



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 August 31, 2024)

Pay Grade	Service					Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	
O-10	13	8	3	13	3	40
O-9	53	37	25	43	5	163
O-8	110	68	29	86	9	302
O-7	124	107	39	99	11	380
O-6	3,614	2,959	702	3,183	232	10,690
O-5	8,607	6,417	1,951	9,171	746	26,892
O-4	15,690	10,151	3,941	13,210	1,129	44,121
O-3	26,350	19,522	5,881	20,934	1,262	73,949
O-2	12,307	7,435	3,823	6,873	581	31,019
O-1	9,848	6,614	2,734	7,001	565	26,762
W-5	555	79	111	not reported	0	745
W-4	1,642	462	269	not reported	0	2,373
W-3	3,103	809	673	not reported	0	4,585
W-2	6,137	713	880	not reported	0	7,730
W-1	4,273	33	284	not reported	0	4,590
Total	92,426	55,414	21,345	60,613	4,543	234,341

Source: Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, *Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Rank/Grade*, August 2024. **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 	Chief Warrant Officer 2 	Chief Warrant Officer 2 	Chief Warrant Officer 2 	NO WARRANT
W3	Chief Warrant Officer 3 	Chief Warrant Officer 3 	Chief Warrant Officer 3 	Chief Warrant Officer 3 	NO WARRANT
W4	Chief Warrant Officer 4 	Chief Warrant Officer 4 	Chief Warrant Officer 4 	Chief Warrant Officer 4 	NO WARRANT
W5	Chief Warrant Officer 5 	Chief Warrant Officer 5 	Chief Warrant Officer 5 	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 	General of the Space Force 

Source: CRS adaption of Department of Defense web page: <https://dod.defense.gov/About/Insignias/Officers/>. 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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