

## Chapter 16 – Leaving the Service

Next stop: civilian life! But before you go, make sure your military records are in order and double check them for errors. It is much easier to resolve problems before you leave the service. The following section will provide information on topics ranging from how to ensure the accuracy of your records to the dos and don'ts of wearing your uniform after you leave the military. Make a copy of your complete medical records and take them with you.

### A. Keep Important Documents in a Safe Place

You should keep your performance ratings; service-issued licenses or certifications; DD Form 2586, "Verification of Military Experience and Training" and other service documents (such as your security clearance) in a safe and permanent file. Never give away the original copy of any of these documents.

**DD Form 214, "Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty:"** This form is one of the most important documents the service will ever give you. It is your key to participation in all Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs as well as several state and federal programs. Keep your original in a safe, fireproof place and have certified photocopies available for reference. You can replace this record, but that takes a long time – time that you may not have. Be safe. In most states, the DD Form 214 can be registered/recorded just like a land deed or other significant document. So, immediately after you separate, register your DD Form 214 with your county recorder or town hall. If you register your documents, they can later be retrieved quickly for a nominal fee. You should check whether state or local law permits public access to the recorded document. If public access is authorized and you register the DD Form 214, others could obtain a copy for an unlawful purpose (e.g., to obtain a credit card in your name). If public access is permitted and you choose not to register your DD Form 214, you still should take steps to protect it as you would any other sensitive document (wills, marriage and birth certificates, insurance policies). You may wish to store it in a safe deposit box or at some other secure location.

In addition your local Vet Center can certify your DD214 and have a copy placed on file. Find your nearest Vet Center online at <http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter.asp>.

**Other military service papers:** Documents associated with any military service should be kept in your permanent file at home. This includes those documents mentioned above.

**VA papers:** All VA forms and correspondence also should be kept in your file, including certificates of eligibility for loans, VA file number records, and other VA papers.

**Family records:** Documents such as marriage licenses, birth and death certificates, and divorce and adoption papers are permanent records you will need on a recurring basis. Keep these in your permanent file as well.

**Health records:** You and your family members should know the location of your health records, including medical history and individual immunization records. Keep a copy in a file at home, and know where the original is kept (usually in a military medical facility or doctor's office). Don't forget to keep your family current with shots and immunizations as you transition.

**Insurance documents:** Insurance policies and premium payment records should be kept in your permanent file at home.

### **Where Are You?**

When you leave the military, you are likely to have a change of address. During this time of transition, people – including prospective employers – will be trying to contact you. Tracking you down will be a slow or impossible task unless you provide the service with a forwarding address indicating where you can be reached up to 120 days following your separation. If you do not have a reliable forwarding address, provide the permanent address of a parent or trusted friend.

**Wills:** All service members and their spouses should have a will. Once prepared by your local legal services office or through your own private attorney, it should be placed in a safe location with your other important documents.

### **Need to Correct Your Military Record?**

Each branch of military has its own procedures for correcting the military records of its members and former members. Correction of a military record may result in eligibility for VA and other benefits – such as back pay and military retirement – that the veteran (or survivors) could not otherwise get. Generally, a request for correction must be filed within three years after the discovery of the alleged error or injustice.

If you believe there is an error in your military record, apply in writing to the appropriate Service using a DD Form 149, "Application for Correction of Military or Naval Record." The form can be submitted by the veteran, survivor, or a legal representative. Get a copy from any VA office listed in the local telephone directory or download the form from

<http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/correcting-records.html>

### **Replacing a Lost DD Form 214, "Certificate of Release or Discharge"**

You or your next-of-kin can request a copy of your DD Form 214 online by going to the National Personnel Records Center website: <http://www.vetrecs.archives.gov/>

Or, you can request the DD Form 214 by mail by sending a SF 180, "Request Pertaining to Military Records" or letter to the National Personnel Records Center. Include the following information in your letter:

- Your full name
- Social Security number
- Current phone number (including area code)
- Approximate dates of service
- Place of discharge
- Return address
- Reason for request

#### **Send this request to:**

National Personnel Records Center  
Attention: [Your Service, e.g., Army] Records  
9700 Page Avenue  
St. Louis, MO 63132-5000

Or you can fax your request to 314-801-9195.

\* To obtain a SF 180 you can download it from <http://www.vetrecs.archives.gov/>, or request the form by fax by calling the Fax-on-Demand System at (301) 837-0990 **from a fax machine**, using the handset. Follow the voice instructions, and request document number 2255.

For immediate assistance you can call 314-801-0800

## B. How to Get a Review of Your Discharge

The Department of the Army, Air Force, and Navy (including the Marine Corp), and the Coast Guard have their own discharge review boards. These boards have the authority to change or correct any discharge or dismissal from the Service, unless it was the result of a general court martial. A discharge board has no authority to address medical discharges.

If you feel your discharge decision was not fair or did not consider all the facts in the case, you may request a discharge review. Use an Application for Review of Discharge or Separation from the Armed Forces of the United States, DD Form 293, "Application for the Review of Discharge or Dismissal from the Armed Forces of the United States" (available at: <http://www.veterans.ocgov.com/forms/DD-293.pdf>). You may obtain a copy from your nearest VA office. Written application should be submitted by the veteran, next of kin, or a legal representative. Application must be made within 15 years after discharge.

## C. Wearing Your Uniform: Do's and Don'ts

- **Always proper:** After separation, it is appropriate to wear your uniform during Reserve duty.
- **Sometimes proper:** Under certain conditions, you may wear your uniform as a civilian. Generally, if you served honorably, you may wear your uniform:
  - For military weddings, funerals, memorial services, or inaugural ceremonies.
  - For patriotic parades on national holidays and for any military parades.
  - For ceremonies in which a U.S. active or Reserve unit is taking part.

### Voting

As you leave the Service and locate permanently in a community, make registering to vote a top priority. For more information, including contact information for your local election official and primary and general election dates, please visit <http://www.canivote.org/>. Responsibility has no borders - Vote."

- **Never proper:** Never wear the uniform under circumstances that would detract from its prestige or tend to discredit the Armed Forces (such as attending a totalitarian or subversive function or while engaging in a business activity). Also, it is against the law for unauthorized persons to wear a uniform of the U.S. Armed Forces.

## D. Missing Medals, Ribbons, or Awards

Before you separate, look over your collection of military awards, medals, ribbons, badges, and other distinguished insignia.

**If awards you have earned are missing:** Speak with your unit personnel officer about obtaining replacements. You may also purchase lost ribbons and medals from the military exchange.

**Note:** Once you have left the service you may request issuance or replacement of military service medals, decorations, and awards through the specific branch of the military in which you served. Use the

**Standard Form (SF 180), “Request Pertaining to Military Records,”** for requesting medals and awards. SF 180 can be downloaded from <http://www.vetrecs.archives.gov>.

**If you believe you are eligible for awards that you did not receive:** Ask your unit personnel office for the Service regulation outlining the eligibility requirements, or get the number of the Service regulation and pursue it yourself. No one knows better than you when or where you were assigned, what special training you took, or when you received special recognition. Replacement medals and ribbons can be obtained for a small fee from:

National Personnel Records Center  
Attention: Military Personnel Records  
9700 Page Avenue  
St. Louis, MO 63132-5000

See <http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/replacement-medals.html> for more information.

### **Young Men Must Be Registered for Selective Service**

Currently, young men must register under the Selective Service system within 30 days before or after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. This is true, even if the draft is not currently in effect. If you failed to register before entering the Service, now is the time to do so.

If you were born in 1960 or later and did not register before entering active service, you are still required to register for Selective Service after you separate, even if you are in a Reserve unit. You will find the necessary forms at the main branch of your local post office. Failure to register may disqualify you from enrolling in certain federal job and training programs.

### **E. Military Funeral Honors**

You are about to depart from the Military Service and you are entitled to a number of benefits, one of which is Military Funeral Honors. Each veteran who desires Military Funeral Honors when they die should brief their family members on this benefit. Veterans are eligible for Military Funeral Honors if they served in the active military and were discharged under conditions other than dishonorable, or if they were a member or former member of the selected reserve. Upon request of the next of kin or authorized representative, the funeral director requests the honors from the Military Service in which the veteran served. The Military Service will provide the Military Funeral Honors to the eligible beneficiary, consisting of the ceremonial folding and presentation of the American flag and the sounding of “Taps.” The ceremony is normally provided by two uniformed members of the armed forces, at least one of whom will be from the Service in which the veteran served. The Military Services, based on their traditions and resources, may render additional elements of Military Funeral Honors. The Nation is grateful for every veteran’s service to the country. This is the Department of Defense’s time-honored way to recognize those who faithfully served. For additional information on veterans burials benefits, go to the Internet at <http://www.va.gov> or the Department of Defense website at <http://www.militaryfuneralhonors.osd.mil>.