

5 Easy Steps to Start WWI, WWII, Korea, or Vietnam Research



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Congratulations with taking a first step on a journey to learn more about your WWI, WWII, Korea, or Vietnam soldier's, sailor's, airman's, or Marine's military service. The information provided in this document and on the WWII Education website, is World War II specific. However, the same process for research and records also applies to all 20th century wars.

20th century military research is surrounded by stories and myths which often give people the perception they cannot obtain any information about military service. Have you heard, "All the records burned!" Have you read on a website that you must be the next-of-kin to receive information? Do you think sending in one form to request records gave you everything available? Do you think starting your search in unit records will provide all the answers?

Some of these stories and myths were based in fact at the time they originated five or more years ago. However, currently, much of what we've read and heard about researching these wars is no longer accurate, yet the same outdated information continues to circulate. In addition, nothing that is circulating gives you a specific process to do the research, especially if the service record indeed burned.

Are you ready for something different? Are you ready to take a journey?

If you are, read on.

1. Discover the basics.

There are a few pieces of information you absolutely must have to begin military research:

- 1) Full name of the service member
- 2) Military Serial Number, also known as the Serial Number (SN) or Army Serial Number (ASN).
- 3) Biographical information: date and place of birth; address at time of enlistment; names of parents or spouse.
- 4) Dates of service. Even knowing the years someone was in service is helpful.
- 5) Unit(s). Locating a unit is important, particularly for Army or Army Air Force service. Knowing a unit in which someone served at any point in time allows you to dive deeper into reconstructing military service.
- 6) Date and place of death if the soldier died while in service or is still Missing In Action (MIA).

2. Document everything and never assume what you think you know is correct.

First, write down everything you know about your soldier's service including all the family stories you've heard. Use the Military Service Questionnaire in this document to start.

Note for each fact you write down, the date, the unit and location they are stationed, and details about service. Also note where you obtained that information (a family story, a Discharge record, or other document.)

Next, take these facts from the questionnaire and create a timeline of service. This enables you to see where the gaps are in service history so you can create a research plan. You are also able to see errors from transcribing

records or an error in the military record.

To create a timeline, I use Word and create a table with three columns. One for date. One for unit and location. One for notes. Timelines can be created without a table structure or in Excel. Use what works best for you.

Secondly, never assume the one or two things you know about a soldier's service is the entire story. It usually is not.

Over time, I've heard the whole spectrum of stories from people, including my own family, about a soldier's service history in World War II. Often when we explore the military records, we find there are grains of truth within the stories we've heard, and other times we discover some stories are just not accurate. Family stories are a bit like the Telephone Game. Remember that from when you were a kid? By the time the story reaches the first person who told it, it usually resembles nothing of what it was.

In other cases, we know one piece of information, perhaps the unit a soldier was in when they were discharged after the war ended, and we search all records for that unit. Many never consider they never saw combat with that unit or were only with them a short period of time.

For example, my cousin James Privoznik was Killed In Action 11 January 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge. His grave shows the 358th Infantry Regiment 90th Infantry Division. Had I researched the 358th Infantry Regiment's history for the entire time they were overseas, I would have had James' service history wrong.

James was a rifleman in that infantry regiment for only 14 days before he was killed. Patton needed Replacement soldiers for the front lines during the Battle of the Bulge and men were taken from rear echelons and put on the front lines. Using this infantry regiment as a start point I was able to reconstruct James' service moving backward and discovered he was part of the 790th Ordnance Medium Maintenance Company the rest of the nine months he was overseas with the 90th Infantry Division. He had two completely different war experiences.

NOTE: Always document everything and never assume the one thing you think you know is all there is to know.

3. Search for Home Sources

Home Sources are items you, or your family members, may have in their homes that provide clues to military service. We most often think of things like Separation and Discharge papers, death certificates, newspaper articles, photographs, and letters. Our homes contain many more items we might not think of immediately.

4. Search for Home Front and Public Records Resources

Home Front Materials consist of things created during the war in the U.S. These may include company newsletters which published news from former employees fighting overseas. Magazines, buttons, pamphlets, and other documents explaining life on the home front or the sacrifice of our boys overseas will provide more of a historical context for service. Be sure to look closely at the papers you discover as some may have notes written on them that are helpful in learning about your family.

Public Records Resources are locations in which you may discover Home Front Materials or collections of military papers donated by a family or unit. It is important to note that military records are not only in our National Archives repositories. They are found in many locations across the country and overseas.

5. Start Looking for Clues Online

Most of the records you need will not be found online. However, there are some online resources like Army Enlistment Databases, indexes on Ancestry.com and Fold3.com, details in FindAGrave Memorials, and WWII Reunion Association websites, which can provide clues. Many reunion associations span from WWI to the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. You might connect with members from wars from WWII to the present.

It is rare to find an entire unit's records online. The 7th Armored Division is the closest thing I've seen to a unit digitizing and making available online their records for the company and Division. The one thing you will not find here however, are the service records.

Please keep in mind that some records for Korea and Vietnam may still be classified. This means they will not be available online or in archives. If you are researching service members for these wars, please talk to us about a research project.

Would you like to know more?

WWI, WWII, Korea, and Vietnam research has a specific research process through which you can discover your soldier's, airman's, sailor's, or Marine's story. However, you won't find this documented anywhere online or through any other archive that is talking about military research.

We have a proven research process to share with you through online courses and other research materials and books. Newsletters will be sent out as each new resources is released to the public. For now, please take advantage of some of our other resources.

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Military Service Questionnaire

Please complete as much of this form as possible. Some of this information can be found on the Separation/Discharge Paper, family sources, and the Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF). Attach additional blank sheet if needed. Please note where you obtained each piece of information.

Biographical Information

Full Name _____

Date and place of birth _____

Names of parents _____

Names of siblings _____

Residence in 1940 _____

Educational information _____

Date and place of death _____

Location of burial _____

Service Information

Serial Number and military branch _____

Date and place of enlistment _____

Address at enlistment _____

Date and place of active duty status _____

Prior Service _____

Rank and all units in which he served with dates. _____

All Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) _____

Service Schools Attended with dates _____

Dates of service outside continental U.S. _____

Date and place of separation & discharge _____

Address at discharge _____

Overseas Service

Campaigns and Battles _____

Ships on which he served with dates _____

Decorations and citations _____

Wounds received with date and place _____

Additional details about overseas service _____

Death or MIA Status During Service

Was soldier ever declared Missing in Action? Please provide details.

Date, place, and cause of death _____

Date and place of Temporary Burial(s) _____

Date and place of Permanent/Final Burial _____

What Documents Do You Have?

_____ Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) also known as the service file

_____ Separation and Discharge Papers (if he survived the war)

_____ Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) if he died in service or is MIA

_____ Company or Squadron Level Records (often from NPRC)

_____ Muster Rolls

_____ Unit Level Records (often from NARA College Park)

_____ Family stories, diaries, letters, photographs, etc.

_____ Genealogy documents

_____ Cemetery information

Use this space to document stories you have heard or other information you have not mentioned in this questionnaire.