

Officers' ranks and insignia

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Naval uniforms were first introduced in the Royal Navy in 1748. At first only for officers and midshipmen, from 1787 warrant officers also were required to wear a uniform. The actual rank held by an officer was shown by the so-called distinction lace, introduced 1783, and, for senior officers, by the presence of epaulettes, the embroidered gold shoulder straps which were introduced from 1795. Until 1812 captains of less than three years seniority wore only one epaulette.

In the modern navy the rank of officers is shown by the number of gold rings worn on the cuffs of the coat, and, in certain orders, on the shoulder. The uppermost ring include a curl. Until the Second World War an embroidered slash, which crossed the cuff rings, was worn on full dress uniform only. Additionally, embroidered shoulder boards, though no longer the elaborate gold cord epaulettes, are worn by flag officers on the greatcoat or coat.

From 1864 the gold cuff rings included a coloured distinguishing cloth between the rings. The Executive, seaman, or "Military" branch as it was known, wore no distinction cloth, so that the underlying blue cloth of the coat sleeve showed. Engineering officers wore purple cloth; Surgeon- scarlet (later pink for the medical service); dental- orange; paymaster (after 1944 supply and secretariat)- white; instructor- light blue (introduced 1879, and later white); shipwright and constructor- silver gray; electrical- dark green; ordnance- dark blue; wardmaster- maroon; and air branch- blue.

The use of this distinction cloth, and the parallel use of such ranks as Instructor-Lieutenant, Surgeon-Commander, Paymaster-Captain, or Lieutenant-Commander (E [for Engineering]), was generally abolished by 1956. However, it survived longer for some, such as Medical Officers, who still use both the distinctive rank and the distinction cloth, and by Instructors, who retained the distinction cloth after the others were abolished.

Some branches added symbols to the rank insignia. The curls of the distinction lace formerly surrounded an "A" for Air Branch (which became the Fleet Air Arm 1953, when the "A" was dropped), and an "R" for Royal Naval Reserve. This later was removed on mobilisation, and, in New Zealand, the Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve lost the "R" in 1993.

The gold lace rings of the cuffs have always been straight for the regular navy. However, the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve had wavy rings 1903-1951, the Royal Naval Reserve coiled ring till 1951.

Today, there is no distinction in uniform between officers of the regular navy and the reserves. But differences in rank are reflected, as they must be, in different rank insignia. The navy has a system which is both logical and simple to understand. Each of the officers' ranks, including some now defunct, had their own distinctive insignia. But the pattern which may be gleaned from the development of rank insignia, especially this century, is that simplicity and standardisation have prevailed. Distinctions based on specialisations have all but disappeared, so that today it is impossible to distinguish an officer's branch, or even whether he is a regular or *rockie*.

In addition to their rank insignia, some officers wear aiguillettes on the shoulder board. These are arrangements of gold wire cords with pointed metal ends, and now indicate that the wearer holds a special appointment. Aiguillettes of gold and crimson are worn on the left

shoulder by members of the personal staff of flag officers. Similar aiguillettes are worn on the right shoulder by Aides de Camp to the Governor-General. Aiguillettes of gold wire are worn on the right shoulder by Aides de Camp to Her Majesty The Queen, by Admirals of the Fleet, and by equerries to members of the Royal Family- the equivalent to junior Aides de Camp.

Equerries also wear the appropriate royal cypher, the initial of the reigning Sovereign, and a Crown, all in dull silver metal. If serving more than one successive Sovereign an equerry may have a number of royal cyphers. Vice Admiral Sir Peter Ashmore, KCB KCVO DSC, Equerry to the Sovereign 1946-48, and an Extra Equerry since 1948, has the cyphers ER and GR, for Their Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II.

Personal Aides de Camp to The Queen, who normally are members of the Royal Family, are distinguished by royal cyphers in block letters 19mm high. These are worn only by Rear-Admiral HRH the Prince of Wales, Commander HRH the Duke of York, Field Marshal HRH the Duke of Kent, and Captain Mark Phillips, 1st Queen's Dragoon Guards (rtd).

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Subordinate and Junior Officers

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The ranks of officers in the navy have evolved over the centuries. During the time of Queen Elizabeth (the First), which were the formative years of Britain's Navy, the key ranks were Admiral, Captain, Lieutenant and Midshipman.

Midshipman

The rank of Midshipman, a subordinate officer, dates at least from Elizabethan times but was probably in use earlier. From 1660 until 1729 they were also known as 'volunteers per order', but when the Royal Naval College, Portsmouth, was established the title of midshipman for an officer still learning his profession, was re-established.

After six years service midshipmen could sit the examination for promotion to lieutenant, provided they were aged at least twenty. But some midshipmen could remain in this rank for the whole of their career, and others entered before the official minimum age of fourteen. Volunteers and Captain's Servants, who often were younger than 14, became midshipmen after three years.

The insignia of a midshipman remains the traditional white lapel flash with a gold brass or anodised naval button. In the 19th and early 20th centuries Midshipmen of the Royal Naval Reserve wore red flashes and those in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve wore navy blue. In addition, the pre-World War Two full dress uniform had three gold buttons on the cuffs (which have since been handed on to the CPO's service dress uniform).

Cadet

The most junior officer rank in the Navy was the Naval Cadet, which came into existence in 1843, when the Royal Navy introduced a new system of land-based officer training. The new rank of cadet fell victim to changes in training after little more than a century. The Royal New Zealand Navy abolished the rank in the 1950s, but it survived in the Royal Navy until 1972. The insignia of a Cadet was a button on the collar lapel.

Ensign

The rank of Ensign was introduced into the Royal New Zealand Navy in 1968, again as a consequence of changing training systems. In the United States Navy the rank of ensign had replaced that of midshipman in 1862, but the RNZN has kept both ranks. The rank of ensign derives from the old British Army infantry rank now more generally known as Second Lieutenant, who was responsible for carrying the unit colours or ensign. The insignia of Ensigns is a half-width gold ring.

Commissioned from the ranks

The rank of Mate was introduced 1912 for officers commissioned from the ranks. In 1931 they were renamed Commissioned Officers, and usually referred to by their specialisation, eg the Commissioned Gunner. The insignia of a Commissioned Officer was a half-width gold ring on sleeve or shoulder flash, the same as that now used by Ensigns in the RNZN.

Today, officers commissioned from the ranks wear the same ranks and insignia used by other officers.

Sub-Lieutenant

The modern rank of Sub-Lieutenant dates from 1861. Masters' Mates, or Mates, were appointed temporary Sub-Lieutenants from 1804 to 1815 as a (Napoleonic) wartime expedient. Then in 1840, Masters' Mates were commissioned and subsequently in 1861 were renamed Sub-Lieutenants.

From 1867 Second Masters were renamed Navigating Sub-Lieutenants, but no more were appointed after 1881. Senior Commissioned Officers ranked with Sub-Lieutenants.

The insignia of a Sub-Lieutenant is, like the former Senior Commissioned Officer, one gold ring on sleeve or shoulder flash.

The introduction of the Sub Lieutenant in the RN meant that all superior ranks moved up one stripe, so that Captains then gained a fourth ring and Commodores shifted to a thick gold stripe.

In the United States Navy the equivalent rank is the Lieutenant (Junior Grade).

Lieutenant

The rank of Lieutenant dates from at least as early as the time of Queen Elizabeth I. The insignia of Lieutenants is two gold rings on sleeve or shoulder straps.

In the early nineteenth century Lieutenants were customarily given command of sloops or brigs. The officers were actually commissioned as 1st Lieutenant, 2nd Lieutenant, etc. A battleship had as many as eight Lieutenants, styled 1st to 8th. Only the courtesy title First Lieutenant survives today, and it describes a post rather than a distinct rank, the First Lieutenant in a frigate usually being a Lieutenant-Commander.

Last century, Lieutenants commanding ships in the RN were customarily called "Lieutenant and Commander". In 1864 lieutenants were divided between those of over eight years seniority and those of less than eight years. Senior Lieutenants were given special insignia, two gold rings on sleeve or shoulder flash with a single thin ring between. In early 1914 the senior Lieutenants were formally named Lieutenant-Commander.

Chaplains

Unlike the Army and Air Force, the Navy does not have ranks for Chaplains. However, they have been commissioned in the RN since 1843, and in the RNZN since its formation. Our custom is to treat a Chaplain as 'approximately a Lieutenant Commander' for most ceremonial purposes. Naval chaplains have been in uniform since 1951.

Conclusion

The single most important influence on the evolution of ranks has been changes in training and technical demands upon officers. It is a common misconception that prior to the 19th century the only ranks used were Captain and Lieutenant. In fact, the rank structure of the sailing ship era was in some ways more complex than today's.

Almost every modern navy uses the equivalent number of naval ranks, though the actual styles may vary somewhat. The ranks in use in the RNZN today are not just a hand-me-down from the Royal Navy, but like other navies we have adopted the ranks and titles to suit our own needs.

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Senior and Flag Officers

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Officers of the rank of Commander and above are generally described as Senior Officers.

Commander

The rank of Commander, which dates from 1674, was originally called "Master and Commander". The Master was the officer entrusted with navigation, usually later called navigating officer. The Master of the Fleet was in charge of navigation training 1825-64. In 1689 one Master and Commander was carried on a 5th rate ship, the smallest of the "line of battle ships", or those capable of taking part in fleet actions. These officers were renamed Commander 1794. They once commanded all ships under 20 guns, sloops, bomb vessels, and were second in command of a large ship after 1827. As late as 1867 Commanders ranked only with army majors, as Lieutenant-Commanders do now. The insignia of a Commander is three gold rings on sleeve or shoulder flash.

Captain

The title and rank of Captain dates from the earliest days of seafaring. For any years, until the 19th century, there was a clear distinction between the Captain, who fought the ship, and the Master, who was responsible for sailing and navigating a line-of-battle ship.

The insignia of a captains is four gold rings on sleeve or shoulder flash.

Commodore

From its institution in 1697 the rank of Commodore was for centuries always a temporary rank. It was held by the senior Captain in command of a squadron, or group of ships smaller than the whole fleet. It was strictly an appointment or office rather than a rank, as no seniority was held as Commodore, the officers ranking as Captains amongst themselves.

From 1824 to 1958 the Royal Navy maintained two grades of commodore, the senior of which was regarded as a Flag Officer. The obsolete rank of Commodore Second Class remained in command of his own ship, while a Commodore First Class ranked as a Rear Admiral and had his own flagship Captain.

The rank of Commodore is a permanent rank in the RNZN and has been since the 1960s as part of the alignment of ranks between the three services with the evolution of our joint defence headquarters. (In December 1995 the Royal Navy made the same decision, for the same inter-Service reasons.)

The insignia of a Commodore is a broad gold ring on the sleeve of the winter uniform. However this year, instead of the old shoulder strap with the broad stripe, the RNZN has issued Commodores with new shoulder boards carrying a crown, crossed sword and baton and one star. The insignia afloat for a Commodore at sea is a broad pennant.

The United States Navy still uses the title of Commodore for the senior Captain of a deployed group of ships, but an attempt to use the title as a permanent rank in the 1980s

quickly came to an end, when the new USN Commodores were retitled Rear Admiral (lower half).

Flag Officers

Flag Officers are those of the rank of Rear Admiral and above. They fly a distinctive flag at sea to indicate their command of squadron or fleet.

The title Admiral derives from the Arabic word *amir al*, or commander, and entered the principal Western European languages as a consequence of the Crusades against the Muslim power of the Holy Land from the twelfth century. The title reached English from French usage, and by then had changed to its modern spelling.

In the Royal New Zealand Navy today there is normally only one flag officer, the Chief of Naval Staff. However, the Chief of the Defence Force, and other joint-service appointments may be held by naval officers, so there is the potential for several flag officers to be serving at any one time. For example, Rear Admiral Ray Gillbanks is the current Deputy Chief of Defence Staff.

Rear Admiral

The rank of Rear Admiral dates from at least the time of the Spanish Armada in 1588 when Sir Geoffrey Hawkins is recorded as the Admiral of the Rear Squadron. By 1620 Rear Admirals commanded the rear division of a battle squadron.

The rank of Rear Admiral was first used in the United States Navy in 1862, for David Farragut, who gained fame during the naval operations of the American Civil War.

In 1960, Peter Phipps, became the first officer of the Royal New Zealand Navy to be promoted to Rear Admiral, when he was appointed Chief of Naval Staff.

The insignia of a Rear Admiral is one broad gold ring and one 'standard' ring above. The RNZN shoulder board carries a crossed sword and baton, and two stars.

Vice Admiral

Sir Francis Drake was Vice Admiral in 1588. By 1660 the practice in the Royal Navy was that a Vice Admiral commanded the van (or leading part) of a battle squadron.

The United States Navy has had a Vice Admiral since 1864 (the first also also being David Farragut), although none were on strength 1899-1915.

Sir Peter Phipps was the first officer to reach this rank in the RNZN, in 1965 when he was promoted while serving as Chief of Defence Staff.

The insignia of a Vice Admiral in the RNZN is a broad gold ring with two standard rings above. On the shoulder board they wear a Crown, crossed baton and sword, and three stars.

Admiral

The rank of Admiral is unlikely to be used in the Royal New Zealand Navy. The post of Admiral was more an appointment than a rank in the seventeenth century. By 1660, European naval practice was that an Admiral commanded his battle squadron from the centre of the 'line of battle'. The United States Navy first appointed as Admiral in 1866 (David Farragut again!), but the rank has been in continuous use only since 1915.

Admiral of the Fleet

Prior to 1688 a few senior officers had been titled Admirals of England. The first to actually bear the title Admiral of the Fleet was the Earl of Dartmouth in 1688. Today, apart from members of the Royal Family, the rank of Admiral of the Fleet will only be conferred in the Royal Navy in wartime, or if an RN Admiral were to be appointed Chairman of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation Military Committee.

The United States Navy promoted George Dewey to the equivalent rank of Admiral of the Navy in 1899. On his death in 1917 the rank was abolished. William Daniel Leahy was promoted to the new equivalent rank, Fleet Admiral, in 1944. The last wartime appointee, Chester Nimitz, died in 1966, since which time the rank has remained unfilled in the USN.

His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh was appointed Admiral of the Fleet of the Royal New Zealand Navy on the 27th August 1958. There is unlikely to ever be any non-royal officer appointed to the rank in the Royal New Zealand Navy.

The insignia of an Admiral of the Fleet is a broad gold ring with four rings above. On shoulder straps the insignia comprises the royal cypher, a Crown, and crossed batons within oak leaf wreaths. Admiral of the Fleet HRH the Duke of Edinburgh is Personal Aide de Camp to the Queen, so he also wears the royal cypher ER.

Lord High Admiral

The ancient title of Lord High Admiral, now held by The Queen since 1964, is the last of the naval titles to remain principally an office rather than a rank. However, the title is closely linked to the administrative history of the Royal Navy, being formalised in 1485.

Conclusion

This series of articles has outlined the history behind the range of officer ranks, most of which have been adopted by the Royal New Zealand Navy. However, the full array of ranks is not the same as the naval chain of command, or management structure, which remains very simple. But the graduations in rank are a product of operational and administrative necessity; for this reason, the general rank structure is common to almost all navies, whatever their history or origins.

For further reading see *England's Sea Officers: The Story of the Naval Profession*, by Michael Lewis, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1939.