

CIVILIANS GUIDE TO MILITARY PROTOCOL



SC DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS



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MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

As the Secretary of South Carolina's Department of Veterans' Affairs, I am deeply grateful for the outstanding support from all our stakeholders who value the liberties and freedoms of this great Nation. Nowhere is this commitment more evident than in the leadership demonstrated at the local, regional, and state levels here in the Palmetto State.

We understand that attending or participating in military events can be unfamiliar or even intimidating, especially if you are not well-versed in the protocols and cultures of the various military services.

This simple guide is intended to equip you with the tools to better understand and navigate the customs, traditions, and expectations you may encounter during military ceremonies or when engaging with service members assigned throughout South Carolina.

Please don't hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns. It is our honor to serve you and your family.



Secretary Todd B. McCaffrey

Purpose

To provide an overview of basic U.S. military customs and courtesies relevant to civilian legislators and staff, supporting respectful and effective civil-military relations. Understanding military customs and courtesies is vital to maintaining effective and respectful relationships between civilian leaders and the armed forces. When in doubt, observe, ask politely, and err on the side of formality. The best advice is to be relaxed, enjoy the moment, and engage military members freely; get to know them.

I. Understanding Military Culture

A. Core Values

Each branch has its own core values, but all emphasize:

- Honor
- Duty
- Respect
- Integrity
- Selfless Service
- Courage
- Commitment

B. Chain of Command

- Perhaps different from many civilian organizations, the military follows a more hierarchical structure.
- Civilian control is a constitutional principle; the President is Commander in Chief, and service members are bound to follow orders of the President.
- Legislators' support is critical to oversight and funding roles.

II. Key Customs and Courtesies

A. Addressing Military Personnel

Army

*RED TITLES INDICATE HOW TO PROPERLY ADDRESS CERTAIN SENIOR ENLISTED OFFICERS

Senior Enlisted (E-7 to E-9)

- E-7: Sergeant First Class (SFC) **Sergeant**
- E-8: **Master Sergeant** (MSG) / **First Sergeant** (ISG)
- E-9: **Sergeant Major** (SGM), **Command Sergeant Major** (CSM)

Officers (O-1 to O-9)

- O-1: Second Lieutenant (2LT) **Lieutenant**
- O-2: First Lieutenant (1LT) **Lieutenant**
- O-3: **Captain** (CPT)
- O-4: **Major** (MAJ)
- O-5: Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) **Colonel**
- O-6: **Colonel** (COL)
- O-7: Brigadier General (BG) **General**
- O-8: Major General (MG) **General**
- O-9: Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) **General**
- O-10: **General** (GEN)

Marine Corps

*RED TITLES INDICATE HOW TO PROPERLY ADDRESS CERTAIN SENIOR ENLISTED OFFICERS

Senior Enlisted (E-7 to E-9)

- E-7: Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt) **Gunnery Sergeant**
- E-8: **Master Sergeant** (MSGt) / **First Sergeant** (1stSgt)
- E-9: **Master Gunnery Sergeant** (MGySgt)/ **Sergeant Major** (SgtMaj)

Officers (O-1 to O-9)

- O-1: Second Lieutenant (2LT) **Second Lieutenant**
- O-2: First Lieutenant (1LT) **First Lieutenant**
- O-3: **Captain** (Capt)
- O-4: **Major** (Maj)
- O-5: Lieutenant Colonel (Lt.Col) **Colonel**
- O-6: **Colonel** (Col)
- O-7: Brigadier General (BGen) **General**
- O-8: Major General (MajGen) **General**
- O-9: Lieutenant General (LtGen) **General**
- O-10: **General** (Gen)

Navy

*RED TITLES INDICATE HOW TO PROPERLY ADDRESS CERTAIN SENIOR ENLISTED OFFICERS

Senior Enlisted (E-7 to E-9)

- E-7: Chief Petty Officer (CPO) **Chief**
- E-8: Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO) **Senior Chief**
- E-9: Master Chief Petty Officer (MCPO), MCPON **Master Chief**

Officers (O-1 to O-9)

- O-1: **Ensign** (ENS)
- O-2: **Lieutenant Junior Grade** (LTJG)
- O-3: **Lieutenant** (LT)
- O-4: **Lieutenant Commander** (LCDR)
- O-5: **Commander** (CDR)
- O-6: **Captain** (CAPT)
- O-7: Rear Admiral Lower Half (RDML) **Admiral**
- O-8: Rear Admiral Upper Half (RADM) **Admiral**
- O-9: Vice Admiral (VADM) **Admiral**
- O-10: **Admiral** (ADM)

Air Force

*RED TITLES INDICATE HOW TO PROPERLY ADDRESS
CERTAIN SENIOR ENLISTED OFFICERS

Senior Enlisted (E-7 to E-9)

E-7: Master Sergeant (MSgt)	Sergeant
E-8: Senior Master Sergeant (SMSgt)	Sergeant
E-9: Chief Master Sergeant (CMSgt)	Chief

Officers (O-1 to O-9)

O-1: Second Lieutenant (2d Lt)	Lieutenant
O-2: First Lieutenant (1st Lt)	Lieutenant
O-3: Captain (Capt)	
O-4: Major (Maj)	
O-5: Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col)	Colonel
O-6: Colonel (Col)	
O-7: Brigadier General (Brig Gen)	General
O-8: Major General (Maj Gen)	General
O-9: Lieutenant General (Lt Gen)	General
O-10: General (Gen)	

Coast Guard

*RED TITLES INDICATE HOW TO PROPERLY ADDRESS
CERTAIN SENIOR ENLISTED OFFICERS

Senior Enlisted (E-7 to E-9)

E-7: Chief Petty Officer (CPO)	Chief
E-8: Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO)	Senior Chief
E-9: Master Chief Petty Officer (MCPO)	Master Chief

Officers (O-1 to O-9)

O-1: Ensign (ENS)	
O-2: Lieutenant Junior Grade (LTJG)	
O-3: Lieutenant (LT)	
O-4: Lieutenant Commander (LCDR)	
O-5: Commander (CDR)	
O-6: Captain (CAPT)	
O-7: Rear Admiral Lower Half (RDML)	Admiral
O-8: Rear Admiral Upper Half (RADM)	Admiral
O-9: Vice Admiral (VADM)	Admiral
O-10: Admiral (ADM)	

Space Force

*RED TITLES INDICATE HOW TO PROPERLY ADDRESS
CERTAIN SENIOR ENLISTED OFFICERS

Senior Enlisted (E-7 to E-9)

E-7: Master Sergeant (MSgt)	Sergeant
E-8: Senior Master Sergeant (SMSgt)	Sergeant
E-9: Chief Master Sergeant (CMSgt)	Chief

Officers (O-1 to O-9)

O-1: Second Lieutenant (2d Lt)	Lieutenant
O-2: First Lieutenant (1st Lt)	Lieutenant
O-3: Captain (Capt)	
O-4: Major (Maj)	
O-5: Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col)	Colonel
O-6: Colonel (Col)	
O-7: Brigadier General (Brig Gen)	General
O-8: Major General (Maj Gen)	General
O-9: Lieutenant General (Lt Gen)	General
O-10: General (Gen)	

B. Saluting

Civilians are not required to salute; however, civilians who are Veterans may salute in civilian attire. Military personnel will salute each other per regulation (ex. subordinates initiate salute to superiors). During national anthem, flag ceremonies, or military funerals, civilians should:

- Remove headgear (if applicable)
- Place right hand over heart, or salute if a Veteran
- Stand respectfully

C. Uniforms and Appearance

Each service branch has unique uniforms for different occasions (combat, dress, service). Do not touch or comment negatively on uniforms or insignia. Recognize that military members are often on duty even during events.

DRESS CODE		
EVENT	CIVILIAN MALE	CIVILIAN FEMALE
Formal evening functions/dinners, military balls, State occasions	Formal: Tuxedo with bowtie Semi-Formal: Tuxedo or dark dinner jacket	Formal: Floor length evening gown Semi-Formal: Long or short evening dress or evening trousers with a dressy top
Ceremonies/Official Engagements Parades, reviews, when special honors are rendered, official visits of dignitaries	Business: Business suit or sport coat and tie	Business: Business suit with pants or skirt. Close-toed shoes
Business Office work, informal social occasions	Informal, Smart Casual or Business Casual: Business suit, sport coat & trousers without tie (open collar)	Informal, Smart Casual or Business Casual: Business suit, simple skirt or dress, slacks with jacket, or pantsuit. Low or flat shoes acceptable
Working Daily attire (especially in an environment where soiling of clothing is expected)	Civilian Casual: Slacks with open collar shirt or golf shirt, no sport coat. Loafers or other close-toed shoes	Civilian Casual: Slacks with blouse, Capri pants, sandals or flats, Close-toed shoes

D. Ceremonies and Protocol

Military ceremonies (retirements, promotions, changes of command) are formal and symbolic.

ACTIONS	NATIONAL ANTHEM	TAPS	SERVICE SONGS	MILITARY MARCHES	PRESENTATION OF U.S. COLORS/FLAG	PRAYER/ MOMENT OF SILENCE
Stand in Silence	X	X	X	X	X	X
Face Flag and Music	X				X	
Remove Head Gear	X	X			X	X
Place Right Hand Over Heart or Salute if Veteran	X	X			X	

NOTE: Follow the lead of military personnel for when to stand, sit, or remain silent.

- If provided words, Sing Service songs when played.
- When National Anthem is played, Veterans are authorized to salute if preferred.
- When Military Marches are being executed, If not required to stand, remain seated.

III. Common Terms to Know

Term	Meaning
"Hooah" / "Oorah" / "Hooyah"	Motivational/expression of enthusiasm (Army/Marines/Navy)
CO/ OC	Commanding Officer/ Officer Commanding
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
PCS	Permanent Change of Station (reassignment)
ETS	Expiration Term of Service (discharge date)
Flag Officer	General Officer / Admiral
"Roger That"	Understand, acknowledgement
TDY/ TAD	Temporary Duty (Work Trip)
SNCO	Staff Noncommissioned Officer

IV. Military Rank Structure



COMMISSIONED						ENLISTED					
ARMY	USAF	USSF	NAVY	USMC	USCG	ARMY	USAF	USSF	NAVY	USMC	USCG
SPECIAL		N/A		N/A							
O-10											
O-9											
O-8											
O-7											
O-6											
O-5											
O-4											
O-3											
O-2											
O-1											
WARRANT											
W-5				N/A							
W-4											
W-3						N/A	N/A		N/A	N/A	N/A
W-2						N/A	N/A		N/A	N/A	N/A
W-1				N/A							

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