



# Quick Guide to Locating World War I Records

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*This quick guide was created in 2012 and updated in 2022. To learn more about military research from WWI – Vietnam, be sure to visit the WWII Research and Writing Center for articles, videos, downloads, online courses and all my research books. <https://wwiirwc.com> While my articles are generally WWII focused, the same research strategies, records, and repositories to start research are the same.*

Discovering your World War I ancestor's story is not always easy. You might not have much information with which to start your search. You might not know where to begin or you run into the problem of missing or destroyed records. Luckily there are other sources which can be used to reconstruct our ancestor's military history. This document is by no means an exhaustive list of resources, but a tool to jumpstart your research.

Important pieces of information you should try to discover before you proceed. Knowing as much information as possible makes for a more successful search.

- Determine the birth and death dates and places for your ancestor. Common places this information can be found is on birth and death certificates; World War I Draft Registration Cards; home sources such as family bibles and Census Records.
- Was your ancestor married and to whom? The World War I Draft Registration Card might contain this information; also consult Census Records and Marriage Licenses.
- What information is contained on the World War I Draft Registration card? Birth date; current address; marriage information or parental information; occupation; draft board. Just because they have a Draft Registration Card for World War I or World War II does not necessarily mean they served.
- Do you know the Serial Number of your ancestor and in what Unit(s) he or she served? If your ancestor died in the war, this information might be contained in a newspaper article, World War I Burial File, or grave; if your ancestor survived the war and was discharged, the information could be on his or her discharge papers.
- Search the local newspapers after the date listed on the Draft Registration Card. Some papers published lists of men physically fit to serve, those being shipped to training camps, and often listed where the soldier was being sent and the unit to which he was assigned. Newspapers would also often publish photographs and information about those killed overseas.
- Contact the State Archives in the state in which your ancestor lived after World War I death or discharge. Ask for a search of WWI Bonus Applications. Veterans who served overseas and those who died overseas, were entitled to a bonus payment after the war. For those who died in service, their next of kin was eligible to apply. These Bonus Applications contain service history, service numbers, units, testimonies from others to offer proof of relationship for those who died, and often lists of family

member names, birth dates, and addresses. Quick tip – if you are researching WWII, there was a Bonus Payment given after that war as well. Different states have different rules for access so inquire.

- If your ancestor read any ethnic newspapers, those often published obituaries, sometimes photographs, and news about the service men and those killed.
- Did your ancestor die in the war? Oftentimes, when a soldier was killed, the family would place a memorial notice in the newspaper. When the remains were returned, an obituary would be placed to provide funeral details. These memorials and obituaries may provide service information and lodge or community involvement information.
- Where is he or she buried? Some states have Rolls of Honor or similar listings of men and women who died in World War I and where in their state of residence they are buried, if their remains were brought home. In Illinois, the listing contains the deceased's name, unit, county and cemetery of burial and date of death. You can also search the [American Battle Monuments Commission](#) website to see if your ancestor is buried in an American Military Cemetery overseas. [www.abmc.gov](http://www.abmc.gov) Many states also have Veteran Cemetery Listings.
- Check the **U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1970** on Ancestry.com. If your ancestor is buried in the U.S. and the family applied for a veteran stone, there will be an application. This will also provide a lot of details. Please be aware that after World War I, remains of our Soldier Dead began coming home in late 1920/early 1921. Headstones may have been requested after that so always check. Verify the unit information written on the application with other military records. While this is checked, it is not always done correctly. My cousin's military stone has the wrong unit because his father wrote it down incorrectly and the government did not accurately verify.
- Check the **U.S., Army Transport Service, Passenger Lists, 1910-1939** on Ancestry.com. If your service member went overseas, this is a valuable resource. You will discover the following. Please be aware the unit they sailed overseas with may not be the same they returned with. Many soldiers were in multiple units. Additionally, if your service member died overseas and their remains were repatriated to the U.S., they will also appear on the ship manifest for the funeral ships.
  - Ship name
  - Arrival date and place
  - Departure date and place
  - Service member's name, rank, service number, age, residence, next of kin with relationship, and the regiment, company, detachment, or other organization that the service member was attached to
  - For non-service members, relation to service member

With all of this information be sure to create a timeline of events and cite the source for each fact you enter into your timeline. This helps you see more clearly the history of service, find errors and research gaps, and create new research paths.

When your preliminary search for information is finished, there are many steps you can take next.

- If your ancestor is buried in the United States, contact or visit the cemetery and obtain information on the deceased and if possible, a photograph of the grave site. Many military fallen have a stone or

monument purchased by the family and another from the government indicating the Unit information, birth and death dates of the ancestor.

- If you know the funeral home that conducted the services and handled the transportation of the casket to the cemetery, contact them for more information on the service; information on the soldier; and information on the person who paid for the services.
- Using the Standard Form 180 obtained from the National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/research/order/standard-form-180.pdf> you can request service information on your ancestor. It is always better to provide as much information as possible because unfortunately there was a massive fire at the facility in 1973 and over 80% of the Army records burned. Sometimes the archivists are able to reconstruct a file through different sources so the more information you provide, the easier it makes their job.
- If you have a unit(s) at any point in time, search both the service member's name and also look through individual microfilm rolls digitized on FamilySearch for muster rolls. As of March 2022, not all the rolls are indexed so you may need to hunt around to reconstruct service. Using these rolls allows you to know what unit your service member was in the entire time they served. Use this record set: **United States, World War I, military muster rolls and rosters, 1916-1939.**

Access the muster rolls here:

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/3378445?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

- Next, to learn more about where your service member was, look for Unit information. You can approach this two ways. First, have unit records searched at NARA College Park, MD. Either go there or hire a research like myself to obtain the records.

Second, search online. There is a multi-volume set of books from the Center of Military History called *Order of Battle of the United States Land Forces in the World War*. These books describe the movements of each Unit, down to the company, for World War I. It gives researchers a general idea of where their ancestor may have been stationed during the time he served in Europe. Another place to find Unit information is in Unit Histories. Some histories can be found in books, online in the form of online books or associations.

- If your ancestor died during the War, you can write to the NPRC in St. Louis requesting the Burial File. The Burial file may contain a description of the Soldier's death; disinterment and reburial information; letters from the family; letters from the government regarding the disposition of remains; and various letters between Graves Registration Services and other governmental offices.

For information about how the Graves Registration Service handled our Soldier Dead in World War I and beyond, see Michael Sledge's book *Soldier Dead: How we Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor our Military Fallen*.

- World War I "Statement of Service Cards" can be located in some states. These records, if they exist, are held with the Adjutant General for the State. There is an interesting article about these cards here: <http://www.lksfriday.com/Column/COLUMN-013.htm>.

These are not all the options available to you to research WWI, but it will get you started. If you need help researching any military service from WWI – Vietnam, or need help with your writing project, please contact me at [info@wwiirwc.com](mailto:info@wwiirwc.com) to set up a free consultation to discuss your projects and all possibilities.

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