

How To Research and Write Your Military Memoirs

The Answers to 8 Frequently Asked Questions About How To Research and Write Military Memoirs

by William L. McGee

1. How does one get started creating a personal military memoir – or that of a close relative? For starters, write, call or fax:

National Personnel Records Center (Military Personnel Records) 9700 Page Blvd. St. Louis, MO 63132-5100 Tel: 314/538-4141 Fax: 314/538-4175

The Center maintains individual Service Records and honors information requests at no charge for veterans and members of their immediate families.

Ask for their Standard Form 180 to submit your information request. Response will be by snail mail. When the form arrives, complete and return it with a copy of a "Discharge" or "Notice of Separation." Be prepared to wait about 3 months for the information to arrive...but well worth it.

2. What kind of information is included in the Service Records?

Everything you need to create a broad-strokes outline for your story. These records provide specific dates of arrival and departure from duty assignments worldwide – from swearing-in to discharge. Must have data after almost 60 years. Key information guaranteed to refresh fading memories and trigger questions from friends and family.

3. What's the best way to create the story outline from the Service Records?

Step 1: For starters, photocopy each record sheet on standard 8-1/2 x 11" paper and 3-hole punch for a ringbinder. All WWII Navy records were on 3-1/2 x 9" paper and I assume this holds true for all service branches.

Step 2: My records were a mess when they arrived. If they were ever in chronological order, you would never know it. So put them in sequential order – from swearing-in to discharge.

Step 3: Make up ringbinder tabs as you go; by year, type of duty, and so on. My binder is divided into three main parts with subsections behind each part. For example, Part I covers "Enlistment & Early Training" and is subdivided 3 times, Part II is subdivided eleven times detailing my Armed Guard duty on five different ships, and 9 months in the Fleet on heavy cruiser *Fall River*; not to mention a hospital stay in Hollander, New Guinea, and Shore Patrol duty in the Philippines,

Caution: Allow several days for this project – largely because it's such a fascinating memory jogger. Be sure you make reminder notes and questions as you go.

Finally, and this is most important, number the pages and create a "Table of Contents," much like you find in most books. You'll refer to it many times, I promise.

4. What are some other key military information sources?

The National Archives complex in College Park, Maryland, just outside Washington D.C., The majority of WWII War Diaries, Operational Plans, Action Reports, and Damage Reports are now kept there. (If you decide to pay them a visit, make your first stop in Room 2400 and ask to speak to someone with naval expertise.)

The Naval Historical Center in the Washington Navy Yard houses the Navy Library, Ships Histories Branch and the Operational Archives Branch, as well as a Photographs Section.

The Ships Histories Branch contains a wealth of data on individual ships such as action reports, war diaries and deck logs.

The Navy Library has an extensive collection of WWII publications such as the "Combat Narratives" generated by the Office of Naval Intelligence.

All of these and more are detailed in the back of each of our books. Free reprints are available from BMC upon request, but please include a self-addressed, stamped #10 envelope.

If you have a computer, or know someone who does, check out the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) website at www.nara.gov. You'll be pleasantly surprised, I promise.

5. How do you decide what to write first?

The Table of Contents to your Service Records, plus the "Notes and Questions" you hopefully made while reviewing its contents (see Question 3) will help you make this decision.

Consider this. Our lives consist of a full range of short stories. Some happy, some sad, some funny; others frightening or downright boring.

A military memoir will probably include all of the above emotions and then some.

Think of each short story as a building block and the full memoir as a house. So pick a favorite subject, and break it down into a rough outline – which will no doubt change several times – and start writing! Don't worry about spelling, grammar or punctuation. That will come later. Handwritten copy works just fine. I'm proof of that. However, you will eventually want your story typed on a computer so the manuscript is available to your publisher or printer [or this newsletter] via disk or e-mail.

6. What if you have arthritis in your hands and can't handwrite or type?

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