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Get in Line

new officers the next available register number as of the date of commissioning if in grades O-2 or above. Because seniority among ensigns is meaningful only to other ensigns trying to determine who should be “George,” lineal and register numbers aren’t assigned until an officer is promoted to lieutenant (junior grade) (O-2).

Moving on up

A lineal number for an active duty list officer remains unchanged unless the officer promotes, a court-martial orders a loss of seniority, or the officer transfers to the Naval Reserve (at which point the lineal number changes to a register number). Register numbers for Reservists are formatted differently than a lineal number is for an active duty list officer. At each promotion, a Reserve officer receives a new, numerically lower register number. Admirals on active duty have one-or-two digit lineal numbers. The lower the number, the more senior the officer. The most senior Naval officer (CNO) has lineal number 1. (For you trivia buffs, if the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is a Naval officer, that admiral gets lineal number 0.)

Currently, there are no selection boards for promotion to LTjg and LT. Except in unusual circumstances, promotion to LTjg is automatic two years from ENS date of rank. If screened for LT, promotion is effective the first day of the month following four years from the date of rank of ENS. Thus, most USNA and ROTC graduates have dates of rank for LT of 1 June or 1 July.

By the time a Reserve officer selects to LCDR, things begin to change. Instead of promoting all officers on the same date, date-of-rank assignments or promotions are spread out over twelve months. Congress and money have something to do with this, so promotions are “back-loaded” in the fiscal year. Under normal circumstances, 40 percent of Active Duty selectees promote in each of the first eight months (October through May), and 15 percent of the selectees promote in each of

the last four months (June through September). Reserve officer promotions are not as predictable, however.

Each Reserve officer has a “running mate,” who is the next junior officer on active duty. When the running mate is eligible for promotion, the Reserve officer is eligible for promotion. Thus, while active duty promotes on a very predictable pattern, the Naval Reserve may vary widely month-to-month at the beginning of the fiscal year. For example, Reserve boards usually select more above zone officers for promotion than Active Duty boards. October may have a large number of Reserve promotions (five-to-ten percent) because these Reserve officers are senior to the Active Duty officers promoted in October. Likewise, there may be months when no Reserve officer gets promoted because no one had seniority above the lineal number of the junior Active Duty officer promoted that month. Thus, even if a Reserve officer is the next person on the promotion list, it could be a month or two before a date of rank is assigned. This can be confusing and is a good reason to know your own register number.

Over time, promotion dates spread out more and more as fewer officers remain at higher ranks. By the time an officer is up for captain, that C- in English Literature or those parties the night before finals 20+ years ago might be the difference between several months of seniority. In years when the promotion zone is relatively small, being near the bottom of the class can mean delay of an entire fiscal year for promotion if the junior in-zone bisects a list of officers with the same date of rank.

To look up your own register number, go to www.bupers.navy.mil, click on “Selection Board,” then click “Check Your Precedence Number.”

Now that you know your register number and where it came from, next month we’ll take a look at how promotion zones are determined and how to estimate the date of your next promotion board. 📄

Did you ever wonder how relative seniority or “precedence” is determined? It is determined by either a lineal number or register number. Do you know yours? If you know how this element of the promotion system works, you can better predict when you will be in zone for promotion, or when to expect a date of rank. Let’s take a look.

Getting started

The Navy uses a multistep process to determine seniority of all officers upon commissioning and entrance on active duty. The first criterion is date of commissioning. Officers commissioned from ROTC units at the end of the academic year (usually May or June) are assigned the same date of rank as graduates of the Naval Academy. Since many midshipmen receive commissions each spring, the Navy uses additional criteria to place new ensigns in seniority order. Class ranking, based on grade point average (GPA), breaks most ties. A midshipman graduating with a 4.0 average will be the senior officer; a midshipman graduating with a 2.01 average will be the junior officer. Other criteria apply until ultimately birth date and alphabetic name order become the final tie breakers. According to the Bureau of Naval Personnel (BUPERS), this actually happened once, with twins, graduating together with the same GPA, being assigned seniority alphabetically.

The honor graduate from Officer Candidate School (OCS) receives the most senior number for the class; other graduates are assigned seniority by date of birth; ties are broken by alphabetical order. Other commissioning sources, like our own Naval Reserve direct commission program, assign