

Introduction

You already know of my exuberance with the rank of sergeant and my rationale for it being the best rank I ever wore. I was always with the troops. I was a junior and senior DI as a Sgt at PISC. I was a Sgt Instructor at Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Quantico. I was a squad leader, platoon sergeant of both rifle platoons and a weapons platoon. In combat I was a squad leader, platoon guide, and due to unfortunate circumstances one day I became an infantry platoon commander—a billet I held for ten of my thirteen-month tour. During that period, I was awarded a Silver Star, Bronze Star with Combat V, a Purple Heart Medal, and eventually a combat commission to second lieutenant. So, why would I not choose sergeant as my favorite rank? I was allowed to do some absolutely amazing things as a sergeant.

Knowing all that, might it surprise you I fear the rank has lost its significance over the decades—I actually began seeing this happening long before I retired in 1993. It has gotten worse since. This is the other reason I feel this book is necessary—perhaps it can help change what is happening with the bastardization of the rank of sergeant.

I sell my first book personally inscribed and signed at a deep discount to those who contact me directly. If the buyer was—or is—a Marine, I ask his rank. If a GySgt, he says so, if a SSgt he says so, if a Cpl he says so, but if a Sgt, he invariably replies with “E-5.” Why? How did this abomination of the rank of sergeant degenerate to using his pay grade as his designation? I am told by recently discharged sergeants, subordinates even called him “E-5 Jones,” instead of Sgt Jones.

When a customer tells me he was an E-5, I sometimes go back asking what is an E-5? Of course, they probably think I am a dumb shit and reply telling me it is a Sergeant. Amazing! I then ask if he was a Staff Sergeant would he have told me he was an E-6, they always say “no.” No one seems to be able to explain how the sergeant became an E-5, while all the other ranks are not referred to by their pay grade.

When pressured, some say it is because all ranks above the sergeant have the word in its title e.g., staff sergeant, master sergeant, sergeant major, etc. Therefore, so as to not lead one to believe you are one of the higher-ranking sergeants, they simply use E-5. That is pure horse hockey—a cop out!

Want to know exactly how this abomination of the sergeant began? Bear with me, and I shall explain in as simple terms as possible. Perhaps this will be helpful to you since the correct ranks will be used throughout this book.

Anyone who was in the Corps from July 1959 through July 1963 knows what caused the sergeant to become an E-5

Let us back up to our rank structure prior to July 1959. The following was the Corps' enlisted ranks:

- E-1 Private
- E-2 Private First Class
- E-3 Corporal
- E-4 Sergeant
- E-5 Staff Sergeant
- E-6 Gunnery Sergeant or Technical Sergeant
- E-7 Master Sergeant *
- E-7 First Sergeant *
- E-8 Sergeant Major

* Note there were two E-7's. The Master Sergeant (MSgt) was a technical expert within his occupational field, while the First Sergeant (1stSgt) was the senior adviser to the company commander. When a command had both ranks, regardless of seniority by date of rank, the First Sergeant always ranged superior.

In the Spring of 1959, the Corps changed its rank structure by adding another enlisted rank called Lance Corporal (LCpl) making him an E-3 in the pay chart. Therefore, every rank above this new grade moved up one grade e.g., the Corporal—the old E-3—now was an E-4. Additionally, starting with Lance Corporal crossed rifles were added to the chevrons.



Now we had three enlisted ranks i.e., Private (Pvt E-1), Private First Class (PFC E-2), and Lance Corporal (LCpl E-3). We still retained two Noncommissioned Officer ranks (NCO's) i.e., Corporal (Cpl E-4) and the Sergeant

(Sgt E-5). Additionally, we now had four staff Noncommissioned officers (SNCO's). They were the Staff Sergeant (SSgt E-6), the Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt E-7), two E-8's the Master Sergeant (MSgt) and the First Sergeant (1stSgt), and finally two E-9's, the Master Gunnery Sergeant (MGySgt) and the Sergeant Major (SgtMaj). We also had the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, but let's not cloud the issue at hand.

These new ranks came into effect on 1 July 1959. Every Marine wearing the old chevrons and receiving the title and all benefits of the old rank retained everything until 1 July 1963. Each Marine had four years to receive a promotion to the new rank or revert to the new rank designation.

Bear in mind this was 1959–63, Korea was over by five years, Vietnam had not begun yet, and all services were being downsized; therefore, promotions were awfully slow. For example, it took me from March 1958 to March 1959, twelve months to make PFC. Years later in my career every Marine *had* to be promoted to PFC when he had six months in the Corps unless his CO determined not to promote for a variety of reasons e.g., getting trouble. The CO had to make an entry in the Marine's Service Record Book (SRB) detailing the reason. These slow

promotions during this time frame was the reason the Corps gave everyone four years to make the next promotion—sadly, it was still not long enough for some

I was a Drill Instructor in 1962–64. When I reported to my recruit company from DI School in April 1962, there were many fellow DI's of the old ranks—Sgts, SSgts, GySgts, and one MSgt. Although promotions were still slow, every one of them made the next rank prior to the drop-dead date of 1 July 1963, except one.

He was a SSgt (E-5), a SNCO wearing three stripes with one rocker (no crossed rifles). He was a superb DI, and a great Marine, but obviously there was something in his SRB causing him not to be promoted during that four-year period. On 1 July 1963, he removed his old SSgt (E-5) chevrons and sewed on the new Sgt (E-5) chevrons with the crossed rifles. See the different chevrons depicted below.



Pre-1 July 1959 Staff Sergeant (E-5) Chevrons



New Sergeant E-5 Chevron

He no longer was referred to as SSgt, but simply Sgt. Sadly, he also lost his privilege of going to the SNCO club and now had to use the NCO Club. He was still an E-5; therefore, his pay did not change.

Having established the new rank structure, the Corps had one significant problem to solve. Corps-wide during this transition period, they had two of every rank from Cpl and above i.e., the old Cpl E-3 and the new Cpl E-4. There had to be a means of distinguishing them apart in their official records and on their ID cards.

The answer sent shock waves throughout the entire Corps. The old-style ranks were designated as “Acting,” as in Acting Cpl (the old E-3). All the old ranks from Cpl and above had their ID cards changed placing an “A” in front of the rank, as in “ACpl.” Can you imagine having twelve years in the Corps, a SNCO for several years and suddenly be referred to as “Acting?” The SNCO’s were the most vocal, and rightly so. I remember the SSgt I spoke of earlier espousing, “I’m a damn SSgt, there’s nothing acting about it!”

This was a very trying time in the Corps but does not answer the question as to how the Sgt became known as an E-5. During the four-year transition, confusion reigned throughout the Corps. When asked what rank you were and you replied sergeant, the next question was, “What kind?” There were Sgt E-4s and Sgt E-5s. To clear things everyone began using pay grades instead of having to use that awful term “Acting.”

The problem became more exacerbated as time went on. There is a chapter in my book entitled *Only A Sergeant*. I have included a condensed and redacted version of that chapter, which details how frustrating being a Sgt was years after the transition period. Might I suggest you read it. This particular incident occurred in Vietnam in 1966 while I was a infantry platoon commander as a Sgt.

Even after the transition period was over the use of pay grades versus ranks continued for several years. Finally, over time all ranks—except Sgt—slowly went back to using their rank e.g. Cpl, SSgt, etc. Sadly, to not cause a dumb shit asking what kind of Sgt you were, most simply continued using the pay grade E-5 instead of their rank.

I was a Sgt from December 1963–August 1966, and I can assure you, no one—and I mean no one regardless of their rank—referred to me a damn E-5

A sergeant is a sergeant, the backbone of our Corps. If you want to be an “E-5” of Marines” so be it, but I was a “Sergeant of Marines” and damn proud of it. You can be too if you start referring to yourself as such and allow no one to degrade you by using your pay grade!

My simple advice is STOP IT! Be a *SERGEANT OF MARINES!!*

Submitted by a once proud Sergeant of Marines
Jim Bathurst, Col, USMC (Ret)