



Defense Primer: Military Officers

Grade and Rank

The Armed Forces are hierarchical organizations with clearly defined levels of authority. The different levels for officers are defined in law and called *grades*, while *rank* refers to the order of precedence among those in different grades and within the same grade (e.g., someone who has been a Major for three years outranks someone who has been a Major for two years; see 10 U.S.C. §741). However, it is common for the term rank to be used as a synonym for grade. Pay grade is an administrative classification that determines certain rates of pay, but it is sometimes used to indicate grade as well. For example, a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy may be referred to as an O-4. See **Figure 1**.

Numbers and Roles

Officers (including warrant officers) make up about 18% of the Armed Forces, with enlisted personnel and military service academy cadets and midshipmen making up the other 82%. Officers outrank all enlisted personnel. **Table 1** below lists the number of active-duty officers in each pay grade.

Warrant officers (pay grades W-1 to W-5) perform highly technical or specialized work within their career field and

also, in the case of the Army, serve as helicopter pilots.

Warrant officers constitute about 9% of the officer corps.

Company-grade or junior-grade officers (pay grades O-1 to O-3) typically lead units with several dozen to several hundred personnel, or serve as junior staff officers. They make up about 55% of the officer corps.

Field-grade or mid-grade officers (pay grades O-4 to O-6) typically lead units with several hundred to several thousand personnel, or serve as senior staff officers. They make up about 35% of the officer corps. The number of officers in these grades is limited by law (10 U.S.C. §523).

General or flag officers (pay grades O-7 to O-10) may lead units or organizations with several thousand to hundreds of thousands of personnel or serve as staff for the largest military organizations. General and flag officers make up just under 0.4% of the officer corps. The number of officers in these grades is limited by law (10 U.S.C. §§525-526).

Insignia

As shown in **Figure 1**, each officer grade in the Armed Forces has distinctive insignia, typically worn on the sleeve, shoulder, collar, and/or headgear (caps, berets, etc.).

Table 1. Active-Duty Military Officers by Pay Grade (as of March 31, 2025)

Pay Grade	Service					Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	
O-10	11	8	3	13	3	38
O-9	53	35	18	39	5	150
O-8	88	63	32	70	10	263
O-7	114	105	37	100	10	366
O-6	3,631	3,172	715	3,137	241	10,896
O-5	8,554	6,803	1,975	9,271	770	27,373
O-4	15,378	10,400	3,996	12,969	1,144	43,887
O-3	25,701	17,833	6,095	20,417	1,200	71,246
O-2	14,242	7,348	3,345	7,027	590	32,552
O-1	7,816	7,017	2,984	6,605	594	25,016
W-5	549	78	109	0	0	736
W-4	1,561	465	281	0	0	2,307
W-3	3,156	824	562	0	0	4,542
W-2	6,468	727	792	23	0	8,010
W-1	4,212	40	539	22	0	4,813
Total	91,534	54,918	21,483	59,693	4,567	232,195

Source: Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, *Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Rank/Grade*, March 2025. **Note:** The Air Force first began accepting applications for Warrant Officers in April 2024.

Figure 1. Pay Grade, Grade, and Insignia of Officers

Paygrade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force
WARRANT OFFICERS					
W1	Warrant Officer 1	USN Warrant Officer 1	Warrant Officer 1	Warrant Officer 1	NO WARRANT
W2	Chief Warrant Officer 2	NO WARRANT			
W3	Chief Warrant Officer 3	NO WARRANT			
W4	Chief Warrant Officer 4	NO WARRANT			
W5	Chief Warrant Officer 5	NO WARRANT			
OFFICERS					
O1	Second Lieutenant	Ensign	Second Lieutenant	Second Lieutenant	Second Lieutenant
O2	First Lieutenant	Lieutenant Junior Grade	First Lieutenant	First Lieutenant	First Lieutenant
O3	Captain	Lieutenant	Captain	Captain	Captain
O4	Major	Lieutenant Commander	Major	Major	Major
O5	Lieutenant Colonel	Commander	Lieutenant Colonel	Lieutenant Colonel	Lieutenant Colonel
O6	Colonel	Captain	Colonel	Colonel	Colonel
O7	Brigadier General	Rear Admiral Lower Half	Brigadier General	Brigadier General	Brigadier General
O8	Major General	Rear Admiral Upper Half	Major General	Major General	Major General
O9	Lieutenant General	Vice Admiral	Lieutenant General	Lieutenant General	Lieutenant General
O10	General	Admiral	General	General	General
WARTIME ONLY	General of the Army	Fleet Admiral		General of the Air Force	

Source: CRS adaption of Department of Defense web page: <https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/Insignias/#officer-insignias>. The Department of the Air Force provided CRS with the insignia design for Air Force Warrant Officers. The U.S. Coast Guard, which normally falls under the Department of Homeland Security, uses the same names, collar insignia, and striping conventions as the Navy.

Resources

10 U.S.C. §§101(b), 523, 525-526a, 741, 742.

Department of Defense Instruction 1310.01, Rank and Seniority of Commissioned Officers.

CRS Report R44496, *Military Officer Personnel Management: Key Concepts and Statutory Provisions*.

CRS Report R44389, *General and Flag Officers in the U.S. Armed Forces: Background and Considerations for Congress*.

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