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Retaining Warrant Officer Pilots

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One of the most attractive career programs offered by the Army is that involving warrant officer aviators. The program is progressive, generates its own interest and motivating factors, and has been updated to incorporate both short and long-range improvements. The warrant officer aviator program has been highly successful in attracting top-quality personnel.

Performance of our warrant officers in the conduct of flight operations in Vietnam has been outstanding. They are essential to what is probably the finest military aviation effort that has ever existed. However, the program faces a serious problem in retaining these warrant officer aviators in the service after they have completed their initial three-year obligatory tour of active duty following flight training.

From approximately 65 percent in 1965, the retention rate has dropped to a current rate of around 30 percent. There are indications that the retention rate might drop even lower. Lack of retention, of course, impedes the ability of the Army to meet its aviator requirements in the support of the conflict in Vietnam and for many other requirements throughout the world. Further, it causes a great increase in the costs of training additional aviators to replace those who leave the service.

An examination of the program may help in developing appropriate courses of action to increase retention and add vitality to the program.

The recent history of the employment of warrant officer aviators commenced in 1951 when the Army activated three transportation helicopter companies. Warrant officer aviator production continued in step with expansion of the Army's airmobile capability and, by 1959, the warrant officer aviator strength had stabilized at 1,200.

In 1961, based on recommendations of the Tucker Board, the Army increased the authorization for warrant officers in the expanding aviation program to 2,600. Subsequently, the Army established its ratio of warrant officers to officers at aviation company level at about three to one. On this basis, requirements for warrant officer aviators have increased to approximately 12,000 at the present time. Current warrant officer aviator strength is around 7,500.

The procurement of warrant officers is from two basic sources. About 30 percent are enlisted men who apply for the program. The remaining 70 percent are "enlisted option" applicants - civilians facing military service who volunteer for the warrant officer aviator program. All applicants must meet stringent physical, mental, and flight aptitude requirements. Enlisted option candidates must also complete basic training.

Preflight Course

All aviator warrant officer candidates receive a four-week, officer candidate school-type preflight course to condition them for the rigors of flight training and to prepare them to meet more responsible and demanding military duties. Flight training lasts 34 to 38 weeks depending upon whether the candidate is undergoing fixed-wing

or rotary-wing qualification. All flight training is oriented toward ultimate service in Vietnam, and virtually all new warrant officer aviators are immediately assigned to aviation units in that country.

Army regulations define the warrant officer as a highly skilled technician, who, under certain circumstances, may be used in a supervisory capacity. Supervisory positions are usually associated with aircraft maintenance. In actual practice, however, warrant officer aviators frequently command at the operational level while filling vacant officer positions. By and large, warrant officers are used interchangeably with officer aviators in the performance of cockpit seat duties, and they also perform a wide variety of nonaviation duties such as unit supply officer, unit motor officer, and general administration. The warrant officer aviator; is exposed to equal danger, accepts the same hazard, and routinely performs the same duties as the junior officer.

Differential Rates

There is a marked difference in the pay of the officer and the warrant officer, however. In flight pay, the officer draws about 30 percent more than the warrant officer. This is a source of widespread dissatisfaction among warrant officers who consider this an inequitable differential of flight pay for performance of duties that are essentially identical.

Actually, flight pay is not awarded to compensate pilots for combat duties performed, or hazards encountered, or proficiency in flying skill. The purpose of flight pay was established by law in 1948 and 1955, and that purpose is explicit: It is to provide an incentive to induce volunteers to engage and remain in hazardous occupations on a career basis during peacetime.

The reason for differential rates by grade evolved from the stated purpose, and this reason was that a greater inducement was required for commissioned officers than warrant officers to keep them in an aviation career. Nonetheless, the typical warrant pilot is under the impression that his flight pay is awarded for hazardous duty, and for that reason does not sympathize with the current system of flight pay.

During recent months, the Army has implemented measures to provide both short and long-range improvements in the warrant officer aviator program. These improvements are designed to insure a program with optimum benefits to the Army and to the individual participant. Salient features are:

- A formalized aviator program covering an entire 30-year career.
- Reduction of time in grade by 50 percent prior to consideration for promotion to the next higher grade.
- Opportunity for civil education under the degree completion program.
- Additional Regular Army warrant officer appointments.
- Intermediate and advanced career courses of schooling for selected warrant officers.

For the career courses, a warrant officer must have three years or more as a rated aviator to qualify for the intermediate course, and must have attained the grade of W-4 or be on a selection list for promotion to W-4 for the advanced. The intermediate course will be 23 weeks long and will cover the role of Army aviation, aviation unit staff functions and procedures, and general instruction in combined arms operations. The course is similar to that taken by officers in the branch basic courses.

The advanced course of 28 weeks in duration will include refresher training in the role of Army aviation, aviation safety, techniques of aircraft accident prevention and investigation, airfield operations, and air traffic control. The course will provide training for duty in a wide variety of responsible positions. Both courses are designed to produce a highly professional aviator possessing aviation skills much broader than those merely entailing the operation of aircraft.

While pursuing these courses, individual students will also have the opportunity to qualify in more advanced aircraft and to earn ratings as instructor pilots and instrument flight examiners. It is expected that this formal training will establish a core of experienced personnel within the aviation program and provide maximum benefits to the Army. It is further believed that the training will increase the attractiveness of the program and, thereby, increase retention rate of high-quality aviators.

HumRRO Survey

Despite the positive actions that the Army has taken to improve the warrant officer aviator program and the status of the individual aviator, there still remain several shortcomings which seriously reduce the over-all success of the retention effort. Recently, the Human Resources Research Office (HumRRO) of George Washington University conducted a survey of about 2,400 warrant officer aviators. The survey was in the form of a questionnaire containing 1,250 questions designed to determine motivation factors, career satisfaction, and recommendations for improvement in the warrant officer aviator program. Among elements addressed by the survey was career intent. The survey indicated that only 20 percent of those entering the aviation program from civilian life under the enlisted option plan would remain in

the service after completion of their initial obligatory tour. Enlisted option plan men had completed an average of one and one-half years of college before entering the service and stated a desire to resume civilian education or to seek employment with commercial aviation as principal reasons for leaving the Army. On the other hand, 40 percent of the personnel entering the aviation program from active enlisted status intended to continue in the aviation program after completion of initial obligatory tours. With a rate twice as great, future recruiting efforts should be concentrated on prior service personnel.

Independent Army studies as well as the HumRRO survey have revealed these factors which adversely affect the retention rate of warrant officer aviators:

- Individual dissatisfaction with the aviation program due to repetitive combat tours to Vietnam, the belief that warrant officer flight pay is inequitable in relation to that received by officers, frequent dislocation and separation from family, and the feeling that promotion opportunity is limited because of the warrant officer grade structure.
- Inability of the long-tour rotational base to provide aviator positions for all returnees from short-tour areas.
- Opportunity for individual improvement by leaving the service to take advantage of the GI Bill or other veterans' benefits.
- Opportunity for greater security and better pay with civil airlines or industry.

It appears that, at current and projected attrition rates following initial obligatory tours, the Army will never have sufficient aviators to meet the objective of a three-year cycle for

assignment of aviators to short and long-tour areas. Under this cycle, an individual would be assured assignment of at least two years in a long-tour area prior to reassignment to a short tour area such as Vietnam. Dissatisfaction due to repetitive tours to Vietnam, therefore, will continue. This will increase attrition and further aggravate the over-all problem.

Airmobile Capability

Continued high attrition will prevent the Army from substantially expanding its airmobile capability. Without considerable improvement in retention, activation of additional airmobile divisions for quick-reaction forces will not be feasible. With these two factors in mind, it is evident that the Army and the Department of Defense must take a new look at the retention problem and adopt positive and, perhaps, revolutionary measures to induce far greater numbers of aviators to remain in service beyond initial obligatory service.

The 30-year career program for warrant officers is a distinct improvement, but it will appeal to only a relatively small percentage of career-motivated aviators and, in itself, will not significantly increase retention. Although it is not possible to quantify the increase in retention that would ensue, certain actions to alleviate individual dissatisfaction within the aviation program will collectively be productive. The three most important of these are:

- Equalization of flight pay between warrant officer grades and the first four officer grades.
- Creation of warrant officer grades W -5 and W-6 in order to prevent stagnation of an individual in the grade of W-4 after about the 10th year of service.
- The inadequacy of the long-tour rotational base to provide appropriate positions for aviator

returnees from short-tour areas might be corrected by cross-training warrant officer aviators in nonaviation skills such as meteorology, air defense missile assembly, radio and radar repair, nuclear powerplant operation, armament repair, automotive maintenance, image interpretation, and intelligence.

Aptitudes for such type duties are commonly found among aviator personnel. With adequate cross-training, warrant officer aviators could be used productively in nonaviation assignments in long-tour areas when aviation positions are not available.

Marginal Solution

These measures are short range and, at best, will offer only a marginal increase in the retention rate. With industry, particularly the airline industry, offering greater pay and job security, and with the attractions of the civilian life and the opportunities under the GI Bill, it is highly unlikely that the Army will ever be able to satisfy its aviator requirements unless something better is offered.

From a cost standpoint, it is less expensive to retain aviators for long periods than to continue the mass production of aviators to replace losses. This points to the one probable approach which offers a chance of substantially increasing retention - greater compensation.

One form that this might take would be to offer a tax-free, lump-sum bonus for continuation on active duty. This would put total career pay on a basis comparable with that offered by the airlines. For example, the plan might include a \$10,000 tax-free bonus at the end of the fourth, eighth, 12th, 16th, and 20th years of rated service on condition that the individual would agree to serve for the ensuing four years.

On the basis of a recent estimate, it costs \$43,000 to qualify an aviator. This, plus five bonuses, would total \$93,000 over the 24 years if the pilot remained in service. On the other hand, the cost to train a new aviator every three years to fill the same cockpit vacancy would cost the Government \$334,000. The potential savings to the Government are obviously substantial for several thousand pilots. In addition to the monetary saving, the Government would save the skills and experience gained by the aviator over the years. In view of the virtually insolvable problem of retaining aviators, some such revolutionary approach must be taken. The Army in concert with the other services should sponsor legislation sufficiently bold to prevent the continuing loss of money and skill.

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