

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 make up about 18% of the armed forces, with enlisted personnel 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 8% 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 36% 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. §525-526a).

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, 2021)

Pay Grade	Services				Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force/Space Force	
O-10	16	9	3	13	41
O-9	48	39	20	50	157
O-8	105	63	30	96	294
O-7	129	110	36	134	409
O-6	3,903	3,278	659	3,357	11,197
O-5	9,139	6,756	1,959	9,946	27,800
O-4	16,179	10,722	4,004	14,497	45,402
O-3	27,227	18,927	5,952	21,401	73,507
O-2	12,286	7,196	3,988	8,666	32,136
O-1	9,737	6,954	2,818	6,713	26,222
W-5	543	85	108	0	736
W-4	1,972	467	309	0	2,748
W-3	3,475	733	594	0	4,802
W-2	5,849	670	944	0	7,463
W-1	2,835	10	277	0	3,122
Unknown	0	25	0	0	25
Total	93,443	56,044	21,701	64,873	236,061

Source: Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center.

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	NO WARRANT	NO WARRANT
W2	Chief Warrant Officer 2	Chief Warrant Officer 2	Chief Warrant Officer 2	NO WARRANT	NO WARRANT
W3	Chief Warrant Officer 3	Chief Warrant Officer 3	Chief Warrant Officer 3	NO WARRANT	NO WARRANT
W4	Chief Warrant Officer 4	Chief Warrant Officer 4	Chief Warrant Officer 4	NO WARRANT	NO WARRANT
W5	Chief Warrant Officer 5	Chief Warrant Officer 5	Chief Warrant Officer 5	NO WARRANT	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://dod.defense.gov/About/Insignias/Officers/>

Resources

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

Department of Defense Instruction 1310.01, Rank and Seniority of Commissioned Officers, August 23, 2013.

CRS Report R44496, *Military Officer Personnel Management: Key Concepts and Statutory Provisions*, by Lawrence Kapp

Resources (continued)

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

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