

Noncommissioned Pilots and Their Changing Roles

Every branch of the US military has a proven rank system in place and the Air Force is no exception. A defining separation exists in the Air Force between the enlisted personal, and the officers. To enlist, you must be between the ages of 17 and 39 and have either a high school diploma or possess a GED, and be a legal US resident. To serve as an officer, you must be between the ages of 18 and 34, have at least a bachelor's degree, and be a US citizen. In addition, you must either attend the Air Force Academy, OTS (Officer Training School), or ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps), all of which require very intense training and time commitment. Traditionally, pilots in the Air Force are selected from the officer ranks, however there are significant instances where non-commissioned pilots were, and are, utilized.

Starting in 1912, "Flying Sergeants" commonly flew due to the shortages of qualified commissioned officers. Training for enlisted personal was initially informal, however near the outbreak of World War II, competition became fierce with many of the trainees being cut after harsh training conditions and extensive physical exams. All of the enlisted trainees promoted directly to the rank of Staff Sergeant upon completion of training, regardless of previous rank. These "Flying Sergeants" flew virtually every type of mission in the war including light reconnaissance, spotter, fighter escort, dogfight, cargo, personal transport, and medium/heavy bomber missions. Several "Flying Sergeants" became fighter aces. Walter Beech, one of the founders of Beech Aircraft Corporation, was one such enlisted pilot. As was Bob Hoover, a legendary test and stunt pilot. However near the end of 1942, the Army Air Core discontinued

recruitment out of the enlisted ranks and recruited out of the warrant officer ranks. All previous “Flying Sergeants” were promoted to the rank of flight officer in the warrant officer ranks. The flight officer rank was phased out altogether in 1945.

Prior to 1947 the Air Force did not exist as we know it to today. The aerial warfare service of the Army was known as the Army Air Force. This branch shared rank systems with the Army, including the ranks of warrant officers. Warrant officers straddled the line between the enlisted and officer ranks. They often specialized in certain fields and performed some of the responsibilities of an officer without being commissioned. When the Air Force became an independent entity after World War II, warrant officer ranks were eliminated in 1959. The last warrant officer retired in 1992.

More recently, the Air Force has been training enlisted airmen to fly unmanned drones, more specifically the RQ-4 Global Hawk, a state-of-the-art reconnaissance vehicle. In addition to the new drone training program, the Air Force has been performing studies on enlisted personnels’ potential to fly modern service aircraft.

The history of the Air Force is filled with great enlisted and commissioned pilots serving side by side, and the system has served well. However, with the changing nature of warfare and the development of unmanned aircraft, the Air Force may soon offer non-commissioned pilots more opportunities to fly. These changes may also present the need for a new rank similar to the previous warrant officers. Whatever the future holds, it is clear that the Air Force should be on the lookout for potential aviators among the ranks in order to preserve our national security.