

U. S. Military Service Records & Veteran Records Online

What you need to know to start the search:

The person's name – as full as possible including middle name. Women are only officially part of the service starting in WWI so don't even bother if you're looking for women before 1900 (there are a few exceptions, but it's really hard work to prove anything).

Know dates as far as can be determined

Know what state he was from or what state he enlisted in (for instance, in the Civil War, many men crossed state lines to enlist with what the individual considered the correct side, so a Virginian who agreed with the North would go to Maryland or Kentucky to enlist in the Union army).

Prior to WWI, service personnel were tracked by unit muster rolls, rosters, & pay records. Units were state-based (eg 9th Pennsylvania Infantry; for the Navy the unit was the ship and the record was the ship's roster).

The more recent the war the more detailed the records will be, but the more info you'll need to get hold of it. For CURRENT service members (post-Korean War), records are only available to the service person or his/her next of kin.

Know his/her service number if the dates are from 1918 to 1974 depending on the service; see the incredibly in-depth articles on Wikipedia for lots of details:

All US armed forces: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_number_\(United_States_Armed_Forces\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_number_(United_States_Armed_Forces))

Just the Army: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_number_\(United_States_Army\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service_number_(United_States_Army))

After 1974, all services were using the Social Security Number for the service number. With the rise of identity theft, the services are slowly phasing back to using an arbitrarily assigned 10-digit number instead. However, if you are not the service person or his/her next of kin, you can't get these records anyway because they are not old enough.

If you read the Wikipedia articles, you'll find out how much you can tell about the service member if you have the service number: what service, what time period the person served; whether the individual was officer or enlisted, whether the person was drafted or signed up voluntarily (for the Army), male or female. More info about figuring out service number meaning is at <http://www.amyjohnsoncrow.com/how-to-decode-a-wwii-army-serial-number/>

All about US Military Service Records from the National Archives, including who holds which record:

<https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/about-service-records.html>

Where the records are located, by dates and service:

<https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/locations>

Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF), Non-Archival Holdings: NON-archival means you have to be the service member or an immediate family member to get access to the record no matter how much info you have about the person. A service record becomes archival 62 years after the DISCHARGE date.

<https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/about-ompfs.html>

On July 12, 1973, a fire at the NPRC destroyed approximately 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files. The records affected were 80% of Army personnel discharged November 1, 1912 to January 1, 1960 and 75% of Air Force personnel discharged September 25, 1947 to January 1, 1964 whose names are alphabetically after Hubbard, James E.

Note that the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard were not affected.

The ARCHIVAL (ie more than 62 years old) records are listed at:

<https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/archival-programs/military-personnel-archival>

This does not mean the whole record is online. This is where you order the record from, to get a copy for yourself, for whatever fee the archives are charging this week.

Keep in mind that the National Archives only do **Federal** records – records of state militias were kept by the state, not the feds.

<https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records>

Forms for requesting older records, and descriptions of what records & types of records are available. Also has useful definitions. For example, the 9th Pennsylvania Reserve Infantry was also known as the 38th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry – Volunteers in this case was an actual branch of service, defined on this page as “Military service performed by persons serving during an emergency and whose service was considered to be in the Federal interest, 1775 – 1902”

What the National Archives have (there were fires in 1800 & 1812 so a lot of early records were lost.):

<https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/093.html>

<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/veterans/online.html>

For help locating living service members & retirees; <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/locate-service-members.html> also note service-related social media like military.com and Together We Served <https://navy.togetherweserved.com/usn/servlet/tws.webapp.WebApp?cmd=Landing> – click on the correct service

Another source for finding specific records:

[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Finding_a_World_War_II_\(1939-1945\)_Veteran%27s_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Finding_a_World_War_II_(1939-1945)_Veteran%27s_Records)

There are a lot of military operations that are not part of a declared war that an ancestor may have been involved in. For a list see these two pages: <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations.html> and <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/research-guides/wars-conflicts-usnavy.html>

Keep in mind that any war or operation the Navy was involved in, it's highly likely that either the Army or Marines or both also were part of. The Air Force was formed in 1947, so include them also after that date. The Coast Guard is a whole nother ball game – check out their history page at <http://www.history.uscg.mil/>.