

Armed Services' Top Brass Not Typical of Officer Corps

By **ROBERT C. TOTH**, *Times Staff Writer*

(An excellent, well-researched article, which my personal experience in the USAF Squadron Officer's School, as reflected in the accompanying article's Letter to Robert Toth, fully supports. ~ Don Chapin)

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WASHINGTON - With the dawning of the Space Age and the development of guided missiles, the number of pilots in the Air Force has dropped steadily-until today fewer than one of three officers is a flier. When it comes to top brass, however, pilots still dominate the highest ranks: More than four out of five Air Force generals are fliers. A similar pattern, although not so striking, exists in the other military services. Certain favored branches win a disproportionate share of the top promotions.

These patterns cast disturbing doubts on the fairness of promotions in the armed services' officer corps. More important, they raise questions about whether these practices lead to premature retirements of less-favored but vital specialists and even whether the top men exhibit biases that distort critical Pentagon decisions. In the Navy, more admirals are aviators than any other specialists, even though most naval officers command surface ships. Similarly, all 12 of the Army's four-star generals today came from the infantry, artillery or armor-the so-called "combat arms" -although these branches make up only 25% of the Army's total officer corps.

Critics charge that examples abound of biased judgments and policy distortions flowing from these promotion patterns.

The longstanding Air Force policy of preferring manned bombers over unmanned missiles, for example, is widely credited for the overwhelming number of pilots among the top brass. Most recently, the Air Force dragged its feet on developing air-launched cruise missiles, apparently in part out of fear that those weapons would become more

Please see GENERALS, Page 18

18 Part I/Sunday, May 20, 1984 *
GENERALS: Not Typical of Officer Corps
Continued from Page 1

attractive and drain funds from the new B-1 bomber.

Similarly, the Navy chronically calls for more aircraft carriers, cynics have suggested, because one-third of its admirals are aviators rather than because of the huge vessels' military virtues.

Warships Emphasized

When Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr. was chief of naval operations 10 years ago, the service began to re-emphasize surface warships rather than carriers and submarines. This was

attributed to Zumwalt's career as a "ship driver" and to the long neglect of such ships and surface-to-surface weapons by the carrier and submarine admirals who had dominated the Navy since World War II, according to Lawrence J. Korb, assistant secretary of defense for manpower and logistics.

It is in the Air Force, however, that the most blatant aberration in promotion patterns of any service is seen, the favored status of pilots. Eleven of 12 Air Force four-star generals are pilots. Among lieutenant generals (three stars), 32 of 35 are pilots. Overall, 83% of the generals are pilots-but only 38% of the officers are rated pilots (23,000 men) or navigators (10,000 men).

Some high-ranking civilian Air Force officials have been quietly urging the military leadership for years to improve the balance, with some success. But Air Force Secretary Verne Orr now has called openly, for the first time, for a more equitable distribution of Air Force stars. '

"It's not going to be easy and it won't happen overnight," Orr said in an interview. "but we have to make sure that there is room at the top for the great young officers who don't wear wings."

'To Fly and Fight'

He added, "There is still the saying that the Air Force mission is 'to fly and fight, and don't you forget it.' But now we're in the middle of a soaring trend of nonrated officers (who are neither pilots nor navigators)," which has dramatized the gross under-representation of these specialists at the top levels. Air Force top-heaviness in flier generals is caused largely by historic factors, Orr said- The development of long-range strategic bombers was the primary rationale for splitting the Air Force off from the Army after World War II. Indeed, bomber and fighter pilots formed the majority of officers through the 1950s-when today's generals were entering the Air Force-and it was an understandable tradition that the top commanders would come from those who fought.

But, with the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles and orbiting satellites, the focus shifted radically from manned to unmanned weapons and space systems. The Pentagon decided that Soviet ICBMs made Soviet bombers a minor threat. U.S. air defenses were allowed to decay and U.S. bomber forces were reduced. In 1960, about 2,500 fighter planes defended the continental United States. Today, there are fewer than 300 interceptors. Similarly, the medium-range B-47 bombers were totally phased out and only the strategic B-52 bombers survived.

As the pilot population decreased, the number of non-flying officers who develop, maintain and man the missiles and spacecraft grew rapidly .

Please see GENERALS, Page 19

GENERALS: Fairness Question, Continued from Page 18

until they became a majority in the service, This change occurred in the early 1960s, judging from data on the most recent candidates for brigadier general (one star). These colonels entered the Air Force between 1956 and 1962. The oldest group of them included 83% pilots; the youngest group, only 42% pilots. Although past reasons for the imbalance may be explainable, Orr told top Air Force generals earlier this year that he wanted more non-pilots among the generals in the future.

"The goal is to be fair," he said. To ensure fairness, Orr ordered that candidate lists be sent to him identifying each officer as non-rated or rated as a pilot or navigator, so that the ratio would approximate the composition of the officer corps as a whole. He stopped short of demanding that the Air Force promote to general in precisely the same ratio, however.

"I can't see the day when the heads of the flying commands such as the Strategic Air Command (composed of both bombers and missiles) or the Tactical Air Command (fighter planes) will be nonrated," he said.

"But there's no reason why the systems (weapons procurement) and logistics and space commands cannot be non-rated," he said. These major commands also are run by four-star generals.

However, the new emphasis on promoting non-fliers in the Air Force risks refueling the recurrent argument among military experts about whether the Pentagon promotion system favors managers rather than leaders, technical specialists rather than combat commanders—persons whose organizational skills in time of peace do not guarantee that they can inspire troops during a war.

But Korb, who had written extensively on military leadership issues before coming to his present job, rejects this as a cause for concern.

He explained in an interview, "If we tried to run the Pentagon like IBM, promoting only managers forgetting the 'heroic' dimension of warfare and the need for officers to lead men, then there would be a problem. That's not done."

Moreover, because management skills are easier to identify and teach, the emphasis likely remain on promoting leaders to the highest jobs.

"That's why I cannot imagine a day when the majority of Air Force four-stars (top-rank generals), are not pilots, whatever the rated to non-rated ratio among the officer corps," he said. "Certainly, the chief of staff of the Air Force will always will always be a pilot"

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