



## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COMMISSIONED CORPS AND THE SCIENTIST CATEGORY**

The PHS Commissioned Officers Corps was formally established in 1889 to provide highly-trained and mobile health professionals, who administer programs to promote the health of the Nation, understand and prevent disease and injury, assure safe and effective drugs and medical devices, deliver health services to Federal beneficiaries, and furnish health expertise in time of war or other international emergencies. The Scientist Category of the PHS Commissioned Corps is composed of PHS officers holding a doctoral degree (Ph.D., DrPH, D.Sc., Psy.D., or Ed.D.). In 2008, there are approximately 250 scientist officers. The Scientist Category and the commissioning of scientists in the Corps have had an interesting history.

### **Commissioning Non Medical Officers in the Regular Corps**

At its inception, all members of the Commissioned Corps were physicians and the narrowly defined mission of the Corps was to provide a professional body of medical officers on short notice. As the role of the Public Health and Marine Hospital Service was expanded, so too, was the mission of the Corps. In 1902, Supervising Surgeon General Walter Wyman recognized the need to commission non-medical officers in the Corps. An early draft of legislation passed in 1902 suggested that the directors of Divisions at the Laboratory of Hygiene (later the National Institutes of Health), known as "Professors" should be commissioned officers. These Divisions included such basic sciences as Chemistry, Pharmacology, and Zoology. There were differences in pay between Professors and Commissioned Officers, which made retention of talented scientists problematic. However, due to opposition by Commissioned Medical Officers provisions for commissioning non-medical officers was not in the final bill. The opposition by the Commissioned Medical officers was possibly due to the fact that appointments of non-medical officers at the Hygienic Laboratory were likely to be permanent and could cause discord among medical officers assigned to less appealing duty stations.

Surgeon General Hugh Cumming raised the issue of commissioning non-medical officers again in the 1920's. The twenties were an era in which there was a movement to identify and reorganize to consolidate the various public health activities to eliminate duplication of effort and the associated intricate and costly bureaucracy. Surgeon General Cumming wrote a memorandum on the proposed reorganization and presented his own plan which included:

*“First maintain the present organization of the Public Health Service; second, provide for admission into the regular corps of scientific men other than those of the medical profession...”*

Parts of Cumming’s proposal was included in a bill introduced by Congressman James S. Parker of New York in 1926, and called for commissioning of sanitary engineers, dental officers, and scientists. Opposition arose this time from retired Brigadier General Herbert Mayhew Lord, head of the Bureau of Budget. General Lord questioned the value of public health measures and medical research programs. A vote on the Parker Bill was delayed in May 1928 because of strong opposition that was based, in part, on objections to commissioning scientists and other non-medical officers. The bill was revived the following year and after passing both houses was sent to conference committee to reconcile differences between the House and Senate bills. A little over a week later, President Calvin Coolidge vetoed the Parker Bill, stating that it was unconstitutional to commission non-medical personnel. President Coolidge commented that:

*“For some time past there has been a definite movement among various groups of Government professional and scientific employees toward militarization of their respective services, and I am impelled to oppose this movement from the standpoints of both economical administration and public policy. ...But more important still, I do not believe that permanency of appointment of those engaged in the professional and scientific activities of the Government is necessary for progress or accomplishment in those activities or in keeping with public policy.”*

Public health advocates opined that President Coolidge’s objection to commissioning non-medical personnel and his subsequent veto of the bill was due to the influence of General Lord.

## **The Parker Bill Revived**

The Parker Bill was revived and revised in 1929 to address the concerns expressed by President Coolidge to the previous bill. Changes to the personnel section included rewording sections to indicate that non-medical officers would be appointed to the Commissioned Corps in accordance with regulations agreeable to the President and commissioning of scientist officers was limited to scientists at or above the level of Division Director. General Lord retired as Budget Director in 1929 but supporters of the Parker Bill were uncertain of the stance that the new Budget Director, J. Clawson Roop, might take on the bill. In early 1930, the Parker Bill was approved by Roop but with a disappointing cutback in the number of non-medical officers to be commissioned from 110 to 55. It is believed that an outbreak of psittacosis, a sometimes fatal zoonoses spread by birds, may have highlighted the need for public health measures and research as well as the personal hazards faced by research scientists. The outbreak in early 1930 was due to parrots imported as Christmas gifts and resulted in thirty-six deaths. A researcher and laboratory assistant at the Hygienic Laboratory died of the disease while investigating the outbreak. On April 1, 1930, the Parker Bill passed the Senate and was signed into law by President Herbert Hoover on April 9, 1930. At last,

there was a provision in the law for commissioning scientist officers in the regular corps of the Public Health Service. The law allowed for the commissioning of three research scientists annually after that time.

## **The Public Health Acts of 1943 and 1944**

In the early 1940's there was a reorganization of the PHS which resulted from the passage of both the Public Health Law of 1943 and Public Health Law of 1944. These laws were shepherded through the system by Surgeon General Thomas Parran. Title 2 of the 1944 PHS Act established the Commissioned Corps' leadership role in the PHS and strengthened the authority of the Surgeon General. The 1944 Act also incorporated provisions of the 1943 Act which had expanded the eligibility of health professionals other than medical officers to join the Regular Corps. The Commissioned Corps overall grew by five-fold between 1940 and 1945.

## **Establishment of the Scientist Category**

The Scientist Category was established in 1945 and a number of civil service scientists converted over to the Regular Corps after passing appropriate examinations. On July 1, 1946, there were eleven scientist officers listed on Active Duty in the *Official List of Commissioned and Other Officers of the Public Health Service*. By January 1, 1948 the ranks of scientist officers had swelled to fifty officers. In 1984, the Scientist Category became an "active" category with the establishment of the Scientist Professional Advisory Committee (SciPAC) and the assignment by the Surgeon General of the first Chief Professional Officer (CPO), CAPT Jim McTigue. A number of scientist officers have reached the level of Flag Rank over the years, with the latest being RADM Helena O. Mishoe in 2007.

### **Chief Professional Officers for the Scientist Category**

CAPT James McTigue	October 1983 - September 1987
CAPT Richard Chiacchierini	October 1987 - September 1991
CAPT Jerry Johnson	October 1991 - September 1995
CAPT Derek Dunn	October 1995 - September 2000
RADM Lireka Joseph	October 2000 - February 2004
CDR Doug Thoroughman	February 2004 - March 2005
CAPT Ralph O'Connor	April 2005 - July 2005
RADM Helena O. Mishoe	August 2005 - Present

## **The Scientist Category Today**

The Scientist Category of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps is comprised of officers who hold a doctoral degree (Ph.D., DrPH, D.Sc., Psy.D., or Ed.D.) and that degree served as the qualifying degree for their commissioning. The assigned billets and duties are diverse within the category and include a wide array of career tracks such as research scientist, regulatory scientist, environmental health scientist, epidemiologist, psychologist, and laboratorian. Currently, there are about 250 scientist officers (April 2008; [http://dcp.psc.gov/rpt\\_select.asp](http://dcp.psc.gov/rpt_select.asp)) in the Scientist Category encompassing over 46 distinct disciplines in their primary assignments. Each of these professions contributes to the Commissioned Corps mission in unique and valuable ways.