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**FILE TITLE:** Supergrade Creation: Establishment of Air Force Supergrades, E-8 Senior Master Sergeant and E-9 Chief Master Sergeant

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# **SUPERGRADE CREATION**

## **Establishment of Air force Supergrades: E-8 Senior Master Sergeant and E-9 Chief Master Sergeant**

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

SENIOR NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER ACADEMY

CLASS 97D

SEMINAR TWENTY FOUR

3 JUNE 1997 TO 22 JULY 1997

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**SUPERGRADE CREATION**  
**Establishment of Air force Supergrades:**  
**E-8 Senior Master Sergeant and E-9 Chief Master Sergeant**

At the end of the Korean War, the United States military to experience staggering retention losses of first term members. In the Air Force alone, approximately 80% of all first term airmen left the service after their first tour.(9:44) This concerned military leaders because it effected military readiness. The services elevated their concerns to Congress, but Congress had other pressing national concerns that directed their efforts away from the problem. Then in October 1957, the Soviet Union launched the rocket “Sputnik” into space and this sent panic waves through our government because it showed that the Soviet Union had the means to launch Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles at the United States.(11:37-41) Congress returned their focus to the military and started building the strategic arm race. Still nothing immediately changed to improve the military’s retention rates. It wasn’t until the military reported to congress that the US strategic bombers could not get off the ground in response to a missile attack. They identified the cause was due to poor retention rates preventing them in keeping qualified airmen to maintain the bombers.(16:7625) Congress quickly responded by putting together a committee to determine the cause of the problem so they could fix it. This paper will show what actions Congress took to correct the military service retention problems and the drastic changes the Air Force enlisted force structure went through to increase the importance of the new supergrades. I will begin by explaining the Cordiner Committee results and their plan to create the supergrades as a way to fix the retention problems. I will describe some initial problem with the plan and ways they tried to increase the prestige of the NCOs. Finally, I will touch on why this plan help lead to the

demise of the warrant officer program. It's important for the enlisted force to recognize that they do have a proud heritage built by dedicated enlisted professionals and they should build on their effort to increase the prestige of the enlisted force. Lets begin with the findings of the Cordiner Committee that researched the cause of the retention problems.

In March 1956, Reuben B. Robertson, Deputy Secretary Of Defense put together a Defense Advisory Committee on Professional and Technical Compensation (more commonly known as the Cordiner Committee). The committee was headed by Ralph J. Cordiner, president of the General Electric Company. He focused their study on the retention problems among the services and how changing technology was effecting personnel. The committee pointed out that technological changes means a change in weapon systems in combat units, change in techniques of maintenance, and change in the level of skill and judgment of the user. They found that more sophisticated weapon systems require longer training requirements. Approximately 80% of all first term airmen left the service after the first four year enlistment. Yet in that four year period the airmen spent most over half their time in training leaving less than 40% left to actually work on the weapon system. Another area found by the committee was that first term service members normally could expect higher pay starting a civilian job than in the military. They also found a promotion stagnation of E-7s and pay inversion between supervisory and subordinate personnel. The average person progressed to E-7 by the 12th year of service, leaving 8 to 18 years of service without further advancement in

rank.(6:60-62) The committee combined their findings and put together their recommendations to Congress.

The committee's recommendations included adding two additional grades of E-8 and E-9 for all services. They limited the number initially to one half for E-9 and one and a half in grade E-8 in order to protect the prestige value of the grades. Later it was changed to 1 and 2% respectively. The same percentage we still have today. The number of promoted to the new grades should be taken from existing E-7 grade allocations, in order to prevent across the board up-grading in the lower ranks. The pay of the new top grades should represent a monetary reward in significant proportions so that it may act as a career incentive for personnel in lower grades.(15:5292 ) It would take a year for congress to act on the proposal and finally, on 20 May 1958, President Eisenhower signed Public Law 85-422 creating the two new enlisted grades. Public Law 85-422 provided a new compensation system aimed at reducing the tremendous personnel turnover in the Armed Services and thereby provide for attracting and retaining highly qualified personnel for careers of proper duration. This military pay act represents an important step forward in efforts of the Armed Services to attract and retain highly qualified personnel.(10:60) The Air Force quickly responded to the legislation and created a plan to incorporate the new supergrades.

The two new grades were particularly welcome in that they would relieve the "compression" in the grade of Master Sergeant. It was an excellent solution to the problem of differentiation in the levels of responsibility among Master Sergeants. For Instance, in the maintenance T.O., s a tactical fighter squadron, four flight chiefs, two

inspectors, and a line chief all held the grade of E-7. The new grades would allow the top supervisor a grade superior to the others, each whom had substantial responsibilities of their own.(8:33)

The Air Force calculated that it need to promote 2,000 to E-8 by 1 Sept 1958 using a 10 month cycle promotion schedule. They also determined that 1,700 promotion to E-9 would be required in Dec 1959.(3:1) The Air Force manpower office developed the following requirements as the minimum criteria to be eligible for promotion to the grade of E-8. All master sergeants will as a minimum have:

- 7 Level
- 90% on test
- TAMSD 10 years to E-8 and 11 for E-9
- TIG is 24 Months and 12 Months

Headquarters USAF added that the selection criteria will be based on promotion boards at the wing or equal level, but 12 Jul 1958, pulled back the promotion authority from the wing to itself and the board would be made up of field grade officers. The board selection will hinge on 1) Demonstrated leadership ability and supervisory ability 2) Supervisors evaluation on the proficiency report 3) Commanders recommendation and 4) Best qualified. They also stated that 73% of promoted to E-8 will be in highly technical fields and 65% to E-9. No more than 12% from nontechnical to E-8 and 7% to E-9.(3:1)

The USAF Manpower Office estimated that 50,000 E-7s were eligible to take the new E-8 test. The test had 150 multiple choice questions. The test was almost identical to the warrant officer test. Testing began 20 Jun 1958 to start promoting 1 Sept 1958. Under the new pay scales, an E-8 will add \$20-35 a month to basic pay.(4:37) During the months of May and June 1958, approximately 45,000 master sergeants from all commands were tested with the Supervisory Examination as a first step in the final selection of 2,000 for eventual promotion to E-8. Due to the speed with which the Air Force desired to promote to E-8 as a result of congressional action, an accelerated testing program involved local scoring. The testing program was carried out effectively with minimum confusion. The supervisory test had screened out approximately 15,000 applicants permitting 30,000 to be further screened by command boards from which 2,000 would be selected initially.(10: 29-130)

For the first time in Air Force history, a board was convened to consider Master Sergeants for promotion to the newly established supergrade of E-8. The board consisted of 14 colonels, who were in session three and a half days and considered 734 records. The board selected 125 Master Sergeants for promotion to this new grade.(9:14) The plan seemed to be working on all cylinders, but there were initial problems caused by the swift implementation.

The speed with which it was necessary to implement the legislation did not permit a complete review of the enlisted structure. It was therefore determined that, for the present, the titles and insignia should blend into the system with the least possible change.

Adding two new grades did present some problems. Most significant was the fact that of all the nine grades, five were to be at the sergeant level. Up to 40% of the total enlisted structure would be in these five grades. For this reason, the older breakout of “airmen” and “sergeants” seemed out of moded. It was apparent that, with a near one-to-one ratio between airmen and sergeants, not all sergeants could be supervisors. It was considered that the time had to come to effect differentiation between the less skilled airmen, the more skilled at staff and technical sergeant level, and supervisory level.(8:33) This started the creation of the three tier enlisted structure.

General Lew Allen Jr. commented about another problem encountered after the creation of the supergrades. *“Initially the first sergeant position remained as an E-7 which oftentimes lead to the supergrades having more jurisdiction and out rank the first sergeant in many cases. We attempted in various ways, insignia and other things, to give recognition to first sergeants and try to address that through appropriate recognition of first sergeant responsibilities.”*(1:115)

The Directorate of Personnel Planning also identified that movement of senior master sergeants were going to be held to a minimum because only a small number of the total authorization were filled by promotions and movement might fill a position that would be later filled by such method. It was anticipated that approximately one and one half years would elapse before senior master sergeants could be integrated into the normal manning system. This requirement was necessary since the complete requirement Air Force-wide for Senior Master Sergeants were not yet established.(9:6)

Grades E-8 and E-9 were expected to relieve the grade compression which existed in the grade of E-7. However, since all authorized spaces were to come from the E-7



authorizations, there would not be an advantageous effect on any grades below E-7.(8:118) To compound the initial problems, there was a matter of increasing the prestige of the new ranks.

The new supergrades suffered initially from lack of prestige that caused overlapping authority and responsibilities as well as positions in the workforce. Lt Gen Kenneth Tallman, Commander of the Air Force Military Personnel Center at Randolph AFB commented about the lack of prestige among the enlisted grades *“One of the more common complaints in the Air Force at that time was from the senior NCO ranks on the decrease in prestige, at least perceived by them. It probably started back in the days when we eliminated the warrant officer and replaced them with the E-8 and E-9 ranks but did not give him equal jobs. In other words, we replaced the rank structure, but did not make the E-8 or E-9 assistant supply officers and so forth. Therefore, there was a perception that the prestige of the senior ranks who were suppose to occupy the same prestige level as the warrant officer was diminished and now they were just common, everyday NCOs instead of at the highest levels of the NCO ranks. We developed a number of ideas to try to reinstitute the prestige of the position of senior and chief master sergeant. At the same time at the personnel center, they instituted the chief’s group, which was a separate manning section designed to handle the assignments of chief master sergeants. Here again, they were given a more personalized treatment in enhancing their prestige.”*(14:140-141) Lt Gen Tallman was one of the early proponents for increasing the prestige of the NCO. He generated the action for all command to work

on ways to increase the NCO prestige. This kicked off a massive effort by all commands to enact programs to increase prestige of the supergrades.

The Air Defense Command announced plans to beef up the prestige and authority of its new senior and chief master sergeants (E-8 and E-9). Included in this plan would be excuse from additional duties now required of master sergeants such as NCO of the day, staff CO, etc.; excuse from standby in-ranks inspections, authority to sleep off base and ration separately from bachelors; and others. Thus far, a total of 205 airmen in ADC and NORAD have been promoted to the new rank of senior master sergeant. A message sent throughout the command from ADC headquarters here said “ Positive actions on the part of all commanders to increase the prestige and authority of these airmen are essential.” The message further pointed out that the newly promoted airmen are dedicated career airmen who have worked long and hard to achieve these grades and that actions which recognize these achievements will provide incentives for lower grade airmen to remain in the Air Force.(13:1)

The Air Force supergrade plan did have problems, but the leadership recognized the need to move on creating a workable environment. Not all the services had it so easy. In the Settle Board’s report, this interesting finding which relates to the overlapping of responsibilities between warrant officers and senior enlisted men appeared in the Navy: It was agreed that the senior and master chiefs do not fit into the current grade structure where they should. The E-8 and E-9 grades are merely two higher pay levels in the chief Petty Officer rate that did not involve broader and higher competence, responsibility and authority. Senior and master chiefs have been largely interchangeable with E-7s, resulting in damage to the professional prestige of E-7, and professional frustration for

the E-8 and E-9. The Navy began working on their internal problems, but the Army took a hit right up front with their plan. Most of the Army's top NCO lost their titles and one stripe as the ground service laid on the major revision of its enlisted grade system to accommodate the new super ranks. The Army grade changes, by far the most drastic planned by any service, drew blasts from the soldier ranks less than a week after they were announced. Biggest objection is from the Army men in E-5, E-6 and E-7 grades, all of whom lose a stripe in the changeover.(2:4) As you can see, not all was well planned to accommodate the new supergrades in any service. The Air Force had a serious dilemma separating the warrant officer and E-8 and E-9 responsibility overlaps. The AF NCOs were winning the prestige battle causing the warrant officer programmed to be relooked at for discontinuation.

The promotion stagnation created serious career frustration for the enlisted force. The only avenue for E-7s was to apply for the warrant office program. The program considered applicants two times a year to meet boards with limited slots. Before the creation of the super grades, 11,000 applications flooded the board.

Even though Air Force had been experiencing difficulties in administering the warrant officer program prior to 1958, few suspected that its continuation was in jeopardy until the new E-8 and E-9 grades became part of the Air Force grade structure. Previously, most new warrants were appointed from the outstanding group of master sergeant applicants. But, with the new super enlisted grades whose base pay equaled and sometimes exceeded the base pay of the warrants in pay grade W-1 and W-2, In the area of pay and allowances finance directives had included basic pay tables, per diem,

substance allowance, hazardous duty pay, basic quarters. It was in this area that a great deal of dissatisfaction was, shown in 1958, by sergeants who were eyeing warrant officer bars. The new pay law established a questionable pay structure for warrants in relation to E-8 and E-9 pay rates.(12:11-12)

Outstanding master sergeants were no longer eager for a warrant appointment. Since the jump to the supergrades there was a lag in warrant officer applicants. Before, the board was flooded with thousands of applicants now, just 195 applicants.(4:1) A short excerpt from the editorial column of the Air Force Times on 21 Jun 58, summarized the problem “ A further jolt for masters eyeing warrant officer bars came with the new pay law. It established enlisted supergrades and questionable warrant officer structure (in relation to the E-8 and E-9 and proficiency pay rates.)”(5:10)

The future of the Warrant Officer Program became doubtful with this announcement, in December 1958, by Directorate of Military Personnel. “Submission of applications and testing of applicants for warrant officers appointments have been postponed until further notice.” The action was necessary because the fate of the WO program has not been decided and previous instructions called for the application period to open next month. Basic to the problem is the new super grade pay rates which overlap warrant pay scales. It was apparent at that time that the step toward ending the program on a phase out basis had been taken when warrant appointments for FY59 and FY60 had been eliminated.(12:16) On 26 December 1958, the Directorate of Manpower advised the Director of Personnel Planning that the creation of the two new enlisted pay grades had resulted in problems of work over-lap. This in turn created additional problems in determining manpower requirements. As a result, an AD Hoc Committee was held 17

Dec 1958. The committee agreed that warrant officers procurement should be discontinued (8:122)

Today's Air Force enlisted personnel are beneficiaries of what the early enlisted professionals left behind. We should studying what they went through during the creation of the supergrades and remember that they made great gains in the prestige of senior NCOs. I explained the causes of the retention problem that forced the creation of the supergrades and then identified some initial problems faced by them and the need to increase their prestige. Finally, I explained the reasons for the demise of the warrant officer program was largely due to the creation of the supergrades. Its important for us as enlisted members to remember our past struggles and victories and see that your history was built by brave enlisted professionals who suffered much to give you what you now have. Only then can you appreciate your heritage and carry on with the proud tradition. Woooh!

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