



U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center



Historical Services Division

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Temporary Promotions of U.S. Army Officers: A Brief Overview

Title V, Section 503 of the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) authorizes the temporary promotion of “officers in certain grades with critical skills.” A first lieutenant, captain, major, or lieutenant colonel in the Army may be temporarily promoted to the next rank, “under regulations prescribed by the Secretary of the military department concerned.” The President will make the appointment “by and with the advice and consent of the Senate.” To receive such an appointment, officers must have a skill that the Army deems in shortage; be in a position designated for a captain, major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel; and have the skills required for the position. The Secretary of the Army determines if those three criteria are met and will convene a board to approve or disapprove the promotion.¹

A temporary promotion does not alter that officer’s “position on the active-duty list or the permanent, probationary, or acting status of the officer so appointed, prejudice the officer in regard to other promotions or appointments, or abridge the rights or benefits of the officer.” Temporary promotions, and the associated pay and allowance increases, take effect on the date of appointment. The temporary promotion ceases upon permanent promotion, or when the officer no longer fills the position that required the temporary promotion (unless the officer is on a promotion list, in which the temporary appointment will cease when the permanent promotion takes effect). There

¹ 2019 NDAA, 105.

are a limited number of temporary promotions available per rank: to captain, 120; major, 350, lieutenant colonel, 200; and colonel, 100.²

Promotion situations similar to today's temporary promotions have existed throughout Army history. During the Civil War (1861-1865), officers could receive a **brevet**, or honorary, promotion, for valor or meritorious service. Such promotions compare to receiving a valor award today; an awards system as we know today was not in place during the Civil War. Article 61 of the 1806 Articles of War allowed breveted officers, in a regiment based ranking system, to carry the authority of their breveted rank "in courts martial and on detachments when composed of different corps," but they could not carry the authority of their breveted rank within their own unit.³

A brevet promotion usually did not provide any additional authority or pay, but the breveted officer could use the rank in correspondence. A well-known example of a brevet promotion is Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, breveted to major general by President Abraham Lincoln after being wounded again and nearly captured in a skirmish in March 1865. Brevet promotions ceased in 1869, partly due to hard feelings that too many brevets had been awarded at the end of the Civil War. Brevet promotions were resurrected, however. The 1911 *Military Laws of the United States* noted that the President had the authority to confer brevet promotions, and only by Presidential authority could an officer command at that rank. Brevets became obsolete shortly after World War I.⁴

However, World War I saw use of **temporary promotions**. George S. Patton, for example, was promoted to captain in May 1917. Three days later he was designated commander of Headquarters Troop, American Expeditionary Forces. In November, he

² 2019 NDAA, 105-106.

³ In 1862 the Medal of Honor was first authorized for Soldiers who distinguished themselves in battle. It was the only medal available, hence the need for brevet promotions as a means of awarding valor. Medals as awards became much more prevalent in World War I.

1806 Articles of War, <http://suvvw.org/education/documents/articles.htm>. "Officers having brevets or commissions of a prior date to these of the regiment in which they serve, may take place in courts martial and on detachments when composed of different corps, according to the ranks given them in their brevets or dates of their former commissions, but in the regiments, troop, or company to which such officers belong, they shall do duty and take rank both in courts-martial and on detachments which shall be composed of their own corps, according to the commissions by which they are mustered in the said corps."

⁴ *The Military Laws of the United States*, fourth edition, 1911, 210, 503-504.

was “detailed to the Tank Service.” In January 1918, he was promoted to temporary major, in March to temporary lieutenant colonel, and in October to temporary colonel (he had been wounded in September in the Meuse-Argonne). In the post-war demobilization, Patton reverted to his last permanent rank, captain, in June 1920. However, his next permanent promotion came quickly: to major in July. Fourteen years later, he got his permanent promotion to lieutenant colonel, in March 1934. In July 1938, he was promoted to permanent colonel. He resumed climbing via temporary ranks just prior to World War II, when he was temporarily promoted to brigadier general in October 1940 and to major general in April 1941.⁵

Temporary promotions were used widely during World War II (1941-1945). AR 605-12 (August 1944), *Commissioned Officers: Temporary Promotions in the Army of the United States*, states,

For the duration of the present emergency and excepting promotions in the Regular Army prescribed by statute, all promotions of officers of the Army will be temporary promotions. . . . The purpose of these regulations is to provide a means by which the officer who demonstrates the greatest degree of efficiency and capacity for increased responsibilities may be selected for a higher grade.

These promotions required vacancies, and individuals considered for temporary promotion had to meet time in grade and position requirements. All promotions were authorized in the name of the President, but others with authority to promote included certain “commanding generals of overseas commands . . . [who] may delegate this authority down to and including commanders of field armies and numbered air forces.”⁶

Patton continued to receive temporary and permanent promotions during the war: temporary lieutenant general (March 1943), permanent major general (August 1944, skipping permanent brigadier general), and permanent general (April 1945). He died in April 1946 as a result of a car accident.⁷

Dwight D. Eisenhower also received temporary promotions to meet the needs of the Army in World War II. He was promoted to permanent lieutenant colonel in 1936. He

⁵ Keane, Michael. *Patton: Blood, Guts, and Prayer*, p. xi-xiii.

⁶ AR 605-12 (August 1944).

⁷ Keane, *Patton*, p. xiv-xvi.

received a temporary promotion to major general in March 1942, temporary promotion to lieutenant general July 1942, and temporary promotion to full general in February 1943. He received his permanent promotions to brigadier general and major general in August 1943. In December 1944, he was promoted to General of the Army. The temporary and permanent promotion system remained in place until the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980 centralized promotions. Prior to DOPMA, temporary promotions were in the Army of the United States (AUS), while the permanent promotions were in the Regular Army.⁸

In 1954, in the wake of the Korean War, the Army codified **battlefield promotions** as “the temporary promotion of officers based upon their performance of duty in combat.” Authority for such promotions rested in theater commanders who reported directly to the Department of the Army. Such commanders could promote to lieutenant colonel, major, captain, and first lieutenant. Promotions to first lieutenant could also be delegated to army, corps, and division commanders.⁹

The 1955 regulation noted that temporary appointments were “for indefinite periods and will not terminate permanent appointments in the Regular Army or reserve components. They may be terminated at any time by the Secretary of the Army in the name of the President and will automatically terminate upon relief from active duty.” Selection for temporary promotion to captain, major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel would happen through a selection board.¹⁰

The 1960 regulation noted “authority to make temporary promotions below general officer grade may be delegated to specific major commanders and commanders of combat theaters of operations for the purpose of filling local grade vacancies, on the basis of demonstrated fitness and capacity to perform satisfactorily in the position

⁸ Eisenhower National Historical Site, Eisenhower Military Chronology, <https://www.nps.gov/features/eise/jrranger/chronomil1.htm>. “The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment,” RAND, 1993, 10, 89, 91.

⁹ AR 605-12 (1954).

¹⁰ AR 624-115 (August 1955).

vacancy, and subject to criteria to be prescribed by Headquarters, Department of the Army.”¹¹

AR 624-100 (1979) added **frocking**. “Under certain conditions, it may be in the best interest of DA or other Government agencies to allow an officer to wear the insignia of a higher grade than that in which he holds a valid appointment.” Such “is not a true promotion” and does not result in receiving pay of the frocked rank, nor a new date of rank. The AR states, “Frocking is sometimes necessary when an officer’s performance of duty would be severely restricted by serving in the lower grade.” Frocking was possible when an officer had already been approved for promotion. Officers below general officers would likely be frocked if they interacted with foreign officials.¹²

The current Army Regulation 600-8-29 (25 February 2005) *Officer Promotions* addressed frocking, in which an officer can wear a higher rank without being appointed to such rank. Frocking is still “not a true promotion,” and there is no promotion ceremony, no official orders, no increase to pay and allowance, and no benefit toward future promotion or retirement. Five criteria must be met for frocking to major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel to occur:

1. It must be in the interest of the U.S.
2. The officer would be restricted in conducting duties by wearing the lower rank (usually applies to those who interact with foreign officials).
3. The officer has been selected for promotion and has been designated for command as authorized in the TOE or TDA.
4. The officer has been selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel or colonel and to “a DA-identified product manager or project manager position.”
5. The officer has been selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel and “to fill a position as a professor of military science or Command and General Staff College instructor.”

¹¹ AR 624-115 (October 1960).

¹² AR 624-100 (1979).

Additionally, five requirements must be satisfied for frocking:

1. The officer must be on an approved promotion list.
2. The officer “must not be under suspension of favorable personnel actions.”
3. The request must come from or be concurred by the gaining organization.
4. The officer “must be assigned to a MTOE-or TDA position authorized at the next higher grade.”
5. Certain administrative information (items a-o on the outline) must be included in the request.

Lastly, officers cannot be frocked to or within general officer rank without Presidential approval and Senate confirmation.¹³

Temporary direct commissions existed during World War II to fill slots where particular expertise was needed. William Knudsen, president of General Motors starting in 1937, was asked by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1940 to co-direct the Office of Production Management. In 1942, Knudsen received a direction commission to lieutenant general in the U.S. Army and served as Director of Production.¹⁴

U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay implemented a **spot promotion system** while he command the Strategic Air Command (1948-1957). He worked out a deal with the Air Force, which had promotion vacancies left over from World War II. LeMay’s spot promotions were not awarded based on seniority, but on skill and “combat readiness.” The promotions were awarded to crews, not individuals, and only crews deemed in the top 15 percent could attain promotions. Additionally, crews could lose their promoted ranks. Such a system required consistent, top-level effort and teamwork.¹⁵

In conclusion, temporary promotions are not new to the U.S. Army and military. Brevet promotions, temporary promotions in the AUS, battlefield promotions, frocking, temporary direct commissions, and spot promotions (USAF) are all variations of

¹³ AR 600-8-29 (2005), p. 36-37.

¹⁴ “Big Bill’ Knudsen turned Chevrolet into a powerhouse,” *Automotive News*, <http://www.autonews.com/article/20111031/CHEVY100/310319979/big-bill-knudsen-turned-chevrolet-into-a-powerhouse>.

¹⁵ Coffey, Thomas M. *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay*, 293-294.

temporary promotions. Most occurred in wartime as a way of rewarding valor, or simply out of necessity due to manpower needs. Usually there were restrictions and certain requirements that had to be met. The temporary promotions authorized in the 2019 NDAA (which require an officer with critical skills, a selection board, an appointment by the President, and allow a pay increase) are most like the temporary promotions within the AUS from World War II to 1980 (which promoted those with talent, required a selection board, and were authorized by the President). A deeper examination of the benefits and drawbacks of the AUS temporary promotion system could guide the implementation of today's system.



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