

How to fix USAR Warrant Officer Promotions – by CW4 Scott A. Gagnon, USAR

The Army Reserve is in need of overhauling its warrant officer promotion system. When compared to both the Active component (AC) and the Army National Guard (ARNG), the Army Reserve (USAR) is a decidedly third class citizen with its warrant officer promotions. The promotion system for its selections to CW5 is at best described as dysfunctional, where qualified and capable CW4 are frequently overlooked and positions remain needlessly vacant. These issues are easily fixable with regard the CW5 promotions but will take serious thought with regard to CW3 and CW4 promotions.

The promotion systems for each of the three components are guided by similar regulations but are executed quite differently. The standards for warrant officer promotions are 24 months time in grade at WO1, 72 months time in grade at CW2, 72 months time in grade at CW3, and about 65 months time in grade at CW4. The regulations do authorize a few methods to speed up some promotions; below the zone promotions and unit vacancy promotions which expedite the promotions of talented, hard working and productive warrant officers.

The AC runs merit based promotions based on the needs of the AC. They promote based on the performance of the individual warrant officer. The exceptional warrant officer can be promoted ahead of his or her peers in their year group as well as ahead of their year group with below the zone promotions. At the promotion board warrant officers are ranked in order of their perceived performances, given a sequence number which indicates which warrant officers should be promoted first through last. These promotions begin as soon as the board results are published. In an ideal situation with no MOS over strength issues an exceptional AC warrant officer could expect to reach eligibility for CW5 in 13-14 years – two years at WO1, 3-4 years at CW2, 3-4 years at CW3 and 4 years at CW4.

The ARNG conducts promotions similar to the Army Reserve in that they are not merit based but qualification based. Warrants in the same year group are all assessed as being qualified educationally and performing satisfactorily. These qualified warrant officers do not receive a sequence number to indicate which warrant officer is promoted first thru last, they are simply promoted on the anniversary date of their last promotion. The ARNG and USAR interpret that its warrant officers are not fully qualified until they meet all the requirements of the regulations. This means that when the warrant officer meets the time in grade requirement for each grade, then and only then he or she is fully qualified and therefore promotable. The ARNG has decided to subtract one year from its required time in grade to make CW3. Thus their warrant officers only need to serve 60 months time in grade for that promotion. The ARNG does not allow for below the zone promotions but it does allow for unit vacancy promotions. These unit vacancy promotions are similar to regular officer promotions where a 1LT filling a CPT's slot will be considered for promotion to CPT a year ahead of his or her year group. Taking on extra responsibilities is rewarded in this way. The ARNG allows for unit vacancy promotions to occur from CW2 to CW3 and CW3 to CW4. The ARNG also allows for CW4s to be considered for CW5 positions in their fourth year time in grade. If a qualified warrant is in such a situation he or she can subtract one year time in grade requirement from each of these promotions. In an ideal situation where the ARNG warrant officer takes higher responsibilities – filling a CW3 slot as a CW2 and filling a CW4 slot as a CW3,

the ARNG warrant officer can expect to reach eligibility for CW5 in 15.5 years – 24 months at WO1, 48 months at CW2, 60 months at CW3 and about 54 months at CW4.

The USAR conducts promotions similar to the ARNG with exception that there are no unit vacancy promotions (although it is legally possible they are not conducted), the USAR has not decided to subtract the one year off the time in grade requirements to CW3 and the USAR does not consider it CW4s qualified for consideration to CW5 until their fifth year as a CW4. As long as the USAR warrant officer completes his educational requirements and performs his or her mission adequately the warrant officer must expect that he or she will become eligible for consideration for CW5 no sooner than 19.5 years after making warrant officer- 24 months at WO1, 72 months at CW2, 72 months at CW3 and 65 months at CW4 (provided the issues with the CW5 boards don't greatly lengthen the time at CW4) . With no merit based selection process, with no below the zone the promotions and with no unit vacancy selection process there is no way to promote the best and brightest ahead of their peers. In the USAR absolutely everyone (adequate through outstanding) is treated exactly the same.

As can be seen, the times needed to reach eligibility for CW5 are about 13 years for AC, 15.5 years for ARNG and 19.5 years for USAR. I have never been one to think the ARNG and USAR warrant officers should be treated on the same level as AC warrants. Times have greatly changed in the nearly 20 years I have served as a fulltime USAR warrant officer but it is still true that more is expected of the AC warrant officer than his or her USAR and ARNG counterpart. The AC warrant officer usually deploys more often and conducts a larger variety of missions during his or her career. The differences between the RC and AC warrant missions and responsibilities have greatly diminished over the twenty years but they still exist. The differences between the missions and responsibilities of USAR and ARNG warrant officers are non-existent. Why then is there such a disparity between our promotions systems? The ARNG after seeing how its regular officer's promotions were sped up conducted a study a few years ago to determine how it could expedite the promotions of its warrant officers. The USAR has not. The USAR needs to conduct such a study and bring its promotions in line with the ARNG or use a merit based promotion system similar to the AC.

Recently, HRC announced that USAR AGR promotions would be executed with sequence numbers in order to have the USAR promotions be more in line with Active Component promotions. Unfortunately the warrant officer promotions will continue to be based solely on seniority. This means that the sequence number a promoted USAR warrant officer will receive will depend only on the date of his or her last promotion (which is based on when they graduated Fort Rucker). Since the sequence number are normally equated to the relative performance of the promoted officer, granting these sequence numbers will be perceived as insulting to many USAR warrants. It could be very likely that a November or December graduate from Fort Rucker could have shown that he or she is greatly superior to a January or February graduate in the same year group but the sequence numbers given to these warrants will show that the January graduate will have a very low sequence number and the December graduate will have a very high sequence number (normally indicating that such an officer was barely adequate for promotion.) If the use of sequence numbers was intended to make USAR promotions resemble AC promotions, it fails miserably. The term "lipstick on a pig" comes to mind. It would much better to actually create an OML for promotions and promote based on this OML.

Repercussions:

There would be repercussions to changing the USAR promotion system to the ARNG or AC promotion system. Although most USAR warrants will be promoted a great deal sooner, many USAR warrant officers would be adversely affected.

In order to make the changes that the ARNG completed, the ARNG had to encode each warrant officer position. Each position in each unit is a CW2, CW3 or CW4 position. In such a case a CW4 would not be allowed to fill a CW3 position in the same way that a Major is not allowed to fill a CPT position. With any promotion the officer would be required to find a position somewhere or not take the promotion. Currently a USAR warrant joining a unit could fully expect to stay in the same slot of the same unit for his or her entire career. The slots are coded as CW2, CW3 or CW4 slots but are treated as warrant officers positions for any otherwise qualified W1 thru W4. That makes life fairly simple. No need to find a new position or new unit or worse- having to travel to another city or state to find a position to go with their new rank. This could become very costly for unit members in Hawaii and Alaska where the only promotion possibility might be located on the mainland. Such promotions may force a reservist to pay out of pocket for travel expenses or to re-class to an MOS that does exist in their area.

Abiding by the ARNG system will also cause another issue. Incorporating this system will mean two year groups will be evaluated for promotion at the same time, those WOs with the traditional six years TIG requirement and the WOs with the new 5 year requirement (CW2-CW3). The same issue with sequence numbers is exacerbated greatly when the two year groups are combined. Simply adding that second year group to the promotion pool might mean that a barely adequate warrant officer with a January DOR from the second year group could be promoted well ahead of an outstanding warrant officer with a December DOR in the first year group. A simple solution to this problem would be to execute the promotions of these qualified warrant officers not on their anniversary dates but on a staggered basis. Those warrants who graduated from Fort Rucker in January and February in the first year group would be promoted in January of the next year. Those that graduated in March and April in the first year group would be promoted in February of the next year and so on. The second year group would begin its expedited promotion in July of the next year. This would only need to be a one-time promotion event. Since both the ARNG warrant officer and USAR regular officer promotions have been greatly expedited in the last five to ten years all the USAR need do is to look at how promotions were conducted after these new promotion systems were inaugurated. The other solution to this issue would be to execute promotions in accordance with an OML based on how the board ranked the officers being considered for promotion.

If a system similar to the AC system is used then the USAR would need to take numbers into consideration. Promotions would depend on the needs of the Army Reserve. Meaning promotions in the USAR would not occur if the MOS is currently over strength at specific pay grades. If there are only 12 CW4 positions in the USAR for an MOS and there are 12 CW4 currently filling those slots – no one is getting promoted until at least one of the CW4s retires or moves up to CW5. This could greatly slow USAR promotions in over-strength MOSs. This could somewhat counter to expense of early promotions in other MOSs.

CW5 Promotions

All of these junior promotions culminate to the point where CW4s reach eligibility for consideration for selection to CW5. Unfortunately this promotion system in the USAR is highly dysfunctional. Promotion boards in the USAR for CW5 are very different than other USAR promotion boards described earlier. Since there are very few CW5 slots in the USAR not every eligible and qualified CW4 who is performing adequately can be promoted to CW5. If there is only one CW5 in an MOS then only one CW4 can be promoted to that slot at a time if and only if there is a vacancy.

Problems arise in the current system when more than one warrant is eligible for consideration. The promotion boards dutifully create an Order of Merit List (OML) to determine which of the multiple CW4s is the best and most deserving of the CW4s. Issue: What happens when the board-selected CW4 is not actually eligible, or has already retired or declines the promotion when given to him or her. The system does not allow for HRC to reach back to the OML and see who was the board's next choice (provided that the #2 or #3 was also fully qualified). The end result of the current system is that no one is promoted and the position remains vacant if the selected CW4 cannot or will not take the promotion. How much of an issue is this? The last four times that HRC actually conducted a promotion board in my MOS they selected four individuals for promotion but only promoted one, and he served for only six months. On the three other occasions the selected CW4s could not or would not accept the promotion. The end result was that no one was promoted despite the fact that other CW4s could have or would have accepted the promotion. The position remained needlessly vacant.

HRC has attempted to treat some of the symptoms of this issue by having only AGRs compete with AGRs and TPUs compete with TPUs and to check to see if the CW4 has already dropped his retirement paperwork for the near future. A much better solution would have been to retain the OML from the board and reach back to promote the next best qualified individual rather than simply promoting no one. HRC current solutions do nothing for the event that a CW4 declines a promotion when another competing CW4 might have accepted the position.

The other major issue with the CW5 promotion boards is that HRC determines CW5 vacancies too early in the year prior to board. The issue arises when there is only one CW5 slot in the MOS in the USAR and HRC is conducting a board to fill that vacancy. HRC makes the assumption that since there is a board to fill the vacancy there will be a promotion shortly thereafter and therefore no vacancy in the next year. History shows that that assumption can be very wrong. Yes there was a board but no promotion occurred and there is still a vacancy. BUT: no, there will be no promotion board the following year to fill this vacancy. The end result of this is a comedy of errors. Year one has a promotion board, selects someone but promotes no one. Year two has no promotion board because HRC assumes year one's board will have taken care of the vacancy but did not. Year three has a promotion board, selects someone but promotes no one. Year four does not have a promotion board because HRC assumes that the Year three's board will have filled the vacancy but did not. Etc.. How often does this have an effect? In the last eight years my MOS's CW5 slot was mistakenly listed as filled four years but no one was filling the position. Therefore no promotion board was convened to try to fill the vacancy. (and yes there were qualified CW4s who could have filled it every single time.)

The last minor issue with the CW5 boards is that HRC withholds consideration to otherwise qualified CW4s who have only been in the AGR program for one, two, or three years. I somewhat understand potentially not considering a new AGR CW4 when it would mean that a CW4 long in the AGR system and performing wonderfully is bypassed by this newly minted AGR warrant officer. I do not understand how an otherwise qualified CW4 is not allowed to be considered for the promotion when no one else could fill the position and that position stays vacant. I know of one CW4 in the AGR program who had to wait till his eighth year as a CW4 and his fourth year in the AGR program to be considered for CW5.

The end result with this comedy of errors has been that USAR has successfully filled my MOS's CW5 position only once in the last nine years for a grand total of only six months. This situation has led to its final comical error. The USAR has decided that since the CW5 position is nearly always vacant and there are no ill effects to its nearly continuous vacancy, the position is not critical to its mission and is no longer on its MTOE. The fact that it was needlessly vacant is not considered important in this equation. One may be concerned that this process of making repeated "unfortunate mistakes" could become standard practice. If the USAR decides that after a CW5 position is repeatedly vacant and there are no serious ill effects, then the position must not be critical and therefore can be eliminated.

The solutions recommended for the CW5 boards would be fairly simple to execute. Retain and use the OML already created by the board, determine vacancies for the next year only after the board results are announced and allow any otherwise qualified CW4 in the AGR program to compete for promotions regardless of the number of years in the program.

The solutions for the CW3-CW4 promotions would have issues. It would be costly to the USAR with earlier promotions but leaving the system to stand as is I believe a greater issue. When the ARNG allows for decidedly faster promotions for its warrants officers (up to four years faster) , why should USAR warrant officers remain in the USAR?