



By Shelly Davis

They are older than the Navy and Marine Corps, but they didn't join the Army until the 20th century. The Air Force doesn't have any; the Coast Guard has a higher percentage than any other service.

What are they?
Warrant officers.
But, really, what are they?

"We're known as the experts," explains freshly minted Marine Corps WO1 Wade Wallace, while pushing tent stakes into the cold earth at Quantico Marine Corps Base in Virginia. Before he was selected for promotion to warrant officer, Wallace was an E-6 staff sergeant with 12 years of Marine Corps enlisted experience behind him. His overnight bivouac at Quantico is part of the Marine Corps' effort to teach its new warrant officers the leadership and combat skills expected of its officer corps.

The rank of warrant officer is perhaps the most misunderstood of all military ranks. Most, but not all, are commissioned officers. As a group, warrant officers fall between the lowest regular officer rank and cadets, officer candidates, and enlisted personnel. Confusion over the precise definition and role of warrant officers is widespread.

And for good reason: Historically, each service has used warrant officers in a different way. Legislative efforts to unify the use of the rank for the most part have not brought uniformity, although the Warrant Officer Study of the 1980s resulted in 1986 legislation that provided a framework for standardized procedures across the services.

But one thing all warrant officers agree on is that they are, as Wallace says, the experts. Wallace's area of expertise happens to be telephone cable systems, but warrant officers serve in a broad range of technical specialties, including air traffic control, aviation maintenance technician, satellite communications system repair/technician, underwater special operations, pilot, Criminal Investigation Division special agent, band leader, physicians' assistant, and information systems technician, to name only a few. "We are the true technicians. We know the job inside and out," is the way retired CWO4 Tom Hennen puts it.

To understand the importance of defining a warrant officer as a "technical expert," it is necessary to roll the clock back — waaaaay back, all the way to the Middle Ages.

Tracing the evolution of the warrant officer corps in a single service is a challenge, let alone determining their status and stature in each branch. But here we go.

Nautical beginnings

When ships were needed for fighting a thousand years ago, they were drafted into service from their merchant owners. The captain placed in charge of a ship often did not know how to sail, so commoners who were expert seamen received royal warrants requiring them to serve their king for specified periods of time. The term "warrant" is derived from an old German word meaning trust, care, or guarantee. Today, each service secretary issues warrants for the lowest warrant officer grade, WO1. Warrant officers above WO1 — from Chief Warrant Officer 2 through CWO5 — are commissioned officers, with promotions received from the president.

Given the nautical origins of the rank, it makes sense that the U.S. Navy has the longest tradition of using warrant officers. On Dec. 13, 1775, when Congress agreed to build 13 frigates to form the nucleus of the Revolutionary War navy, it established two grades of officers for this force: commissioned and warrant. The commissioned group included captains and lieutenants to command ships. Warrant officers included those with the specialized skills needed to sail and control the ships, such as boatswains, gunners, carpenters, surgeons, and pursers — in other words, the experts.

The status of the warrant officers in the Navy has changed over time: In 1910, Congress authorized the promotion of 10 warrant officers annually to the rank of ensign. By World War I, most warrant officers came from the enlisted ranks, embedding the view of warrant officer as a “bridge” rank between enlisted and commissioned personnel.

A 1959 Navy study evaluating the impact of enlisted pay grades and Limited Duty Officers on warrant officer ranks brought a short-lived phaseout of warrant officers, but in a pattern followed by each service, the Navy continued to evaluate its use of warrant officers, making this rank perhaps the most pondered in our modern military structure. By 1963, the Navy had reversed itself and jump-started its warrant officer corps. Eleven years later, yet another Navy study recommended retaining warrant officers, stressing the need for this seasoned group of technical experts.

To support this goal, the Navy dropped the entry-level rank of wo1 and offered commissions to all warrant officers, allowing them to enter at the CWO2 level. Today, the Navy has about 1,700 warrant officers, including 81 women who can serve in every career field except seals.

The other services

Marine Corps: talented ten

The Marine Corps added warrant officers in 1916 for positions of gunner, quartermaster clerk, and pay clerk and today has slightly more than 1,800 warrant officers — or roughly 10 percent of Marine Corps personnel. Of those 1,800, 117 are women who are restricted from serving in any combat arms military occupational specialty.

Coast Guard: greatest percentage

The Coast Guard today has 6,866 warrant officers in a total force of 35,092, the highest percentage of any service. When the Revenue Cutter Service merged with the U.S. Lifesaving Service in 1915 to become the U.S. Coast Guard, there were 351 warrant officers and 242 commissioned officers. The Coast Guard assumed Navy ranks in 1921, converting many warrant officer billets to chief petty officer billets.

The use of Coast Guard patrol boats to fight liquor smuggling during Prohibition required more personnel, prompting the Coast Guard to offer exams to civilians and enlisted personnel for entrance into its warrant officer ranks, the only service to use this recruiting technique.

The Coast Guard appointed their first female warrant officer, Ships Clerk Elizabeth Splaine, in December 1958 and today has 49 female CWOs out of a total female force of 1,450, with no restrictions on the fields in which female warrant officers can serve. Through the years, the Coast Guard has maintained a higher percentage of warrant officers in its ranks than any other service.

Army: largest volume

In sheer numbers, Army use of warrant officers overshadows all other services, with about 11,700 warrant officers on active duty today — about 2.3 percent of its total force. Women make up nearly 5 percent of the Army's warrant-officer corps with 616 female warrant officers on active duty and 673 in the Reserve forces. Yet, the words “warrant officer” didn't appear in the Army until 1918, when Congress included the appointment of warrant officers to serve as masters, mates, and chief engineers in the Army Mine Planter Service.

Two years later, Congress authorized the use of warrant officers in other fields. The expansion of the Army's warrant officer corps became a way to reward and retain talented and devoted enlisted personnel after World War I. Over the years, the number of Army warrant officers fluctuated widely, and the rank continued to be used as a reward, leaving a sense of confusion over the official role of warrant officers within the Army. By World War II, warrant officers served in about 40 Army specialties, without any clear policy on their role. It was also at this time, in 1944, that women were authorized to be appointed as warrant officers in the Army.

After World War II, the Army suffered a severe shortage of aviators. Warrant officers offered the continuity needed in the Army's aviation program, which often suffered from rapid rotation and command assignments expected of regular officers. The first class of Army warrant officer helicopter pilots graduated from the Army Aviation School at Fort Sill, Okla., in 1951.

The Army began to redefine the concept of a warrant officer, bringing it closer to the “expert” model used by the other services. A 1954 study recommended more study, and another report in 1957 recommended increasing the number of warrant officers with a “high degree of technical skill acquired through extensive training.” It clearly stated that warrant officers should “not be considered as a category of personnel established as a reward or incentive.”

The Vietnam War solidified the role of warrant officers as the premiere Army aviators, as their ranks swelled from 2,960 in the mid-1960s to more than 12,000 by 1970. They were among the first to be killed and the last to leave, flying the helicopters that became a symbol of that war.

Almost 50 percent of Army warrant officers today work in aviation, although Army warrant officers now can serve in 73 different job specialties, all but two of which are open to women. In 1975, by contrast, only 36 percent of warrant officer jobs could be filled by women; it’s no coincidence that 20 years ago, the Army had fewer than 50 female warrant officers on duty.

Air Force: the one with none

When the Air Force gained its independence in 1947 and changed its name from the Army Air Corps, it brought the Army’s warrant officer rank with it, including the tradition of using the rank as a reward or incentive.

But Air Force concerns over the need to retain skilled enlisted personnel and protect its fledgling officer corps conflicted with this role for warrant officers, and even as the Army expanded its use of warrant officers, the Air Force began to decrease its force.

As a result, warrant officers were perceived as a threat to commissioned officer ranks, and Air Force leaders viewed the addition of the top enlisted grades of E-8 and E-9 in 1958 as a solution to promotion stagnation in its enlisted ranks. The last Air Force warrant officer retired from active duty in 1980, and the Air Force today is the only service without the classification.

The Future

Today’s warrant officers in the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Army carry on the traditions of their Revolutionary War predecessors, working in a wide range of highly technical and skilled positions, ever more important as each service uses more sophisticated weapons technology. Warrant officers also provide essential stability to each of the services. Marine Corps WO1 Stuart White, who already has 18 years of enlisted service behind him, says of the transition to warrant officer: “If we make this jump, we intend to stay for 30 years.”

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