

# A history of sea service ranks & titles



**Part One: The Flag Officer**

## Why can we string up an ensign each day at colors, but not later in the wardroom? What do the petty officer and dog catcher have in common? Why don't we have vice commanders and lieutenant admirals?

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By PACM Dave Cipra, Editor

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This six-part article will give you some background on the evolution of our ranks and uniforms. Revenue Cutter Service records are incomplete, so there are many gaps in the story.

Much of the information is from an Air Force pamphlet, "Why is the Colonel called Kernal?" by Raymond Oliver, Museum Curator at McClellan Aviation Museum.

**Admiral:** The term for our highest-ranking naval officers has a unique beginning. Most other terms we use have been derived directly from Romance or Germanic languages (as was the English language).

Admirals found their way into our sea language from the Arabic term *amir-ar-bahr*, meaning *commander of the seas*. Soldiers, probably as early as the 11th Century, brought the term home from the Crusades.

Outside Arabia, the term was first used by Sicilian sailors. They, and later the Genoese, dropped the last syllable and combined the first two into *amiral*. The French and Spanish gave their sea overlords similar titles.

The letter "d" was eventually squeezed in, and when the early English changed the spelling from the 14th Century *admyrall* to the 16th Century *admiral*, the spelling evolution was complete.

Edward I appointed the first British *admyrall* in 1297, when he titled William de Leyburn "Admyrall of the Sea of the King of England." Some time later, the

title became Lord High Admiral. The title seemed to be more administrative than operational. It definitely denoted royalty. Admirals became sea commanders in the English Navy by the 16th or 17th Century.

Originally, the admiral's job was to ride a ship in either the lead or the middle portion of the fleet. If his flagship were in the middle of the fleet, he would appoint a deputy to represent him in the leading portion or van.

The Latin term for deputy is *vice*. We have vice admirals instead of lieutenant admirals because *lieutenant* takes the place of an absent senior officer, while a *vice* is a deputy, whether the senior officer is present or not.

Even the vice admiral had deputies. Instead of *vice vice admirals*, or *lieutenant vice admirals*, the English coined a new term. The admiral, remember, bobbed about in the middle of the fleet, while his vice admiral took the lead. And — you guessed it — the vice' deputy brought up the rear. So ... they called the *Admiral in the Rear*.—Thus *rear admirals*.

The first U.S. Navy rear admiral was not appointed until 1862. Even though the Army was led by generals, (who had colonels and captains serving under them) the highest grade in the sea services had been captain. The reason? Many people in this country remembered the British tyranny in the Colonies. The title of Admiral was too reminiscent of royalty.

But others saw a need for naval grades above that of captain. Among these were Captain John Paul Jones, who felt Navy officers need parity with Army generals — a Navy captain was at

the time a junior officer, equivalent to an Army captain. There were also disputes among naval captains. Who would be senior enough to resolve them?

Various Secretaries of the Navy suggested to Congress that we needed admiral grades, if only to achieve parity with foreign navies. Our most senior captains were "often subjected to serious difficulties and embarrassments in the interchange of civilities with those of other nations..."

By 1857, the Navy had created the temporary grade of *flag officer* to allow the most senior captain in a fleet or squadron to be in command (and hoist a flag to adorn his flag ship). These flag officers were, in practice, commodores.

Congress authorized nine Navy rear admirals on July 16, 1862, one of which was former flag officer David Glasgow Farragut. Two years later, Rear Admiral Farragut was promoted to vice admiral — our nation's first. In 1866, he became the U.S. Navy's first full admiral.

He was not the first admiral in the Americas, however. That honor goes to a Genoan, "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" Christopher Columbus, who had demanded the title before leaving Spain for the Indies. He is also the first admiral known to have landed half a world away from his destination — and still come out of it a hero!

The Coast Guard promoted its first rear admiral in 1922 — William E. Reynolds. From 1919, he had ranked as "Captian Commandant," equivalent to a Navy captain. Our first full admiral was Russel Wasche. He was promoted directly from commander to vice admiral in 1942, and to admiral just after World War II.

When Congress created the rear admiral grade in 1862, there was of course no flag officer insignia. It was common at the time for Army flag officers to design their own pompous uniforms, including feathers in the hats and pounds of gold on sleeves. The

result was some very ornamental sleeve lace.

Our rear admirals wore six sleeve stripes; three were three-quarter of an inch wide, alternating with three stripes of quarter-inch lace — sort of a “triple jay-gee.” The six stripes measured a full 10 inches, top to bottom.

When Farragut was promoted to vice admiral in 1864, he flashed even more gold. And when promoted to admiral in 1866, he had so many stripes they stretched from his cuff to just below his elbows!

The sleeve lace now worn by admirals and vice admirals dates from March 1869. A general order from the Secretary of the Navy specified for admirals a two-inch gold stripe at the cuff with three half-inch stripes above. Vice admirals wore two half-inch stripes above the stripe. Some believe that the two-inch stripe comes from combining the four half-inch stripes of a captain.

As you'll see below, there is another theory.

**Commodore:** Some might argue that the commodore was not a “flag officer” until the 1980s. Originally, commodores rated a pennant, not a flag.

The Dutch invented the grade of commodore in about 1652, during one of their wars with England. They already had enough admirals to command fleets and captains to command vessels. They needed a grade in between to command squadrons of ships within the fleets. And they didn't relish the thought of paying for more admirals. So they created a median grade of *commodore*, at about half an admirals pay.

The word commodore comes to us from the Dutch (*commandeur*), which in turn was borrowed from Old French (*commandeor*) or Spanish (*commen-*

*dador*) all of which mean “having command over others” — a commander.

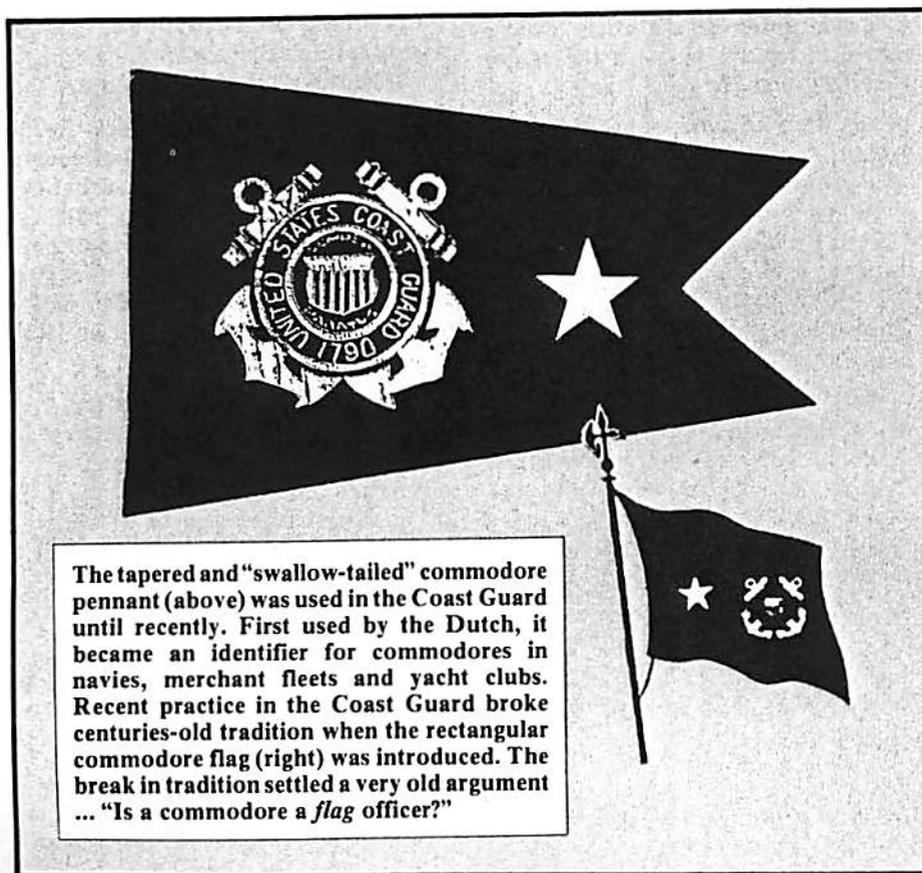
The Dutch leader William of Orange introduced the rank to the British Isles in 1689, when he became King William III of England. Sometime later, merchant sailors began using the term for the senior officer of a merchant fleet.

Dutch commodores rated the wide, “broad command pennant” which was tapered and swallow-tailed, like the tail of their coats. The pennant has since become an identifier for commodores in many navies, merchant fleets and yacht clubs. The tradition carried over in the United States. Until the commodore grade was reincarnated recently, U.S. Coast Guard and Navy commodores flew a single star on a swallow-tailed pennant. Recent practice broke the centuries-old tradition, however, with the introduction of a rectangular commodore flag.

Our Navy used the honorary title commodore from the Revolutionary War until the Civil War. It was reserved for captains commanding two or more ships operating together, or for a captain with other significant duties. An example is commodore Patterson of New Orleans, who lead Navy ships (and the Revenue Cutters *Louisiana* and *Alabama*) in 1819 in their fights against Jean Lafitte and other pirates in the Gulf of Mexico. By at least the Civil War, the term *flag officer* was used interchangeably with the term *commodore*, but always as a title, not as a true grade.

In 1862, the Navy was given more parity with troops ashore when Congress authorized two new grades above captain. Commodore became an official grade, with the “promotion” of 18 senior captains. Actually, there had been several grades of captain up to this time. The officers in the senior grade became commodores. Captain Farragut (remember him?) had held the title of *flag officer* up to this time and was promoted from flag officer to rear admiral.

The two-inch commodore sleeve lace is said to have been inspired by the Commodore's Broad Pennant — in effect transferring it from the masthead to his sleeve. Commodors also took



over the single star which captains had worn on their shoulder straps up to this time.

Commodore was a command grade from 1862 to 1899, when it was retired — literally. After 1899, captains with Civil War service were retired to the grade of commodore.

The grade was brought back to active service in 1943, when 147 captains received temporary promotions. Four of those were Coast Guardsmen, ranking from June 1, 1943. After the war, it again became an honorary title for commanders of some squadrons.



• *Above:* No wonder ADM Farragut put his hand in the breast of his coat. How else could he hold up all that gold braid???

• *Right:* William E. Reynolds was the Coast Guard's first rear admiral — thusly becoming our first flag officer. Photos courtesy US Navy and USCG Historian

Congress revived the grade in 1981 for the Navy to replace rear admiral (lower half) and this time to give the non-service parity with the navy and Coast Guard. We had been promoting our captains directly to two-star rear admirals, who outranked Army, Air Force and Marine colonels promoted as one-star brigadiers. In December 1981, the navy promoted 38 captians to commodore. The Coast Guard beat the deadline and promoted captains to rear admiral that year, but afterward, all Coast Guard captains were promoted to

the commodore grade.

The Coast Guard presently has several commodores (by grade) but we have only one commodore (by title), since we have only one squadron (Squadron Two in Key West). We had commodores (by title) heading Squadrons One and Three in Vietnam.

Look for the continuation of this series in the next issue of the *Bulletin*.

The next installment will look at the command grades: captain, commander and lieutenant commander. //



# A history of sea service ranks & titles

By PACM Dave Cipra, Editor



Part Two:  
Those in command

This second installation of our six-part article will give you more background on the evolution of our ranks and uniforms. Records kept in the Revenue Cutter Service are very incomplete — that's why you'll find many gaps in the story.

Much of the information is from "Why is the Colonel called Kernal?" a U.S. Air Force publication by Raymond Oliver, curator of the McClellan Aviation Museum.

**Captain:** If you ever want to really befuddle a landlubber, try explaining what we mean when we call the boss "captain." — especially when he or she is not a captain.

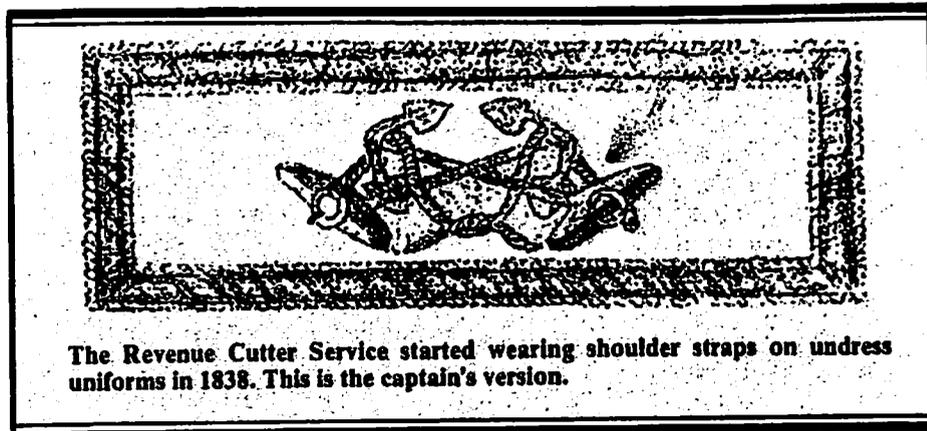
Our vessel commanders hold the *title* of *captain*, if not always the *grade*. But if the unit commanders are not officers, we call the officers-in-charge. To add to the confusion, we also use the term *skipper*, which comes from the Dutch word (*schipper*) meaning shipper.

The term *captain* is derived from the Latin word for *head*. Early terms for the head of a military unit were *capitaneus* (Latin), *capitain* (French) and *capitane* (Middle English).

The whole mess started in the 11th Century and we can blame it on the Army. In fact, we can blame it on the British Army. Captains served on British vessels — but not as captains (as we know them). They commanded not the ship but a contingent of soldiers on board. The masters of the vessels were warrant officers, commanding the vessel and crew, while the captains (Army-types) concerned themselves with combat troops.

The captains started becoming captains in about the 15th Century, when they took over some of the executive functions on board. By 1747, they had taken full command of the ships from their warrant officer master. (See warrant officer in an upcoming issue.)

The British recognized this slow take-over and during the process established the official title (not rank or grade) of *captain*. Thereafter, all sea commanders



were called by that title, despite their rank or grade. Soon, the British spilt the captains into three captain grades, depending on the size of the ship. The top grade of *post-captain* was equal in grade to a British army colonel. The lower grades eventually became commander and lieutenant commander.

Captain was the highest grade in the Continental Navy from its beginning in 1775, and from the beginning of the U.S. Navy in 1798 until 1857 when Congress created a temporary grade of *flag officer* (now *commodore*).

In the Continental (and later the U.S.) Navy, the captain of any warship was a captain in one of three grades, depending on the duties assigned. The lowest of the three became *master-commandant* in 1806, and the top two captain grades became *commodore* and *rear admiral* in 1862.

The Revenue Cutter Service approached the question a little differently. Our first captain, Hopley Yeaton, was commissioned as a master of a cutter. The next in command was the mate. Soon, however, the commanders of the Revenue Cutters were referred to as captains, as they would have been in the Navy. But the lower grades were first, second and third lieutenants — Army grades! The Army-style designation of Revenue Service (and later Coast Guard) junior officers continued until after World War I. Our captains were then equivalent to Army majors and Navy lieutenant commanders.

Little is known about the earliest

Revenue Cutter Service officer uniforms. Almost nothing is known about enlisted uniforms — if the existed. Before about 1834, it appears that cuttermen wore either their old Navy uniforms, or whatever merchant seamen were wearing at the time.

While Revenue Cutter captains did not enjoy parity with Navy counterparts, they experimented with Navy-style uniforms. It was the source of much grief for a few Navy officers who felt that the lowly Revenue Cutter Service captains were trying to masquerade as "real" captains.

In 1834, this caused quite a stir in Boston. Our captains were equivalent to Navy lieutenants (and later equivalent to Navy lieutenant commanders), probably because of the small size of our ships. One Navy officer sent a letter to the Secretary of Treasury complaining that

*"the Officers of the Revenue Cutter Service of this port and along the coast have assumed the uniform of the Officers of the Navy by adding Epaulettes to their full dresses, the Commander of the Cutter in particular having assumed the dress of a Master Commandant of the Navy."*

The Navy, by this time, had begun wearing shoulder straps, reserving epaulettes for dress uniforms.

He included an extract from the Treasury Regulations of the day which described the Revenue Cutter Service

uniforms. Commissioned officers were to wear

*"blue coat & pantaloons Edged with buff & buff vest, the coat with a rolling collar, six buttons on the breast, on each side, one button on each side of the collar & one in the middle of the skirts fold. The Captains will wear in addition, two buttons on each cuff, & two on each pocket."*

The regulation hat had a "black cockade with a glit button in the center ... Warrant officers will wear the same uniform as the Lieutenants but without the edging." The cock hat was part of the officer uniform until the mid-1930's.

The Navy complaint prompted action. The Treasury Secretary ordered the creation of new uniform regulations for Revenue Cutter officers (enlisted uniforms, if there were any, stayed the same). On July 21, 1834, a circular letter prescribed a uniform of

*"Dark grey cloth with rolling collar, double breasted, lined with black silk; nine buttons on each lapel and one on each side of the collar; four buttons on the cuff, four on the pocket flaps, one on each hip, two in the middle of the skirt fold, and one at the extremity of the skirt."*

Officers also received sleeve lace — "a strip of black braid, one inch wide, to be worn around the sleeve immediately above the cuff." The dress uniform included plain gold epaulettes.

First lieutenants wore one less button on each cuff and pocket flap and wore one epaulette on the right shoulder. Second lieutenants wore the same, with the epaulette on the left shoulder, and third lieutenants wore the same as second lieutenants, but without the sleeve lace. Warrant officer uniforms were quickly changed to be closer to those of the rest of the crew.

The eagle as a grade insignia first appeared in 1852. An eagle perched on an anchor was displayed on Navy shoulder straps and epaulettes. Until this time, our captains were apparently distinguished from other officers by

extra buttons on sleeves, pockets and lapels. On the epaulettes, the captain also wore a silver star (which he lost to the commodores in 1862).

The epaulette, besides showing rank and being rather decorative, originally served to ward off sword blows and was made of gold braid over metal armor. In the Navy, it soon became more decorative than useful. Navy officers began wearing shoulder straps in 1830, although they retained epaulettes for dress uniforms for about another century. The original use of the shoulder strap appears to have been to hold down the epaulette, keeping it from flapping in the sea breeze. In effect, the shoulder strap was upgraded from a tie-down to a rank device, whenever full-dress gold was not worn.

The Revenue Cutter Service adopted the shoulder strap for undress uniform in 1838. The Army adopted it, too, but for a different reason. They discovered that flashy epaulettes made their officers great targets in the field. Keeping epaulettes for dress uniforms, they converted to shoulder straps for non-parade dress in 1831.

The Revenue Cutter Service probably began wearing grade insignia instead of extra buttons when shoulder straps came into vogue. But it appears we followed the Army's fashions. Captains at first wore twin bars, and lieutenants wore single bars on shoulder straps. We're not exactly sure when (at least by the turn of the century), but Revenue Cutter Service captains eventually wore gold oak leaves on their shoulder straps and collars.

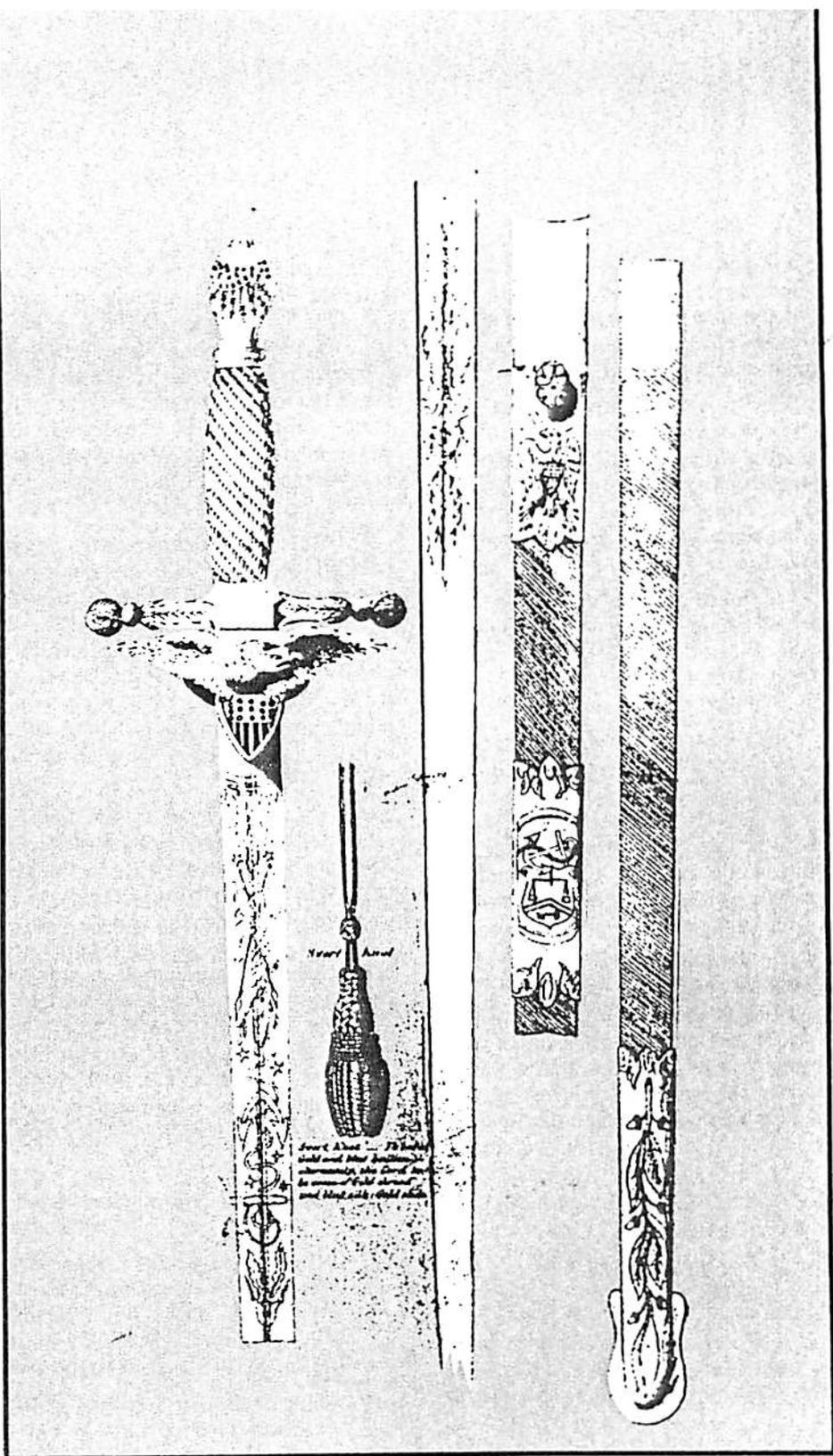
The parity continued for many decades. The 1894 Revenue Cutter Regulations state that revenue cutter captains ranked with Navy lieutenant commanders.

Some time around 1900, the Coast Guard was authorized to carry two higher grades of captain on its register. The top grade was *captain-commandant*, held by the man directing the service. There were at one time a half-dozen *senior captains*. The captain commandant wore four stripes on each sleeve, and eagles perched on anchors for collar



devices. Senior captains wore three full stripes and silver oak leaves (now the commander device) and captains wore the same insignia our lieutenant commanders now wear.

There was a short time when the Coast Guard had only one captain



*Left:* CAPT Robert M. Clark in parade dress blues, circa 1880. USCG historical photo.  
*Above:* Detail of officer's sword.

(actually a captain commandant) — in 1921 and 1922. At that time, we shifted from pseudo-Army designations to Navy grades. The six senior captains in the register reverted to commander and the 31 captains reverted to lieutenant commander. The captain commandant kept

his rank and title, and next year was promoted to rear admiral.

The practice of wearing four half-inch stripes on naval shoulder straps started in 1899. Soft shoulder straps eventually gave way to our present hard shoulder boards. In 1941, the eagle on

the anchor as a collar device was exchanged for the present "spread" eagle — adopted from the Army and Marine Corps.

**Commander:** A commander is one who gives commands, or has

command over others. The word comes from the Latin *commandare*, meaning "to give into one's hand," or to commit to one's charge — roots similar to those of commodore.

The British Navy used the term *master and commander* in about 1674 to designate the officer, usually a warrant officer, junior to the captain on larger sailing ships. Other terms used were *sub-captain*, *under-captain* and *master-commanding*.

The master and commanding could also skipper a smaller warship, in which case he could be addressed as captain. They shortened the title in 1794 to commander.

Our Navy followed a different course but came to the same destination. The second of the three grades assigned as vessel captains was *master commandant* which in 1838 became *commander*. (The third and lowest grade, *lieutenant commanding*, became *lieutenant commander* in 1862.)

The Revenue Cutter Service, as you would expect, went its own direction. Our original masters and mates became captains and lieutenants. (And, if you're ready for this, our most senior warrant officers became master's mates, even though we no longer had masters!)

Even though our vessel skippers were referred to by regulations as commanders, only our grade of senior captain was equal to the Navy's grade of commander (and wore the same sleeve lace). In effect, signing on as a Revenue Cutter officer limited your promotion potential to the equivalent of a Navy lieutenant commander, until we achieved parity in 1921.

In 1862, Navy commanders began wearing embroidered silver oak leaves as insignia, along with Bosun-style fouled anchors, on shoulder straps and epaulettes. Oak leaves as signs of heraldry apparently date to a least the days of the Roman Legions. In 1869, Navy commanders were authorized to wear three half-inch gold stripes on their sleeve cuffs.

Again, the Revenue Cutter Service refused to "follow suit." (Pun intended.) At some time between the start of the Civil War and the turn of the century, we failed to follow the Navy's lead in calling our officers captains, commanders, lieutenant commanders, etc. We stuck by the old system, which paralleled the Army's, of captain and three grades of lieutenant. The parity problem may have been the cause: our captains would have been "demoted" to lieutenant, had we chosen Navy-style grades.

We also used a mixed-up, hybrid system for uniform insignia. Our officers wore Navy sleeve lace corresponding to the grade of Army officers, and Army collar devices on Navy-style shoulder straps! For example: a Revenue Cutter captain (equivalent to a Navy lieutenant commander and an Army major) wore two and a half stripes on his sleeve and an oak leaf on the collar (with an oak leaf on a shoulder board). A first lieutenant wore two sleeve stripes, with twin silver bars on the collar and shoulder boards.

### Lieutenant commander:

Now, here's an officer grade U.S. naval forces did not copy from the British or French. It's an American original. In fact, those countries took it from us.

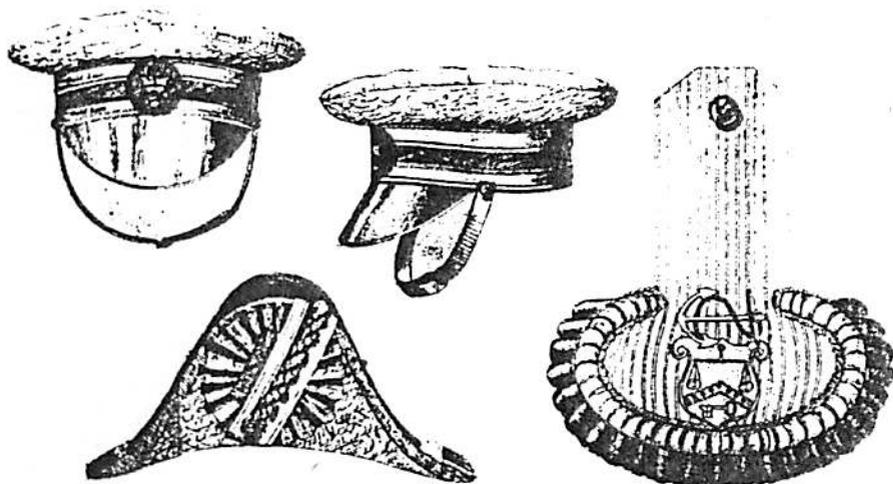
If a lieutenant is a person who takes the place of a superior officer, then a lieutenant commander would take the place of a commander, right? Not precisely so!

Shortly after 1775, a senior lieutenant commanding a smaller U.S. Navy vessel was referred to as — you guessed it — a *lieutenant commanding*. (The ships were usually 10- to 20-gun men-of-war.) The same is true of the Revenue Cutter under the command of a lieutenant. There are some references to a *grade of lieutenant-commandant* on similar classes of Navy vessels. In 1862, the Navy promoted those holding the *title* lieutenant-commanding to the *grade* of lieutenant commander. The Revenue Cutter Service did not make this change, sticking with the original four officer grades.

Navy lieutenant commanders wore gold embroidered oak leaves on their shoulder straps starting in 1862. In 1874, the present two and a half stripes were authorized for sleeve lace.

The British began using the grade of lieutenant commander in 1914, seven years before the U.S. Coast Guard, replacing the grade senior lieutenant.

In the next issue, we'll discuss junior officers: lieutenants and warrant officers. The subject will be no less confusing! //



# A history of sea



# service ranks & titles

## Part Three: The Junior Officers

By PACM Dave Cipra, Editor

Our third installation in this six-part article describes the evolution of the bottom half of the officer ranks. Remember, the Revenue Cutter Service didn't keep very good records — so you may find some gaps in the story.

Much of the information is from "Why is the Colonel called Kernal?" a U.S. Air Force publication by Raymond Oliver, curator of the McClellan Aviation Museum.

**Lieutenant:** The term *lieutenant* comes from the French *lieu* (place or space) and *tenant* (to hold or occupy). It is properly translated "place-holder."

The lieutenant takes charge when a superior officer is absent. He was his deputy when the superior officer was present but did not change from being a lieutenant to being a *vice*.

There may have been lieutenants on British naval vessels as early as the 12th Century, when ships carried soldiers (or, properly, marines) to do whatever fighting was necessary. A captain commanded the soldiers and he may have been served by one or more lieutenants.

The grade appeared officially in the British Navy in about 1580, but it soon disappeared. It became a designated grade in 1650, given to noblemen in training to become captains. Since there were no other grades below captain, there could have been several grades of lieutenant — first, second and third.

The lieutenant has been part of U.S. sea services since the Continental Navy in 1775. Lieutenants in 1862 wore two gold bars as insignia; in 1877 the bars turned to silver — a form of alchemy, perhaps. In 1874, the sleeve lace for lieutenants was two half-inch stripes of gold.

Revenue Cutter lieutenants (1834) wore the same uniform as captains, minus a few buttons. The sleeve lace at the time was a subtle decoration — one inch of black braid barely visible against the dark uniform. First lieutenants wore one gold epaulette on the right shoulder. Second and third lieutenants wore the epaulette on the left shoulder. Eventually, Revenue Cutter officers began wearing shoulder straps with collar and strap insignia.

**"Jay-Gee":** In the early days, the U.S. Navy's grade below lieutenant was *sailing master* — a warrant officer. After 1855, a new grade was established, with experienced Naval Academy graduates filling the positions and having the hefty title *master in line for promotion*. This distinguished them from warrant sailing masters (who could not be promoted) and from inexperienced



*passed-midshipmen* (see Ensign).

The grade insignia in 1862 for masters in line for promotion was a gold bar—half a lieutenant's insignia. This was changed to a silver bar in 1877 (ensigns did not wear rank insignia until 1922). They received gold sleeve stripes in 1881, one quarter-inch stripe above one half-inch stripe.

Since Revenue Cutter captains were

at one time equivalent only to Navy lieutenants, they wore twin bars. Later, our captains were judged equivalent in rank to Navy lieutenant commanders. All Revenue Cutter lieutenants apparently wore grade insignia equivalent to their counterparts in the Navy.

**Ensign:** *Ensign* comes from the Latin word (insignia) for an emblem or

banner. A warrior who carried his lord's colorful banner or ensign into battle became known as the *ensign-bearer*, and later as the *ensign*. We now call this kind of leadership "being a target." The ensign eventually led a unit of about 500 soldiers called an *ensigne*.

As a military grade, the ensign can be traced to the French Army. The French Navy adopted the grade and still calls its most-junior commissioned officers *ensignes*.

In this country, our first ensigns served in the Army as junior infantry officers. After the war, they also served in Regular Army infantry regiments from 1796 to 1814.

Ensigns did not join the U.S. Navy until the Civil War (or the Coast Guard until 1921). In 1862, graduates of the Naval Academy (who had been called *passed-midshipmen*) were given this grade and the same status as Army second lieutenants.

They wore a sleeve stripe of gold lace, a quarter-inch wide (the width grew to a half inch in 1881). The gold bar insignia was adopted in 1922.

In the Revenue Cutter Service, the most-junior officer grade was third lieutenant, up to 1921, when Navy-style grades were adopted. All third lieutenants became ensigns. Second lieutenants became lieutenants (junior grade).

**Warrant Officer:** The *warrant* part of the warrant officer's title comes from a German word meaning trust, care or guarantee. It is also the source of modern word *warranty*. A warrant is actually a piece of paper — an authorization — just as a commission is a warrant granting power.

Warrant officers were not enlisted people who warranted or deserved to be officers. They were sailors who carried an authorization from a higher echelon. In fact, warrants were once some of the most senior officers in Britain's Navy. The same was true in the Revenue Cutter Service, and this, as you'll see, caused problems into the 20th Century.

The term warrant set sail in 1040



Second LT James A. Alger of the Revenue Cutter Service in parade dress (circa 1907).  
Photo: USCG Historian

when five English ports built ships for King Edward the Confessor in exchange for certain privileges. They also furnished crews whose officers were the *master*, *boatswain*, *carpenter* and *cook*. Later, these officers were "warranted," or authorized by the king to sail under his name and ensign. They sailed and maintained the ships and were permanent officers of the navy, while captains were laid off or hustled ashore with the troops after each cruise.

Soldiers were also on the ships, but they had nothing to do with the sailing. The word "soldiering" became a contemptuous sailor term for the soldiers and anyone else who avoided shipboard duty. Today, we say "skating" or "slacking."

So, the warrant officers were permanent members of the crew. While the seaman and petty (from the French word *petite* for small) officers were

routinely discharged between sailings, officers holding warrants stayed on board as caretakers to supervise repairs and refittings.

Early in the 14th Century, the *purser* joined the warrant officer corps. (The most famous purser in naval history is Gopher on *The Love Boat*.) Originally called the *clerk of bursar*, the purser cared for the ship's treasury and store. We still have disbursing clerks in the Coast Guard, and until only a few years ago, our warrant PERS specialty was called *ship's clerk*.

In the centuries that followed, the *gunner*, *surgeon*, *chaplain*, *master-at-*

*arms* and *schoolmaster* warrants signed on.

Warrant officers were part of our Navy — and to some degree our Revenue Cutter Service — right from the start. We had warrant officers on Continental Navy ships in the Revolution. Congress, in 1774, listed as Navy Warrant Officers the *sailing master*, *purser*, *boatswain*, *gunner*, *carpenter* and *sailmaker*. There was also a warranted midshipman.

We haven't been able to figure out just when the Revenue Cutter Service shipped its first warrants. The confusion exists because warrant officers were considered to be petty (small) officers. The term appears in Revenue Cutter Service documents almost interchangeably.

Petty officers were selected by (and



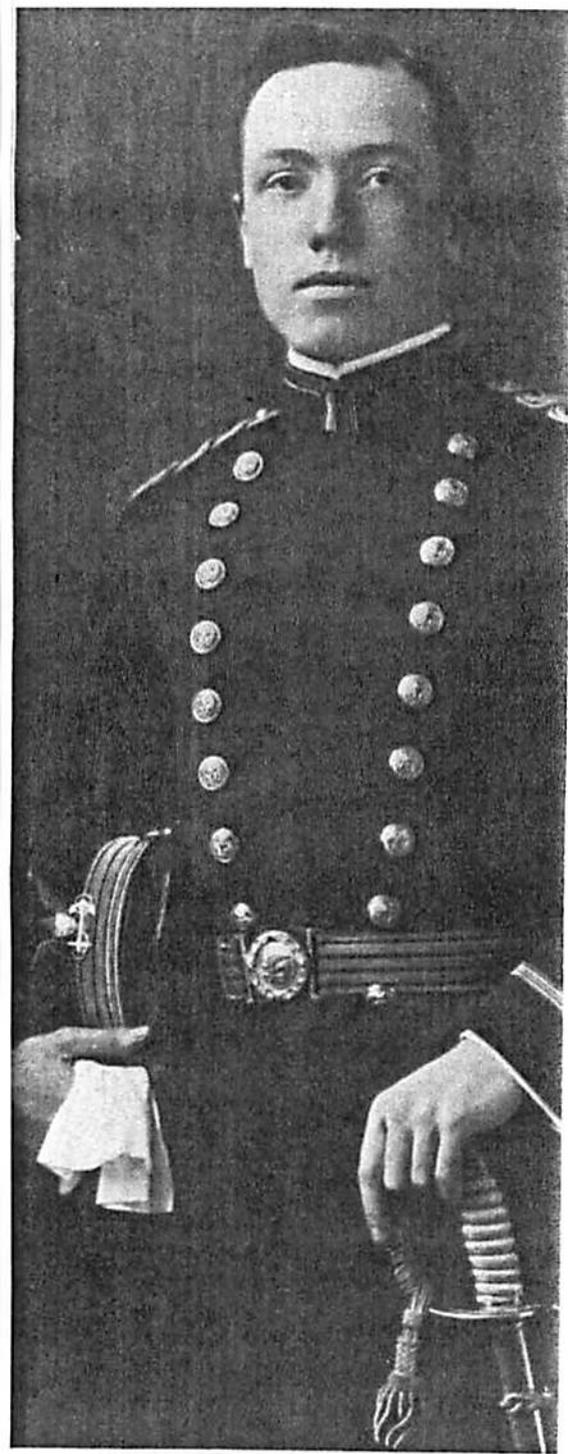
Second LT John L. Maker in the usual uniform for social affairs (circa 1903). Photo: USCG Historian



Chief Engineer James M. MacDougal in dress blues for his rank (circa 1871). Photo: USCG Historian



First LT Bernard H. Camden wears parade dress blues (circa 1904). Photo: USCG Historian



A 3rd lieutenant of the Revenue Cutter Service in parade dress blues. This photo was taken in 1887. Photo: USCG Historian.

served at the pleasure of) the captain from among the seamen, while warrant officers were supposedly selected and warranted by the Secretary of the Treasury (or at least the local Collector of Customs). Commissioned officers were commissioned by the President. Regulations issued in 1834 allow only for Petty Officers on Revenue Cutters, while cutter crew lists from the period before that show warrant officers serving on board. Later regulations allow for warrant officers but make no mention of petty officers, except when they refer to warrant officers generically as petty (small) officers. Our guess is that they were simply warranted petty officers.

By the early 1830s, there were nearly as many warrant officers as commissioned officers in the Revenue Cutter Service (57 commissioned and 35 warrants). On some ships, such as *Gallatin*, the commissioned officers were outnumbered two-to-one.

Revenue Cutter Service regulations called for three classes of officers: those in command (captains or lieutenants commanding), executive officers (always lieutenants) and forward officers (warrant officers). Warrants, not holding commissions, were a part of the crew, and lived "up forward" with the seamen. They also wore the seaman's uniform, with the addition of a few buttons here and there.

Navy warrants began wearing blue-and-gold stripes in 1853, but not on their sleeve cuffs, as they do today. The strips of lace adorned their caps. Two half-inch gold stripes were separated by a quarter-inch of blue cloth.

In 1899, Navy chief warrant officers started wearing a sleeve stripe of half-inch gold lace, broken at intervals by sections of blue thread a half-inch wide. In 1919, junior warrant officers also began wearing sleeve lace of gold broken by blue stripes.

The two grades of Revenue Cutter warrants wore a more conservative single

strip of unbroken mohair braid, one inch wide, two inches above the cuff—until about 1921, when we switched to the Navy system of officer grades. Our warrants wore the same headgear as commissioned officers but with a chin strap only a quarter-inch wide.

The Revenue Cutter Service ran into a problem when it was absorbed by the U.S. Lifesaving Service in 1915. What were they to do with the civilian station keepers? They had been performing the duties of at least junior officers, at a pay roughly equivalent to that of enlisted cuttermen. The answer was to make them all *Keepers Warranted by the Secretary of the Treasury*—warrant officers. The U.S. Coast Guard began life with 242 commissioned officers and 351 warrant officers.

The warrant keepers ranked just below *master's mates* (also warranted, who commanded such vessels as *Golden Gate* in San Francisco and *Davey* in New Orleans or small shore facilities such as the Depot at Baltimore, now the Coast Guard Yard). Warrant keepers ranked just above warrant boatswains.

In 1921, when we took on Navy grades, the three warrant specialties were combined into our present warrant boatswain specialty. The Navy complained heavily about the topheaviness of the Coast Guard, and many warrant keeper billets were reverted to chief petty officer.

According to regulations issued in 1908, men could enlist or be rated by the Captain as Acting Warrant Officers, until they were appointed by the Treasury Department. Records before this time show that a captain could enlist or appoint a crew member as a petty officer.

In the next issue, we'll leave the "realm of the horizontal stripe" to discuss our petty officers and seamen. Then it's on to the landlubbers—from general to private. And that's when when we take the "Sea Service" out of our headline. //

# A history of sea service ranks & titles

## Part Four: The Crew

By PACM Dave Cipra, Editor

This fourth installment of our six-part series will give you background on *The Crew*, from Petty Officer to "Boy."

Much of the information is from "Why is the Colonel called Kernal?" a U.S. Air Force publication by Raymond Oliver, curator of the McClellan AFB Aviation Museum, Calif.

**Petty officer:** The petty officer can trace his or her grade back to the Old French word *petit*, meaning something small. In medieval (and later) England, each village had several "petite," "pety" or "petty" officials or officers. In charge of sanitation, busting skulls or whatever, they were subordinate to such major officials as the steward or sheriff.

Senior warship officers in the English fleet were the boatswain, gunner and carpenter (see Warrant Officer in Issue 7-85). Each had assistants — pettier officers — called *mates*. Since early sailors were familiar with petty officers in their home villages, they adopted the term to describe minor officials on ship.

The ship's captain or master hired his own petty officers and they served at his pleasure. At the end of a voyage, or



whenever the ship's crew was paid off or released, all petty officers looked elsewhere for work.

There were petty officers in the British Navy at least by the 17th Century but the grade did not become official and permanent until 1808.

In our Continental Navy, petty officers were very important members of the crew. They were appointed by the ship's captain and held their appointments only while serving with that skipper. They did not wear uniforms or rank insignia, as did commissioned officers.

Revenue Cutter petty officers, as our present Coast Guard petty officers, had law enforcement duties unique to our

customs tasks. Revenue laws allowed officers and petty officers to board, inspect and seize vessels for violation of certain U.S. laws. Navy petty officers have never had such authority and responsibility.

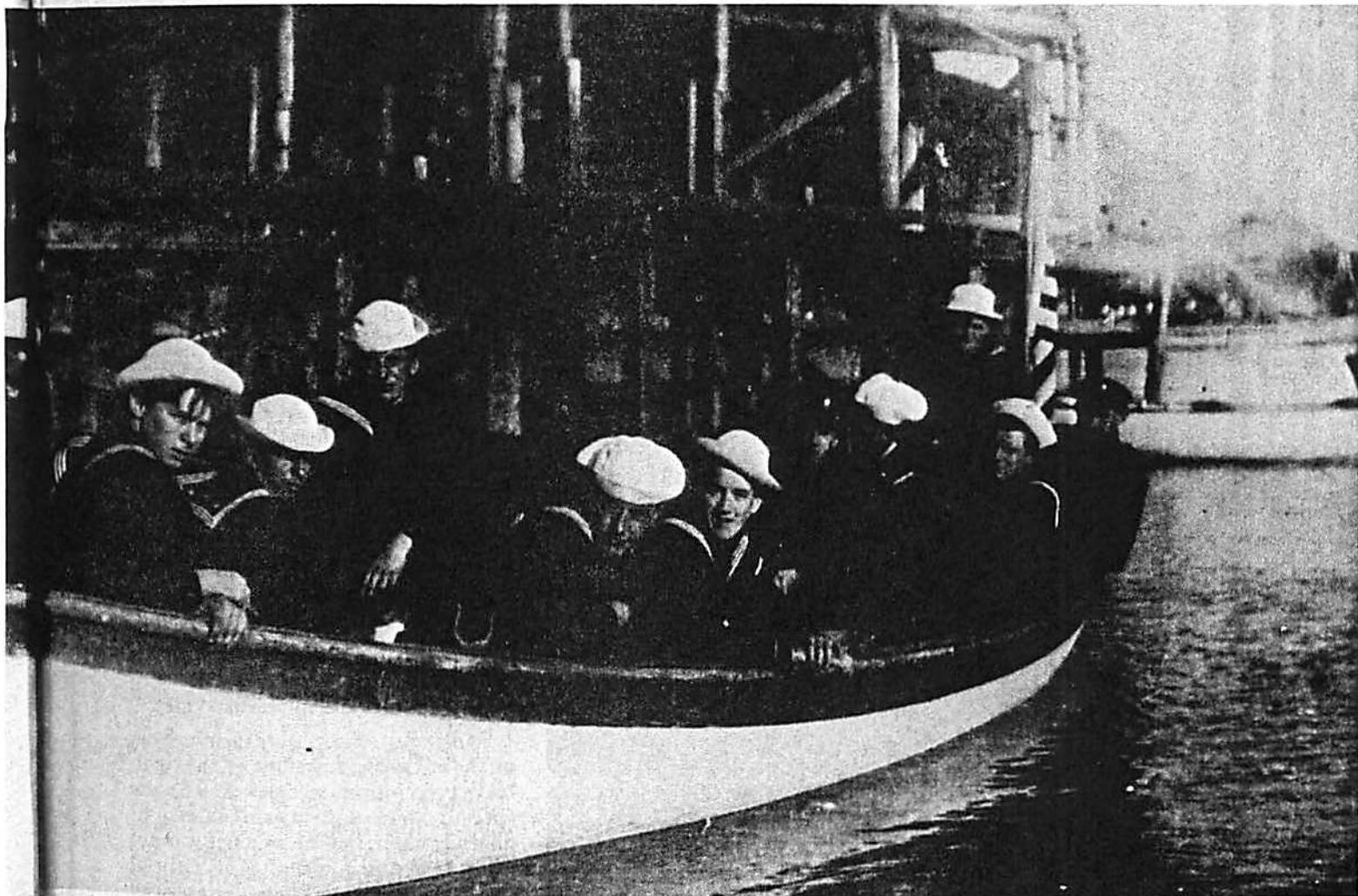
Someone apparently felt these petty revenue officers should have written authorization (*warrants*) to carry out the boardings. Originally selected from among the crew by the cutter skipper, at least some petty officers were soon warranted by the Secretary of the Treasury or the local Collector of Customs. While this may have in effect created warrant officer grades, the warranted petty officers were still part of the crew. They were sometimes referred to as

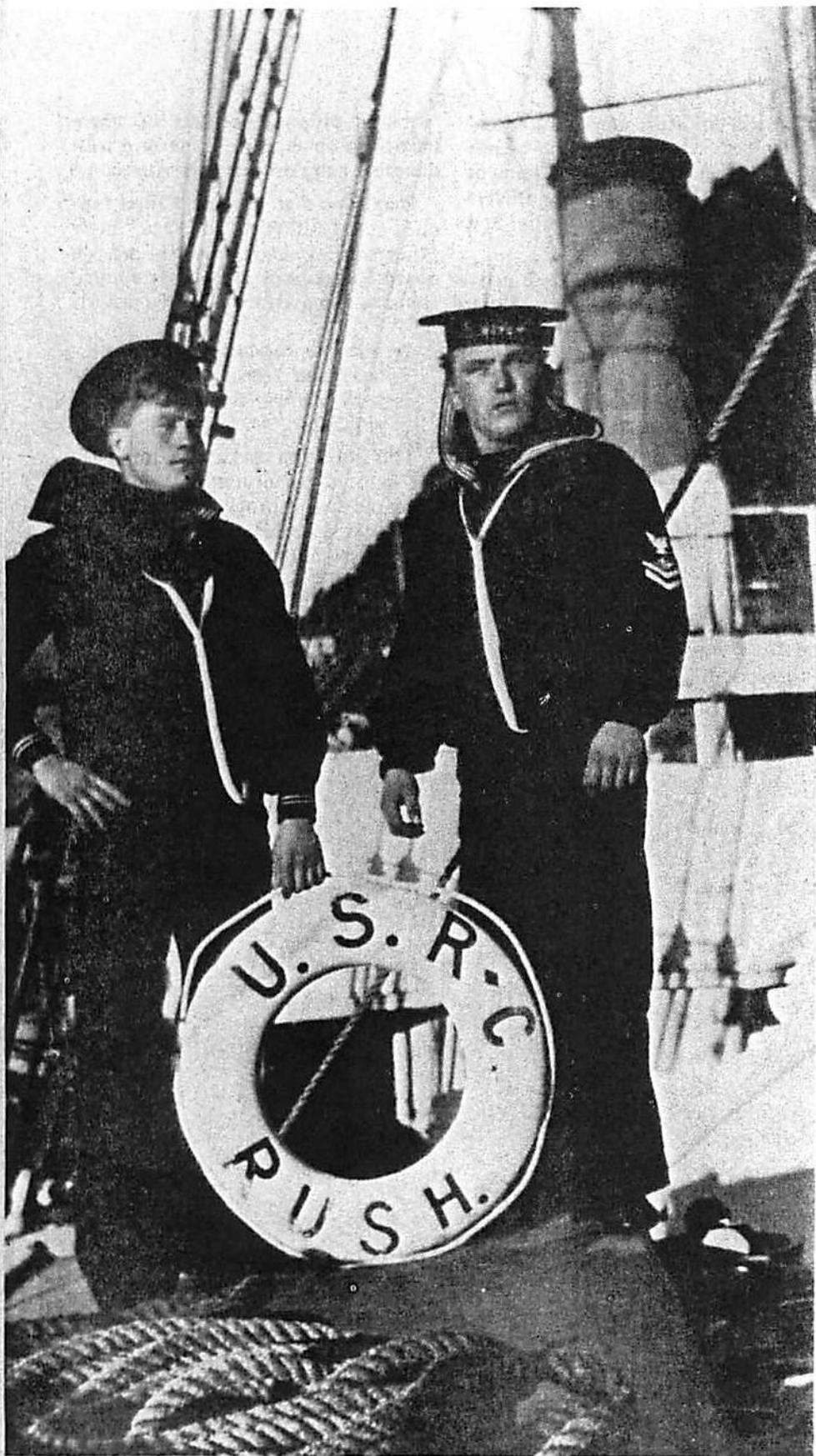
"forward officers," because of where they lived on ship — up forward with the other petty officers and seamen.

It appears that Revenue Cutter captains could still select and "rate" petty officers from among the seamen on board. Regulations (circa 1834) required captains to muster their crews quarterly to

*"revise the ratings of the petty officers and crew, having strict regard to their merits and demerits."*

This is the first recorded requirement for enlisted performance evaluations. Since the captain probably had no power to revoke a departmental warrant, it's safe to assume that we had seamen rated





as petty officers, plus the warranted "petty" officers.

Revenue Cutter Service petty officers, in 1834, wore:

*Blue cloth jackets, with five revenue buttons on each lapel, one on each side of the collar, and on each cuff; white frocks with collar and breast facing of blue, a worked star on each side of the collar, and two on each side of the breast; white or blue trousers, according to the season, with blue belt.*

Seamen wore the same garb, "omitting the buttons on collar and cuffs."

When the 1843 Revenue Cutter Service Regulations were published, there was no mention of separate uniforms for petty officers, but the warranted officers wore a uniform similar to the one prescribed in 1843 for petty officers:

*Blue cloth coat or jacket with nine revenue buttons on lapels, three under pocket flap, and on each cuff.*

Warrant officers were again referred to as petty officers and were not considered to be among the officers of the ship.

In 1841, petty officers in the U.S. Navy began wearing a sleeve device which was the predecessor to the present rating badge. The device was a spread eagle, perched on an anchor stock. The anchor's stock still appears on our present "crows" if you look closely. Some say that the anchor arm and flukes are now represented by petty officer's chevrons.

Did the Revenue Cutter petty officers follow the practice of wearing sleeve devices? We don't know for sure, but we can guess that they did, since many of our cuttermen were former navymen.

Some petty officers wore their insignia on the left sleeve and some on the right. Navy petty officers sometimes also wore specialty devices, such as signalman or quartermaster, but this practice was not recognized officially until 1866. Official regulations sometimes follow established

practice.

The crow's chevrons which were adopted some years later actually date back to at least the 12th Century. The word *chevron* comes directly from French, meaning rafter or roof — the shape of a points-up chevron.

Chevrons as military insignia seem to have originated in the wood or iron strips which held together and strengthened soldiers' shields. Shields, and their chevrons, became a basic element in the colorful science of heraldry. They often serve as signs of authority and honor, such as the Treasury Shields (without any chevrons) we wear on our sleeves.

French soldiers started wearing cloth chevrons (points up) in 1777 to show good conduct or length of service. Some British units also used them to show length of service. In 1803, the British began wearing chevrons (points down) to show rank or grade. Sergeants wore three and corporals two. A few British units used chevrons of gold lace as officer grade insignia.

In 1782, General George Washington ordered that enlisted men who had served for three years "with bravery, fidelity and good conduct" wear as a badge of honor a "narrow piece of white cloth, of angular form" on the left sleeve of the uniform coat — the first United States chevrons.

In 1817, the superintendent at West Point used chevrons to show cadet rank. The devices spread from West Point to the rest of the Army and also to the Marine Corps. Marine Captains wore three gold chevrons (points down) on each sleeve above the elbow — similar to the present CPO device. Lieutenants wore one or two chevrons, depending on the duties assigned.

In 1885, the Navy recognized three classes of petty officers: first second and third. The next year, they were allowed to wear rank insignia consisting of chevrons (points down) under the crow and rating mark. The eagle faced to the left, instead of to the right as they now do. The present petty officer insignia was adopted in about 1894, at the same time the Navy created the chief petty officer grade.

It appears that the Revenue Cutter Service followed a similar path with its enlisted personnel, even though the cutters had no chief petty officers. We did, however, have a rating badge identical to the Navy's CPO badge, complete with "rocker" over the top chevron.

Revenue Cutter petty officers fell into four grades in some ratings and three in other ratings. The highest-ranking petty officers wore a rocker atop the upper chevron with the rating insignia centered between the chevron and rocker. The four petty officer grades with rockers — and remember that they were not *chief* petty officers — were: master at arms, electrician, ship's writer and wheelman. Their specialty marks were embroidered in silver.

Other petty officers, such as the signal quartermaster, assistant master at arms, quartermaster, oiler, bayman or coxswain, wore crows identical to our present first, second and third class petty officers.

**Seaman:** It doesn't take much to figure out that the word *seaman* means a *man of the sea*. Until recently, it was an *occupation*, not a pay grade. The term goes back so many centuries, it is impossible to trace, probably predating any military grade within the nautical pecking order. (While a *seaman* was a man of the sea, a *sailor* was originally a professional seaman in charge of navigating or sailing a vessel. It comes from the Old English word "*saylor*.")

The seaman's opposite number was the "landsmen," a poor, deprived person unfortunate enough to live and work on dry land. The 1843 Revenue Cutter Service Regulations prohibited shipping (enlisting)

*"any landsman under twenty-five years of age, unless he shall have a knowledge of some mechanical trade which will be useful on board a vessel...."*

This was the first time we'd received any permission to hire other than able seamen on cutters. It also coincides with the purchase of the first steam cutters — and probably a push to hire on a few engineering folks.

There have always been at least two grades of seaman, usually termed "able" and "ordinary." The earliest Revenue Cutter Service Regulations recognized the special needs of the service, prohibiting other than able seamen. Later, ordinary seamen could be shipped, but only if they had two years of salt wake behind them.

The seaman's stripes first appeared in 1886 on Navy jumper cuffs, below the elbow, as on officer blouses. We presume the same was true of Revenue Cutter Service jumpers. Petty officers and seamen wore three stripes, seamen second class wore two stripes and seamen third class wore only one.

Revenue Cuttermen also wore "watch marks" — sort of sewn-in aiguillettes — to show whether they were on the port or starboard 12-hour watch. Seamen on the port watch wore white or blue braid (to contrast with blue and white uniforms) at the left shoulder seam. For the starboard watch, the stripe belonged on the starboard shoulder seam. This has nothing to do with seam-men, by the way. "Firemen and coal heavers" wore red watch marks; there was even a distinguishing mark for buglers, which was worn on the sleeve opposite the watch mark.

The seaman's stripes moved to the upper arm of the jumper just after World War II.

**Boy:** There was a grade — of a sort — below seaman. It apparently carried on into the 20th Century on Revenue Cutters. Captains could ship "*boys*" at less than half the pay of a real seaman, and could hire two boys to replace a single seaman. In early days, a boy drew \$6-10 per month, while a seaman cashed in a whopping \$16 per month.

A boy's exact duties are not recorded, but we can assume they had at least some jobs on deck. From their uniform requirements, we can also assume they spent a great deal of time as mess-boys.

In the next two issues, we'll wrap up this series with a few carefully worded and at times irreverent comments on our land-lubber friends in uniform.

# A history of ranks & titles

Part Five:  
The landlubbers



**Why is the colonel called "kernal?" And if a major outranks a lieutenant, why does a lieutenant general outrank a major general?**

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By PACM Dave Cipra  
Commandant's Bulletin

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We'll wrap up our series on military titles with two installments on the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps. All followed essentially the same pattern.

Next issue, we'll stay ashore for a look at junior officers and enlisted personnel of the non-sea services.

**General:** Once upon a time, there were, generally speaking, no military titles above captain. Armies fighting for feudal lords were small, made up of only a few hundred soldiers (from Latin, *solidus*, a Roman coin used to pay the troops). The local tyrant named his brother-in-law or some other military wizard as its head, or captain (Latin, *caput* or *capitaneus*, a head or chieftan).



Facing page: By 1794, the tri-corner cap was folded fore-and-aft.  
Above: The war with Mexico introduced less decorative Army uniforms.

By about 1500 A.D., armies were no longer sent home after a war was won (or the survivors, if the war was lost). Standing armies became common. In the United States, there was a long battle of words over whether our country should disband the Continental Army and Navy. The Continental Navy was drydocked before the U.S. Constitution was adopted, letting the Coast Guard lay claim to being the oldest sea service in the United States.

As armies grew to have many hundreds of troops, there came a need for several captains to serve over companies of soldiers. One of them would command not only his own company, but also the junior captains, keeping the army a single unit. This super-captain was called the *captain-general* (from the Latin *generalis*, something pertaining to the whole, as opposed to simply individual parts). Thus, the word general was used as an adjective, not a noun, unlike the naval use of the term admiral as a sea lord. Admirals apparently had higher stature than generals. An admiral could command all the great seas of Earth — vast and unknown expanses — while generals kept watch over flocks of ex-farmers.



The term *captain general* has not survived. The British dropped the captain part by the 18th century, leaving plain generals to lead its armies.

Captain generals generally had helpers — lieutenants — who took charge of things while the boss was home tending the castle or out chasing ... er ... making friends. The captain general's lieutenant, usually called the *lieutenant general*, took care of daily chores and since he was often a commoner, could let the wife and kids tend the flocks and plow the fields. The captain general, after all, was always a nobleman and had little time for trodding in the muck and drilling the troops.

Lieutenant generals were often regimental colonels (more on colonels later) who kept their regimental duties, as well as wearing the captain-general's hat in his absence. In some armies, a colonel

Left: An artillery private and an infantry lieutenant in 1781.  
Below: An officer of engineers supervises artillerymen, 1802.



serving as a captain general's lieutenant would be called a *colonel-general*. There are still some armies who have the grade of colonel-general — most notably the Soviet Union and East Germany.

So far, we've seen the word general combined with the current U.S. Army grades of lieutenant, captain and colonel.

That leaves just one hybrid, the major general (there never was a grade of general general, to my knowledge). Actually, there is one more level of general officers, the *brigadier* general, which we'll cover in a minute.

With all those general-types out there doing the fighting, someone in a modern army has to stay behind to handle the paperwork, burn the stew and order replacement swords and assorted head-thumpers. Certainly not a general, you'd think. A sergeant would be just about right, but not just any old supply sergeant. He should be at least a sergeant major. (Latin again! Sergeant comes from *serviens*, a servant, and *major* is a Latin word meaning greater. More on both in the next installment.)

But this is about generals, right? Well, armies continued to outgrow their structures of grades and titles, and they needed someone to oversee the whole — as opposed to just parts — of the administrative business. *Eureka!* (Greek — "I've found it.") Exactly the definition of a general, and thus the term *sergeant-major-general*. A third of the title eroded away, leaving major generals as the administrative corps. Some historians guess that the sergeant-major-generals didn't like being just a super-sargein-charge.

Back to the trenches. The fighting raged on, with armies growing all the time. Lieutenant generals and major generals dealt directly with regimental commanders (the colonels). But as the numbers of regiments grew and as armies started fighting far and wide, many regiments formed into brigades under brigade commanders, or *brigadiers* (from Latin, *briga*, meaning strife or fighting).

Many armies considered the brigadier to be a senior colonel and others (ours included) considered him to be a general officer, or brigadier general.

The Continental Army in 1775 commissioned George Washington as a general and as Commander in Chief. He of course became President and passed the title of Commander-in-Chief along to his reliefs.

General Washington, and his major

and brigadier generals, wore colored ribbons to designate rank. There were no lieutenant generals in the Continental Army. In 1780, he ordered major generals to wear epaulets with two silver stars on each shoulder. Brigadiers were to wear single silver stars on their epaulets — the same grade insignia they wear today.

Why stars? While we adopted English words for our military grades, we generally copied our French allies' blue uniforms, including their stars. Some believe also that Washington was inspired by the stars on our new national flag, adopted in 1777. Either way, the oldest military insignia in use today is the star.

Washington became our first lieutenant general in 1798, wearing three stars. After he died the next year, there was not another lieutenant general in the United States until 1855. But that's not the last we've heard of General Washington, as you'll see.

In 1866, lieutenant general U.S. Grant was promoted to be our first "General of the Army of the United States," with four stars as his grade insignia. Since then, there have been several periods in U.S. history when we had no four-star generals and for a time, the insignia was the U.S. Coat of Arms between two stars.

During World War II, there were so many four-star generals making the world a safe place for democracy that Congress created a five-star grade of General of the Army. But even this was not the highest grade. The five-stars did not outrank "General of the Armies" John Pershing. And in 1976, Congress authorized the President to appoint George Washington as "General of the Armies of the United States," specifying that he would rank first among all the officers of the Army, past or present.

**Colonel:** At last, the colonel, or *kernal* as we pronounce it. These officers can trace their titles to King Ferdinand of Spain. With Admiral Columbus having returned with sea stories of people and riches to conquer, the king reorgan-

ized his army to take command of the New World. He created 20 columns (called *colunelas*) of troops of 1,000 men each — what were later called regiments.

Too large for common captains to command.

Too small for the noble generals.

Each column commander was a *cabo de colunela* (head of the column). Since these were royal or "crown" columns, they were often referred to as *coronelias* and their commanders as *coronels*.

Conquests by the coronelias in the New World became famous (or infamous, if you were an American native) and other armies started reorganizing to gain the same efficiency. By 1600, the French had *colonels*, pronounced as it is spelled, in charge of regiments.

On the other side of the Channel the British did the same, but botched the pronunciation. They Anglicized colonel to sound like the word kernal (which was more like the Spanish pronunciation), but kept the French spelling. They "corned the term kernal," so to speak.

Our Army had the grade of colonel from the start. U.S. colonels transferred their insignia — spread eagles — from their cockade hats to their collars in 1829. Eagles, like oak leaves, have been popular military symbols since at least the Roman Legions. The eagles perched on epaulets in 1831.

The U.S. Army at the same time came up with a curious custom of having infantry officers wear epaulets of a different color than horse drivers, mortar-luggers, etc. Infantry officers wore silver-edged epaulets and shoulder straps, while other Army officers wore gold. Infantry colonels wore gold eagles to contrast with the silver epaulets, while infantry lieutenant colonels wore silver oak leaves to match their epaulets. Non-infantry officers wore the opposite. Matters became confusing when you had a group of lieutenant colonels and majors together. For example: infantry majors wore gold oak leaves on silver epaulets while non-infantry lieutenant colonels wore gold oak leaves on gold epaulets. The mess continued to 1851.



# A history of ranks & titles

Final episode: The landlubbers

By PACM Dave Cipra, Editor

**Major:** Let's backtrack for a moment to last issue and the generals. Remember that the *sergeant majors* became *sergeant major generals* and then dropped the sergeant third of the name.

Some of the sergeant majors simply dropped the sergeant half of their name, becoming *majors*. The term comes directly from the Latin word meaning "great" or "large" — a "great sergeant," originally.

But the sergeant major was an officer — third in charge of a regiment. He outranked the captains and was outranked by the colonel's

lieutenants (lieutenant colonels).

Captains commanding companies often created their own pecking order. We guess that whoever was still standing after the brawl became the colonel. The last to fall was to be the lieutenant colonel and the next in line was the sergeant major. There were probably some peaceful selections, too.

The sergeant major became somewhat of a traffic cop in battle, forming companies into the regimental unit and maintaining that unit as they marched on the enemy. Again, plain old sergeants were not officers, as were the sergeant majors, and that may be the reason why we have *majors*, or "greats," instead of *sergeant majors*, or "great servants." Good help is hard to find.

U.S. Army majors began wearing oak leaves as insignia in about 1832. Navy officers, and some in the Army, had worn oak leaves for years. Some say the sailors wore their oak leaves as a symbol of the mighty tree from which ships were built. Others trace the oak leaf and acorn back to pagan rituals, which seems more in keeping with naval tradition.

In 1851, someone finally got fed up with infantry and non-infantry majors and lieutenant colonels wearing their confusing epaulets and oak leaves, settling on silver oak leaves for all lieutenant colonels and gold oak leaves for all majors, the same devices they wear today. But majors did not wear their oak leaves on their epaulets — they were so heavily loaded with gold fringe, there was no room.

**Captain:** The captain, to refresh your memory, is a chieftan or head of a unit, which is usually a company of soldiers (on ship, a "ship's company"). We've covered most of their early history in sections on naval captains and captain-generals.

It appears that captains were company commanders in the Italian army as early as the 10th century. In the 11th or 12th Century, the British had captains on ships, in command of the ship's company of soldiers.

Captain was a Continental Army (and later a U.S. Army) grade. Senior officers wore stars, eagles or oak leaves. Captains, on the other hand, were most often seen wearing (not *in*) bars. The "railroad tracks" insignia on shoreside captains was adopted in 1832. Again, infantry and non-infantry captains wore different colors, with silver going to the infantry.

The number of bars the captain wears comes from the number of straps holding down his epaulets. Captains and lieutenants wore plain epaulets and the only way to tell them apart was the number of straps — two for captains and one for lieutenants. The cloth straps were traded for metal bars on the epaulets. Later, when the Army adopted the Navy and Revenue Cutter Service shoulder straps, the bars were sewn onto the straps for the fatigue uniform.

**Lieutenant:** We've also discussed lieutenants in previous installments. A lieutenant takes the place of an absent officer.

Captain generals had assistants they called lieutenant generals. It would make sense, then, that captains could also have lieutenants. If they were ever called **lieutenant-captains**, the term didn't survive. They were, and are, simply lieutenants.

Ashore, there had been lieutenants in the British and most other armies, so naturally we adopted the grade in the Continental Army.

About 1832, first lieutenants began wearing a single gold bar on each of their gold-edged epaulets. Of course, infantry first lieutenants wore a silver bar on each silver-edged epaulet. The insignia system didn't work any better for lieutenants than it did for the more senior Army officers so, in 1851, all Army first lieutenants began wearing a single gold bar on each shoulder strap. But not on their epaulets. They wore silver on epaulets, to contrast with the gold fringe. Still too confusing, so 21 years later, the Army gave up and made all first lieutenants wear silver bars on all uniforms.

Second lieutenants, on the other hand, had a real problem. They had no bars at all. Their dress uniform epaulets and non-dress shoulder straps, even without a grade insignia, showed they were officers, but only until the Spanish-American War. Our Army shifted to strapless khaki uniforms for both officers and enlisted soldiers. With no grade insignia, the poor "second looney" looked more like a boot private. In 1917, the Army resurrected the gold bar and gave it to its most junior officers.



**Warrant officers:** Warrant officers were once strictly sea-going men, and in fact were the senior officers afloat. The grade has never been very popular ashore. Our Continental Army had a few warrant officers, but the grade disappeared with the Redcoats and did not reappear until the present century — in the *Army's navy* and the *Navy's Marines*.

In 1916, the Marine Corps promoted some of its gunners and quartermaster

clerks (supply sergeants) to warrant officer. Two years later, Marine pay clerks could also go the warrant route.

The Army, in 1918, created warrant officer grades in its Mine Planter Service (some of whose ships we inherited and turned into buoy tenders). The most senior warrant officers served on board as captains — *oops!* the Army already *had captains!* — as masters of the mine-planting ships. More-junior warrant of-

ficers were shipped as mates and engineers. The Army has continued filling “unsoldierly” jobs with warrants, including some vessel billets, but mostly as air cavalry helicopter pilots.

Congress authorized Army warrants for clerical, administrative and band-leader duty in 1920, but the intent there appears to have been to reward enlisted performance with promotions, or to salvage the careers of officers during the



*Above:* A Corps of Engineers lieutenant and a first sergeant during the Civil War.  
*Left:* A quartermaster officer (foreground) and a first sergeant. Circa 1855



General George Washington cut a fine figure in his dress uniform — his troops were a different story, though!

post-WWI cutbacks.

**Sergeant:** The sergeant started military service not as a soldier but as a servant (*serviens*, in Latin) to a medieval knight. Sergeant, like seaman, was an occupation, not a military grade.

He marched into battle alongside his master's steed, pretty much unarmed — and definitely terrified.

Sergeants probably became combat experts simply to survive. The enemy knight didn't care if you were a nobleman or a servant. He bludgeoned you right after he bashed your boss. So you grabbed your master's shattered lance and fought for your life — and, of course, for your king.

The English took a liking to the word

sergeant and borrowed it from the French in about the 13th Century. They spelled it several ways through the years and pronounced both *SARjent* and *SERjent*. The popular English pronunciation, however, became *SARjent* (while in French and many other languages it is still *SERjent*).

**Corporal:** Corporals also came to our Army and Marine Corps from Latin, via French. The term shares its origin with the word captain.

Corporals first appeared on the battle lines in 15th Century Italy. A troop formation known as the *squadra* (*square*) was placed in charge of a *capo de squadra* (*head of the square*, not *square-head*). By the 16th Century, the word

evolved to *caporale* and meant a leader of any small group of soldiers. In many armies, a squad of troops is still considered to number 16 — four across and four deep. We of course call a small group of cutters a *squadron*, led not by a corporal but a commodore.

The French may have mixed the term with the Latin word *corpus* or its French counterpart *corps*, both meaning *body*. Thus, a corporal became the head of a body of soldiers.

Corporals, were rather pushy leaders, marching behind the squad. They carried small swords while the rest of the squad carried lances. The most frequent use of the sword was not to draw blood, but to keep the squad moving toward the enemy, with a smart rap on the behind for anyone who fell behind. While corporals were never known as *sword corporals*, some lance-toting privates were temporarily promoted to corporal, keeping their weapons and becoming *lance corporals*.

**Private:** Privates appear to be named for either the contracts they signed or, perhaps, the fact that they didn't rate their own offices.

The word private comes from the Latin *privus* or *privo*, meaning an individual person — and later meaning a person without, or deprived of, an office — a non-officer.

As a military grade, the term appeared in the 16th Century, when individuals could actually *volunteer* for enlistment in an army, making *private* contracts to serve their feudal lords. Before then, serfs were simply herded together, handed skull-mashers, and led into battle. We now call this the draft, but our lowest grade of soldier is still called a private, whether draftee or enlistee.

The Air Force didn't need privates, but it did need *airmen*, and it made sure its most junior enlisted grade was just that — even though darned few of them ever take flight. But that's okay. Try to find any Coast Guard firemen who stoke coal!

*And that's it! We hope you've enjoyed reading this series as much as we've enjoyed presenting it! //*