

# Raises won't reverse warrant 'pay compression'

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If the Pentagon's pay proposals stay on track, they would provide big, long overdue raises to warrant officers, a small group of specialists who often feel neglected and worry they're underpaid compared to the enlisted ranks. But even the most generous of several military pay plans on the table wouldn't reverse the so called "pay compression" that warrant officers and advocates say is hurting recruiting and retention in their ranks.

The compression, which has worsened in the past few years, results in warrants earning only slightly more money than the enlisted people they supervise. The discrepancy stems from recent well-intentioned and well-deserved raises for noncommissioned officers and petty officers, said Raymond Bell, executive director of the U.S. Army Warrant Officer Association and a retired chief warrant officer 5.

And because the warrant-officer community draws most of its members from the enlisted ranks, the pay compression has given enlisted personnel less incentive to go warrant. The result: The services are seeing a shrinking number of warrant officer applications is the active-duty services still are meeting their goals, but the reserves and Army National Guard are short at least 2 000 warrants, Bell said.

The Army has as many as 28,000 warrant officers; the Coast Guard has about 2,000 and the Navy and Marine Corps combined have about 2,000. The Air Force has no warrant officers, but some have suggested creating such ranks to help the service reduce the departure of valued technical experts.

About 45 percent of warrant officers are Army pilots. Others lead criminal investigation units and special forces teams. Warrants also serve as specialists in maintenance, military intelligence, electronics, logistics and other fields.

Warrants nearly always are recruited from the midcareer enlisted ranks at eight to 12 years of service. As a recruiting incentive, it's considered ideal to keep basic pay for warrants at least 20 percent higher than for enlisted personnel with similar years of service, Bell said.

But the recent midgrade enlisted raises have shrunk the gap to between 15 percent and 18 percent in most cases. And in terms of total take-home pay, the gap can be even smaller because enlisted people often get special trays that are more generous than those given to officers,

New raises proposed by the Pentagon would start to fix the problem in some of the lower warrant ranks. But proposed targeted raises of 9.5 percent for the most senior enlisted ranks would lead to even greater pay compression compared to senior warrant ranks.

Beginning Jan. 1, the Pentagon wants to give raises of 8.5 percent to warrants in the W-1 and W-2 pay grades, 8 percent to W-3s grade and 7.5 percent to W-4s. Most commissioned officers would get 5 percent raises; junior enlisted people would get 6 per-cent raises and senior enlisted people would get raises of 7,5 percent to 9.5 percent.

An alternative devised by Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., would offer 7.3 percent raises to all ranks, with targeted raises equal to or greater than those the Pentagon proposed. However, President Bush's \$1.3 trillion tax cut is leading many lawmakers to question whether enough money will be left for ambitious Pentagon spending. By law, next year's military raises must be at least 4.6 percent.

Warrant Officer Association members briefed a Pentagon pay task force on their concerns in February. Defense officials since have said they don't want future raises to "exacerbate" this problem, according to a Pentagon position paper.

For now, enlisted people making career choices are seeing fewer advantages in switching to the warrant track, Bell said.

In 1996, the Army received 3,026 applications for 920 warrant positions, a ratio of 3.3 to 1. In fiscal 2000, the ratio dropped to 2 to 1. This year it's 1.9 to 1, Bell said.