

Using World War I U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Records for Genealogical Research
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Introduction

The purpose of this lecture is to introduce the public to using records and resources of the National Archives to research, document, and develop the stories of family members who served in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War I.

This lecture is divided into three parts: Brief guidance on how to get the service record of your sailor or Marine, how to research your World War I sailor, and how to research your World War I Marine.

Before we describe how to document sailors and Marines who served during the First World War, it is important to understand why the United States entered the war and why it played an important role in ending the war.

On April 6, 1917, The United States declared war on Germany after American shipping had been attacked by German U-boats as an expansion of their “unrestricted” submarine warfare campaign and the discovery of the Zimmerman Telegram, which encouraged Mexico to ally with German against the United States should the U.S. enter the war.

Mobilization of American forces began, and starting in May 1917 the first of American forces began to arrive in Europe. The U.S. Navy sent a squadron of destroyers to Queenstown, Ireland, to assist in anti-submarine warfare patrols. The 5th Marines were authorized to deploy, but they did not arrive until June. The Marines were considered to be among the most disciplined and well-trained units sent to Europe. And being the first of American ground troops to arrive, they took on the motto “First to Fight.” In total, the U.S. Marine Corps had the 4th Brigade (Marine) consisting of 5th and 6th Marine Regiments and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, and they were assigned to the 2nd Division (U.S. Army). As the war was drawing to a close, the 5th Marine Brigade was raised and trained. Consisting of the 11th and 13th Marine Regiments and 5th Machine Gun Battalion, they arrived in France in November 1918.

By the end of the war in November 1918 and during the occupation period to 1920, the U.S. Navy, under the Commander of Naval Forces in European Waters, operated bases and air stations all over Europe and in the Mediterranean. The Navy provided large numbers of ships including submarine chasers, destroyers, and minelayers to combat German U-boats. Navy and Marine aviation units flew anti-submarine patrols.

When the war began Marine aviation consisted of the 1st Marine Aviation Squadron at Pensacola, FL, with six officers, one warrant officer, and 43 enlisted men. By the end of the war, that squadron had expanded into the 1st Marine Aviation Force, consisting of four squadrons with many more officers and men with 340 airplanes. During the war, the aviation force developed the long-lived close air support, forging the bond between Marine air and ground forces.

The Navy contributed a unique organization to the war effort in 1918 with Naval Railway Gun Batteries to respond to German heavy artillery units that were shelling Paris at the end of the summer of 1918. Five 14-inch guns were installed on rail cars and were positioned around France to defend Paris.

The Department of the Navy's preparation for their involvement in World War I broke a glass ceiling for women. The Naval Reserve Act of 1916 did not prohibit women from entering either naval reserve or the Marine reserve. This was the first time that women could join these two military agencies, and these military agencies were the first to induct women.

Part One: Getting the Official Military Personnel Files for Your Sailors and Marines

Because many of the naval and Marine Corps records in the National Archives are arranged by the unit designation or name of a ship or command, you will need to know what units, ships, squadrons, or other commands your relative was assigned to during the war. The complete list of their duty assignments are part of their military personnel file.

The Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) are available at the National Military Personnel Records Archives in St. Louis, MO.

NOTE: Unlike the Army service records, the Navy and Marine Corps service records should be unaffected by the 1973 fire and available.

Because the naval and Marine service records from this era are archival, meaning they are open to the public regardless of kinship, there is a fee of \$70 per request.

To make a request for service records, you would use the Standard Form 180: Request for Military Service Records. <https://www.archives.gov/veterans>

National Personnel Records Center
1 Archives Drive
St. Louis, MO 63138
Telephone: 314-801-0800
Fax: 314-801-9195

Part Two: How to Research Your World War I Sailor – Basic

The majority of your research will concern the period after training and your subject has entered the fleet. From the service record, make a list of naval commands and the specific dates that your subject was assigned to those commands. This will help you and the research staff locate the specific resources you need to tell your relative's story. When you have this list of units, ships, or naval commands along with the dates they served in each place, your next step is to go to the National Archives in Washington, DC, and consult the finding aids of the Old Military and Civilian Reference Branch.

To contact the Old Military and Civilian Reference Branch for more information or requests, you can email them using Archives1Reference@nara.gov, or you can visit their webpage <https://www.archives.gov/dc> for more information.

Record Group 24: Records of the Bureau of Navigation

- Deck logs – the record of the Officer of the Watch – a general summary of the ship's activity during each of the six 4-hour watches. These records are arranged alphabetically by the first letter of the first word of the name of the ship.

- Muster rolls – the record of the assigned personnel to a naval command – first divided into ship and non-ship partitions, and then alphabetical by the name of the ship or the type of command or station.
- For Yeoman (F) or Yeomanettes in the Muster Rolls. They are more likely to be found in muster rolls of naval districts and shore stations.

Record Group 45: Records of the Office of Naval Records and Library

NOTE: A fairly comprehensive finding to RG 45 is Inventory 18: *Inventory of the Naval Records Collection*

Records Relating to War Diaries [Monthly Operational Narratives]

These records will be written by officers but generally to not mention individuals by name unless under specific circumstances. These records will apply to ship and non-ship units.

- War Diaries
- Memorandum and Lists Relating to War Diaries
- Chronology of events described in War Diaries and other Navy Dept. Recs
- List of U.S. Naval Vessels on November 1, 1918. Cards provide name of vessels, class, service, and name of Commanding Officer. The list also indicates if a war diary or log book or both were received.

Records Relating to Ship Movements

These records are about ships and where they were, not about personnel.

- Ship Movements – arranged by name of ship
- Summary reports of Movement of U.S. Naval Vessels – arranged by name of ship

Records Relating to Casualties and Prisoners of War

These entries include both officers and enlisted on ships and on shore

- Lists of U.S. and Foreign Vessels Lost
- Lists of Sinkings and other incidents involving U.S. Naval Craft
- Lists of Officers and Enlisted Men of the Regular Navy and Naval Reserves who were reported dead or missing
- Lists of Prisoners of War

Records Relating to Shore Establishments

Within RG 45, there are several groups of record series relating to different shore establishments within the United States and territories, including the Washington Navy Yard and several naval shipyards like Brooklyn and Philadelphia. Within each group are separate series of records for administrative files. For any records of shore establishments not found in RG 45, contact the National Archives field locations for records of naval districts and shore establishments in Record Group 181: Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments. <https://www.archives.gov/locations>

Miscellaneous Records of Interest

- Award Files for Naval Personnel can be found in the Navy Subject Files, 1910–27; this series is arranged by a unique filing scheme of subject designations. Although the series contains award files, it may not be comprehensive.
- Index to Data Collected by the Historical Section in 1917 and 1918, arranged by subject, name of ship, type of aircraft, or name of plane [Good for using U.S. Navy Area File, 1910–27]

Record Group 125: Records of the Naval Office of the Judge Advocate General

- Promotion and Retirement Board (Officers Fully Retired by 1942) – alphabetical by name of the officer

Part Three: How to Research Your World War I Marine – Basic

The majority of the research will concern the period after training and your subject has entered a unit. From the service record, make a list of Marine commands and the specific dates that they were assigned to those commands. This will help you and the research staff locate the resources you need to tell your relative's story. When you have this list of units, ships, or Marine commands, along with the dates they served in each place, your next step is to research those commands. Unlike the Navy records, World War I Marine Corps records are in two different buildings: the National Archives in Washington, DC (the Old Military and Civilian Reference Branch) and the National Archives in College Park (the Military Reference Branch).

Section One: Records at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC

To contact the Old Military and Civilian Reference Branch, send an email to Archives1Reference@nara.gov, or visit their webpage, <https://www.archives.gov/dc>, for more information.

Record Group 127: Records of the United States Marine Corps

- Personnel-Related Records
- Muster Rolls – these have been digitized and are available on Ancestry.com.
- Alphabetical Card List of Enlisted Men of the Marine Corps, 1798–1941
- Registers of Promotions of Non-Commissioned Officers, 1914–20
- Register of Deserters, 1910–41
- Register of Discharges, 1838–1927
- Register of Discharges under Special Orders, December 1918–May 1920
- Original Death Registers of Enlisted Men, 1908–18
- Death Registers of Enlisted Men, 1868–1942
- Register of Deaths of Marine Corps Personnel during World War I, 1918–19
- Several Series of Card Lists for Marines that were wounded, killed, had shell shock, and whose remains were returned to the United States

Operational Records

Unit Records for 4th Marine Brigade, 5th Marine Regiment, 6th Marine Regiment, 6th Machine Gun Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, 13th Marine Replacement Regiment, and other supporting and aviation units. These files include Operational Orders, Files, Field Messages, Brief Histories, records on Awards, Casualties, and Deaths.

Other Records

Copies of Newspapers Published by Marine Corps, 1914–48, includes several papers printed by the Marines during World War I

Section Two: Records at the National Archives in College Park, MD

To contact the Military Reference Branch, send an email to Archives2Reference@nara.gov, or visit their web page, <https://www.archives.gov/college-park>, for more information.

Record Group 120: Records of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF)

Records of Combat Divisions

- 2nd Division, which include files on 4th Marine Brigade, 5th Marine Regiment, 6th Marine Regiment, and 6th Machine Gun Battalion

Records of Brigades

- 4th Brigade (Marine)

Record Group 407: Records of the Adjutant General's Office

Central Decimal Files, Project Files, 1917–25

- There are specific files for Marine Corps and Decorations to Marines in 2nd Division

Record Group 117: Records of American Battle Monuments Commission

- Correspondence with Division Officers of the American Expeditionary Forces
- There is an index to correspondence first divided in divisions and then alphabetical by surname. There is a section for the 2nd Division.

Going Beyond Basic – Advanced Naval and Marine Corps Research in World War I

For further research in to U.S. Naval Forces in European Waters beyond ship, unit or shore establishment specific records, we would recommend reviewing the following:

In Record Group 38: Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, there are several types of series that can contain more information to help you broaden the story of your sailor or Marine in World War I.

- Entry NM-63 63: Miscellaneous Correspondence for Commander and Subordinate Units to Naval Forces in European Waters, 1917–18
- Entry NM-63 245: Tactical Data Reports from Vessels, 1913–34
- Entry UD 118: Formerly Security-Classified Publications of World War I
- Entry UD 120: Formerly Security-Classified Armed Guard Reports

And More Generic Correspondence Series –

- Entry NM-63 58: Office of Naval Records and Library Administrative Records, 1918–25
- Entry NM-63 178: General Correspondence (Confidential), 1914–26

In Record Group 72: Records of the Bureau of Aeronautics, there are several series relating to topics relating to naval and Marine operations in World War I. Although the Bureau of Aeronautics had not been established until 1921, many of these series were created by the CNO's office and later included into the new bureau's records.

General Correspondence should have specific information on airplanes, blimps, development of squadrons, and anti-submarine technique and equipment used by aircraft.

- NM-52 23: Formerly Classified Correspondence Relating to Aviation, 1917–19
- PI-26 17: General Correspondence Initiated in CNO, 1917–25
- PI-26 19: General Correspondence Initiated in CNO [Dispatches Naval Forces in European Waters]
- PI-26 30-A/B: Security Classified Records Naval Forces in European Waters

- PI-26 34: Records of Naval Forces in European Waters Aviation Section
- PI-26 36: Aviation Section Reports, 1918–19

General Correspondence should have specific information on airplanes, blimps, development of squadrons, and anti-submarine technique and equipment used by aircraft.

As a complement to Record Groups 38 and 45, Record Group 313: Records of Naval Operating Forces contain the Administrative Files of Naval Commands in the Field these include 32 entries of administrative and operational records (Entries UD 9-A to UD 9-GG) for the U.S. Atlantic Fleet and Naval Forces in European Waters that are inclusive to World War I.

A Brief Selection of Related Series:

- UD 9-A: Commander Cruiser and Transportation Force War Diaries, 1917–19
- UD 9-D: Atlantic Fleet Submarine Force, General Correspondence, 1915–18
- UD 9-F: U.S. Naval Operations in European Waters, General Correspondence (London Headquarters), 1917–19
- UD 9-R: Historical Files, 1917-18
- UD 9-M: Headquarters U.S. Naval Air Stations in Ireland, General Correspondence, 1918.

For the **Marine Corps Records relating to World War I**, there are additional series in **Record Group 127** that can be found at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC including the following:

- Alphabetical Card List of Enlisted Men of the Marine Corps, 1798–1941
- Registers of Promotions of Non-Commissioned Officers, 1914–20
- Register of Deserters, 1910–41
- Register of Discharges, 1838–1927
- Register of Discharges under Special Orders, December 1918–May 1920

In total during World War I, the Marine Corps had casualties of 118 officers and 3,166 enlisted. Of those numbers, 45 officers were killed in action, and 1,409 enlisted were killed in action. Other deaths were from dying of wounds, dying of disease, and other causes.

In Record Group 127 (in Washington, DC)

Original Death Registers of Enlisted Men, 1908–18

Death Registers of Enlisted Men, 1868-1942

Register of Deaths of Marine Corps Personnel during World War I, 1918–19

Several Series of Card Lists for Marines that were wounded, killed, had shell shock, and whose remains were returned to the United States

Additional materials located at the National Military Personnel Records Archives in St. Louis, MO, relating to casualties for both naval and Marine personnel include Navy and Marine Corps Casualty Records, 1898–1970, in Record Group 24, Records of the Bureau of Navigation; and the Burial Case Files in Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, which are arranged by the name of the deceased. The files can provide unit information, kinship, and where they were buried.

To request these records, you do not need a Standard Form 180. You can make a direct request asking for these materials. Use the same contact information from the section on requesting service records.

For special media records—photographs, motion pictures, ship/aircraft drawings, and charts and maps—contact the Special Media Branches at the National Archives in College Park, MD:

<https://www.archives.gov/research/start/by-format>.

Outside Reading:

- *Victory at Sea* by Admiral William S. Sims (1920)
- *Our Navy at War* by Josephus Daniels (1922)
- *The United States Marine Corps in the World War* by Major Edwin N. McClellan (1920)
- *The United States Marines: The First Two Hundred Years, 1775–1975* by Edwin H. Simmons (1976)
- *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* by Allan R. Millet (1991)
- *Captains & Cabinets* by David F. Trask (1972)
- *Sovereignty at Sea* by Rodney Carlisle (2009)