
Defense Report

AUSA



An Aviator Is an Aviator — Their Flight Pay Should Be the Same, Regardless of Rank

Few people outside the Army realize that the bulk of the Army's active aviators are not lieutenants, captains or majors but warrant officers. Although they stand below the commissioned officers on the protocol pecking order, the warrant officers are the Army's career aviation specialists. While the commissioned officers periodically move out of the cockpit to command non-flying units and act as staff officers, the warrants usually spend their entire service life flying. They become the instructor pilots, the instrument examiners, the safety and maintenance officers and, even with a commissioned pilot on board, their experience often causes them to be designated as aircraft commander. Because of the day-to-day risks involved in flying, all aviators receive incentive pay.

But, oddly, the warrant officers who do most of the flying receive less incentive pay than the commissioned officers after both groups have passed the two-year point in flying experience. After two years the commissioned officer receives \$156 per month in incentive pay while the warrant officer gets just \$138. The warrant officer continues to get \$138 at the three- and four-year points, while the commissioned officer jumps first to \$188 then to \$206. At the six-year point the warrant officer gets \$250 per month and stays at the level until he leaves the service, but the commissioned aviator climbs to \$306 and stays there until he reaches 18 years of service. At that point commissioned flight pay begins to decline and finally drops out entirely at 25 years.

This difference is correctly perceived by the warrant officers as an inequity. An Army Research Institute survey in 1980 received responses from 1,006 warrant officer aviators who had decided to leave the service and more than 70 percent of them cited the incentive pay inequity as the prime reason for leaving. It is small wonder that almost 80 percent of the commissioned aviators stay in the Army after completing their obligated service while less than 58 percent of the warrant officers remain in uniform.

The Army would like to equalize incentive pay for all aviators at the levels now paid to commissioned pilots. Legislation is needed to do this and the price tag is small—only \$3.2 million a year. And if only 26 or 27 more warrant officer aviators are thereby convinced to stay on active duty each year, thus eliminating the need to recruit and train their replacements, the cost will even out.

The Army is having problems retaining many of its skilled personnel, but the continuing loss of warrant officer aviators is particularly alarming because they are expensive to train and are just reaching the point of full proficiency when the incentive-pay gap sets in. Support for the needed equalization legislation has a strong base in equity and simple common sense.