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Military Service Records, Awards, and Unit Histories: A Guide to Locating Sources

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Summary

This guide provides information on locating military unit histories and individual service records of discharged, retired, and deceased military personnel. It also provides information on locating and replacing military awards and medals. Included is contact information for military history centers, websites for additional sources of research, and a bibliography of other publications, including related CRS reports.

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Personnel Files: Military Service and Pension Records at the National Archives

The Military Personnel Records division of the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), a component of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) located in St. Louis, Missouri, holds most existing U.S. military personnel, health, and medical records of discharged and deceased veterans of all services from World War I to the present. Neither the NPRC nor the Department of Defense (DOD) intends to destroy the physical records of U.S. servicemembers. Some older records have been electronically scanned to reduce the handling of fragile records. See NARA's site "Access to Military Service and Pension Records" at https://www.archives.gov/research/order/order-vets-records.html.

Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) records may be requested online at https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records, by using the Standard Form 180 and submitting by mail (the appropriate address listed on the back of the form), or fax (314-801-9195).

Veterans, their next-of-kin (NOK), or authorized representatives (e.g., lawyers, doctors) may request these records. According to the NPRC, the NOK is the un-remarried widow or widower, son, daughter, father, mother, brother or sister.[1]

If an individual does not meet the definition of a NOK, he or she is considered a member of the general public and may request military personnel records via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). See "Access to OMPFs for the General Public" at https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/public/general-public.html.

In 1973, a fire at NPRC destroyed approximately 16 million to 18 million Army and Air Force official military personnel files.[2] In such cases where files were lost, NPRC uses alternate sources of information to respond to requests.

More information about obtaining military personnel files can be found on the NPRC website, http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/, or by contacting the center at

National Personnel Records Center
Military Personnel Records
1 Archives Drive
St. Louis, MO 63138
Tel: (314) 801-0816 *congressional line*
Tel: (314) 801-0800 public customer service line
Status Update Request Form: https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/forms

Older military personnel records (generally prior to 1917) are located at

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
Textual Archives Division

[1] National Personnel Records Center, "Access to Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF) - Veterans and Next-of-Kin," site at https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/ompf-access.

[2] Kerri Lawrence, "Archives Recalls Fire That Claimed Millions of Military Personnel Files," National Archives News, July 23, 2018, at https://www.archives.gov/news/articles/archives-recalls-fire. This article provides additional reference to a 1974 white paper, *The National Personnel Records Center Fire: A Study in Disaster*, which provides an extensive account. In addition, *Prologue* magazine published an article, "Burnt in Memory: Looking back, looking forward at the 1973 St. Louis Fire," Spring 2013, at https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2013/spring/stl-fire.pdf.

Washington, DC 20408
http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records.html

Correcting Military Service Records

For guidance on the review of discharges and military corrections boards, see NARA's "Veterans' Service Records: Correcting Military Service Records".[3] For information on the military service review boards (Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, and Navy and Marine Corps), see "Boards for Correction of Military Records (BCMR)/ Discharge Upgrades" site.[4] NARA's site also provides the following BCMR guidance:

> "Prior to submitting a request to a Board for Correction of Military Records, ALL administrative avenues must be used. Generally, that means a request to NPRC for a correction (minor corrections can be made by NPRC), then a request to the military service department (service departments can make more corrections than NPRC), and finally if both these fail, then submit DD Form 149, with supporting evidence as instructed on the form."[5]

Military Awards and Decorations

The NPRC also provides information and guidance on issuance of military awards; how to request replacing certain military awards and decorations for veterans and their NOK; and obtaining a Cold War Recognition Certificate.[6] This information is available for the records of a servicemember who separated before 1959. For records of individuals with a discharge date of 1960 or after are non-archival and are maintained under the Federal Records Center program and can be requested through FOIA. The general public may also purchase a copy of the veteran's OMPF to determine the awards due and obtain the medals from a commercial source. Individuals can request information on military service medals, decorations and awards online: https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/awards-and-decorations.

By military service (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force including Army Air Corps & Army Air Forces) via mail:

National Personnel Records Center
1 Archives Drive
St. Louis, MO 63138

For Coast Guard:
Coast Guard Personnel Service Center
4200 Wilson Blvd., Suite 900 (PSC-PSD-MA)
Stop 7200
Arlington, VA 20598-7200

[3] NARA. "Correcting Military Service Records" at https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/correct-service-records.html.

[4] Boards for Correction of Military Records (BCMR)/Discharge Upgrades at https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/vso/boards-for-correction-of-military-records.

[5] Ibid. For more information on the BCMR, see also CRS Report R46107, *FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act: Selected Military Personnel Issues*, coordinated by Bryce H. P. Mendez in the section "Separation, Discharge, and Discharge Review."

[6] Military Awards and Decorations at https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/public/awards-and-decorations.html.

Cold War Recognition Certificate

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 1998 (P.L. 105-85) in Section 1084 required the Secretary of Defense to prepare a certificate recognizing the Cold War service of qualifying members of the Armed Forces and civilian personnel of DOD and other government agencies contributing to national security. This certificate, known as the "Cold War Recognition Certificate," may be awarded upon individual request to all members of the Armed Forces and qualified federal government civilian personnel who served the United States during the Cold War era from September 2, 1945, to December 26, 1991.[7]

Finding Unit Histories

The Modern Military Records office of NARA has custody of records relating to World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. The records vary by conflict and branch of service; for example, the records for Army units active during the interwar periods (1920-1939 and 1945-1950) are incomplete. For more information, contact the Textual Records office at

Textual Records Office
National Archives and Records Administration at College Park
8601 Adelphi Road
College Park, MD 20740-6001
Tel: (301) 837-3510
Email: archives2reference@nara.gov

If a military unit record is not publicly available, a FOIA request may be submitted to the agency where the record is held. For example, for special access records held at the National Archives at College Park, contact the Archives FOIA office at the following:

Special Access and FOIA Division
National Archives at College Park
8601 Adelphi Road
College Park, MD 20740-6001
Tel: (301) 387-3190
Email: specialaccess_foia@nara.gov

For more information on how to submit a FOIA request, visit https://www.foia.gov/how-to.html.

Other types of auxiliary and organizational records, including Army morning reports, Army unit rosters, Army officer pay cards, Navy muster rolls, U.S. Army Surgeon General's office records and Veterans Administration index cards are maintained at the National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri. Further information regarding these records, as well as the timespan of available records for each category, are available at http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/archival-programs/other-records/index.html. Certain published unit histories can also be found in the collections of the military departments (see **Table 1**).

[7] Cold War Recognition Certificate at https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/awards-and-decorations#cwc. Additional information regarding requesting a Cold War Recognition Certificate is also available at that site.

Table 1. Military History Centers and Museums

Center or Museum	Telephone Number
Air Force	
U.S. Air Force Historical Research Agency 600 Chennault Circle Maxwell AFB, AL 36112-6424 Email: AFHRA.NEWS@us.af.mil or use form https://www.afhra.af.mil/Contact-Us/ https://www.afhra.af.mil/	(334) 953-5697 or (334) 953-5342
Air Force Historical Support Division HQ USAF/HOH 2822 Doherty DR. SW, Suite 404 Joint Base Anacostia Bolling Washington, DC 20373-5899 Email: usaf.pentagon.af-ho.mbx.afhso-research@mail.mil (preferred method) https://www.afhistory.af.mil/	(202) 404-2264
National Museum of the U.S. Air Force 1100 Spaatz Street Wright-Patterson AFB, OH 45433 Email: nationalmuseum.mup@us.af.mil https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/	(937) 255-3286
Army	
U.S. Army Center of Military History 102 4th Avenue Bldg. 35 Fort McNair Washington, DC 20319-5060 Email: usarmy.mcnair.cmh.mbx.answers@mail.mil https://history.army.mil/	**Congressional Inquiries Division*** (202) 685-2676 for House offices (202) 224-2881 for Senate offices *For those inquiring from the office of a Member of Congress. All others should use email.
U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center (USAHEC) 950 Soldiers Drive Carlisle, PA 17013-5021 Email: usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ahec-ves@mail.mil https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/	(717) 245-3949/3660 research assistance (717) 245-3972 information desk
Coast Guard	
U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office Commandant (CG-09231) ATTN: Coast Guard Historian's Office U.S. Coast Guard Stop 7031 2703 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE Washington, DC 20593-7031 Email: history@uscg.mil https://www.history.uscg.mil/	(202) 372-4653 (757) 398-6643 Atlantic Area Historian
Coast Guard Museum U.S. Coast Guard Academy 15 Mohegan Avenue New London, CT 06320-4195 https://www.history.uscg.mil/Museum/	(860) 444-8511
Marine Corps	
Edwin H. Simmons Marine Corps History Center Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division 2044 Broadway Street	(703) 784-4685 general inquiries

Center or Museum	Telephone Number
Quantico, VA 22134 https://grc-usmcu.libguides.com/marine-corps-archives/main Archives Branch reference requests and general inquiries: history.division@usmcu.edu	
Marine Corps Heritage Foundation 18900 Jefferson Davis Highway Triangle, VA 22172 Email: info@marineheritage.org https://www.marineheritage.org/	(800) 397-7585 toll free (703) 640-7965 local
Merchant Marine	
American Merchant Marine Museum 300 Steamboat Road Kings Point, NY 11024 Email: museum@usmma.edu https://www.usmma.edu/museum	(516) 726-6047
Navy	
Naval History & Heritage Command 805 Kidder Breese Street, SE Washington Navy Yard, DC 20374-5060 Email: archives@navy.mil (archives branch) Email: nhhcpublicaffairs@navy.mil (public inquiries) https://www.history.navy.mil/	(202) 433-3224 archives (202) 433-4132 library (202) 433-7880 public inquiries

Source: Table compiled by the Congressional Research Service.

Military Records for Veterans Compensation

To support disability claims of exposure to hazardous materials (Agent Orange, asbestos, radiation, etc.), numerous veterans are culling through Army morning reports, unit rosters, pay cards, Navy muster rolls, Captain logs/Navy Deck logs, etc. during their military service.

For more information on military exposures, see the **VA's Military Exposure** site: https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/index.asp.

For **Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans** see VA's Blue Water Navy Veterans and Agent Orange Exposure site at https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/locations/blue-water-veterans.asp. The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-23) extended the presumption of herbicide exposure, such as Agent Orange, to veterans who served in the offshore waters of the Republic of Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975. See CRS In Focus IF11368, Expansion of Benefits to Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans, by Heather M. Salazar.

For **Airborne Hazards and Burn Pit Exposures** see the VA's Public Health site at https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/. VA continues to study the long-term health issues of deployed veterans and their exposure to burn pits used at military waste sites in Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas of the Southwest Asia Theater of military operations. For more information, see also CRS In Focus IF11813, *Presumptive Service Connection: Former Servicemembers of Camp Stronghold Freedom at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Airbase*, by Bryce H. P. Mendez and Heather M. Salazar, and related CRS products on VA health care and disability in the sources listed in the next section.

Selected Additional Sources for Research

Selected CRS Reports

CRS Report R42324, *Who Is a "Veteran"?—Basic Eligibility for Veterans' Benefits*, by Heather M. Salazar

CRS Report R42747, *Health Care for Veterans: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, by Sidath Viranga Panangala and Jared S. Sussman

CRS Report R44162, *Veterans' Benefits: Eligibility of Merchant Mariners*, by Heather M. Salazar (See section "Active Duty Status Determinations of Merchant Mariners")

CRS Report R44837, *Benefits for Service-Disabled Veterans*, coordinated by Heather M. Salazar

CRS Report R46813, *Department of Veterans Affairs: Burial Benefits and the National Cemetery Administration*, by Heather M. Salazar and Tamar B. Breslauer

CRS Report 95-519, *Medal of Honor: History and Issues*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon

CRS Report R42704, *The Purple Heart: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon

CRS Report RS21405, *U.S. Periods of War and Dates of Recent Conflicts*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon

Selected Federal Government Web Resources

American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) at http://www.abmc.gov
The website contains databases of veterans interred or memorialized at overseas American military cemeteries and memorials.

Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System, National Park Service
https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm
This website contains a database of the men who served in the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War, as well as information on regiment histories, significant battles, and some prisoner-of-war records and cemetery records.

Confederate States of America (CSA) Records at the Library of Congress
https://www.loc.gov/collections/confederate-states-of-america-records/about-this-collection/
The records of the CSA span the years 1854-1889, with the bulk of the material concentrated in the period 1861-1865, during the Civil War. Provides links to Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies External; Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies External; and War Department Collection of Confederate Records.

Military Awards for Valor – Top 3
https://valor.defense.gov/
Official DOD site for the top 3 military awards for valor (the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Crosses and the Silver Star) that lists the names of recipients alphabetically by each military department.

Military Resources: Veterans at the National Archives Library Information Center (ALIC)
https://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/military/veterans-related.html

This site provides links to veterans' information, military casualties, Prisoners of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIAs), and medals & honors.

Philippine Army and Guerilla Records at the National Archives
http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/philippine-army-records.html
The collection includes records of the Philippine Commonwealth Army of the United States Armed Forces Far East (USAFFE), including recognized Philippine Guerrilla forces (*not* the Army of the United States or Philippine Scouts) during World War II.

Veterans Affairs (VA) Reconstruct military records destroyed in NPRC fire site at
https://www.va.gov/records/get-military-service-records/reconstruct-records/
This site provide guidance on military records needed to submit disability compensation claims and explains how the VA reconstructs service records lost in the 1973 NPRC Fire.

VA Nationwide Gravesite Locator at http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/
The database contains burial locations of veterans and their family members.

Veterans History Project (VHP) at the Library of Congress at http://www.loc.gov/vets/
VHP collects, preserves, and makes accessible the personal accounts of American veterans.

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