

Reconstructing World War II Service Records

Jennifer Holik looks at alternate record sources when dealing with a missing Army, Air Corps or National Guard service record



You may be searching for the personnel file of an ancestor who flew US Navy aircraft, such as the Grumman torpedo bomber shown here, during WWII. It may be necessary to reconstruct the file from alternate record sources. (Library of Congress)

ALL THE RECORDS BURNED!

This phrase, "All the records burned!" has been uttered in frustration by many people seeking information from the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) regarding their Army, Air Corps (US Army Air Forces) or National Guard soldier from World War II. A request for information was sent and a letter was returned stating no record is available or a few documents could be reconstructed for the file. This is the norm when an individual sends in Form 180 from the NPRC website.

There was a fire at the NPRC in 1973 which destroyed approximately 80% of these records. The Navy, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine, and Marine Corps records were almost

completely untouched. Researchers can read about the 1973 fire on the National Archives website and learn about alternate record sources, <http://archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html>.

Information about the fire is helpful, but does not teach a researcher or family member how to actually reconstruct service. It often leaves people with the idea that a duplicate of the file exists somewhere. It does not. The website also does not explain how the files were stored which would be helpful to understand why an Officer's file for surname WHITE survived intact, yet a Private's file for WINKLER did not.

To better understand the alternate record sources and how to

begin reconstructing service history, we first need to understand what the word RECONSTRUCTION means.

Reconstructing a Soldier's Service

The term reconstruction is thrown around a lot in discussions on burned military records. Yet, the meaning is not always clear. Reconstructing a file does not mean the exact duplicate of every record it originally contained, is located elsewhere. Reconstructing a file means, through alternate record sources, the NPRC can prove service and tell you a little about when and where a soldier served.

There is also another meaning which applies to every branch of the military. Reconstructing a soldier's service means starting with what you know and the documents you have, to create a timeline of service. This timeline is used as the foundation of all other research. Everyone is actually reconstructing service unless someone has done it for them.

Reconstruction Starting Points

1) Start with what you know.

Download the Military Service Questionnaire off my website, <http://bit.ly/199fP0i>. Fill in as much information as you can regarding service. Just as in genealogy research, you do not have to know every piece of information to proceed with research. Fill in the blanks as you move forward. If you missed it, pick up a copy of the last issue of *Your Genealogy Today* and read my article on common resources to help start military research.

2) Find the Serial Number or Service Number

The more information you can provide on the form, the easier the search becomes. The Serial Number or Service Number is an important piece of information. What if you do not have this number? First, check the NARA Army Enlistment database to see if your soldier is listed. This database is incomplete and only covers soldiers who enlisted, <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=3360>.

If you do not find your soldier in the Enlistment database, write a letter to the NPRC requesting a search of the VA Index. This runs about \$5.00 per individual searched and NPRC will send you an index card with the information for your soldier. The VA Index Card will provide the name, first rank, branch of service, first unit in which the individual was placed, serial number, dates of birth, enlistment, discharge, and death, plus address.

NPRC
1 Archives Drive
St. Louis, MO 63138

Hazel Clark VA Index Card. Caption: The VA Index card for U.S. Coast Guard SPAR Hazel Clark providing service information from which a search can be started. (Courtesy: NPRC VA Index Card Microfilm)

3) Request the Official Military Personnel File (OMPF.)

There are two ways to request the OMPF from St. Louis. One option is to hire an independent researcher who can request the OMPF and view additional records held at the NPRC. The National Archives provides a list of researchers who can assist you with record retrieval and copying. I have had greater success obtaining records and information, particularly pieces of burned files, by using an independent researcher named Norm Richards. His contact information is found on the Resources page of my website, <http://jenniferholik.com/resources.html>.

Another option is to visit the NPRC website, at <http://archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/index.html>, and submit a request online or download Form 180, complete it, and mail it to the NPRC.

IMPORTANT! Form 180 will only provide a search of the OMPF if you have enough information. This will not provide

research services into the other records held at the NPRC which will be useful in reconstructing service history.

4) Analyze the OMPF

The OMPF, depending on the branch of service, length of service, and whether or not it burned, can be short or lengthy. There are many components to the OMPF, but some key components to look for are outlined here.

TIP

Files do not always come in chronological order. Sort the file by date so you understand what you are looking at and when events occurred.

Application for Service. The Application was a standard form across all branches. The application contained background information similar to what job applications contain today. A potential soldier was required to provide vital information, education and training, job history,

prior service history if applicable, and family information. Additional documents which may have accompanied the application were Birth Certificates, Adoption Certificates, High School and College Transcripts and Letters of Recommendation, particularly if the soldier was applying for an Officer rank. This information was usually put onto a Qualification Card which was filed in the OMPF.

Next-of-Kin and Insurance Beneficiary Information. Each soldier had to complete a

next-of-kin contact information sheet in case he was a casualty. Casualty was defined as someone who received wounds, or had a status change to Missing In Action, Prisoner of War, or Killed In Action. Usually the next-of-kin was the soldier's father or spouse then mother or siblings. Name and address for the next-of-kin was provided.

Soldiers were also encouraged to take out a life insurance policy which also required the names of beneficiaries and home addresses. The next-of-kin information is especially helpful in genealogical research if you

are trying to trace a family throughout the 1940s or could not locate them in the 1940 census.

Medical information. The OMPF has sections within the soldier's service booklet for the usual medical tests, vaccinations, dental records and treatment, and routine hospital admissions. Sometimes if a soldier was treated stateside, the information will be included in the OMPF, but not always.

Not all medical information will be found in the OMPF. Each soldier had a separate medical

NAME (LAST)	PAUL		(MIDDLE)	(NONE)	SERIAL No.	0-391988	GRADE	2nd Lt	Inf-Res	SECTION	CAIG	ASSIGNMENT GROUP	Yes	W	R		
DATE OF BIRTH	5/7/18		COUNTRY OF BIRTH-OFFICER	USA		FATHER	USA		MOTHER	USA		MARITAL STATUS	Single				
HOME ADDRESS	922 B St. Springfield, Oregon																
BUSINESS ADDRESS	Springfield, Plywood Corp. Springfield, Oregon. (EAD Ft. Ord, Calif.)																
PERSON TO BE NOTIFIED IN AN EMERGENCY: NAME	John E. White, 1317 N. Wallace St., Indianapolis, Indiana																
ADDRESS	1317 N. Wallace St., Indianapolis, Indiana.										RELATIONSHIP	Father					
BUSINESS IN ORDER OF EXPERIENCE																	
EMPLOYER	Indiana National Bank					Springfield Plywood Corp.											
TYPE OF BUSINESS	Banking					Douglas Fir Plywood Mill											
POSITION HELD	Asst. Manager					Fresman											
NATURE OF WORK	Messenger & Transit Clerk					Operator of hot press											
YEARS EMPLOYED	1936-1938 3 mos.					1940 2 mos.											
OTHER EXPERIENCE	Living group pres. at college for 1 yr. Member of Independent Student Council, Living group council & Chairman as member of numerous campus committee at College.																
EDUCATION																	
SCHOOL	DATES	GRADUATED?	DEGREE-YEAR	NAME OF INSTITUTION								SUBJECT MAJORED IN					
HIGH SCHOOL	4 yrs.	Yes	1935	Arsenal Technical Schools								Science					
COLLEGE	4 yrs.	Yes	BS 1940	Butler University 1 yr. OSC 3 yrs.								Wood Prod.					
POST GRADUATE																	
9 EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES																	
10 MEMBERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES None																	
11 ATHLETIC ABILITY Track, basketball, Mbr. Sen. Life Sav. Am. Red Cross INSTRUCTOR trnd. basic stud. in ROTC dur. sr. yr. at OSC in close ext./																	
12 HOBBIES Fishing, hunting, sports, music ENTERTAINER Song leader (drill)																	
LANGUAGES																	
FRENCH				GERMAN				SPANISH									
SPEAKS								Slightly									
READS								Slightly									
TRANSLATES								Slightly									
4 MILITARY SPECIALTIES Co. Officer. PA																	
5 RECOMMENDED MOBILIZATION ASSIGNMENT-1 Troops 2 Troops 3 Troops																	
6 ADDITIONAL TRAINING REQUIRED																	
PRIOR MILITARY TRAINING																	
DATES		GRADE	UNIT		DUTIES				DATES		GRADE	UNIT		DUTIES			
8 WOUNDS, CITATIONS, DECORATIONS																	
W. D., A. G. O. Form No. 177 August 26, 1940																	
RESERVE OFFICER'S QUALIFICATION CARD																	
INACTIVE STAR CREDITS																	
DATE	TY	HOURS	DATE	TYPE	HOURS	DATE	TYPE	HOURS	DATE	TYPE	HOURS	DATE	TYPE	HOURS	DATE	TYPE	HOURS

Qualification Card for Paul White who applied for service in the Army during college. (Source: Paul White OMPF, NPRC St. Louis)



To all who shall see these presents, greeting:
 Know Ye, that reposing special trust and confidence on the patriotism, valor, fidelity
 and abilities of Paul White
 I do appoint him Second Lieutenant, Infantry in the

Army of the United States

such appointment to date from the twenty-fourth day of May
nineteen hundred and forty. He is therefore carefully and diligently to
 discharge the duty of the office to which he is appointed by doing and performing all
 manner of things thereunto belonging.

He will enter upon active duty under this commission only when specifically
 ordered to such active duty by competent authority.

And I do strictly charge and require all Officers and Soldiers under his command
 when he shall be employed on active duty to be obedient to his orders as an officer of his
 grade and position. And he is to obey and follow such orders and directions from time
 to time as he shall receive from me, or the future President of the United States of
 America, or the General or other Superior Officers set over him, according to the rules
 and discipline of War.

This Commission evidences an appointment in the Army of the United States under
 the provisions of section 37, National Defense Act, as amended, and is to continue in
 force for a period of seven years from the date above specified, and during the pleasure
 of the President of the United States for the time being.

Done at the City of Washington, this twenty-fourth day of May
 in the year of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and forty, and of the
 Independence of the United States of America the one hundred and sixty-fourth.

By the President:

File
 4-15-40 *ear*
 LEV-1512

G. E. Isaacs
 Adjutant General.

Promotion to 2nd Lieutenant for Paul White, U.S. Army. For each promotion received, a document similar to this would be included in the OMPF. (Source: Paul White OMPF, NPRC St. Louis)

file with information concerning major disease and illness, treatment, and medical attention given during the war and before discharge. These files can only be requested by the veteran or his next-of-kin, even if the soldier has been dead 100 years. It is important if you are the veteran or next-of-kin, you request these records before your family can no longer do so. If the veteran is deceased, you must provide proof of death in the form of a death certificate, obituary, or funeral paperwork with the request for the medical records.

Appointments for Rank and Promotions

If an enlisted man rose in rank to Officer, or entered service with an Officer's rank, the commission certificate will be included in the OMPF. This record provides information on

the new rank and date it was official. An Oath of Office for the Officer may also be included, which the soldier had to sign, and contains the date of change in rank and his signature.

Training and Educational Information

All training a soldier participated in was documented in the OMPF. This includes any special training courses. Once completed, the scores for a course or training would have been entered or a Certificate of Completion would have been issued. If a man was attempting to become a pilot and attended flight school, those records were also part of his file. The documents may appear as official certificates of completion, or as a letter or memo to be sent to Headquarters and placed in the man's file.

TIP

Sometimes OMPFs will have mixed files. This might have meant a man began in the Army Air Corps and completed flight training. The Navy or Marine Corps needed pilots and he was transferred. All prior service history applicable to the new branch would have been transferred. The original branch OMPF would also remain intact which means if a soldier changed branches, you need to search both for the OMPFs. Sometimes the families did not pass this information down and it isn't until you look at an OMPF and realize all the usual papers are not included, and look for the prior service history, that you find the other branch.

Men who wished to attempt pilot training completed applications, which were sent to the Army Air Forces and included in the OMPF. The Commanding Officer of the unit in which the soldier was serving had the option to veto the application and not recommend the soldier for pilot training. When that happened, a brief explanation was included in the OMPF.

Awards and Citations Earned

Awards issued often were prepared on an official form. There are cases where the file will contain a memo with a list of names of men who were to receive an award. All awards and medals received during service will be included in the OMPF. Any award issued after the

TIP

Family members can request replacement medals using Form 180 from the NPRC website.

Last Name - First White, Paul		Serial Number 0391998	Grade Capt.	Organization Infantry
Date of Death 1 August 45 (presumed)	Location or Area European			
Awards PURPLE HEART (POSTHUMOUS) AND COMBAT INFANTRYMAN BADGE		Philadelphia CMD Depot: Engrave and Ship to Next of Kin PAUL WHITE		
Date on 24 Aug 45				
Name and Address of Next of Kin Mrs. Virginia E. White P. O. Box 1238 Tulare, California		Relationship Wife	THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE DECORATIONS AND AWARDS BRANCH WASHINGTON, D. C. RECORD OF POSTHUMOUS AWARD OF PURPLE HEART AND COMBAT INFANTRYMAN BADGE FILE IN ENLISTED BRANCH <input type="checkbox"/> OFFICER'S BRANCH <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

The Purple Heart Citation for Captain Paul White who went Missing In Action. (Source: Paul White OMPF, NPRC St. Louis)

soldier was discharged will not. Copies are usually found within the unit records in College Park, MD.

Casualty Telegrams or Notices (MIA, POW, KIA)

Each time a soldier had a change in status, which meant he went from being a healthy, active soldier to some sort of casualty — wounded, missing, prisoner, or killed, a telegram was sent to the next-of-kin and included in his file. Sometimes these telegrams are found in the Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) if the soldier was Missing In Action and never recovered or Killed In Action.

Discharge or Separation Information

The Separation and Discharge papers contain the name, rank, service number, final unit in which a soldier served, and MOS (Job) for the soldier. The place of entry & discharge are listed with the theaters of war in which a soldier served and dates of service. Dates the soldier sailed overseas, arrived, then departed overseas to return to the US are also included.

Pay attention to the final unit listed on the discharge papers. This may not have been the unit in which the soldier served and saw combat. In some cases, this final unit was one that was ready to be sent home and disbanded. Men with enough points for discharge were placed in these units for the sole purpose of discharge.

In addition, the MOS and job description may have been one of the jobs held by the soldier, but not necessarily the job held throughout combat. With

every fact you find, look for additional documentation to back-up the facts. Be sure to cite your sources also because after reading many different military records, it can become confusing to think about where you found each piece of information.

TIP

The soldier was given six copies of his discharge and separation papers upon leaving the service. Soldiers were encouraged to file one copy with the County Recorder or County Clerk where they lived, for safekeeping. If you do not have copies of the discharge paperwork, check with the county. Laws vary as to access to these records.

Additional Resource: To help you better understand what an Army OMPF may contain, please visit my website to see Captain Paul White's complete OMPF, <http://jenniferholik.com/service-records.html>.

- **Next steps if the OMPF burned**
If the OMPF did burn or you receive very few pages from a burned file, all hope is not lost. You can also contact the County in which your soldier lived to see if the discharge papers are available.
- **World War II Bonus Applications**
Check with your State Archives to see if the World War II Bonus Applications are accessible.

After the war, soldiers or their beneficiaries were given a bonus payment based on the number of days served. Some states, like Iowa and Pennsylvania, have digitized these records and placed them online. There are also states like Illinois, who have a law on the books which does not allow access to these records for another 50+ years. Just as with genealogical records, military records have restrictions.

Traveling the Road of Service Reconstruction

Whether or not the OMPF for your soldier burned, there are a multitude of other records you can obtain to fill in gaps in the service history and make the story richer. Some of these valuable records will be discussed in a future article. Until then, I encourage you to begin the process of obtaining the VA Index Card if needed, and the OMPF. Check with the County to see if you can also obtain discharge papers. Military records research is a lengthy process. Are you ready to embark on this journey? ☞☞☞



JENNIFER HOLIK is a Chicago-based genealogist and military historian specializing in World War II US records, research, and writing.

WEBLINKS USED IN THIS ARTICLE

- <http://archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html>
- <http://bit.ly/199fP0i>
- <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=3360>
- <http://jenniferholik.com/resources.html>
- <http://archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/index.html>
- <http://jenniferholik.com/service-records.html>