



OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000



PERSONNEL AND
READINESS

MAR 10 2004

The Honorable Duncan Hunter
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services
U. S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This is in response to the request of the Senate Armed Services Committee for the views of the Department of Defense on "Career progression of military astronauts" in Senate Report Number 107-151, which accompanied the National Defense Authorization Act for 2003.

The committee requested the Department's views, in consultation with the Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), on whether military astronauts should be awarded joint duty credit for astronaut duty, or excepted from the requirement for joint duty assignment before consideration for promotion to general or flag officer, and the rationale for these views. The committee also requested a description of typical career patterns of officers selected for astronaut duties, including data about the promotion history of military astronauts from each of the Services, and recommendations regarding the management of this unique community of officers.

Currently, there are no astronaut positions that receive joint duty credit. Given the standard for joint duty assignment credit, prescribed in section 668(b) of title 10, U.S.C., astronaut duty would not meet joint validation standards.

Section 668(b) provides that joint duty assignments are limited to assignments "in which the officer gains significant experience in joint matters." It defines joint matters as "relating to the integrated employment of land, sea and air forces, including matters relating to national military strategy; strategic planning and contingency planning; and command and control of combat operations under unified command." Although astronaut assignments are of vital national importance, they fall outside the scope of this standard.

Typical career patterns of officers selected for astronaut duties vary. Astronauts are selected by NASA approximately every two years and are expected to remain at NASA for approximately ten years from the time of selection. The astronaut specialty includes commanding space shuttle missions, piloting a space shuttle, serving as mission specialists, accomplishing on-orbit duties, operating payloads, and providing manned space flight consultation. There is no established career path for officers to become astronauts.



Flight test experience is highly desirable, and the majority of officers who become astronauts are graduates of a military test pilot school, either as test pilots or flight test engineers. Normal tours begin with a three-year NASA contract. These contracts are then extended in three-year increments until the officers return to their parent service or separate/retire. On average, officers enter the astronaut program as O-4s with eleven years time in service and stay at NASA until they retire.

The Department does recognize the significant contributions our astronauts make both within the Nation's space program and within the military services. Astronaut selection is among the most competitive of any career field within military service. Only the highest caliber officer is selected and retained for astronaut service. Accordingly, astronauts are given special consideration during selection for promotion. Guidance provided to members of promotion selection boards informs members of the special qualifications and high quality of military astronauts and instructs them to consider such guidance when selecting the best-qualified officer for promotion. Historically, military astronauts have been selected for promotion to grades through O-6 at higher rates than their peers. For example, the Navy's typical promotion board instructions read as follows:

“Due to highly specialized training and operational mission requirements, astronauts are precluded from acquiring joint duty credit, or serving in traditional command billets. However, they spend considerable time working overseas with partner nations, operating in a multi-service environment, and command multi-billion dollar spacecraft. The quality of performance required of these officers, along with progressive assignments of increasing responsibility and leadership, should be given weight equal to that ordinarily given to other members of their respective communities who have followed more traditional career patterns.

Be particularly attentive to the records of officers in the astronaut program. In view of their requisite performance level and invaluable contribution to our National Security Strategy, the board should give appropriate consideration to officers with these skills when selecting for promotion the best and fully qualified officers.”

As a result of this tailored management, astronauts enjoy better promotion rates than the vast majority of their fellow officers, including those within the career fields served prior to becoming an astronaut. Most importantly, for the last twenty years (the extent reviewed), astronauts from all Services, with very few exceptions, were promoted to the next higher grade, up to the grade of O-6, for those choosing to stay on active duty long enough to receive this promotion. Particularly significant to this promotion trend is, within the typical astronaut career pattern, the officer never returns to duty in the parent service after astronaut selection.

Of the astronauts who have returned to their respective services after completing their NASA tour, two astronauts were promoted to general officer in the past five years. Hence, two former astronauts (one currently on active duty; the other retired in 2002) have served as general officers against a base of 88 officers serving as astronauts or candidates in the grades of O-4 to O-6. This success rate is far greater than that of military officers in any other career specialty. Astronauts selected for promotion to general and flag officer grades who lack a qualifying joint duty assignment are not precluded for appointment to such grade because the Department will consider the current joint assignment waiver available (good of the service or scientific/technical) to remove the impediment.

With respect to career management, there is neither retention nor accession difficulty for astronauts. As stated above, the typical astronaut career pattern does not entail the officer returning to duties within the parent Service. The Department attributes this primarily to the extensive training requirements needed for performing space missions. The training requirements can take several years, making it difficult for the officers to return to duty in their previous specialties. Typically, astronauts achieve senior rank while away from their parent service, and there are limited senior positions within the astronaut's previous career field. This does not mean the Department should not capitalize on the wealth of experience astronauts offer. The Department has proven successful in reintegrating astronauts into their parent service upon their return to ensure they receive appropriate responsibilities. The Department and NASA recognize and greatly values the contributions astronauts make to our nation's space program and the Department of Defense.

This response has been formally coordinated through NASA. The Office of Management and Budget advises that, from the standpoint of the Administration's program, there is no objection to the presentation of this report for the consideration of the committee.

A similar letter is being sent to the Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee.

Sincerely,


Charles S. Abell
Principal Deputy

cc:
Honorable Ike Skelton
Ranking Member