



Updated January 7, 2026

Defense Primer: Military Enlisted Personnel

Grade and Rank

The Armed Forces are hierarchical organizations with clearly defined levels of authority. These different levels are 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 sergeant for three years outranks someone who has been a sergeant for two years). 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 staff sergeant in the Army may also be referred to as an E-6. See **Figure 1**. The service secretaries manage the accession, promotion, and assignments of enlisted members under broad statutory authorities.

Numbers and Roles

Enlisted personnel and military service academy cadets and midshipmen make up about 82% of the Armed Forces, with officers making up the remaining 18%. Enlisted personnel rank below all officers. **Table 1** lists the number of active-duty enlisted personnel in each pay grade.

Junior enlisted personnel (pay grades E-1 to E-4) typically work in small units across the Armed Forces. Individuals normally serve in these grades during their first enlistment term (usually four years). More senior enlisted

personnel supervise them. Junior enlisted personnel make up about 50% of the enlisted workforce.

Mid-level noncommissioned officers (NCOs) (pay grades E-5 to E-7). NCOs have significantly more responsibility than junior enlisted personnel. They lead small units, typically ranging from a few to several dozen personnel, and serve as technical experts in their occupational specialties. NCOs at this level translate orders from their superior officers into action.

Senior noncommissioned officers (pay grades E-8 and E-9) typically serve as senior enlisted advisors to commanders or as staff NCOs. They also serve as a channel of support for the enlisted force in general. By law, the authorized daily average of enlisted personnel in pay grades E-8 and E-9 may not be more than 3.0% and 1.25%, respectively, of the number of enlisted members in a given service on the first day of the fiscal year. The statutory caps can be waived in certain circumstances (10 U.S.C. §517).

Insignia

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

Table 1. Department of Defense Active-Duty Military Enlisted by Pay Grade (as of September 30, 2025)

Pay Grade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
E-9	3,468	2,954	1,618	2,433	63	10,536
E-8	10,551	6,883	3,834	5,085	147	26,500
E-7	35,348	24,021	8,237	23,193	665	91,464
E-6	57,033	52,277	14,409	37,750	1,042	162,511
E-5	66,040	72,728	24,641	51,405	1,047	215,861
E-4	95,338	45,049	30,874	67,159	749	239,169
E-3	57,124	37,344	39,235	47,817	1,212	182,732
E-2	24,948	26,470	16,669	9,771	233	78,091
E-1	8,161	13,090	12,217	8,999	178	42,645
Total	358,011	280,816	151,734	253,612	5,336	1,049,509

Source: Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, *Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Rank/Grade*, September 2025.

Note: The Department of Defense is “using a secondary Department of War (DOW) designation,” under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 2025.

Figure 1. Pay Grade, Grade, and Insignia of Enlisted Servicemembers

Paygrade	Army		Navy		Marine Corps		Air Force		Space Force	
E1	Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>		Seaman Recruit <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>		Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>		Airman Basic <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>		Specialist 1 	
E2	Private E-2 		Seaman Apprentice 		Private First Class 		Airman 		Specialist 2 	
E3	Private First Class 		Seaman 		Lance Corporal 		Airman First Class 		Specialist 3 	
E4	Corporal 	Specialist 	Petty Officer Third Class 		Corporal 		Senior Airman 		Specialist 4 	
E5	Sergeant 		Petty Officer Second Class 		Sergeant 		Staff Sergeant 		Sergeant 	
E6	Staff Sergeant 		Petty Officer First Class 		Staff Sergeant 		Technical Sergeant 		Technical Sergeant 	
E7	Sergeant First Class 		Chief Petty Officer 		Gunnery Sergeant 		Master Sergeant 	First Sergeant 	Master Sergeant 	
E8	Master Sergeant 	First Sergeant 	Senior Chief Petty Officer 		Master Sergeant 	First Sergeant 	Senior Master Sergeant 	First Sergeant 	Senior Master Sergeant 	
E9	Sergeant Major 	Command Sergeant Major 	Master Chief Petty Officer 	Fleet/Command Master Chief Petty Officer 	Master Gunny Sergeant 	Sergeant Major 	Chief Master Sergeant 	First Sergeant 	Command Chief Master Sergeant 	Chief Master Sergeant 
E9	Sergeant Major of the Army 		Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy 		Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps 		Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force 		Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force 	

Source: CRS adaptation of Department of Defense web page: <https://www.war.gov/Our-Story/Insignias/#enlisted-insignias>. The U.S. Coast Guard, which normally falls under the Department of Homeland Security, uses the same names for enlisted ranks as the Navy.

Resources

Chapter 31 of Title 10, U.S. Code

Army Regulation 611-1, Military Occupational Classification Structure Development and Implementation.

NAVPER 18068F, Volume 1, Manual of Navy Enlisted Manpower and Personnel Classifications and Occupational Standards.

U.S. Air Force, The Enlisted Force Structure, September 2025.

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IF10684

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