Researching Military Service Records
By Sharon Lawrence

I. Getting Started

Individuals beginning a search of military records would be well served by first reading a general overview of the subject area. Excellent resources in this regard include the “Frequently Asked Questions” publication prepared by the National Archives and Records Administration, http://www.archives.gov/faqs/index.html.

Equally helpful would be the “Frequently Asked Historical Questions” publication of the US Army Heritage and Education Center and a comparable piece compiled by the Naval Historical Center, http://www.carlisle.army.mil/AHEC/USAMHI/FAQ.cfm and http://www.history.navy.mil/nhc3.htm respectively.


II. Obtaining Military Service Records

A. Federal Resources

The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), Military Personnel Records, http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel, is a repository for the personnel, health, and medical records of all discharged and deceased veterans (all branches of the armed forces) who served after 1900. Veterans and their next-of-kin may now use the “eVetRecs” system to request records from the Center, http://www.archives.gov/veterans/evetrecs. Veterans and next-of-kin without Internet access and all others may submit their requests in writing to:

National Personnel Records Center
Military Personnel Records
9700 Page Avenue
St. Louis, MO 63132-5100
Fax: (314) 801 – 9195 (requesting military records)

If possible, use a Standard Form 180 for this request. The form may be downloaded from http://www.archives.gov/facilities/mo/st-louis/military_personnel_records/standard_form_180.html. If you cannot obtain a Standard Form 180 for this request, include in your inquiry the service member’s complete name, Social

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1 May not be reproduced with permission of the author, P.O. Box 13541, Austin, TX 78711.
Security number and/or service number, branch of service, and dates of service as well as your return address. Date and place of birth for the veteran would be helpful too, as would be place of discharge, last unit of assignment, and place of entry into service, if known. You must sign and date your request.

More than one request may be submitted per envelope, but policy requires that you submit a separate form/letter for each individual whose records are being requested. Please allow at least 4 weeks for a reply. If you need assistance, telephone the Center at (314) 801-0800 or contact them via email at “mpr.center@nara.gov” or “mpr.status@nara.gov” (to check the status of a request).

B. State Resources

State agencies may be valuable resources as well. The Military Records and Research Branch of the Kentucky Department of Military Affairs, for example, contains more than 300,000 discharge documents for Kentucky veterans, beginning with individuals who served in World War I through modern day. It also contains historical records of Kentucky militia and National Guard units dating from 1792. Oregon’s State Archives offers a detailed listing of the resources it has available regarding the military service of state residents. To assist researchers, the state has prepared the Oregon Military Department Records Guide, 1847-1986. For a complete state-by-state listing of state government resources, see the final section of this document.

C. Local Resources

Although the federal government is the primary source for military records, other sources may be close at hand. Local governments, for example, merit a researcher’s attention, as veterans may have filed their military discharge documents (e.g., AGO 100 or DD-214) with the county clerk or recorder. To find contact information for a county, see http://www.naco.org/Template.cfm?Section=Find_a_County&Template=/cffiles/counties/usamap.cfm.

III. Understanding What You Find

A. Abbreviations/Acronyms

Glance at any service record and one will see quickly that the military has its own special language. Fortunately, the Department of Defense posts a searchable version of its current Dictionary of Military Terms at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary. For those struggling with the abbreviations used in Naval records (e.g., CVHE & LST), the Ship’s Hull Identification guide provided by the US Navy also is a godsend, http://www.nvr.navy.mil/nvrships_s_type.htm, as is its listing of abbreviations for Navy ratings (i.e., jobs), http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq78-2.htm#anchor1614. Grunt, the Ultimate Military Site, also offers an ever growing dictionary of military terms, http://www.milterms.com.

Abbreviations and terms change over time, thus, for the acronyms and terms commonly used during WWII, see:


Basic abbreviations that individuals may encounter frequently, especially in conjunction with World War II research, will include:
B. Awards, Decorations, and Campaign and Service Medals

Most service records will mention commendations earned by the serviceperson individually or as part of a unit. The Institute of Heraldry provides comprehensive information on Army awards, badges, decorations, insignia, and medals, [http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Awards/dec_awards_military.aspx](http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Awards/dec_awards_military.aspx).

Similar information about Navy commendations may be found at [http://www.history.navy.mil/medals/index.html](http://www.history.navy.mil/medals/index.html). (The site also includes an interesting discussion of battle streamers and a detailed listing of awards for all service branches.). To learn more about Air Force and Coast Guard honors, see [http://www.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-070228-012.pdf](http://www.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-070228-012.pdf) and [http://www.uscg.mil/history/awards/Coast_Guard_Medal_Index.asp](http://www.uscg.mil/history/awards/Coast_Guard_Medal_Index.asp).

For instructions on how to request original or replacement medals and awards, go to the NPRC’s site, [http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/replacement-medals.html](http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/replacement-medals.html).

C. Military Rank

During World War II, grades/ranks were as shown in the following chart.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Army</th>
<th>Navy</th>
<th>Marine Corps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private (Pvt)</td>
<td>Apprentice Seaman (AS)</td>
<td>Private (Pvt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private First Class (Pfc)</td>
<td>Seaman 2nd Class (S2)</td>
<td>Private First Class (Pfc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician Fifth Class (T/5)</td>
<td>Seaman 1st Class (S1)</td>
<td>Corporal (Cpl)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporal (Cpl)</td>
<td>Petty Officer 3rd Class (PO3)</td>
<td>Sergeant (Sgt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician Fourth Class (T/4)</td>
<td>Petty Officer 2nd Class (PO2)</td>
<td>Platoon Sergeant (PLSgt) or Staff Sergeant (Sgt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant (Sgt)</td>
<td>Petty Officer 1st Class (PO1)</td>
<td>Gunnery Sergeant (GunSgt) or Technical Sergeant (TSgt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician Third Class (T/3)</td>
<td>Chief Petty Officer (CPO)</td>
<td>1st Sergeant (FSgt) or Quartermaster Sergeant (QMSgt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Sergeant (SSgt)</td>
<td>Warrant Officer (WO)</td>
<td>Sergeant Major (SgtMaj) or Master Technical Sergeant (MTSgt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Sergeant (TSgt)</td>
<td>Commissioned Warrant Officer (CWO)</td>
<td>Warrant Officer (WO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Sergeant (FSgt)</td>
<td>Ensign (Ens)</td>
<td>Commissioned Warrant Officer (CWO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Sergeant (MSgt)</td>
<td>Lieutenant – Junior Grade (Ltjg)</td>
<td>2nd Lieutenant (2Lt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant Major (SMJ)</td>
<td>Lieutenant (Lt.)</td>
<td>1st Lieutenant (1Lt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant Officer – Junior Grade (WOJ)</td>
<td>Commander (Lt.Com)</td>
<td>Major (Maj)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Warrant Officer (CWO)</td>
<td>Commander (CDRO)</td>
<td>Lieutenant Colonel (LtCol)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Lieutenant (2Lt)</td>
<td>Captain (Capt.)</td>
<td>Colonel (Col)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Lieutenant (1Lt)</td>
<td>Commodore (CDRE)</td>
<td>Brigadier General (BGen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captain (Capt)</td>
<td>Rear Admiral (RADM)</td>
<td>Major General (MajGen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major (Maj)</td>
<td>Vice-Admiral (VADM)</td>
<td>Lieutenant General (LtGen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lieutenant Colonel (LtCol)</td>
<td>Admiral (Adm)</td>
<td>General (Gen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonel (Col)</td>
<td>Fleet Admiral (FADM)</td>
<td>General of the Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigadier General (BGen)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Major General (MajGen)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lieutenant General (LtGen)</td>
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<tr>
<td>General (Gen)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

D. Military Units

Organization. For administrative and tactical purposes, military forces are organized in various size units.4 Army personnel may be grouped in the following manner:

**Squad** – Small unit of 9 – 14 men, commanded by a sergeant.

**Platoon** – Three or more squads, commanded by a lieutenant.

**Company** – Basic combat unit consisting of three or more platoons, commanded by a captain. Total force averages about 120 soldiers.

**Battery** – Artillery combat unit with three or more heavy guns. Similar in size to a company, commanded by a captain.

**Battalion** – Three or more companies or batteries, commanded by a lieutenant colonel. Total force averages 500 – 800 men.

**Regiment** – Large unit formation, consisting of three or more battalions, commanded by a colonel. Total force ranges between 2,000 – 3,000 men.

**Brigade** – Two regiments with supporting artillery and support troops, commanded by a brigadier general. Used in World War I but not in World War II.

**Division** – The command units for large formations of three or more regiments, with various supporting troops, commanded by a major general. Total force exceeds 15,000 soldiers.

**Corps** – Two or three (usually the latter) divisions, commanded by a lieutenant general.

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3 The Marine Corps had no rank equivalent to General or Admiral during World War II.

Army – Two or more corps, commanded by a general (four stars). The 36th Infantry Division was assigned to the 5th Army in Italy and the 7th Army in Southern France.


IV. Additional Reference Materials or Resources

A. Records of US Ships and Naval Units from the Modern Era

The National Archives has custody of a wide range of records relating to ships and other Navy units for the period from World War II through Vietnam, with a heavy concentration in WWII vessels. Available records include, but are not limited to:

- Action Reports (WWII)
- Armed Guard Logbooks and Reports (WWII)
- Casualty Reports (WWII – late 1950s)
- Deck Logs (1941 – 1967)
- Movement Report Cards (i.e., Records of the Tenth Fleet, WWII)
- Muster Rolls/Personnel Diaries (WWII – 1970)
- Records of Individual Convoys (i.e., Records of the Tenth Fleet)
- Submarine War Patrol Reports (WWII)
- War Diaries (WWII)

To learn more about the scope of these materials and to request records for a given ship, write to the following address.

5 In the alternative, you may write the Institute at 9325 Gunston Road, Room S-112, Fort Belvoir, Virginia 22060-5579 (telephone: 703-806-4971).

6 Ship plans may be obtained from the Maps and Plans Work Group, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS), Room 3320, National Archives and Records Administration, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001.

For photographs of Naval ships, contact the Still Picture Reference Team, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS-Stills), Room 5360, National Archives and Records Administration, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001 (telephone 301-837-0561; facsimile: 301-837-3621; E-mail: stillpix@nara.gov).

7 Deck logs consist of brief records of the administrative activities of a ship.

8 These file cards list the ports of arrival, due dates, dates of actual arrival, and the dates of setting sail to the next port as well as convoy information, if applicable.
Modern Military Records Unit (NWCTM)
National Archives at College Park
8601 Adelphi Road
College Park, MD  20740-6001
(301) 837-3510

In your letter, include the ship/unit’s name, the date/time period of interest; your full name, address, and telephone number; and as much other detail as possible about the information you would like to obtain. Due to the volume of requests received and the time needed to identify all appropriate records, Archives staff requests that you limit your request to five items per each letter. Allow approximately 10 – 12 weeks from the initial inquiry to receipt of the records.

A charge will be imposed for reproduction/mailing of the records, however, do not send any cash/check/charge card information with your initial inquiry. Staff of the Archives will review your request and send to you by mail an estimate of the cost and payment information. Follow the directions contained in that letter to order the desired records.

B. Selected Reference Works


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C. Burial Locations & Casualty Lists (Including Missing in Action)

The Department of Veterans Affairs offers an on-line locator service for most of its 120 national cemeteries, http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/j2ee/servlet/NGL_v1. For veterans buried overseas, the American Battle Monuments Commission also facilitates the search for their final resting place, http://www.abmc.gov/wardead/index.php.


For information about service members missing in action or prisoners of war during World War II, see http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/WWII_MIA/MIA_MAIN.HTM.

D. Miscellaneous

The Armed Forces use symbols in a variety of ways. For a basic overview of military map symbols, for example, see http://www.gruntsmilitary.com/sizes.shtml.

Once you’ve navigated the unique world of military acronyms, you also might be interested to learn more about the special language of the military. The US Navy has done a wonderful job of explaining some of the familiar terms, such as scuttlebutt and watches, that one might encounter in old correspondence or military records. See http://www.navy.mil/navydata/navy_legacy_hr.asp?id=280.

V. On-Line Resources

A. Military History Resources

Individuals and organizations interested in military history are among the most active users of the Internet. As a result, a tremendous volume of information is available on-line about any conflict or military unit, especially those of the modern era. Included among the sites that may be valuable reference sources are:

- American Civil War Homepage, http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war
- Army Air Forces, http://www.armyairforces.com
- Army Historical Foundation, http://www.armyhistory.org
- Civil War (National Park Service), http://cwar.nps.gov/civilwar
- Civil War Archive, http://www.civilwararchive.com
- Civil War Center, http://www.cwc.lsu.edu

12 Offers a glossary and other valuable features.
(128 volumes of Confederate & Union Army records; 31 volumes of Confederate & Union Navy records)

Fleet Air Arm Archive (British site), http://www.fleetairarmarchive.net
HyperWar (annotated history of WWII), http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar

National Guard (state listing), http://www.ng.mil/resources/states.aspx
Naval Historical Center, http://www.history.navy.mil
Naval Historical Foundation, http://www.navyhistory.org
Naval Vessel Registry, http://www.nvr.navy.mil
Rutgers University, Oral History Archives of World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, and the Cold War, http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu
US Army Aviation and Missile Command (i.e., Redstone Arsenal Historical Site), http://www.redstone.army.mil/history
US Coast Guard Historian’s Office, http://www.uscg.mil/history
US Military Academy, http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/history/web03/atlast/index.htm

16 Superb on-line collection of maps covering military engagements from ancient to modern times.
Veterans History Project, http://www.loc.gov/vets
Vietnam Center and Archive, http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu
Western Front Association (WWI), http://www.westernfrontassociation.com
Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), http://www.twu.edu/library/wasp.asp
http://www.twu.edu/library/wasp/index.htm
Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), http://www.wingsacrossamerica.us
Women in Military Service for America Memorial, http://www.womensmemorial.org
Women of the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services), http://www.womenofthewaves.com
World War II Documents, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/wwii.asp

B. State Archives and Historical Agencies

AL http://www.archives.state.al.us/referenc/military.html
AK http://www.archives.state.ak.us
AZ http://www.lib.az.us/archives
AR http://www.ark-ives.com
CA http://www.sos.ca.gov/archives
CO http://www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/archives/military.html
CT http://www.cslib.org/genealogy.htm#P88_10062
http://archives.delaware.gov/collections/civilwar/cw08.shtml
http://www.hsd.org/gengd.htm
http://www2.lib.udel.edu/subj/genealogy/resguide/mil.htm
FL http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/archives/militarypension
GA http://www.sos.state.ga.us/archives
HI http://www.hawaii.gov/dags/archives
ID http://www.idahohistory.net
IL http://www.sos.state.il.us/departments/archives/serv_sta.html#military
IN http://www.in.gov/icpr
IA http://www.iowahistory.org/about/index.html
KS http://www.kshs.org/genealogists/military
KY http://www.kdla.ky.gov/research.htm
http://www.mainehistory.org/library_holdings.shtml#military
MD http://guide.mdsa.net/viewer.cfm?page=military
http://www.mdhs.org
MA http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcweb/colidx.htm#military
http://www.masshist.org/library/begin.cfm#military
MI http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-54463_19313---,00.html
MN http://shop.mnhs.org/moreinfo.cfm?Product_ID=420&bhcp=1
MS http://www.mdah.state.ms.us
MO http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/military.asp
MT http://mhs.mt.gov/default.asp
NE http://www.nebraskahistory.org
NV http://nsla.nevadaculture.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=587&Itemid=418#military

17 Site has the capability to translate the material into French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish.
http://www.jerseyhistory.org/arch_military.html#Military%20Unit%20Records

NM  http://www.nmcp.state.nm.us/archives/ancestors.htm
NY  http://www.archives.nysed.gov/a/research/res_topics_military.shtml
NC  http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/archives/military.htm
    http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/archives/veterans.htm
ND  http://history.nd.gov/archives/genmilitaryrecords.html
OH  http://www.ohiohistory.org/resource/archlib/military.html
OK  http://www.odl.state.ok.us/oar/resources/genealogy.htm
    http://www.okhistory.org/research/library/genealogy.html
OR  http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/milit.html
    http://www.okhistory.org/research/library/genealogy.html
PA  http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=512&objID=3186&&SortOrder=300&level=3
    &parentCommID=3162&menuLevel=Level_3&mode=2
    http://www.phme.state.pa.us/bah/dam/milit2.htm
    http://www.digitalarchives.state.pa.us/archive.asp
RI  http://www.sec.state.ri.us/Archives
SC  http://www.state.sc.us/scdah/newgenealre.htm#military
    http://www.southcarolinahistoricalsociety.org
SD  http://www.sdhistory.org/arc/archives.htm
TN  http://www.tennessee.gov/tsla/history/military/index.htm
TX  http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/arc/service/introhelp.html
    http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/arc/pensions/  (Confederate pensions search)
UT  http://archives.utah.gov/index.html
VT  http://vermont-archives.org
VA  http://www.lva.lib.va.us/whatwehave/mil/index.htm
    http://www.vahistorical.org/research/cw_history.htm
WA  http://www.secstate.wa.gov/history/genealogy.aspx
    http://www.wvculture.org/history/military.html
WV  http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/military
WI  http://wyoarchives.state.wy.us

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