

Cyber warriors wanted

The need to recruit and retain sailors with high-tech skillsets has led to the return of a rank not seen in decades.

RETURN OF WARRANT 1

REVIVING AN OLD RANK FOR A HIGH-TECH FLEET

By Mark D. Faram

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The Navy is forging a new career path for enlisted sailors by bringing back the warrant-1 paygrade for the first time in more than 40 years.

The change, which will soon be announced, comes at a time when the Navy is struggling to recruit and retain the skilled sailors needed for high-tech warfare.

Dusting off the old W-1 paygrade will give the Navy the ability to target sailors with lucrative skills and offer them significantly more money and promotion opportunities than the traditional enlisted career track.

Vice Adm. Robert P. Burke, the Navy's top uniformed personnel officer, says it's a solution to growing "technical supervisors" through the ranks.

Initially, the plan is to start using the paygrade for cyber-related warrant officer specialties, but Navy officials familiar with the program say that could soon expand to other technical career paths in the coming years.

The opportunity to transition into a W-1 rank will also be available to E-5 sailors. That's a massive change from the current Navy personnel structure, which mostly limits warrant officer commissions to Navy chiefs, who can enter at the W-2 paygrade.

The new offer is an enticement that Burke says the Navy needs to keep sailors and their critical skills from leaving the Navy for a career in the private sector.

Burke hopes the combination of a hefty pay raise, the

prospect of moving into the officer ranks, a wider range of career opportunities and improved retirement payouts down the line will provide more of an enticement.

"Our big challenges are on the senior enlisted technical leaders...they'll grow to sort of the E-5, E-6 level, and then they'll be poached off" by the private sector, Burke said while explaining the program to the House Armed Services Personnel Committee on April 13.

In effect, the Navy's decision to recreate the W-1 paygrade ends the controversial past discussions about the possibility of allowing civilians with high-demand skills to skip the junior enlisted ranks and enter the navy as a mid-level non-commissioned officer.

That plan would have required changing federal laws that govern military careers.

The Navy continues to seek congressional authority to offer direct commissions and bring in newly minted officers into the Navy at the O-6 level. But for now, the service has dropped the idea of lateral entry for enlisted sailors.

HOW IT WILL WORK

Reviving a rank not seen since 1975 won't be easy.

The Navy must again create programs and policies that will govern not only their initial selection, but promotion to higher grades down the line.

Currently, the service's warrant officer program starts at the W-2 paygrade and requires applying sailors to be at least a chief petty officer and have at least 12 years of service under their belt.

The W-1 program would cut the paygrade requirement to E-5 and required time in service to six years.

"So, instead of a commissioned warrant officer, we went with a W-1 program that made E-5s eligible for this," Burke told the committee. "That was within our existing service authorities to use that option."

Internally, Burke approved the idea in March.

An detailed announcement is expected in June.

But Navy personnel officials have given Navy Times a sneak peek at some of the particulars.

The program will be limited at first, but has the potential to grow over time as the Navy determines need, and officials are optimistic it will work well.

"Right now, this is only in the cyber warrant world, and though it is being offered through existing authority, it is in a sense a pilot program," said a Navy source familiar with the program.

"I would suspect that, if successful, other communities could easily come in with proposals to start growing W-1s," the Navy official said.

According to Capt. Amy Derrick, spokeswoman for the chief of naval personnel, the initial selection board will

only offer the opportunity to sailors in the cryptologic technician (networks) with set enlisted classifications.

For now, that will limit this endeavor to about 55 sailors, Derrick said.

Derrick said that the first selection board will meet sometime before the end of fiscal year 2018 to appoint an initial cadre of three W-1s who will assume that rank in FY2019. Another three will move up in FY2020.

Burke's hope is that bringing E-5 sailors into the W-1 level will entice them with longer careers.

The change, meanwhile, comes at a time when education levels among today's sailors are soaring.

The number of enlisted sailors with college degrees has increased fivefold in recent years. Today, roughly one in four enlisted sailors has earned either an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree, and many are working toward a master's degree.

It's a sweeping change that is blurring the once-rigid lines between officer and enlisted sailors and forcing the Navy to rethink the way it pays, promotes and retains.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Navy hopes the new program will offer two major incentives: A bigger paycheck up front and a significant boost to retirement benefits down the line if the sailors stay in uniform long enough to retire from the Navy.

An E-5 sailor with six years of service currently makes about \$2,925 per month in basic pay. Sailors with six

years of service who put on the W-1 insignia, meanwhile, would net more than \$3,800 per month in basic pay. And that's not including housing allowance.

An E-5 getting the nod for W-1 this year could advance to W-3 over the next 12 years, giving that sailor an opportunity to bring in a monthly pension check far more robust than a retired chief.

POTENTIAL GROWTH

By law, the U.S. military is authorized to have both warrant officers and chief warrant officers.

W-1s are not considered commissioned officers. Rather, these sailors receive a "warrant" to their rank by their service secretary.

Chief Warrant Officers hold the pay grades W-2 through W-5, and are issued commissions by the president.

Currently, only the Army and Marine Corps are using the W-1 paygrade. The Air Force does not have warrant officers in its current force structure.

Specifically, the Army has nearly 2,300 W-1s and the Marine Corps has about 500.

If the Navy grew its W-1 ranks to a proportion similar to those services, the eventual W-1 population could fall between 350 and 500 sailors, giving the service room to grown technical supervisors in other specialties if they choose.

These eventual W-1s won't be wearing the regular



Last seen in 1975

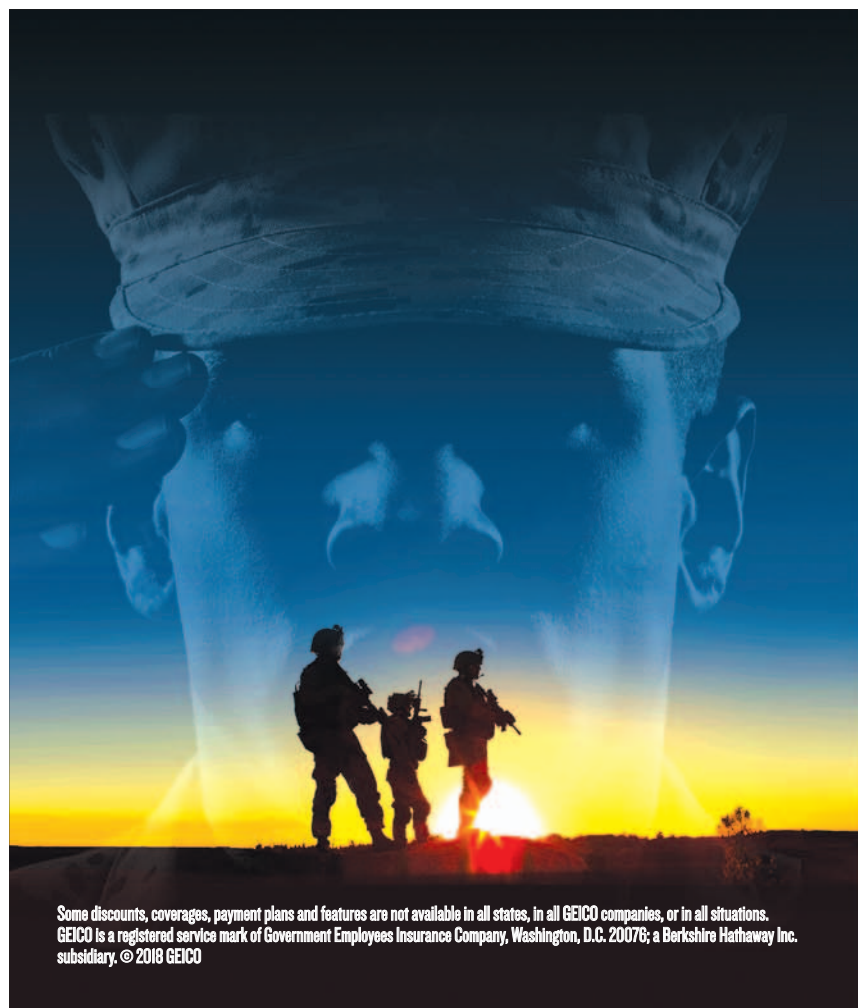
An embroidered W-1 tab could soon be seen again around the fleet.

officer cap insignia. Instead, they will wear the warrant's crossed anchors on their combination cover. Still, warrant officers get saluted, live in officer's country and take their meals in the wardroom.

Unlike their mustang counterparts in the limited duty officer ranks, all warrant officers are expected to be technical experts and supervisors of those with related technical skills.

"As they progress, [W-1s] are eligible to become commissioned at W-2 and they have a lot more time to grow in those senior supervisor roles, so we can also keep them around," Burke told Congress.

"We have high hopes for that one and it's an example of using existing authorities to solve a problem."



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