

May 20, 1958: Making the Supergrade

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May 21 2007

On May 20, 1958, enlisted history was made. Not just at Bolling, but at every American military base worldwide. Public Law 85-422 was passed, creating the enlisted positions of E-8 and E-9. The law was the result of many years of rank congestion and debate for an enlisted force that was playing an expanding technological role in the Cold War.

After the Korean conflict had drawn to a cease-fire in 1953, all branches of the armed forces suffered huge retention losses. In the Air Force alone, 80 percent of all first-term Airmen left the service after their first tour. Military readiness was negatively impacted. In October 1957, the Soviet Union launched the sputnik satellite into space, establishing their space superiority at the time. Sputnik was the impetus Congress needed to focus on rebuilding our nation's military. But U.S. Air Force bombers couldn't fly unless qualified Airmen were available to maintain them, and retention rates were still dropping. In response, they established the Cordiner Committee to find a solution.

More sophisticated weapon systems required longer training requirements, which required a measure of senior-level experience for the enlisted force. That skill was present in the ranks, but a promotion stagnation of E-7s made it largely unappreciated. The average person progressed to E-7 by the 12th year of service, leaving eight to 18 years of service without further advancement, and the civilian sector was paying generously for the continued application and deployment of such highly developed skills.

The solution proposed by the Cordiner Committee was to include two additional grades of E-8 and E-9 for all services. Originally, they limited the number to 0.5 percent for E-9 and 1.5 percent for E-8, but later changed them to 1 and 2 percent, respectively. (The Top Three

organizations on military bases today were originally made up of just the E-9s and E-8s because they represented the top 3 percent.)

Public Law 85-422 created a new compensation system that attracted qualified personnel and motivated them to remain in the enlisted force. The target date for the first round of approximately 2,000 E-8s was Sept. 1, 1958, with a second round to follow on March 1, 1959. Testing for the new grades began May 26. To test, an enlistee had to have served at least 10 years, with a minimum of two years in grade E-7 as of March 1, 1959.

On Sept. 1, 1959, 39 enlistees assigned to Headquarters Command, Bolling, were given the first senior master slots. The first to be presented with the new rank was Senior Master Sgt. Paul Skreptack, a senior administrative noncommissioned officer for the 1100th Air Base Wing, the host organization at Bolling at the time.

The new senior master sergeants were all classified as superintendents. It solved the problem of a squadron having four flight chiefs, two inspectors and a line chief, all at the grade of E-7, by creating a top supervisor a grade higher than the others. Exempting the E-8s from additional duties that distracted from their supervisory priorities added professional shine to the enlisted image. Retention rates improved and the enlisted force was able to keep pace with the evolution of the rapidly changing military landscape.

Today's E-8s and E-9s have 15 to 30 years of experience, surpassing that of most CEOs and board presidents in the civilian industry. They remain their commanders' senior advisers for enlisted matters and represent the pinnacle of enlisted experience in the ranks today.