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# WWI Records, Resources, and Research Methodology

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Over four million Americans served in the US military during World War I. This presentation provides an introductory overview of the records, resources, and research methods you can use to discover their stories, whether they went overseas or remained in the United States. Case study examples are used to illustrate how to apply the material discussed and demonstrate the rich details you can discover.

**This handout is intended primarily as a future reference. It follows the presentation and is designed to facilitate note-taking, especially during the case studies (the key part of the program).**

## FORMAT:

Records (brief intro) > Research Methods (overview) > **Case Study Examples** > Resources (inspiration)

## BUT FIRST: 1973 FIRE AT NARA-ST LOUIS

Impacted Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs)

- Navy and Marine Corps OMPFs were not damaged!
- Army: impacted files of those discharged 1 Nov 1912 - 31 Dec 1959 = estimated 80% loss.  
(Air Force: those discharged 25 Sep 1947 - 31 Dec 1963 with surnames Hubbard – Z = est. 75% loss.)

Never assume a file doesn't exist. B-files (burned files) & R-files (reconstructed files) are still helpful.

This article provides an excellent overview of the fire and the ongoing effort to reconstruct files:

<https://www.wired.com/story/the-night-17-million-precious-military-records-went-up-in-smoke/>

## A FEW HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- *War Department* = Army, *Dept of the Navy* = Navy (USMC = part of Navy, served w/Army in France)
- Between 6 April 1917 and 11 Nov 1918, the Army increased from 127,500 to **4,000,000** personnel.
- Approximately 2 million doughboys served in the Army Expeditionary Forces.
- The War Department was faced with a sudden need for training camps, equipment, transport, etc.
- Things to bear in mind:
  - Ongoing legislation and amendments.
  - Frequent changes in military policies, procedures, and regulations.
  - Challenges of rapid mobilization.
  - Battlefield timelines.
  - Challenges of demobilization.
  - Impact of segregation and race issues.

## **WWI RECORDS – GETTING STARTED** (Records are listed in their recommended order of research.)

A = Ancestry.com, FS = FamilySearch.org, F3 = Fold3.com

### **1. Draft Registration Cards, 1917 - 1918** (A, FS, F3-index only)

Purpose: To provide a method for rapidly building an Army while also supporting war industry needs.

Research Value: Provides a baseline of information, i.e., date of birth, residence, employment, etc.

### **2. Veterans Administration Master Index (VAMI), 1917 1940** (A-index only, FS)

Purpose: To establish a (consolidated) master index of claims submitted for benefits and compensation.

Research Value:

- Involved adjusted compensation money, therefore most WWI veterans have a VAMI card.
- Provides key service info: serial number + date entered + date discharged + at least one unit
- Provides clues to other records: VA Claim No + Rehabilitation (aka Trainee) Cards

Additional Info: National Archives list of VAMI card codes and prefixes -

<https://www.archives.gov/files/calendar/genealogy-fair/2018/6-csar-handout3.pdf>

**3a. WWI Service Cards** (Available for most states. Locations vary by state – some on A & FS. May be cataloged under various names, i.e., *WWI Discharge Cards* or *Abstracts of WWI Service*.)

Purpose: To provide each state's Adjutant General a statement (card) of military service for each person who entered wartime service from that state.

Research Value: Provides a detailed overview of the servicemember's wartime service.

Additional Info: The North Carolina Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources has an excellent article.

<https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2018/01/04/interpreting-north-carolina-world-war-i-service-cards>

**3b. State Bonus Applications** (Locations vary, some online.)

Purpose: To provide some form of financial compensation or assistance to those who entered wartime (WWI) service from that state. **File typically includes a copy of the WWI Service Card.**

States that paid some kind of WWI bonus\*: Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania (A), Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin.

\* Source: *State Veterans Laws*, Committee on Pensions, House of Representatives, 1945.

**3c. Service Card Facsimiles** – Honor Books, State Files, etc. (Locations vary, some online)

Some states created honor books or card files for those who served during WWI. Sometimes these were created using the WWI service cards, but other time the content came from family members, service members, selective service records, etc.

Research Value: Provides clues to service, but information may require verification via other sources.

4. **Army Transport Service (ATS) Passenger Lists**, if served overseas. (A, F3)

Purpose: To provide accountability of passengers aboard Army Transport Service vessels (troop ships).

Research Value: Provides unit & service info, military FAN club, details regarding transport experience.

5. **Military Headstone Applications** (A = 1925-1985, FS = 1925-1949)

Purpose: To memorialize deceased servicemembers and veterans of the US military.

Research Value: Application form changed over time. Earlier forms incl service dates, unit, serial no, rank.

6a. **Burial Cards**, if died overseas (F3, N)

F3 - <https://www.fold3.com/publication/1115/us-wwi-burial-cards-1915-1919>

Purpose: To document the death and burial information of US servicemembers who died overseas.

Research Value: Info includes unit, cause/date of death, location/dates of initial, interim, and final burials.

6b. **Other Burial, Cemetery, and Headstone Records**

A – Burial Registers, Military Posts and National Cemeteries, 1862-1960

A – Veterans' Gravesites, ca 1775-2019

FS – Burial Registers for Military Posts, Camps, and Stations 1768-1921

Additional information may be available on Find-a-Grave ( <https://www.findagrave.com> )

7. **BIRLS - VA Beneficiary Identification Records Locator Subsystem Death File** (A)

Purpose: To establish an index of deceased individuals who received benefits from the VA while they were alive or whose survivors applied for benefits.

Research Value: Branch of service, service dates, birth/death dates, possibly cause of death, SSN

8. **Army Muster Rolls & Rosters** (FS - <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3346936> )

Purpose: To provide an accountability record of personnel by unit. Used in part to resolve pay disputes.

Research Value:

- This collection is name indexed; therefore, you can *usually* trace a doughboy's service from unit to unit.
- Arranged by unit and created monthly or bimonthly. Usually lists personnel by rank and serial number.
- Should show hospitalizations, deaths, departures, and attachments. May indicate location.
- The Army used Muster Rolls (which are highly detailed) until July 1918, when they switched to Rosters.

NOTE: Using these records may take some practice (and patience).

9. **WWI Morning Reports** (F3 - <https://www.fold3.com/publication/1141/us-morning-reports-1912-1939> )

Purpose: To provide daily details of a unit's status, those impacting pay and rations.

Research Value: Frequently documents *by name* changes in duty status, rank, court martials, wounded or killed in action, etc. Arranged by unit, then by month.

NOTE: Using these records takes some practice (and patience). Some are missing or difficult to read.

## WWI RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.

### 1. Identify What You Know

- Everything is a clue.
- Consolidate any documents, photos, letters, medals, etc. that you have.
- Log both what you know and what is unconfirmed, such as family stories. (Annotate accordingly.)

### 2. Use a Simple Timeline

This is key to the effective search and analysis of military records.

Simplicity = Clarity. Gaps and connections will be easier to spot.

- Date + Age + Event + Source
- Only 1-2 lines per entry
- Include location (if known) with the event.
- Color code relevant historic events and those involving family.

These add nuance and context to their story.

Helpful hint:

Keep links on the following page, sorted by category for handy reference: Records, References, Newspaper Articles, Other.



DATE	AGE	EVENT	SOURCE
6 Nov 1892	0	Born at Shoals, GA	WWI Service Card
19 Jul 1918	26	Residence at 20 Fort St, Edgewood, GA	WWI Service Card
19 Jul 1918	26	Induction at Atlanta, GA	WWI Service Card
19 Jul 1918	26	Assignment as Private, 157 Depot Brigade at Camp Gordon, GA	WWI Service Card
16 Aug 1918	26	Assignment to Co B, 539 Engineers at Camp Gordon	WWI Service Card
Sep 1918	26	Unit AWOL prior to sailing: 8 (4ea Co B & C); Detention: 5 (1Co A); Hospital: 12 (all Co's, most A Co)	Transport List (Out)
2 Sep 1918	26	Depart US	WWI Service Card
3 Sep 1918	26	Embarkation onto Cunard vessel Karmala at Pier #56, sometime between 9:11am and 1:49pm.	Transport List (Out)
3 Sep 1918	26	Departure of Karmala at 2:45 enroute to England. Removal of 3 sick 539th soldiers via tug in harbor.	Transport List (Out)
Mid-Sep 1918	26	Burial at Sea of two men, B Co, 539th Eng	Transport List (Out)
15 Sep 1918	26	Promotion to Private 1 Class	WWI Service Card
1 Oct 1918	26	Assignment to 'kitchen' of Cook	WWI Service Card
Post 11 Nov 1918	27	Assignment as Cook, Demobilization Center	VAMI
20 Jun 1919	27	Embarkation of U.S.S. Troy at Brest, France	Transport List (In)
30 Jun 1919	27	Arrive U.S.	WWI Service Card
10 Jul 1919	27	Discharge, honorable with 0% disability noted	WWI Service Card
1919 or later	U	Residence at 144 S Mayson Ave, Athens, GA	WWI Service Card
May 1924 or later	U	Conversion of War Risk Insurance to Adjusted Service Certificate (Bonus Act of 1924)	VAMI
Jun 1936 or later	U	Receipt of 'Bonus' Bonds cash-out (Adjusted Compensation Act of 1936)	VAMI

### 3. Prioritize Service Vitals

Service vitals are the military service equivalent to the genealogy vitals of birth, marriage, and death.

- Serial Number = important to verify you have the correct person. (Issued in Mar 1918 – soldiers only.)
- Service dates = enlistment/induction, assignments & overseas movements, and discharge.
- Unit(s) = your person likely served with more than one unit.

Focus first on the records that contain this information.

### 4. Abstract Records

Abstract each record or item. *Read collection descriptions.* Don't guess what abbreviations, acronyms, and terms mean (research them). Use Google. Use Wikipedia (verify the article is well sourced).

The following links can help decipher abbreviations and acronyms:

- (WWI) War Department abbreviations used in WWI Service Cards (courtesy on NC State Archives):  
[https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/blog/files/ncwwiservicecards\\_abbrevlist.pdf](https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/blog/files/ncwwiservicecards_abbrevlist.pdf)
- (WWI) Abbreviations found on pp 183-194 of this 1920 publication by the Infantry Association:  
<https://archive.org/details/companyadministr00unitrich/page/n3/mode/2up>
- (WW2, but some WWI overlap) Navy & USMC abbreviations:  
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-navy-abbreviations-of-ww2.html>

### 5. Step Back and Analyze in Service Blocks

Don't overload trying to search or grasp someone's war experience all at once. Think in service blocks.

Sample questions about a WWI ancestor:

Draft/ Enlistment	Training	Wartime Experience	Post-wartime To Discharge	Veteran Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer or Draftee?</li> <li>• Where/When?</li> <li>• National Guard?</li> <li>• Previous work?</li> <li>• Deferment?</li> <li>• Literate?</li> <li>• Local send-off?</li> <li>• Newspapers</li> <li>• 'Subversive'?</li> <li>• Segregation impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where trained and unit(s)?</li> <li>• Training Dates?</li> <li>• Camp life?</li> <li>• Segregation?</li> <li>• Weather?</li> <li>• Naturalization?</li> <li>• Influenza?</li> <li>• Local Support?</li> <li>• Newspapers at every location</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What unit(s)?</li> <li>• Locations?</li> <li>• Actual work?</li> <li>• Newspapers</li> <li>• Promotions / Demotions?</li> <li>• Unit Histories?</li> <li>• Wounded or KIA?</li> <li>• Influenza?</li> <li>• Segregated units</li> <li>• Service Orgs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What unit(s)?</li> <li>• Locations</li> <li>• Actual work and activates</li> <li>• Civilian Prep</li> <li>• Service Orgs</li> <li>• Return to US</li> <li>• Discharge Location</li> <li>• Influenza</li> <li>• Newspapers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recession &amp; Depression</li> <li>• Red Scare</li> <li>• Red Summer</li> <li>• Newspapers</li> <li>• Post-war work</li> <li>• State Bonuses</li> <li>• 1924 &amp; 1936 Adjusted Comp</li> <li>• Medical (esp. TB)</li> <li>• VA Burial</li> <li>• Naturalization</li> </ul>

### 6. Consider Context

**Some basic examples** of legislation, policies, major wartime events, even mundane details to consider.

Aug 1914	War breaks out in Europe rapidly and violently. US declares neutrality.
1915 - 1916	US war-related manufacturing & job migration increases. Border Troubles w/Mexico (1916)
25 Mar 1917	President puts the country on a war-footing which includes some National Guard call-ups.
06 Apr 1917	U.S. declares war on Germany. (On 7 Dec 1917, declares war on Austria-Hungary)
18 May 1917	Selective Service Act of 1917 requires draft registration of men 21-30 (inclusive) on 5 Jun 1917.
05 Sep 1917	First draftees begin to arrive at training camps. Camps struggle to be ready. Blacks delayed
Winter 1917	Powerful ice storms and blizzards wreak havoc across the county. Railroads nationalized.
15 Dec 1917	New draft procedures go into effect. Local boards required to maintain Classification Lists.
Mar-Jul 1918	German spring offensive, intended to defeat the Allies before the AEF is fully deployed to Europe.
09 May 1918	Alien Naturalization Act allows aliens in military to naturalize with minimal requirements.
20 May 1918	Congress authorizes second registration (5 Jun 1918) for those who turned 21 since 5 Jun 1917.
23 May 1918	War Department issues "Work or Fight" policy authorizing induction of registrants not in war-work.
1-25 Jul 1918	Battle of Belleau Wood involves US forces; US families on edge due to casualties.
08 Aug 1918	Allies launch a major offensive w/US forces participating in major campaigns.
31 Aug 1918	Congress authorizes registration (12 Sep 1918) for men ages 18-45 (inclusive)
11 Nov 1918	Armistice signed following Allies successful "Hundred Day Offensive."
By Jul 1919	Most US servicemembers home from France and discharged.

## MONITORING FOR NEW & UPDATED RECORDS

1. **Fold3.com** – Use this button on the left side of their homepage.



2. **Ancestry.com**

- From the “Search” dropdown menu, select “Catalog” > then filter by “Military” + “United States (or State)” + “1900s” > then sort results by “Date Added” or “Date Updated” at top right of page.

3. **FamilySearch.org**

- From the “Search” dropdown menu, select “Records”

- Scroll down on page > click “Browse All Collections” (shows all published (reviewed) collections).

Collection Title

[BROWSE ALL COLLECTIONS](#)

- Then filter by “Military” + “United States (or State)” + “1900-1949” > then click “Last Updated” twice to see most recent additions

## OTHER REPOSITORIES & RESOURCES (This is just a sampling of what is available.)

1. *National Archives* ( <https://archives.gov> )

- Learn more about collections via webinars: <https://www.archives.gov/calendar/genealogy-series>

- HISTORY HUB, a NARA crowdsourcing community: <https://historyhub.history.gov>

- WWI Photographs (public domain, free to use): <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/533461>

- List of non-OMPF military records available at NARA-St Louis:

<https://www.archives.gov/files/nonompfarchivalseries-arrresearchers-27september2018.pdf>

- The WWI Selective Service Classification Lists are currently at NARA-Atlanta. (A google search will show you what this record look like.) Email NARA-Atlanta your request by providing the registrant’s name and an image of the front and back of his draft card. There is a fee.

2. *State Libraries, Archives, Historical Societies, University, and Other Archive Collections*

- These contain a wide variety of content. Explore the site; look for finding aides (call for help, if needed).

Learn what is available online and in their non-digitized collections. May have a blog and/or podcast.

- Universities can have amazing donated collections, along with their own wartime and veteran-related records; may have yearbooks and alumni journals online.

- Find archives/collections by location/topic via ArchiveGrid - <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

3. *FamilySearch Wiki page for US World War I Military Records* - This page has a ton of links!

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/World\\_War\\_I\\_United\\_States\\_Military\\_Records,\\_1917\\_to\\_1918](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/World_War_I_United_States_Military_Records,_1917_to_1918)

4. *Newspapers* - Hometown, local (near camps and training sites), and military newspapers.
  - Look for draft, training, and transfer announcements; local social tidbits; camp news, etc.
  - Examples: *Chronicling America* (free), *Newspapers.com* (\$), *GenealogyBank.com* (\$), university libraries (online collections), other public and private websites.
  
5. *WikiTree* - <https://www.wikitree.com>
  - WikiTree is a free world-wide collaborative family tree. Takes time to learn how to navigate.
  - Their *Military & War Project* include 'The Great War'. Focus is on documenting individual military service details and in some cases, unit members. Has helpful reference pages.  
[https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Project:The\\_Great\\_War\\_1914-1918](https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Project:The_Great_War_1914-1918)
  
6. Official Government Websites
  - Free. Great contextual resources. Recommended for intermediate and advanced research.
  - U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH): <https://history.army.mil/>
  - Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC): <https://www.history.navy.mil/>
  - American Battle Monuments Commission (see Education tab): <https://www.abmc.gov>
  
7. Memoirs, Unit Histories, Official Reports, Military Publications, Regulations, etc.
  - Internet Archive: <https://archive.org>
  - HathiTrust: <https://www.hathitrust.org>
  - Google Books: <https://books.google.com/>
  
8. Wikipedia – always check citations.
  - Military-related articles are typically written by experts & enthusiasts.  
Example: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stevedore\\_operations,\\_American\\_Expeditionary\\_Forces](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stevedore_operations,_American_Expeditionary_Forces)
  - A good resource for historical overviews of various topics. (Use as a starting point.)
  
9. Miscellaneous Websites (examples)
  - Database powerhouse related to Burial Cards: <https://wjh.us/AEF/>
  - Privately maintained site listing records by state: <https://www.militaryindexes.com/worldwarone/>
  - WWI AEF Burial Cards database (advanced search functions): <https://wjh.us/AEF/index.asp>
  - Unit Specific (example):
    - 314<sup>th</sup> Inf Reg AEF: <http://www.314th.org/index.html>
    - Base Hospital No. 50: <https://basehospital50.blogspot.com/p/wwi-medicine.html>
  - USGenweb: <https://usgenweb.org> and USGenWebArchives: <http://usgwarchives.net>
  - Online Military Indexes and Records: <https://www.militaryindexes.com>
  - Black Soldiers Mattered (North Carolina focused, but great overall info).  
<https://www.blacksoldiersmattered.com>

**ADDITIONAL NOTES – QUESTIONS - INSPIRATIONS**