

On 1st April 1999 the use of the term "SD Officer" ceased and was replaced by the "Senior Corps Commission Candidates" scheme. This is the most recent development in the long history of the provision of opportunities for promotion to warrant or commissioned officer status from the ranks.

# **Warrant Officers in the Royal Marines**

## **and their promotion ladder**

**by Major Alastair Donald RM**

From a military point of view, a commission is a document authorising the holder to perform duties in the service of the State. They are granted by or on behalf of the sovereign and the recipient is ranked as an officer<sup>1</sup>. A warrant is a document which is signed by a person authorised to issue warrants. In the case of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines the sovereign delegated such authority to issue warrants to the Board of Admiralty. A warrant officer therefore received a paper signed by someone delegated to do so by the Board of Admiralty.

To understand fully the position of Warrant Officers in the Royal Marines prior to 1949, it is first necessary to look at the historical background to Warrant Officers in the Royal Navy.

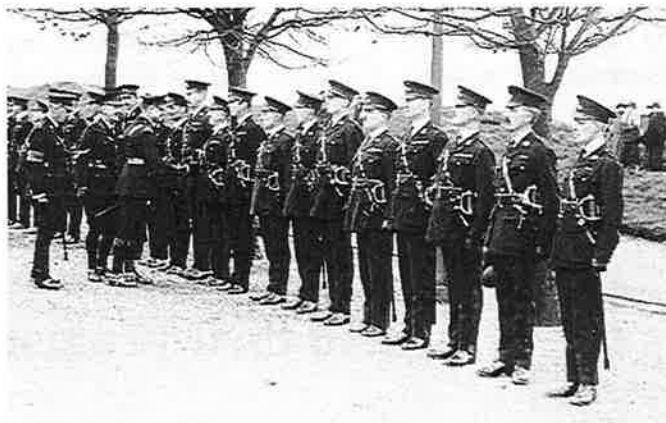
In the Royal Navy, from the seventeenth to the start of the twentieth century officers "fell into several overlapping and often ill-defined groups"<sup>2</sup>. In simple terms, there were commissioned officers and warrant officers. The latter had the standing of petty officers, but were distinguished from them by being appointed by warrant rather than being rated by their Captains. In the early part of the nineteenth century there were three categories of warrant officers in the Navy, Boatswains, Gunners, and Carpenters; Engineers were added in 1837. Later in the century warrant officers were given an opportunity to advance to commissioned rank. In keeping with the pace of technical change, over the years there was a large increase in the number of specialist categories and new warrant ranks were created for these branches. By 1945 there were warrant officers in twenty-four different branches in the Royal Navy.

Warrant rank was introduced in the Royal Marines in 1881<sup>3</sup>, when 8 Sergeant-Majors (1 RMA; 6 RMLI; 1 RMLI supernumerary with an Army Volunteer Battalion), 8 Superintending Clerks (2 RMA; 6 RMLI), 4 Bandmasters<sup>4</sup> (1 RMA; 3 RMLI) and 11 Schoolmasters (2 RMA; 9 RMLI) all received their Warrants dated 1 July that year. At the Royal Naval School of



From a group of Senior NCOs, probably at Forton c 1920, showing L-R, The Drum Major, A Company Sergeant Major, The Armourer sergeant and the Quartermaster Sergeant of Physical Training.

The Adjutant General meeting Warrant Officers of the Royal Marine Artillery and others at Eastney, c1920.



Music, the March 1904 Navy List shows two Warrant Officers, a Musical Director (Franklin - holding an Army Warrant dated 5 Jan 1900) and a Chief Bandmaster RM (Lidiard, with a seniority of 22 Jul 1903); the January 1905 list shows 3 Chief Bandmasters RM and the January 1911 list has 8 Bandmasters RM, the 'Chief' having been dropped, (In this list Franklin is shown as a 2/Lieutenant RMLI with a seniority of 13 Mar 1901). In 1910 20 Gunnery Sergeant Majors were to be appointed<sup>5</sup> and by the following year there were 4 RMA and 14 RMLI (5 Chatham; 5 Portsmouth; 4 Plymouth)<sup>6</sup>. However at sea there was confusion between them and the Senior NCO of the RM Detachment, who was always known as the Sergeant Major and so in 1912<sup>7</sup> their title was changed to Royal Marine Gunners.

In 1916 the rank of Warrant Officer Class 2, similar to the Army, was introduced into the Royal Marines. Existing Warrant Officers, (Sergeant Majors, Bandmasters, Superintending Clerks and Schoolmasters [WO]), serving on 27 August 1915 were then classed as WO RM Class 1, also similar to the Army. WO RM Class 2 were Quartermaster Sergeants, Quartermaster Sergeant Instructors and Schoolmasters [NCOs] and Colour Sergeants, who were appointed as Company Sergeants were also included as WO2s and titled Company Sergeant-Major<sup>8</sup>. Only WO1s were included in the Navy List<sup>9</sup>. In the November 1918 Navy List 'Warrant Officers, Royal Marines, Class 1' were listed as Sergeant Majors, Superintending Clerks, Bandmasters, Chief Gunners and RM Gunners, Chief Schoolmasters and Schoolmasters. By January 1920 they were all shown simply as 'Warrant Officers' again. They wore no badge of rank. Their next promotion was to Commissioned RM Gunners, Commissioned Sergeant Majors, Commissioned Superintending Clerks and Commissioned Bandmasters, and by an Order-in-Council dated 22 January 1920 the term 'Commissioned Warrant Officers' was abolished and replaced by 'Commissioned Officers from Warrant Rank'. Their badge of rank was a single star on their shoulder<sup>10</sup>.

A group of Commissioned Warrant Officers and Warrant Officers at Eastney, circa 1929, with the Colonel Commandant and the Superintendent of the Royal Naval School of Music



In addition to Commissioned Officers from Warrant rank in the RN and RM, Warrant Officers were also entitled to be saluted by Chiefs and Petty Officers, NCOs, ratings and other ranks<sup>11</sup>.

By an Order-in-Council dated 26 July 1926 no further appointments were to be made to Royal Marine Gunner and the title would no longer exist, but twelve years later it was reintroduced.<sup>12</sup>

By an Order-in-Council of 2 February 1937, the junior Sergeant Major in each Division became equivalent to an Army Warrant Officer Class 1. He was to live in the Sergeants Mess and wear the same uniform as a Staff Sergeant, but with the badge of rank of the Royal Arms. In fact he was dressed the same as a WO1 today, wearing a Sam Browne belt and carried an officers' pattern sword. After two years these Sergeants Majors would be eligible for promotion to Staff Sergeant Major, having the seniority as a Warrant Officer from the date they were promoted Sergeant Major. Their service as a Sergeant Major would also count as for warrant rank. This change almost certainly came about due to the Battalion formed for London Duties in 1935, when the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Coldstream Guards was required to salute the Sergeant Major of the RM Battalion, Sergeant Major E H F Bonnett, the latter being a Royal Marines Warrant Officer<sup>13</sup>.

This is perhaps an opportunity to emphasise that Staff Sergeants at that time should not be confused with 'Sergeants on the Staff' at the Divisions. The latter were Colour Sergeants or Sergeants in staff appointments at each of the Divisions; these were Provost Sergeant, Cook Sergeant, Hospital Sergeant, Armourer Sergeant and Band Sergeant. They wore a leather sword belt, a Senior NCO's cap badge and their rank badge was three inverted chevrons on the right cuff; above the chevrons the Hospital Sergeant had a red cross on a circular white background, the Armourer Sergeant had crossed hammer and pincers and the Band Sergeant wore a Royal Academy style lyre. The only survivor dressed in this manner today is the Provost Sergeant. After 1950 the Band Sergeants of the old Divisional Bands became Bandmasters, but still wore the Divisional Band Sergeant's badge of rank; Lieutenant Colonel Graham Hoskins being the last one to wear this badge, when the Bandmaster of the Portsmouth Group Band until 1968.

In the March 1940 Navy List a Commissioned Master Tailor and Warrant Master Tailors are included<sup>14</sup>. In this list Schoolmasters were shown as a Chief Schoolmaster (to rank as Captain), Headmasters and Schoolmasters (both as Commissioned Warrant Officers). With the re-formation of the Royal Marine Engineers during the Second World War, three Temporary Warrant Officers RME appeared in the Navy List, a General Works Foreman, a Quay Foreman and another titled 'Mechanical'. In line with the RN a Warrant Recruiter was included in 1942. Up until 1943 Warrant Officers wore no badges of rank, but early that year they were granted a badge on their shoulder of a small 'WO' surrounded by a laurel wreath<sup>15</sup>, worsted khaki on khaki for battledress and gold on blue for blue uniform.



Provost Sergeant



Warrant Officer's  
Badge



Drum-Major

After becoming a Commissioned Officer from Warrant Rank, their next promotion was to Lieutenant (Quartermaster), then to Captain (QM), Major (QM) and finally Lieutenant Colonel(QM). There was a Lieutenant Colonel (QM) on the staff in London during the Second World War. Dependant on their appointment, Commissioned Bandmasters at the RNSM were either promoted to Lieutenants (Quartermaster) followed by Captain (Quartermaster) or to Lieutenants (Musical Director) and then later be promoted Captain (Musical Director).

On 5 April 1949<sup>16</sup>, in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, the generic title “Warrant Officer” was replaced by “Branch Officer” and they were to be appointed by commission and not warrant. Warrant Officers became ‘Commissioned Officers’ and the previous Commissioned Officers from Warrant rank became ‘Senior Commissioned Officers’. This was a significant change, Warrant Officers’ messes were closed and, now that they were commissioned, they were received into the Wardroom or Officers’ Mess. A minor change was that in both the senior and junior grades, Staff Sergeant-Majors and Superintending Clerks were combined to become Senior Commissioned Sergeants-Majors and Commissioned Sergeant-Majors respectively. The senior grades wore a large star on their shoulder, whilst the junior grades wore a small star. This was now very much in line with the thick and thin stripes which had been worn by equivalent RN officers and warrant officers since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>17</sup>. As before, their further promotion was to Lieutenant (QM) and then to Captain (QM) etc.

<u>Old Title</u>	<u>New Title</u>
Staff Sergeant Major	Commissioned Sergeant Major
Superintending Clerk	Commissioned Sergeant Major
Commissioned Staff Sergeant Major	Senior Commissioned Sergeant Major
Commissioned Superintending Clerk	Senior Commissioned Sergeant Major
RM Gunner	Commissioned RM Gunner
Commissioned RM Gunner	Senior Commissioned RM Gunner
Master Tailor	Commissioned Master Tailor
Commissioned Master Tailor	Senior Commissioned Master Tailor
Bandmaster (WO) RM Band	Commissioned Bandmaster
Commissioned Bandmaster RM Band	Senior Commissioned Bandmaster
Warrant Recruiter RM	Commissioned Recruiter RM

On 1 January 1957 Branch Officers were retitled Special Duties List Officers<sup>18</sup>. The Order-in-Council, which was in fact dated 15 February 1957, directed the following changes:

Commissioned Sergeant Majors	became	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants (QM)
Senior Commissioned Sergeant Majors	became	Lieutenants (QM)
Commissioned RM Gunners	became	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants (SD)
Senior Commissioned RM Gunners	became	Lieutenants (SD)
Lieutenants (QM)	became	Captains (QM)
Captains (QM)	remained	Captains (QM)

There was no change in the rank of Majors (QM)

#### Band Officers

Commissioned Bandmasters	became	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants (BM)
Senior Commissioned Bandmasters	became	Lieutenants (BM)
Lieutenants	became	Captains (BM)
Captains	became	Captains (BM)
Major	became	Major (BM)

There was no change in the title of Recruiting Officers, but they were treated as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants (SD).

Soon afterwards 'QM' was abolished as part of a rank title and these officers all became 'SD'. Band Officers became 'SD(B)' and for a short time were known as Bandmaster 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants, similarly Bandmaster Lieutenants and Bandmaster Captains. When the Commandant of the RM School of Music, Colonel 'Bertie' Lumsden announced this change in title to the Officers at a special meeting in the Mess, he suggested that perhaps therefore the Principal Director of Music would be known as Bandmaster Lieutenant Colonel Dunn – the latter was not amused!

The badges of rank of SD Officers were as for General List Officers, 2nd Lieutenants (SD) wore a single normal sized star on the shoulder and Lieutenants (SD) had two stars, etc.

On 1 July 1972, under the provisions of the Armed Forces Act 1971, the ranks of Warrant Officer Class 1 and Class 2 were reintroduced into the Corps, in place of the ranks of Regimental Sergeant Major and Quartermaster Sergeant respectively. They were to be addressed as 'Sir' by those junior to them, as 'Mr' by those senior and their warrants signed by the Secretary of State for Defence. The terms RSM, RQMS and Company Sergeant Major are now used as titles of appointments held by Warrant Officers<sup>19</sup>. In the RM Band Service, which in 1979 absorbed the Bugler Branch of the Corps, the ranks are WO1 (Bandmaster), WO1 (Bugler), WO2 (Bandmaster) and WO2 (Bugler).



A Sergeant Major, later a  
Regimental Sergeant Major and  
today a Warrant Officer Class 1



A Quartermaster Sergeant  
(with an Imperial Crown),  
today a Warrant Officer, Class 2

The Senior Corps Commission Candidate scheme is now the method by which suitably qualified other ranks, aged between 26 and 46, can obtain a commission in the Corps. On passing the Admiralty Interview Board and final selection they become a Staff Officer (Late Entry) [SO(LE)], or in the case of the Band Service, SO(LE)(BS).

### Notes (including Sources)

There seems to have been very little written about this subject and the author would be very pleased to hear from any member who can add anything to this article. Additional information can then be published, either in *THE SHEET ANCHOR* or the Quarterly Newsletter, and a more complete edition placed in the archives in the Museum, thus making the information available to future researchers more complete. The author has it in mind to prepare a follow up article on 'The Dress of Royal Marines Warrant Officers' and would particularly welcome details on that subject.

## Endnotes

- 1 *Military Origins* by Maj L L Gordon (Kay & Ward 1971)
- 2 *Naval Records for Genealogists* by N A M Rodger (PRO 1988)
- 3 Order-in-Council dated 29 Nov 1881 [see *Royal Marine Records (1837-1914)* General Sir H E Blumberg (RMHS SP No 5 p 24)]
- 4 These were the Bandmasters of the Divisional Bands. Later they were Directors of Music.
- 5 O-in-C 7 Nov 1910
- 6 Contemporary Navy List
- 7 O-in-C 29 Feb 1912
- 8 The Globe and Laurel 1916 pp 23 & 43.
- 9 In common with the Army where only WO1s were included in the Army List.
- 10 There is no mention in the Apr 1920 Appx to the Navy List, but the Jan 1921 list includes "One Star".
- 11 Although in KR&AI(1943) and BR 1834(49), RN Handbook of Parade Training, under 'Saluting', Warrant Officers are not mentioned, the Manual of Seamanship (1937) states "The term 'officer' includes all Commissioned Officers, Warrant Officers and subordinate officers\* of the Royal Navy and corresponding ranks in the other services". [\*Midshipmen and Cadets].
- 12 O-in-C 4 Nov 1938
- 13 Letter from Major J P Synott BEM RM to the author 17 Mar 2000.
- 14 The Commissioned Master Tailor had a seniority of 1 Oct 1930, presumably to 'insert' him, perhaps by age' into the appropriate position in the Warrant Officers' Mess. The seniority of the Warrant Master Tailors was about 1931.
- 15 The Jun 1942 Appx to the Navy List shows "No badges of rank", but the Jun 1943 Appx shows "Letters 'WO' in a Wreath".
- 16 The O-in-C was in fact dated 28 Oct 1949.
- 17 *Badges and Insignia of the British Armed Services [The Royal Navy by Cdr W E May RN](pub Adam & Charles Black, 1974)* pages 16 & 17.
- 18 AFOs 1 & 555/56
- 19 *The Globe & Laurel* 1972 p195.

### A PERSONAL MEMOIR ABOUT A WARRANT OFFICER

*Early in 1943 at Exton someone had made a hash of the rota detailing recruit squads to provide the guard on the main gate. My squad had not commenced arms drill when it was detailed for guard. Our Squad Instructor, one Corporal Briscoe, fell us in and ordered all those who had learnt arms drill in the Home Guard or a cadet corps to prove (for the ignorant, this means you raise your right arm straight above you at an angle of 45 degrees!). Another member of this Society and I were amongst those who did so. He of course being a smart chap found himself as Guard Orderly, whilst I, a very raw recruit of 17½, found myself performing my first period as sentry outside the Guardroom. Corporal Briscoe had carefully briefed us on a 'butt salute' for junior officers and a 'present arms' for field officers and so, when I spotted an elderly officer with a row of medal ribbons and one hump on the shoulder strap of his battle dress coming towards me pushing a bike, I was ready. I came to attention, 'sloped arms' and as he reached me came to 'the present'. I then received my first full scale "boll\*\*\*ing" from an officer, during which I was informed that when he, a Superintending Clerk, reached Field Rank he would personally come and inform me! It was probably worse than if I hadn't saluted him at all! In the course of writing my article I now realise this must have been soon after the badge of rank of the small 'WO' in a laurel wreath was introduced. I therefore in fact wonder how many trained ranks would have recognised it at that time.*

AJD