

# OPERATION GRANNY FILES

## Military Records Field Guide

*Your Quick-Reference Companion for Finding an Ancestor's Service File*

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

---

### Mission 13 — Reporting for Duty

Clearance Level: Beginner

[operationgrannyfiles.substack.com](http://operationgrannyfiles.substack.com)

### QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Military records are among the richest genealogy sources available — containing physical descriptions, family details, and personal narratives found nowhere else. Focus on three record types: service records (the official career file), pension records (the genealogical gold mine, often hundreds of pages), and draft registration cards (the widest net, covering nearly all men of military age). Start with free resources on FamilySearch before paying for subscriptions or postal requests. If your ancestor's record was lost in the 1973 NPRC fire, alternate sources exist — always submit the request.

## The Three Records That Matter Most

### Service Records (Official Military Personnel Files)

A service record — officially called an OMPF — documents your ancestor's entire military career. It covers enlistment, unit assignment, campaigns, rank changes, pay, injuries, POW status, and discharge. More importantly for genealogists, it contains biographical detail that's hard to find anywhere else: date and place of birth, civilian occupation, marital status, and a physical description including height, weight, eye color, and distinguishing marks.

Where they live depends on when your ancestor served. Pre-1912 records are held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Post-WWI records (1917 onward) are at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis, Missouri. Records become publicly accessible 62 years after the veteran separated from service.

### Pension Records — The Genealogical Gold Mine

When a veteran or widow applied for a government pension, they had to prove their case with documentation. That means pension files often contain marriage certificates, birth records, family Bible pages, personal letters, neighbor depositions, and sworn affidavits — sometimes running to hundreds of pages for a single application.

Civil War pension files are the most famous examples, but Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and Indian Wars pensions are also heavily indexed and digitized. Widow's pension applications are especially valuable — they prove the marriage, list children by name, and contain depositions from neighbors who knew the family personally.

### GRANNY PRO TIP

Always check the widow's pension file, not just the veteran's. Widows had to prove marriage and list dependents, so their applications often contain more family detail than the veteran's own file.

### Draft Registration Cards — The Beginner's Best Friend

Draft cards cast the widest net of any military record. The WWI draft covered roughly 98 percent of American men aged 18–45. If your ancestor was male and living in the United States in 1917 or 1918, there is almost certainly a card with his name on it.

Each card records: full name, date and place of birth, current address, name of spouse or nearest relative, occupation and employer, physical description, and citizenship status. WWII brought a

second round of registration, including the “Old Man’s Draft” covering men born between 1877 and 1897. Men in the overlap may have cards from both wars.

Draft cards are digitized and free to search on FamilySearch. They’re also available on Ancestry and Fold3.

## Conflict-Period Matrix: Where to Look

Conflict	Dates	Key Record Types	Primary Repository	Free Online?
Revolutionary War	1775–1783	Compiled service records, pension files, bounty land warrants	National Archives (D.C.)	Partial — FamilySearch, Fold3
War of 1812	1812–1815	Service records, pension files, bounty land warrants	National Archives (D.C.)	Partial — FamilySearch, Fold3
Mexican-American War	1846–1848	Service records, pension files	National Archives (D.C.)	Partial — Fold3
Civil War (Union)	1861–1865	Compiled service records, pension files, regimental histories	National Archives (D.C.)	Yes — FamilySearch, Fold3, Ancestry
Civil War (Confederate)	1861–1865	Compiled service records, state records	National Archives + State Archives	Partial — Fold3, state collections
Indian Wars	1865–1891	Service records, pension files	National Archives (D.C.)	Partial — Fold3
Spanish-American War	1898	Service records, pension files	National Archives (D.C.) / NPRC	Partial — Fold3
World War I	1917–1918	Draft cards, service records (many lost in 1973 fire)	NPRC / FamilySearch	Draft cards: Yes (FamilySearch)
World War II	1939–1945	Draft cards, enlistment records, service records	NPRC / FamilySearch / Ancestry	Draft cards: Yes; enlistment: Yes
Korean War	1950–1953	Service records	NPRC	No — request via eVetRecs
Vietnam War	1955–1975	Service records	NPRC	No — request via eVetRecs

## The 1973 NPRC Fire: Was Your Ancestor’s Record Affected?

On July 12, 1973, a fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis destroyed approximately 16–18 million military personnel files. No backup copies existed and no index survived.

**Records destroyed:** Army: ~80% of records for veterans discharged November 1, 1912 – January 1, 1960. Air Force: ~75% of records for veterans discharged September 25, 1947 – January 1, 1964 (surnames Hubbard through Z).

**Records NOT affected:** Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard records (stored separately). Army records for veterans discharged before November 1912 or after January 1960. Air Force records for surnames A through Hubbard. All pension files, draft registration cards, and pre-WWI compiled service records.

## Reconstruction Sources — What Survived

Source	What It Provides
“B Files” (burnt/damaged originals)	Partial data — name, dates, unit information may be readable
Final Pay Vouchers (19 million survived)	Name, service number, dates of service, character of discharge
Army Morning Reports	Daily unit-level records documenting individual soldiers
VA Claims Files	If the veteran ever filed a VA claim, that file exists independently
Selective Service (draft) records	Draft cards maintained separately — unaffected by fire
State Adjutant General records	State-level copies of federal service records
General court-martial records	Maintained separately at the National Archives

### GRANNY PRO TIP

Always submit a records request to the NPRC even if you believe the file was destroyed. The NPRC automatically searches auxiliary sources and may find partial records, reconstructed files, or alternate documentation you wouldn't know to request on your own.

## How to Request Military Records: Step by Step

**Step 1: Determine the conflict period.** This tells you which repository holds the records and which form to use.

**Step 2: Gather key identifiers.** You'll need the veteran's full name as used in service, service number (if known), branch of service, approximate dates of service, and date and place of birth. The more you provide, the faster the search.

**Step 3: Check free online sources first.** Search FamilySearch (familysearch.org) for draft registration cards and indexed records. Search Fold3 Library Edition through your public library's digital resources. Search Ancestry if you have a subscription or library access.

**Step 4: Submit a formal request if needed.** For pre-WWI records: Search the National Archives catalog at [catalog.archives.gov](http://catalog.archives.gov). For WWI–present: Use the eVetRecs system at [archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records](http://archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records). Processing time: Expect 3–6 months for NPRC requests.

**Step 5: Note the 62-year rule.** Military personnel records become publicly accessible 62 years after the veteran separated from service. Before that date, only the veteran or verified next-of-kin can request them.

## Key Websites and Contact Information

Resource	URL	Cost
FamilySearch	familysearch.org	Free
Fold3	fold3.com	Subscription (free via many libraries)
Ancestry	ancestry.com	Subscription (free via many libraries)
National Archives Catalog	catalog.archives.gov	Free to search
eVetRecs (NPRC requests)	archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records	Free to submit
NPRC Fire Information	archives.gov/personnel-records-center/fire-1973	Free
VA Records Reconstruction	va.gov/records/get-military-service-records	Free

## What's in Each Record? Quick Reference

Record Type	Contains	Best For
Service Record (OMPF)	Enlistment date, unit, rank, campaigns, injuries, discharge, physical description, birth info	Establishing military career and biographical facts
Pension File	Marriage certs, birth records, Bible pages, neighbor depositions, family letters, sworn affidavits	Building a complete family picture — the richest single source
Draft Registration Card	Name, birth date/place, spouse/next-of-kin, occupation, employer, physical description	Quick identification — high success rate, widely digitized
Bounty Land Warrant	Name, rank, service dates, acreage awarded	Connecting military service to land ownership (pre-Civil War)
Compiled Service Record	Abstracted data from muster rolls, pay records, returns	Pre-WWI service summary when originals don't survive
Enlistment Record	Name, age, birthplace, occupation, physical description	WWII-era — digitized on Ancestry and FamilySearch

## Your Research Checklist

Use this checklist for each ancestor you investigate:

- Identified the ancestor's name, approximate birth year, and conflict period
- Searched FamilySearch for draft registration cards (WWI and/or WWII)
- Searched FamilySearch for indexed pension or service records
- Checked Fold3 (or Fold3 Library Edition) for digitized military records
- Checked Ancestry for enlistment records and draft cards
- Determined whether the ancestor's record may have been affected by the 1973 fire
- Submitted an eVetRecs or SF-180 request to NPRC (if post-1912 service)
- Checked state archives for Adjutant General or National Guard records
- Searched for pension file (veteran's AND widow's application)
- Recorded findings in your research log with source citations

**GRANNY SAYS**

"Every service record is a promise someone kept — to their country, to their family, and now to you. Honor the person behind the paperwork. That's what this work is really about."

## Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.