

Information sheet no 096

Naval Ranks

The current naval rankings have been precisely defined for only forty years. There were distinct groups that formed the officer corps: Flag rank officers, Commissioned officers, Warrant Officers and Petty Officers.

Lord High Admiral:

This office was once one of the 9 Great Officers of State in England, dating back to 1413. Most of the post-holders would have been courtiers or politicians upon whom the Monarch would have bestowed the title. Many would have had little sea-going experience. From 1628, the post was considered to be an honorary title. When it was not invested on an individual, it reverted to the Monarch. However, from the eighteenth century onward, the post was, in the main, “in commission” – not held by an individual and the powers and duties of the post were exercised by a board of Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty headed up by the First Lord of the Admiralty. This Board was a mix of professional naval officers and civil politicians. In 1964, with the creation of the Ministry of Defence, the post of First Lord was abolished and the Board’s duties devolved onto the Admiralty Board of the Defence Council. The title was returned to the Sovereign. In 2011, the Queen bestowed the title onto HRH the Duke of Edinburgh on the occasion of his 90th birthday in recognition of long service to the nation.

Flag rank:

The highest naval rank is Admiral of the Fleet. This rank came about from a function of the Lord High Admiral since, although technically in overall charge of the fleet, it was very seldom he put to sea with the fleet and thus required another person to undertake the command of the fleet while at sea in his place. This post became known as the Admiral of the Fleet. The first holder of this title was the Earl of Dartmouth, appointed by King James II in 1688. During 1718 and 1739, it became customary to give the most senior Admiral this title even if there was no fleet to command. From the 1740s –1863, only one person was appointed to this rank and was held for life. It was then decided to appoint more than one, since the Army had six Field Marshals. In 1870, new regulations were introduced to ensure the Admirals of the Fleet retired at the age of 70, but ensuring that there would always be three on the active list. The maximum number was three until 1898 when a fourth was appointed. In 1940, all retired rank-holders were replaced on the active list conforming to the Army practice of Field Marshals who remained on the active list for life. In the 1990s, the rank was abolished and only those who held the rank prior to abolition remain using the rank.

The ranks of Admiral, Vice Admiral, and Rear Admiral arose directly out of the organisation of the fleet in 1620 into three parts. (The system of hierarchy for Admirals is explained in Library Information Sheet no. 55 – Squadron colours)

The junior flag rank was that of Commodore. In 1690, the Admiralty gave the title of Commodore to the senior Captain of a small squadron or a Commander in Chief of a small station when no flag officer was present and therefore involved extra responsibilities. It was considered as a temporary rank which once the circumstances had

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passed meant reversion to Captain and officers retained their seniority position in the Captain's list. In 1747, the first list of "equivalent ranks" between Army and Navy was produced and the Admiralty proposed that Commodores should rank with Brigadiers. This was accepted although in reality the "rank" of Commodore did not formally exist. In 1805, this anomaly was redressed by creating First Class Commodores ranked and paid as a Rear-Admiral if of sufficient importance to have a separate Captain under him and Second Class Commodores if he commanded the ship himself and did not have a separate Captain. 2nd Class Commodores did not receive the same pay as a Rear-Admiral and, if a more senior Captain visited his ship, he was to strike his broad pennant until that Captain left the ship. The distinction between the two classes of Commodores was abolished in 1958 reverting to a single rank.

Commissioned Officers (Executive)

This group of officers were at first appointed to a ship for particular commissions and were ranked according to seniority of first appointment in that rank.

Captain:

The title of Captain was universal to the most senior officer commanding a ship whatever his actual rank. On promotion from Lieutenant, officers were appointed to a small ship eg. sloop, cutter etc. (equivalent to today's rank of Commander). After sufficient experience, the officer could be given command of a rated ship (1st – 5th rate). This was known as a "post Captain" (equivalent to today's rank of Captain). He would take his place in the seniority list of the rank and further promotion was on seniority. Duties on board ship were to prepare the ship for sailing, make inventories of stores and write reports for the Admiralty on work being done on the ship. He also had to recruit the ship's complement and record details in the muster book. During a voyage, he was responsible for the ship and crew's welfare, including feeding, clothing, health and discipline, maintain the log of the ship, and delegate authority as necessary. He was also responsible for directing the ship's activities in naval engagements.

Commander:

The rank of Commander was formally instituted in 1794, obtainable only by being commissioned to command a vessel, smaller than post-ships (1st-5th rates) but larger than vessels commanded by Lieutenants. After this date, post-Captains were appointed solely from the Commanders list. In 1827, the term became used for the Captain's second-in-command. First Lieutenants in battleships were made Commanders, although this was an unpopular move with Lieutenants who were actually in command of smaller vessels.

Lieutenant-Commander:

Lieutenants who were commanding small naval vessels were described as Lieutenant (in) Command. In 1827, this changed when the rank of Commander referred to a Captain's second-in-command and First Lieutenants in larger ships were appointed to this rank. In recognition of being senior lieutenants, usually of eight years' service, the rank of Lieutenant-Commander was instituted giving a distinction from more junior Lieutenants. This also included a different uniform. In 1875, they were allowed to include a "half-stripe" to the two full stripes of Lieutenant. In March

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1914, the substantive rank of Lieutenant-Commander was established with automatic promotion for Lieutenants of eight years' service.

Lieutenant:

The rank of Lieutenant can be traced back to 1580 with the simple reason of being an understudy to the Captain in case of accident or illness, although they were not permanently established. After the restoration, Samuel Pepys introduced an examination to test the abilities of the rank and by doing so transformed their status from mere understudy to an actual job with particular duties attached. A ship's senior Lieutenant, known as the First Lieutenant, was responsible for the organisation of the ship and administration under the guidance of the Captain. This post eventually turned into the rank of Commander. He was responsible for maintaining discipline and navigation and with the junior Lieutenants responsible for ensuring the crew carried out their duties and was in charge of watches. Lieutenants received their commissions for particular ships and the position within the officer ranks. An officer was required to have at least six years' service at sea before passing the examination for promotion to Lieutenant. It was possible for the officer to spend many years in this rank until the eventual distinction for Lieutenants of eight years' service came with the establishment of the rank of Lieutenant-Commander.

Sub-Lieutenants/Master's Mates:

In principle, any person who satisfied the age and service conditions and passed the examination could be commissioned. However, it was usual for candidates for commissioned ranks to pass through a number of ratings including that of Master's Mate. This was technically a senior Petty Officer rank. He learnt navigation from the Master and generally assisted him. This rating was paid more than other ratings and was the only rating allowed to command any sort of vessel. They could pass examinations qualifying them to command prizes and tenders and act as Second Master of vessels too small to be allocated a warranted Master. In 1824, there was a defining split; those wanting to attain the rank of Master became Masters Assistants and those wanting to become Lieutenants remained as Master's Mates. In 1840, Mates were established as a rank below Lieutenants and in 1860, renamed Sub-Lieutenants. This became the most junior commissioned rank and the only route to promotion to Lieutenant.

Warrant Officers

Warrant Officers were the heads of specialist technical branches of the ship's company and reported directly to the Captain. For administration they reported to the different boards which governed naval affairs such as the Navy Board, Victualling Board and Ordnance Board. They were usually examined professionally by a body other than the Admiralty and had usually served an apprenticeship. In the eighteenth century, there were two branches of Warrant Officer - those classed as sea officers, who had equal status as commissioned officers and could stand on the quarterdeck and those classed as inferior officers (keeping no accounts). Three Warrant Officers were classed as "standing officers", warranted to a ship for her lifetime whether in commission or not. When in reserve, they were borne on the Ordinary books of the dockyard and employed in maintenance of the ship. In the nineteenth century, some warrant ranks transferred to commissioned rank and the branch of Engineers was introduced. It became necessary to distinguish between types of officers who could command ships and those who could not – basically

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Military and Civil (equivalent to the modern Executive and Non-Executive officers). After 1847, only three warrant ranks remained.

Masters:

This was the senior warrant rank and was equivalent to a “professional” seaman and specialist in navigation, rather than as a military commander. Their rank was roughly equivalent to a Lieutenant and these officers were usually well educated. They were professionally examined by Trinity House and re-qualified if appointed to a larger rated ship. Masters were able to stand watches and command ships in non-combatant duties. The Master’s main duty was navigation, taking ship’s position daily and setting the sails as appropriate for the required course. He supervised Midshipmen and Mates in taking observations of the sun, supervising entries for parts of the official log to cover the weather, position and expenditure. He maintained the ship’s compass, the rope rigging and sails. Other duties included the stowing of the hold, inspecting provisions, taking stores so that the ship was not too weighted down to sail effectively and reporting defects to the Captain. The Master also has responsibilities for security and the issue of drink on board. In the mid-nineteenth century Masters attained full commissioned rank and titles were changed to assimilate them into the main commissioned structure. As general officer training covered navigation, the specialised Navigating branch was no longer required and phased out and no further entries were taken after 1872. The last Master retired in 1912.

Surgeon:

Surgeons were warranted to ships by the Navy Board. Their examining boards were conducted by various bodies including the Barber-Surgeons Company, the Sick and Hurt Board, the Transport Board and the Victualling Board up until 1832 when the Admiralty took over responsibility for their qualifications. They were the only medical officers on the ship and were assisted by one or more Surgeon’s Mates (inferior warrant officers). They had the right to walk the quarterdeck and became a fully commissioned rank in the nineteenth century. They were responsible for the sick and injured, performing surgical operations as necessary and dispensed medicine. They were required to keep a journal of treatment and advised the Captain on health matters.

Pursers:

Pursers were warranted by the Admiralty but did not require professional qualifications. However, some kind of financial guarantee was required. The duties were to oversee supply and issue of victuals, slops (clothes) and other consumables. In 1825, the Purser became responsible for the payment of the crew and added Paymaster to his title and in 1842 became a commissioned rank. The term Purser disappeared in 1852 leaving the role as Paymaster. The Accountant Branch changed in October 1944 to become part of the Supply and Secretariat branch and the Paymaster ranks became Supply Officers. The term “Pusser” – being derived from Purser – is still an historic nickname used for the modern ranks of Logistics Officers.



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Boatswains:

Boatswains were appointed by the Admiralty and were responsible to the Navy Board. He had responsibility for rigging, cables, anchors, sails and boats. They were not eligible to command ships but could stand watches. They were less educated than the more senior warrant officers, although they needed to keep accounts. This rank did not rise to commissioned status although in the nineteenth century there were limited opportunities for boatswains to rise to commissioned officer status. The Sailmaker and Boatswain's Mate were under the command of the Boatswain. This rank was one of the three standing officers appointed to a ship.

Carpenter:

Carpenters were responsible for the maintenance of the hull and masts of the ship. He was unusual in that many passed most of their careers as civilian employees of the Navy Board in the dockyards and only partly as officers on ships. The majority qualified as Shipwrights in the dockyards before going to sea. In 1918, Carpenters were renamed Warrant Shipwrights when their work ceased to be solely timber. Carpenters were one of the three standing officers appointed to a ship. Their rank did not get transferred to commissioned status.

Gunners:

Gunners were responsible for the maintenance of guns and their equipment. They had to be examined, appointed by and responsible to the Ordnance Board. They had to adhere to strict rules. They made tackle and breeches for guns and make regular inspections during a voyage. Another responsibility was to ensure that powder in the magazines was kept dry. Like Boatswains, they remained a warrant rank but had limited opportunities for promotion to commissioned posts in the nineteenth century. The Gunner was the third of the ship's standing officers.

Petty Officers and Inferior Warrant Officers

Midshipmen:

This rank was a senior Petty Officer, usually filled by young gentleman with aspirations to become commissioned officers. This rank never obtained commissioned status. The number of Midshipmen in a ship was fixed by the rating of the ship and it was at the discretion of the Captain as to who was carried. To get round the problem of large numbers of men wanting to be Midshipmen or get their service time in before the Lieutenant's examination, various supernumerary posts, paid as able seamen were created. During their period as Midshipmen, the officers undertook instruction on a variety of subjects and had the important distinction of being permitted to walk the quarterdeck and wear uniform unlike other Petty Officers

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Chaplains:

Chaplains were examined by the Bishop of London and appointed by the Admiralty. In 1808 they were granted wardroom status until 1843 when they became a commissioned rank.

Other Petty Officers:

This group included Boatswain's Mates, Sailmakers, Cooks, Armourers, Surgeon's Mates, Carpenter's Mates, Clerks, Schoolmasters.