

When he or she receives a brevet, spot, or other unusual promotion that the US armed forces have tried over the years.

When Is a Major Not (Exactly) a Major?



PROBLEM: You have picked an officer for a new post but find that some of his staff will outrank him. Solution: "Frocking."

Within the church, the term refers to investing a person with a new office or, more literally, robes of the office. In the military, frocking is one of several ways to promote members, at least temporarily, for special requirements.

For example, Col. Steve P. Strobridge, USAF (Ret.), recalls frocking's being used in the mid-1980s when he served in Europe. A lieutenant colonel, he was assigned to a billet where he would be the boss of a Belgian colonel. In order to preserve a proper relationship, USAF let Colonel Strobridge wear his eagles ahead of his pin-on date.

The approach also has been used in wartime to fill vacancies in the field while headquarters is catching up on the paperwork.

Today's Air Force still occasionally uses frocking to make officers eligible for international or inter-service assignments calling for higher ranks. Others are frocked to qualify them for foreign professional military education courses or for the State Department's senior seminars, where military attendees must be at or above the grade of colonel.

Air Force policy (AFL 36-2501) allows frocking of an individual only when his or her name is on a promotion list that already has been confirmed by the Senate. They may wear insignia of the higher grade but may

not draw the pay or receive the performance reports for those grades until they are actually promoted. Another stipulation is that the officer "should not already be known in the lower grade by the new contacts."

Three Percent Limit

Defense Department rules allow the services to frock up to three percent of their field-grade authorizations, but the 1996 defense authorization bill lowered this limit to one percent. In fact, the Air Force uses the procedure so sparingly that neither ceiling is a problem. Over the last three years, it has frocked fewer than 300 officers—245 to colonel, forty-one to lieutenant colonel, and eleven to major.

USAF does not frock officers in company grades or in any enlisted grades, officials say, because they rarely hold jobs that would require it. In 1995, the Enlisted Evaluation System Group did consider a proposal to frock all enlisted members when they are selected for promotion, but the policy was not adopted.

Frocking and other devices have been used over the years largely to deal with funding problems or grade limitations. During the Great Depression, for example, Congress froze the pay of government employees, civilian and military. For a time, service members could be promoted but could not receive the pay of the higher grades. Few Air Corps officers were affected by this involun-

By Bruce D. Callander

tary frocking, however. Promotions were scarce for all service members. Air officers, most of whom were younger than their ground-bound peers, stood low on the Army-wide promotion lists.

Earlier, the Air Service used a variation of frocking to lure volunteers into the still-risky business of flying. Under laws passed in 1916 and 1917, lieutenants and captains who were qualified for flight pay also temporarily received the rank of the next highest grade. Unlike frocked officers, however, they also received the increased pay and allowances.

The National Defense Act of 1920 stripped officers of the temporary grades awarded in World War I. One of those affected was Henry H. "Hap" Arnold. He had had only ten years of service when he was posted to Air Division headquarters in Washington, D. C., where he rose from permanent captain to temporary colonel. In 1920, he reverted to his permanent rank but simultaneously was promoted one grade. He continued to serve as Air Officer of the 9th Air Corps Area at the Presidio, Calif., but as a major, not a colonel.

Such temporary wartime grades had been called brevet ranks. Some very high ones went to very junior officers. At the start of the Civil War, George Armstrong Custer was a twenty-one-year-old second lieutenant fresh out of West Point, where he had graduated at the bottom of his class. Given command of a volunteer unit two years later, he was breveted as a brigadier general and later to major general. At war's end, he reverted to captain. He had risen only to lieutenant colonel when he arrived at Little Bighorn.

In the Spanish-American War, Army Capt. Leonard Wood and Theodore Roosevelt, assistant secretary of the Navy, organized the 1st US Volunteer Cavalry Regiment (The Rough Riders) and became its colonel and lieutenant colonel, respectively. When Wood was promoted, Roosevelt took over the unit and colonelcy and led the charge up San Juan Hill. His total military service amounted to little more than one year.

World War II brought a surge of rapid advancements. The case of Jimmy Doolittle was one of the most dramatic. In 1930, he resigned his regular commission as a thirty-three-

year-old first lieutenant, took a new job with industry, and accepted a Reserve commission. Ten years later, he returned to active duty as a major. In 1942, he led the Tokyo Raid as a lieutenant colonel, was promptly bumped to brigadier general, and later made two more stars. General Doolittle kept his wartime rank, but many others lost theirs. He received a fourth star in 1985 as the result of a special act of Congress.

"Model-T NCOs"

During the war, enlisted members advanced even faster than officers, particularly when they served on aircrews. The AAF, to avoid becoming top-heavy with NCOs, used what amounted to reverse frocking. It gave especially skilled enlisted members the pay of higher grades without the military rank. These technicians wore a "T" on their stripes and became known as "Model-T Noncoms."

When the Air Force became an independent service in 1947, it inherited a complex system of temporary and permanent promotions in regular and reserve grades. An officer might hold a permanent grade at one level and temporary grade one or more ranks higher. He might qualify for a reserve grade considerably higher than the one he held on active duty.

These complicated rules grew out of service efforts to man units effectively while staying within Congressionally imposed strength ceilings and the legal grade limits for regular forces. Where the service could not fill requirements with the allowed numbers of regulars in permanent grades, they fleshed out the force with regulars holding higher temporary grades and with reservists.

This approach not only met the needs of the moment but provided the forces with fallback positions in case of strength cuts. In a drawdown, officers could be dropped from temporary to permanent grades, and reservists could be sent home while regulars remained aboard.

Much of the activity ended in September 1981 with the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act. DOPMA discontinued temporary promotions and applied the same rules to all active-duty officers, regular and reserve. It standardized appointment, promotion, separation, and retirement rules for all services.

Even under DOPMA, some differences remain between reserve and regular officers. For one thing, Air Force policy limits reserve officers to twenty years of active duty, while regulars may stay for up to thirty years, depending on grade. Reservists also are subject to reduction-in-force action, and many were forced out during the recent drawdown. Though DoD gave the armed services the power to RIF regular officers as well, USAF did not use it.

Even after DOPMA, promotion policies for the non-active-duty reservists remained different from those for regular officers. But some of those differences were removed on October 1, 1996, when the Reserve Officer Personnel Management Act took effect. Similar to DOPMA, ROPMA standardizes promotion rules among the services and, among other things, supplements the unit-vacancy rule with authority to promote to any position vacancy in the Selected Reserve. ROPMA also will apply to Guard officers, but Guard units have some unique rules because of their dual status as both state and federal entities. For example, the state adjutants general, who administer the Guard programs, still are appointed by the governors, most of them as major generals.

Morale Boosters

Officer promotions have long been structured, but, until recently, the advancement of enlisted members was less regulated. After World War II, for example, enlisted hikes were made to fill unit vacancies and were so scarce that the service had to resort to unusual steps to maintain morale.

The problem was that the newly formed Air Force already began with an oversupply of NCOs who had soared up the promotion ladder during the war. The ranks were swelled further by wartime officers who, finding no commissioned billets in the peacetime force, were allowed to enlist as master sergeants.

In 1948, USAF decided to relieve the promotion stagnation by making one-time hikes to technical sergeant and master sergeant regardless of time in grade. It promoted 750 service members to E-7 and 1,500 to E-6, announcing that these would be the last such special hikes until grade inequities evened out. The buildup

for the Korean War brought at least temporary relief. USAF eased some of the enlisted grade crunch slightly during that war by returning many of the former officers who had been appointed master sergeants to their commissioned status.

During the Korean War, USAF again waived time in grade and encouraged rapid promotion. Master sergeants with three or four years of service were not uncommon, but the practice set the stage for another postwar promotion drought.

In those days, the few promotions available still were made by unit commanders. They literally had the power to strip the stripes from the arm of one airman and hand them to the next. Where they lacked unit vacancies, they also were permitted to appoint "Acting NCOs," under a frocking arrangement that allowed enlisted personnel to wear the stripes of the higher grade but not collect the pay.

In a succession of steps, the Air Force eliminated the unit-vacancy rule, centralized selections, and developed the Weighted Airman Promotion System. For a long time, however, enlisted members as well as officers continued to receive temporary promotions that did not become permanent until the members reached specific lengths of service. And commanders retained power to "bust" them back to their permanent grades for a variety of infractions.

Even after headquarters took most of the promotion power away from unit commanders, it continued to give the field discretion to advance specific members.

"Spot Promotions"

Perhaps the most memorable example was Strategic Air Command's "spot promotion" system. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, SAC commander in chief, was given the power to advance the officers of select bomber crews even though they were not selected by USAF headquarters. Later, spots were authorized for enlisted crew members as well.

The promotions were "real" in the sense that members received the pay

as well as the insignia of the higher grades. But they still were only temporary, and the members went back to their previous grades when they left their aircrews or were rated deficient in operational evaluations.

Spot promotions were intended as motivation and morale boosters for elite crews, but other members were



A complicated set of promotion rules grew out of service efforts to man units effectively while staying within Congressionally imposed ceilings.

convinced the promotions were made at their expense, and USAF eventually stopped the program. Even after it adopted an equal-opportunity policy for airman promotions, however, it sometimes broke its own rules to steer a few hikes toward skills where retention was a problem. Again, enlisted members complained that it was robbing the overall quotas to favor a few specialties.

Some of the old spot-promotion philosophy lives on in a current program called Stripes for Exceptional Performers. STEP gives field units the power to advance deserving "hard chargers" who went unpicked in the normal selection process. Commanders of major commands and some other units may promote to the grades of staff through master sergeant under this limited authority.

Unlike spot promotions, however, STEP hikes are permanent,

are not limited to one command, and may be used to promote enlisted members in any specialty, not just aircrew members. STEP authority also is limited to enlisted members, while spot promotions went both to airmen and to officers.

If spot promotions were a source of annoyance to many members, grade rules for Women in the Air Force (WAF) were an even greater irritant to female members. The Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 provided that no more than two percent of the regular forces could be female, that no more than ten percent of regular lieutenant colonels could be women, and that only one woman in each service could be a colonel.

The Air Force decided its only female colonel would be the director of WAF. A woman could hold the grade only as long as she held that position. Some early directors reverted to lieutenant colonel when their terms were up, so they could serve long enough to qualify for retirement. They then retired as colonels because it was the highest grade held on active duty.

The Air Force normally does not allow officers to carry into retirement higher grades than they held on active duty. It does have special provision, however, for permanent professors at the USAF Academy. At the direction of the President, those professors in grades below brigadier general can be retired with one star.

If such promotions are rare in the Air Force, Col. Paul Arcari, USAF (Ret.), a former USAF personnel official, remembers their being common in the Navy, which routinely advanced officers one grade on retirement. Largely honorary, these promotions allowed the retirees to use the titles of the new grade but had no effect on pay or benefits. They were known as "tombstone promotions," presumably because the higher grades would be more impressive on the members' grave markers.

The closest the Air Force comes to such a practice is its advancement of officers who are selected for promotion but die before they can pin on their new ranks. They may be promoted posthumously to the higher grades (up to colonel), but the promotions do not affect any benefits or entitlements due the next of kin. ■

Bruce D. Callander, a regular contributor to Air Force Magazine, served tours of active duty during World War II and the Korean War. In 1952, he joined Air Force Times, serving as editor from 1972 to 1986. His most recent story for Air Force Magazine, "Revisions to Retirement," appeared in the October 1996 issue.