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Finding Military Records and the DD-214 — A Plain-English Guide

How to request a veteran's records — usually free From the National Archives, step by step

Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

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1 The Short Version

A DD Form 214 — almost always just called a DD-214 — is the single most important military document a veteran has: the official record of their discharge, summarizing their service, dates, rank, awards, and the character of their discharge. Veterans and their families need it for all sorts of things — veterans' benefits, healthcare, burial honors, home loans, and proving service — and sooner or later many people find themselves needing a copy they cannot find.

The good news is that these records are preserved by the federal government and can be requested, usually for free.

This guide explains, in plain language, what a DD-214 is, who can request military records, where they are kept, and the steps to get a copy, including the main online and mail methods. It also covers the realities worth knowing — the 1973 fire that destroyed many older records, the sensitive personal information these documents contain, and how a family member can obtain a deceased veteran's records.

Because this involves official government processes that can change, the guide points you to the authoritative source for the current procedure while giving you the clear overview that makes the whole thing far less daunting.

- A DD-214 is a veteran's official discharge record — their most important military document.
- It's needed for benefits, healthcare, burial honors, home loans, and proving service.
- These records are preserved by the federal government and can be requested, usually free.
- This guide covers what it is, who can request, where records are kept, and how.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> The DD-214 is a veteran's single most important military document — the official discharge record needed for benefits, burial honors, and proving service. If it's lost, the federal government preserves these records and you can request a copy, usually for free.

2 What a DD-214 Is

The DD-214, officially the Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty, is the document issued to a service member when they leave active military service, summarizing their time in uniform. On it you will find the essentials of a person's service: the dates they served, their branch, rank, specialty, decorations and awards, and — importantly for benefits — the character of their discharge, such as honorable. It is, in effect, the official proof and summary of a person's military career in one page.

This is why it matters so much: countless veterans' benefits and services require the DD-214 as proof of eligible service, from Veterans Affairs healthcare and disability claims to the GI Bill, VA home loans, and military funeral honors. Families often discover its importance when a veteran dies and they need it to arrange burial honors or claim survivor benefits.

Because it is so essential and so often needed years after service, keeping it safe — and knowing how to replace it — matters greatly. Understanding that the DD-214 is the key document unlocking veterans' benefits explains why so much of obtaining military records centers on getting a copy of it.

- The DD-214 is the Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty.
- It summarizes service dates, branch, rank, awards, and character of discharge.
- Countless benefits require it — VA healthcare, GI Bill, home loans, burial honors.
- Families often need it when a veteran dies, for honors and survivor benefits.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> The DD-214 is the key that unlocks veterans' benefits — VA healthcare, the GI Bill, home loans, burial honors — because it's the official proof of service and its character. That's why so much of obtaining military records comes down to getting a copy of this one document.

3 Who Can Request Military Records

Not everyone can obtain anyone's military records; access depends on who you are relative to the veteran, because these records contain private information. The veteran themselves can request their own records in full. The next of kin of a deceased veteran — generally the surviving spouse, parent, child, or sibling — can also request records, including the DD-214, which is how families obtain a late relative's documents for benefits or burial. These two groups have the broadest access.

Others can obtain only limited information. The general public can access certain basic facts about a veteran's service, and more of a record becomes publicly available a long period after the service ended, but detailed records of living veterans are restricted to the veteran and their authorized representatives. If you are helping a living veteran, it is usually best for them to make the request or to authorize you.

Knowing which category you fall into — the veteran, the next of kin of a deceased veteran, or a member of the public — tells you what you can obtain and shapes how you make the request, so it is the first thing to establish before you begin.

- Access depends on your relationship to the veteran, because records are private.
- The veteran can request their own records in full.
- Next of kin of a deceased veteran can request records including the DD-214.
- The general public can get only limited basic service information.

> **TIP**
>
> First establish which category you're in: the veteran (full access to their own records), the next of kin of a deceased veteran (can request records including the DD-214), or the public (limited basic facts). That determines what you can obtain and how to request it.

4 Where the Records Are Kept

Most military personnel records for service members who left the military some years ago are held by the National Archives, specifically at the National Personnel Records Center, often abbreviated NPRC, located in St. Louis. This is the central repository where discharged veterans' records, including DD-214s, are archived and from which copies are requested. For older service — generally service that ended a good while ago — the National Archives is the place these records live.

More recent records may be handled differently: the military branches and the Department of Defense keep records of those who served recently or are still connected to the military, and recent veterans may be able to access their records through a Department of Defense online system rather than the National Archives. The dividing line between recent records held by the military and older ones transferred to the National Archives shifts over time.

For most people seeking an older veteran's DD-214, the National Archives' National Personnel Records Center is the destination, and the request methods in this guide center on it, while recent separations may route through a military system instead. Knowing roughly where a given record lives points you to the right request path.

- Most older veterans' records are at the National Archives' National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis.
- This is the central repository for discharged veterans' records and DD-214s.
- More recent records may be held by the military branches or the Department of Defense.
- Recent veterans may access records through a Department of Defense online system.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> For most people seeking an older veteran's DD-214, the destination is the National Archives' National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis. Recent separations may instead route through a Department of Defense online system — the dividing line shifts over time.

5 Requesting Records Online

The quickest way to request military records is usually online, and the National Archives offers an online request system for eligible requesters — the veteran or the next of kin of a deceased veteran — often referred to as eVetRecords. Through it you submit your request for the DD-214 or other records electronically, providing the veteran's information and your own, and establishing your eligibility. For many people this is faster than mailing a form and is the recommended first route to try.

Recent veterans may instead be able to download their own records directly through a Department of Defense online portal, which can be even quicker for those whose service is recent enough to be in that system. Whichever online route applies, you will need to prove who you are and your relationship to the veteran, and provide enough detail to locate the record — the veteran's full name, service dates or approximate era, branch, and service number or Social Security number if known.

Because the exact online systems and web addresses change over time, the reliable approach is to start at the official National Archives website and follow its current instructions for requesting military records, which will direct you to the right online tool for your situation.

1. Start at the official National Archives website for military records.
2. Use its online request system (often called eVetRecords) if you're eligible.
3. Recent veterans may download records via a Department of Defense portal instead.
4. Provide the veteran's details and prove your identity and relationship.

> **TIP**
>
> Try online first: the National Archives' eVetRecords system lets eligible requesters submit electronically, and recent veterans may download their own records from a Department of Defense portal. Since the exact tools and web addresses change, start at the official National Archives site and follow its current instructions.

6 Requesting Records by Mail

If you cannot or prefer not to request online, military records can be requested by mail using a standard form, Standard Form 180 (SF-180), which is the official request for military records. You fill in the veteran's information, the records you want, and your own details and eligibility, sign it, and mail it to the address indicated for the relevant branch and era, generally the National Personnel Records Center. The SF-180 is the traditional, reliable method and the one to use when online is not an option.

The mail route takes longer than online — weeks, sometimes longer, depending on demand — so patience is needed, but it works for everyone eligible and for records that cannot be requested online. You can obtain the SF-180 form and the correct mailing instructions from the National Archives website, which explains exactly how to complete and where to send it.

Filling it out accurately and completely, with as much identifying information about the veteran as you can supply, helps the staff locate the record and avoids delays from an incomplete request. For many families seeking an older veteran's records, a carefully completed SF-180 mailed to the National Personnel Records Center remains the dependable path to a copy of the DD-214.

1. Obtain Standard Form 180 (SF-180) from the National Archives website.
2. Fill in the veteran's information, the records wanted, and your eligibility.
3. Sign it and mail it to the address indicated, generally the NPRC.
4. Supply as much identifying detail as possible, and expect it to take weeks.

WATCH OUT

When online isn't an option, Standard Form 180 (SF-180) mailed to the National Personnel Records Center is the dependable route. Get the form and correct address from the National Archives site, fill it out as completely as you can to avoid delays, and expect it to take weeks.

Rather not do this yourself? I'll come to your home and set it up for you — a flat $99 first visit across Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities. Outside the area? I also help remotely by phone or screen-share. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042.

7 The Cost: Usually Free

A reassuring point is that obtaining a veteran's basic military records, including a copy of the DD-214, is generally free when requested by the veteran or the next of kin of a deceased veteran through the official National Archives process. The government provides these records as a service to those entitled to them, so for the common need — a veteran or family getting a copy of the DD-214 for benefits or burial — there is typically no charge.

Some less common requests, such as extensive copies of a full official military personnel file by someone who is not the veteran or next of kin, or certain research requests, may involve a fee, and the specifics are set by the National Archives. But the core service most people need is free. This matters because there are third-party companies that offer to obtain military records for a fee, and while some are legitimate, you do not need to pay anyone to get records you are entitled to for free directly from the National Archives.

Going through the official channel both saves money and avoids handing your information to an unnecessary middleman. If a service is charging you to get your own or a relative's DD-214, know that the official route is free.

- Basic records including the DD-214 are generally free for the veteran or next of kin.
- The government provides these as a service to those entitled to them.
- Some uncommon or extensive requests may involve a fee set by the National Archives.
- You needn't pay a third-party company for records you can get free officially.

WATCH OUT

You don't need to pay anyone for a DD-214 you're entitled to — the official National Archives route is free for the veteran or next of kin. Third-party companies that charge to obtain records offer nothing you can't get yourself for free, so go through the official channel.

8 The 1973 Fire and Missing Records

Anyone researching older military records should know about a significant event: in 1973, a fire at the National Personnel Records Center destroyed a large number of records, particularly affecting Army personnel discharged over a range of mid-twentieth-century years and Air Force personnel in a certain alphabetical and date range. Millions of records were lost, which means that for some veterans of that era, the original personnel file simply no longer exists, and this can complicate obtaining a DD-214 for affected service.

This is not a dead end, though. The National Archives has worked to reconstruct information for affected veterans from alternate sources — other documents, unit records, and the like — so even when the main file was lost, a usable record or proof of service can often still be assembled. If you are seeking records from the affected era and are told the file was lost to the fire, the staff can guide you through the reconstruction process and alternate documentation.

The main thing is not to give up at the word fire: while it genuinely destroyed many records, the Archives has procedures to recover service information by other means, and families of affected veterans can still usually obtain what they need for benefits with some additional effort.

- A 1973 fire at the NPRC destroyed many records, especially older Army and some Air Force files.
- For some veterans of that era, the original personnel file no longer exists.
- The National Archives reconstructs service information from alternate sources.
- If a file was lost to the fire, staff can guide you through reconstruction.

WATCH OUT

If you're told a record was lost in the 1973 NPRC fire, don't give up — it destroyed many older Army and Air Force files, but the National Archives reconstructs service information from alternate sources, and families can still usually obtain what they need for benefits with some extra effort.

9 Protecting the Sensitive Information

A DD-214 and military records contain sensitive personal information and deserve careful handling. In particular, older DD-214s often carry the veteran's full Social Security number, along with date of birth and other details that could be misused for identity theft if the document fell into the wrong hands. This is worth bearing in mind both when storing the document and when sharing copies of it.

When you obtain a DD-214, store the original somewhere secure, like a safe or a safe-deposit box, and be cautious about who you give copies to, providing it only to legitimate recipients such as the VA, a funeral home arranging honors, or a lender who genuinely requires it. When a copy must be shared and the full Social Security number is not needed, it can sometimes be redacted.

The point is to treat the document with the same care as any record holding a Social Security number. For families handling a deceased veteran's papers, being aware that the DD-214 is both precious and sensitive helps you both use it for the benefits it unlocks and protect the veteran's identity information appropriately.

- Military records contain sensitive data; older DD-214s often show the full Social Security number.
- Store the original securely, like in a safe or safe-deposit box.
- Share copies only with legitimate recipients — the VA, a funeral home, a lender.
- Redact the Social Security number when a copy doesn't need it.

WATCH OUT

Older DD-214s often carry the veteran's full Social Security number and date of birth — identity-theft gold if misused. Store the original securely and share copies only with legitimate recipients like the VA, a funeral home, or a lender, redacting the Social Security number where it isn't needed.

10 Obtaining a Deceased Veteran's Records

A very common reason families seek military records is to obtain them for a deceased veteran, often urgently around the time of death to arrange military funeral honors or to claim survivor benefits. The next of kin — typically the surviving spouse, child, parent, or sibling — can request the deceased veteran's records, including the DD-214, through the same official channels, providing proof of the veteran's death and of their own relationship as the process requires.

Because the need often arises suddenly and time-sensitively at a funeral, it helps to know in advance that a funeral home arranging military honors can frequently assist with or guide the DD-214 request, and that if the family already has a copy of the veteran's DD-214, the immediate need may be met without a new request.

This is one more reason the living veteran keeping their DD-214 somewhere the family can find it is such a kindness. If no copy can be found, the next of kin requests one through the National Archives, and for the urgency of funeral honors, explaining the situation can sometimes expedite it. Knowing the path in advance spares a grieving family from scrambling for a document they did not know how to get.

1. Next of kin can request a deceased veteran's records, including the DD-214.
2. Provide proof of death and of your relationship as the process requires.
3. A funeral home arranging honors can often help with or guide the request.
4. If the family already has a copy, the immediate need may be met without a new request.

TIP

The need for a deceased veteran's DD-214 often arises urgently at a funeral — so a living veteran keeping theirs where family can find it is a real kindness. If none can be found, next of kin request one through the National Archives, and a funeral home arranging honors can often help.

11 Other Records You Can Obtain

While the DD-214 is the headline document, the National Archives and the military hold other records you may be able to obtain, depending on your eligibility. These include the fuller Official Military Personnel File, which contains much more than the discharge summary — assignments, evaluations, training, and more — as well as records of medals and awards a veteran earned, and in some cases service medical or treatment records. Families researching a relative's service, or veterans assembling their full history, may want these beyond the DD-214.

You can also request replacement of medals and decorations a veteran was awarded but whose physical medals were lost, which the military branches handle, a meaningful thing for families wishing to honor a relative's service. The request methods are similar — the official channels, with the SF-180 covering many record types — and the National Archives website explains what is available and how to request each.

If your interest goes beyond a DD-214 to the full story of a veteran's service or to replacing lost medals, know that these broader records and services exist, subject to the same eligibility rules, and can enrich a family's understanding and honoring of a relative's time in uniform.

- Beyond the DD-214, you may obtain the fuller Official Military Personnel File.
- Records of medals, awards, and sometimes service medical records are available.
- Lost medals and decorations can often be replaced through the military branches.
- The same official channels and SF-180 cover many of these record types.

GOOD TO KNOW

The DD-214 isn't the only record available: eligible requesters can obtain the fuller Official Military Personnel File, award records, and sometimes medical records, and can request replacement of lost medals — a meaningful way for families to honor a relative's service, through the same official channels.

12 A Simple Way to Get Started

If you need to obtain a veteran's military records, here is a clear path to follow, leaning on the official source for current details.

1. Establish your eligibility: the veteran, next of kin of a deceased veteran, or public.
2. Gather the veteran's details: full name, service dates or era, branch, and service or Social Security number.
3. Go to the official National Archives website for military records.
4. Request online through eVetRecords if eligible, or by mailing an SF-180.
5. Expect the basic DD-214 to be free, and allow weeks for a mailed request.
6. For a deceased veteran, provide proof of death and relationship; a funeral home can help.

> *A veteran's DD-214 is more than paperwork — it's the key to the care, honors, and benefits their service earned. If it's lost, it isn't gone: the nation keeps these records, and a free request to the National Archives brings it back into your hands.*

13 Recap

The DD-214 is a veteran's essential discharge record, needed for benefits, healthcare, and burial honors, and if it is lost, the federal government preserves it and will provide a copy, usually free. The veteran or the next of kin of a deceased veteran can request records, mainly from the National Archives' National Personnel Records Center, online through eVetRecords or by mailing an SF-180.

Be aware of the 1973 fire that destroyed many older records (which can often be reconstructed), handle the document's sensitive information carefully, and know that broader records and lost-medal replacements are available too. Because these are official processes that change, confirm the current steps at the National Archives website.

- The DD-214 is the essential discharge record; lost copies can be replaced, usually free.
- The veteran or a deceased veteran's next of kin can request records.
- Request from the National Archives' NPRC online (eVetRecords) or by mailing an SF-180.
- Mind the 1973 fire (records often reconstructable) and the sensitive Social Security number.
- Confirm current steps at the official National Archives website.

GOOD TO KNOW

If a veteran's DD-214 is lost, it isn't gone: establish your eligibility, gather the veteran's details, and request it free from the National Archives' NPRC online or by SF-180. Confirm the current steps on the official site — and keep the recovered document secure, since it carries sensitive personal data.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

You don't have to remember all of it — just that a friendly, patient person is one call away, whenever you'd rather have a hand.

KEY SPECS

In your home — $99 flat for the first visit, no contracts and no surprises, with a 30-day come-back-free follow-up. In-home visits cover Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities.
Outside the area? Remotely — $49 for a screen-share session (free for Support Plan members, $39/mo), refundable if I can't fix it — and credited toward a visit if you'd rather have me in person. Book either at billshometech.com/book.

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

Whenever you're ready, I'll come to your home anywhere in Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities, at your pace. Too far for a house call? I also help remotely. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042. — Bill

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