). Both rated salutes from enlisted men, and both wore officer-style uniforms. Both ranked below all commissioned officers.

Unlike other warrant officers, however, flight officers were not tied to enlisted career fields. They filled the same crew positions as other officers, including aircraft commander. Some flew with commissioned copilots, and at least a few led major elements on missions. The Pentagon said they were to be treated "in the nature of third lieutenants. . . due all the customs and courtesies pertaining to commissioned officers."

The trouble was that no one, including the flight officers themselves, was quite sure what that meant. On the job, they performed like any other officers, but, socially, many still felt like outcasts. Enough of the "Old Army" snobbery remained to remind them they were not viewed as the equivalent of commissioned officers.

Back on the Ground. . .

The status of more traditional warrant officers was often equally ambiguous. Many men who had held warrants before the war were commissioned, some in the field grades, but the Army made thousands of new was. Unfortunately, it gave major commands power to appoint and assign them and did little to standardize the process. As a result, the rank often continued to go to NCOs more as a reward than because their positions called for it. They were assigned to the Warrant Officer Corps and spread over more than forty occupational areas, but they still had no real career pattern to call their own.

Though the Army did little to define their position, some wartime warrant officers took it upon themselves to do so. In one bomb group, the enlisted line chief was given the rank. He went about his job, but he adopted a new image. Evidently using a British field marshal as his role model, he cultivated a handlebar mustache and carried a swagger stick.

He was the exception. Most warrant officers filled the essential clerical, administrative, and technical jobs with quiet efficiency and attracted little attention. Most were more experienced than the "ninety-day wonders" then being churned out by Officer Candidate Schools, and the rank gave them the clout that NCOs lacked. In fact, Congress provided that warrant officers in jobs normally filled by commissioned officers would have all powers of the commissioned ranks.

AAF veterans who passed through a certain flight training center in the American southwest may remember one warrant officer who used those powers to the fullest. Assigned to the headquarters staff, he was the person to whom incoming officers reported when the commander was absent. His favorite targets were crewmen returning from combat units, where discipline tended to be lax. If they were unimpressed by a mere warrant officer and failed to render a proper salute, he dismissed them like wayward cadets with orders to report again in the prescribed manner. Some questioned whether the commander's stand-in had that much authority, but few were tempted to test it.

The AAF Inheritance

When the war ended, the Army stopped appointing both flight officers and warrant officers, and most wartime appointees went home. Two years later, the Air Force began life as a separate service and inherited 305,000 former AAF members, among whom were 1,200 warrant officers. The service had no specific WO career plan, but it continued to appoint more.

Over the next decade, Congress and the Pentagon tried to sort things out, with limited success. The lawmakers gave warrant officers four separate pay grades but failed to match them with specific ranks. As a result, some warrant officers wound up supervising others drawing higher pay.

In the early 1950s, the Air Force tried to define the warrant officer by regulation. AFR 36-72 called him "a technical specialist with supervisory ability, who is appointed for duty in one superintendent Air Force specialty."

The regulation defined warrant positions as those in which supervision was limited to other warrant officers, enlisted members, and civilians; duties required more responsibility than was desirable for an NCO but greater specialization than was desirable for a junior officer; and duties could be handled by senior NCOs in the temporary absence of warrant officers.

The Air Force regulation also noted that putting this superintendent position at the top of the airman career ladder provided for the progression of outstanding airmen. By then, the Army had adopted a similar policy. This was intended to make the rank an incentive for outstanding enlisted performance rather than a reward for past service. In addition, however, the Air Force regulation allowed warrant officers to be used as technical assistants and advisors to staff officers and even as commanders of nontactical units.

Again, the Air Force seemed uncertain whether WOs should be used as superairmen or as substitute officers.

One warrant officer spent several years heading a major headquarters office normally run by a field grade officer. He had the specialized knowledge the job required and gave it more continuity than most commissioned officers' tours would have allowed. When he finally left the Pentagon, it was as a full colonel. Such opportunities were rare, however. Bound as they were to the enlisted career fields, warrant officers normally could not expect career-broadening assignments of the types available to their commissioned counterparts.

Another problem was the small number of warrant officers. Though the Air Force made appointments well into the 1950s, peak strength never rose much above 4,500, or about one-half of one percent of the total active-duty force. There were not enough warrant officers to fill more than a handful of commissioned officer billets and far too few to occupy all of the superintendent-level slots in the enlisted fields. As a result, many master sergeants spent years in superintendent positions with little hope of winning warrants.

Nor was the Air Force likely to appoint more. From the early 1950s on, warrant officers were counted as commissioned officers for budgetary purposes. The Air Force was not eager to give up commissioned slots to add warrant officers, particularly if it meant taking them from the rated officer ranks.

To add still more confusion, a Defense Department study group took a long look at the program and recommended that all services replace their warrant officers with limited-duty officers. LDOs would hold commissioned ranks but be restricted to certain specialties, duties, and grades. The Air Force didn't see this as a workable solution and decided to keep its warrant program.

Second Thoughts

A few years later, some officials wondered if they had made the right decision. In 1955, a group of warrant officers formed an association. The Air Force did not outlaw the organization as such but simply proscribed the joining of any group "devoted to the welfare of a single segment of the force." The Air Force Warrant Officers Association died aborning.

The move was questionable because commissioned officers already belonged to several rank-restricted associations. The handful of warrant officers was not the problem. The Pentagon was more worried about the much larger number of airmen who already were grumbling about pay, promotions, and personnel policies. USAF leaders feared that, if the warrant officers were allowed to organize, the airmen would follow and the service would have to deal with some kind of enlisted union.

(Ironically, some years afterward, a group of NCOs organized the Air Force Sergeants Association, which eventually won Air Force approval and support. The Army Warrant Officer Association, formed at about the time Air Force warrant officers were trying to organize, also survived and prospered.)

How much that experience with the Warrant Officers Association influenced the Air Force's attitude toward warrant officers is debatable. Clearly, it did nothing to tilt sentiment in their favor a few years later when the issue of the warrant program came to a head.

In 1958, Congress created two new enlisted grades, E-8 and E-9. The rationale was that enlisted members were reaching the top NCO grades midway in their careers and had no place to go from there. The services did not want to use officer authorizations to make more warrant appointments, so the solution seemed to be to add another tier to the enlisted ranks.

In 1959, the year that the Air Force promoted its first master sergeants to E-9, it also announced plans to phase out its warrant officer program. At the time, officials insisted there was no connection between the two moves, but the correlation is hard to ignore. The Air Force admitted that it had decided that warrant officers constituted an unnecessary layer of supervision between the commissioned and noncommissioned ranks. Some years later, officials concluded that the new senior noncoms were "capable of doing the same jobs as warrant officers."

Unlike warrant officers, the new NCOs were charged against enlisted strengths, and the services could afford more of them. The law allowed only three percent of all enlisted members to be in grades E-8 and E-9, but that was more than four times the number of warrant officers the Air Force had at the time.

Pentagon Foolishness

The advent of the supergrade NCO was not without its problems. In its first burst of enthusiasm, the Pentagon foolishly passed most of the new slots to major commands to fill as they saw fit. Many went to deserving master sergeants regardless of their specialties or positions. Commands again were using the appointments to reward individuals rather than to fill valid requirements. It took USAF several years to regain control over the supergrade program, define the superintendent slots, and begin to fill them by centralized promotions.

Meanwhile, the Air Force had to make use of those several thousand warrant officers who were left in the system. Most were assigned to commissioned officer positions. The service encouraged early retirement and, in some cases, forced attrition. It was not until 1980, however, that CWO James H. Long retired from the 438th Transportation Squadron at McGuire AFB, N. J., and the Air Force said good-bye to its last active-duty warrant officer.

While the Air Force was working warrant officers out of its ranks, the Army was finding a niche for them at last. In the late 1950s, it concluded that if the rank were to survive, it could not be used as a reward for enlisted members and a dumping ground for former commissioned officers. The Army combed its organizational tables for technical positions where warrants could be used to advantage. It found enough to continue the program and even to expand it.

One field in which the Army found warrant officers most useful was aviation. The new Air Force had taken most of its larger aircraft, but the Army still had some light planes and a variety of helicopters to use as "organic airpower." It wanted pilots with more rank than NCOs, but it did not want to spawn another big force of commissioned aviators. The highly specialized job fit neatly into the Army's new definition of a warrant position, and the flight officer idea that had bombed in the AAF soon boomed in the new Army.

Today almost fifteen percent of the Army's officers hold warrants rather than commissions. They continue to fill traditional slots in administration and marine operations and have moved into highly technical jobs in communications electronics, weapons maintenance, and health care.

Even in the Army, however, warrant officers continue to struggle for a better status. Their association has lobbied for higher pay, more commissioning opportunities, and special career legislation.

For all its problems, the WO idea continued to appeal to some Air Force NCOs. As the supergrades filled up and promotions slowed, they saw themselves doing officer-type jobs without having the opportunities of the Army NCOs to earn warrant appointments. The contrast was heightened by the creation of warrant slots for the Army's physician's assistants. Some Air Force PAs argued for a return to the warrant program or for adoption of a limited-duty officer plan.

Neither is likely to happen, particularly while strength cuts keep officer slots at a premium. The Air Force argues that such a move would only dilute the status of top airmen and would serve little purpose except to reward some NCOs and give surplus commissioned officers a place to serve their remaining time. It has been down that road before.

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