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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 56% 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 September 30, 2025)

Pay Grade	Service					Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	
O-10	8	9	3	12	4	36
O-9	53	32	22	33	4	144
O-8	84	69	30	65	11	259
O-7	134	109	37	116	13	409
O-6	3,575	3,234	696	3,237	252	10,994
O-5	8,501	6,919	1,936	9,038	783	27,177
O-4	15,292	10,510	3,895	12,871	1,153	43,721
O-3	26,522	18,280	6,161	21,231	1,291	73,485
O-2	12,069	7,138	3,511	7,328	570	30,616
O-1	9,704	7,404	3,058	7,444	568	28,178
W-5	520	77	104	0	0	701
W-4	1,465	466	288	0	0	2,219
W-3	3,098	806	625	0	0	4,529
W-2	6,936	731	879	36	0	8,582
W-1	4,181	48	270	26	0	4,525
Total	92,142	55,832	21,515	61,437	4,649	235,575

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

Notes: The Air Force first began accepting applications for Warrant Officers in April 2024. The Department of Defense is “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025.

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

Paygrade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force				
WARRANT OFFICERS	Warrant Officer 1		USN Warrant Officer I		Warrant Officer I		Warrant Officer I		NO WARRANT
	Chief Warrant Officer 2		Chief Warrant Officer 2		Chief Warrant Officer 2		Chief Warrant Officer 2		NO WARRANT
	Chief Warrant Officer 3		Chief Warrant Officer 3		Chief Warrant Officer 3		Chief Warrant Officer 3		NO WARRANT
	Chief Warrant Officer 4		Chief Warrant Officer 4		Chief Warrant Officer 4		Chief Warrant Officer 4		NO WARRANT
	Chief Warrant Officer 5		Chief Warrant Officer 5		Chief Warrant Officer 5		Chief Warrant Officer 5		NO WARRANT
	Second Lieutenant		Ensign		Second Lieutenant		Second Lieutenant		Second Lieutenant
	First Lieutenant		Lieutenant Junior Grade		First Lieutenant		First Lieutenant		First Lieutenant
	Captain		Lieutenant		Captain		Captain		Captain
	Major		Lieutenant Commander		Major		Major		Major
	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.war.gov/Our-Story/Insignias/#officer-insignia>. The Department of the Air Force provided CRS with the insignia design for Air Force Warrant Officers. **Note:** 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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