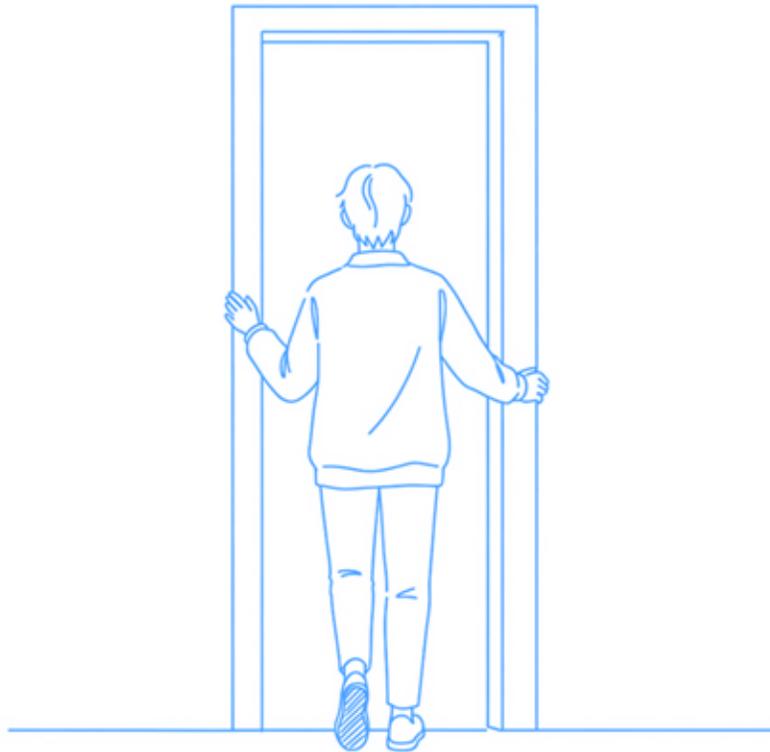


VA Benefits Access for Veterans with a Less than Honorable Discharge

A Guidebook



Veterans Legal Clinic at the Joseph F. Rice School of Law
University of South Carolina
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“Thank you for your service”



You served your country. You endured countless challenges. Yet now you’re back in the civilian population and you have been told you don’t qualify for benefits. It feels unfair and, thankfully, it might not be true!

Every Veteran deserves support.

People get discharged for all kinds of reasons. The VA and military acknowledge that often your discharge does not define who you are as a person, and does not reflect your overall service to this country. There are ways to show them this, so that past mistakes don’t hold you back for the rest of your life.

Is this guidebook for me?

If you have a less than honorable discharge, then **YES** this guidebook is for you. The information in this guidebook covers all military branches. Although it can be difficult to win these cases, this guidebook offers tips on how to move forward no matter how “bad” the reason for your discharge may seem.

We’re here to help!

Applying for benefits can be overwhelming. We’re here to walk you through it. In this guidebook, we will explain how you may still qualify for benefits with an Other than Honorable (OTH) (and in rare cases, a Bad Conduct) discharge. There are two potential paths to benefits with an OTH discharge: (1) a Character of Discharge review through the VA and (2) a Discharge Upgrade through your branch of the military. We will explain what each option can and cannot get you, and help you determine whether you qualify for either option or both. You’ve got this!

As you move forward, ask yourself these questions:

Which path should I choose?

- Character of Discharge review through the VA?
- OR a Discharge Upgrade through my military branch also or instead?

• As you consider a Character of Discharge review with VA, ask:

- Step 1: Am I eligible for a Character of Discharge review?
- Step 2: Do any special eligibility rules apply to me?
- Step 3: Which VA benefit should I apply for to trigger my COD review?
- Step 4: What documents do I need to support my COD review?
 - Statement in Support of a Claim – VA Form 21-4138
 - Additional evidence that supports my story
 - Statements from family or friends?
 - Medical records?
 - Service records pulled through SF180 / eVetRecs?

• As you consider a military Discharge Upgrade, ask:

- Step 1: Which board should I apply to, the Discharge Review Board or the Board for Correction of Military or Naval Records?
- Step 2: Does liberal consideration apply to me?
- Step 3: What documents do I need?
 - *Depending on which board you go to:*
 - DRB: Form DD-293
 - BCMR/NR: Form DD-149
 - Personal statement
 - Official military personnel file: Form SF-180/eVetRecs
 - Health records:
 - In-service records: DD-2870
 - VA records: VA Form 10-5345
 - Any Court Martial transcripts
 - Post-service police or criminal records
 - Letters of support
 - Educational documents
 - Documents that show if I faced a hardship in-service
 - Any relevant post-service records
- Step 4: How do I compile my discharge upgrade packet?
- Step 5: Where do I submit my discharge upgrade packet?



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 Step 4. Find the address or website for the correct board and submit.

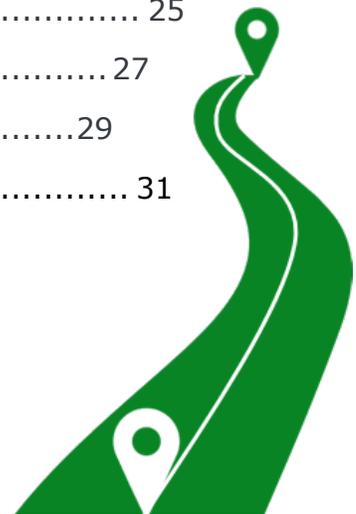
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Which path should I choose?

Congratulations on deciding to seek out VA benefits! The process can seem intimidating, but remember, this is about YOU! Your job is to help the VA or DoD get to know you better so they can see why you deserve the benefits or changes you're looking for. This guidebook will walk you through exactly how to do that.

Let's start with some definitions



Discharge Upgrade (DU) – A DU is the process that your branch of the military would use to change the character of service listed on your DD-214 to a “general” or “honorable” discharge. A DU can also change other information on your DD-214, including the reason for your discharge – this is what’s written under “narrative reason for separation” on your DD-214.



Character of Discharge review (COD) – COD is VA’s process to consider whether someone with an undesirable, bad conduct, or other than honorable discharge may qualify for VA benefits, even if their DD-214 still has a less-than-honorable discharge characterization.

Each option gets you different benefits

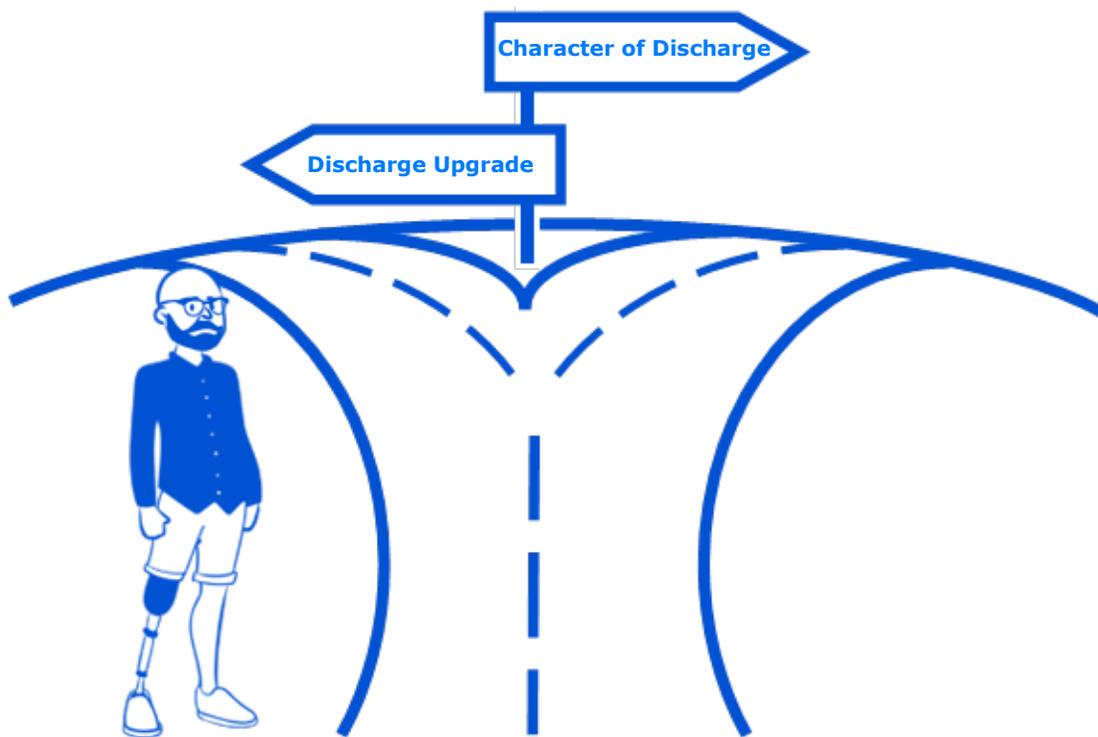
Character of Discharge review and Discharge Upgrade have different benefits and shortcomings. The table below shows you what each option can and cannot do.

	COD (VA)	DU (DoD)
VA Healthcare	✓	✓
VA Home loan	✓	✓
Service-connected disability benefits	✓	✓
VA Pension	✓	✓
Change the character of your discharge to “general” or “honorable”	X	✓
Open to all veterans, regardless of their discharge or reason for discharge	X	✓
Change the reason for discharge on your DD-214	X	✓
G.I. Bill	X	*

*Discharge upgrades can provide G.I. Bill benefits if upgraded to an “honorable” discharge.

Other things to think about:

- The COD process through the VA may be many months faster than a DU.
- Not everyone qualifies to apply for COD review through the VA. The qualifications are set by law as explained on the next page.
- Anyone can apply for a discharge upgrade through their service branch.



Character of Discharge Review

Step 1. Am I eligible for a Character of Discharge (COD) review?

Certain reasons for discharge prevent veterans from getting a COD review. You may remember many reasons why you were discharged. The VA should only look at the reason on your DD-214. If you do not have a copy, you can request it by going to www.archives.gov and clicking "Veterans' Service Records." You can find the reason for your discharge at the bottom of your DD-214.¹

SPECIAL ADDITIONAL INFORMATION <i>(For use by authorized agencies only)</i>		
23. TYPE OF SEPARATION	24. CHARACTER OF SERVICE <i>(include upgrades)</i>	
25. SEPARATION AUTHORITY	26. SEPERATION CODE	27. REENTRY CODE
28. NARRATIVE REASON FOR SEPARATION		
29. DATES OF TIME LOST DURING THIS PERIOD <i>(YYYYMMDD)</i>		30. MEMBER REQUEST'S COPY #

DD FORM 214, AUG 2009 PREVIOUS EDITION IS OBSOLETE MEMBER - 4

Let's get started.

This next exercise will help you determine whether you can qualify for COD review, the issues you might face, and how you might be able to overcome them. If you have more than one DD-214, you can use any of them for COD review to access some benefits, like healthcare. You can do the exercise with any or all of them to see which one will give you the best chance of getting a favorable COD review.

Please Note!

If you are a former Guard member or Reservist trying to get service-connected disability, or you served multiple periods of active duty separated by a day or more, you **must** get COD review using the DD-214 from the deployment when your injury or condition occurred to get disability compensation.

¹ You may need to look up the reason in the administrative separation manual for your branch and time period by referencing Box 25. You may also need to review your military records to figure out exactly which incidents led to your separation.

COD Eligibility Questionnaire

You will need your DD-214 for this exercise. Looking at your “reason for discharge” decide whether each of these sentences applies to you and check the correct box.

Category A.

- Yes No I was AWOL for 180 days straight or more.
- Yes No I was discharged because:
- I had an instance of minor misconduct AND another instance of **OR** minor misconduct or more serious misconduct within 2 years.
 - I had two instances of more serious misconduct within 5 years.
- Yes No I did something that people could consider seriously immoral, like getting convicted of a felony.

Category B.

- Yes No I spied for an enemy or was accused of mutiny.
- Yes No I took a less-than-honorable discharge to avoid trial by general court-martial.
- Yes No I was a conscientious objector discharged because I refused to perform duties, refused to obey lawful orders, or refused to wear the uniform.
- Yes No I have a dishonorable or bad conduct discharge after I was convicted by a court-martial.
- Yes No I was an officer who resigned “for the good of the service.”
- Yes No I deserted.
- Yes No I was not a U.S. citizen and asked for release from the military during a “period of hostilities.”

I answered NO to all questions	I answered YES to a Category A question	I answered YES to a Category B question
Good news! You are eligible to apply for COD review through VA.	You may be eligible if you have “compelling circumstances”, OR you met the criteria of “insanity” when your misconduct happened.	You are not eligible for a character of discharge review at VA, UNLESS you met the criteria of “insanity” when your misconduct happened.

We will talk about “compelling circumstances” and “insanity” in the section 2.

Step 2. Special eligibility rules for veterans who are not automatically eligible for COD review.

This section discusses options for people who answered YES to one of the questions on the previous page. If you answered NO to all the questions, skip to Step 3.

“Compelling Circumstances”

Even when the law says you could be prevented from receiving benefits, the VA can make an exception in certain cases. To figure out if they can make an exception for you, the VA will look at three things.

(1) Besides the situation that caused your separation, was your service otherwise “honest, faithful, and meritorious and of benefit to the Nation?”

It helps if you can show:

- You served for a longer amount of time. Ten years is better than two, but you should still talk about how long you served the country.
- You rarely or never got into trouble (Art. 15s, counseling statements, etc.).
- You received medals, awards, or other recognition.

(2) There were good or understandable reasons for your misconduct or AWOL.

Any of these facts could help you win COD review.

- You had a mental or cognitive condition at the time, including PTSD, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, substance use disorder, ADHD, impulsive behavior, or cognitive disabilities.
- Physical health issues like injuries, physical trauma and side effects of medication.
- Combat-related or overseas-related hardship.
- Sexual abuse/assault.
- Duress, coercion, or desperation.
- You had family obligations or similar obligations to non-family members.
- Your age, education, cultural background, or judgmental maturity negatively impacted you.

By the way ...

It helps, but you don't need a diagnosis from a doctor saying you have or had a mental or cognitive condition. You can show the VA proof of your symptoms from your medical records, personal and buddy statements, and personnel records.

(3) The VA will also consider if this unusual situation applies to you:

You could not have been convicted for AWOL or misconduct under the UCMJ because you had a valid legal defense. The defense must be “substantive,” which means this exception does not apply if your only defense would have been based on procedures, technicalities, or formalities.

What compelling circumstances apply to you?



“Insanity”

You do not need to be “crazy” to qualify for COD based on insanity. The law sometimes uses words as “legal terms of art” to mean something very different to what we would mean in everyday conversation. This is one of those times.

It’s a difficult standard

The legal definition of “insanity” is confusing. Even lawyers don’t agree on what it means. Because this insanity exception is so legally complicated, we have not included the language of the law here. Very broadly speaking, it seems to mean someone who was experiencing severe mental health symptoms.



You need a medical opinion to show there’s at least a 50/50 chance that you were experiencing the conditions of “insanity” at time of discharge. It’s important to note, you **do not** need to prove the conditions of “insanity” caused the conduct that led to your discharge.

Get legal help!

If you think the insanity exception might apply, we recommend that you don’t try to apply on your own. The best option is to work with an accredited VSO or attorney.



Please Note!

If you were separated in lieu of general court martial (you took a plea deal) or received a Bad Conduct Discharge, “insanity” is the **only** option for COD. If insanity does not apply to you, you may still qualify for benefits by applying for a discharge upgrade.

Step 3. How to apply for a Character of Discharge (COD) review.

There is no special form to apply only for a COD review. The VA does a character of discharge review when a veteran applies for VA benefits.

Choose a Benefit.

To apply for a COD, you must choose which benefit to apply for. All the forms are available online to print, or you can apply through eBenefits.

RECOMMENDED BENEFITS:

- ★ **Service-Connected Disability** – If you have a disability that began or got worse during your service, or that you have at least in part because of something in service, disability compensation is the **best option**. The sooner you apply for disability, the more benefits you get if you succeed.

To apply for the first time, submit VA Form 21-526EZ.

If VA already denied you benefits for that medical condition, use VA Form 20-0995 with “new and relevant evidence” to submit a supplemental claim, **OR** VA Form 20-0996 for a Higher-Level Review if you don’t have new evidence and were denied less than a year ago.

If you do not have a disability, apply for one of the following benefits, even if you do not want that benefit. You just need to apply to get the VA to do a COD.

- ✓ **VA Home Loan** – You only need to request a “Certificate of Eligibility” from the VA. You **do not** need to go to a bank and apply for the actual home loan. The Certificate of Eligibility application is VA Form 26-1880.
- ✓ **VA Healthcare** – An VA healthcare application can also trigger COD review. To apply, you will submit VA Form 10-10EZ.

NOT RECOMMENDED:

- ⊘ **VA Pension** – This is a benefit for low-income wartime veterans that works for triggering COD. However, if the VA makes an error in your pension calculation you may have to pay back any pension money that was overpaid.
- ⊘ **Life Insurance** – Most veterans can get this benefit, so this will likely not trigger COD review.
- ⊘ **G.I. Bill** - Only veterans with a fully Honorable discharge are eligible, so the VA will automatically deny your application without doing a COD review.
- ⊘ **Readiness and Employment** – Only veterans who already have service-connected disability benefits qualify. If you may qualify for service-connected disability, use the disability application.



Which benefit application will you use to get COD review?

Tell your story

You know your story best. Your VA file is filled with information that other people have written about your time in the military. Your job is to make sure they have the whole story so the VA can see why you deserve benefits.

You can tell your story by sending a completed "Statement in Support of a Claim" using VA Form 21-4138. Make sure you include the statement "I request a hearing on the issue of my Character of Discharge" on your 21-4138. This should ensure you get a hearing with the VA to review your COD.

There is an example of the first page of this form on the next page.

More information is better!

Send additional letters or other forms of evidence to support your story, if you can. There is no limit on how many letters or how much evidence you can send.



Do you have family members or friends who know about your experiences, or have seen your disability symptoms?

They can submit a letter!

Are there people from your unit who know what happened?

Ask them to submit a "buddy" letter to explain why they know that your story is true.

Have you seen a doctor about your symptoms or are you planning to?



Ask your doctor whether they can write a letter saying it is "at least as likely as not" that medical symptoms contributed to your misconduct.

Gather other records that support your story. We recommend that you work with a VSO who can pull your personnel and medical records from your service for you to review. If you choose to work on your own, you can also access your own records using an SF-180 form (available to print online), or on eVetRecs through <https://vetrecs.archives.gov/VeteranRequest/home.html>.



Who are some people you can ask to write statements for you?

Character of Discharge (COD) Review Application Checklist

Get a folder or envelope to keep your application materials in. Complete this Checklist as you finish each document and as you put them in your folder or envelope.

Complete **In my folder/
envelope**

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | VA Form for the benefit I Chose |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | "Statement in Support of a Claim" VA Form 21-4138 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Relevant medical records, including:

_____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Medical Opinion (optional) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Relevant personnel records, including:

_____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Letters (list the name of each person who is writing
a letter for you):

_____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other evidence of what happened to you in service:

_____ |

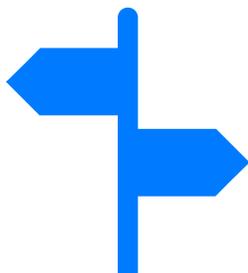
By the way ...

Anything can be used as evidence. Additional evidence of thing that happened that contributed to your in-service misconduct might include obituaries of loved ones, medical records of loved ones, divorce decrees, police reports, letters/emails/text messages between you and someone else while you were in service, news articles, photographs, foreclosure notices etc.

Discharge Upgrade

Whether you are looking to change the character of your service or the reason for your discharge on your DD-214, this guide will walk you through where to apply, what forms you need, and what to submit with your applications. Don't be overwhelmed, you can do this!

Step 1. Figure out which board to apply to.



A discharge upgrade goes through the Department of Defense, not the VA. It's different than a COD because it also looks at your life *after* service. To get a discharge upgrade, you apply to one of two boards for the branch of the military that you served in.

The two basic kinds of board are a Discharge Review Board (DRB) or a Board for Correction of Military or Naval Records (BCM/NR).

Discharge Review Boards (DRBs)

You should apply to the DRB if:

- You have not applied for a discharge upgrade before, or have not had a hearing where you get to appear before the Discharge Review Board,
- Your discharge did not result from a General Court Martial, **AND**
- It has been less than 15 years since you were discharged.

Note: If you have applied to the DRB before but you didn't request a hearing, it's often a good idea to apply to the DRB again and request a hearing.

A DRB can:

- Upgrade a discharge
- Change the reason for your discharge

A DRB can't:

- Change the reason for your discharge to or from a medical discharge
- Make your discharge worse
- Change your DD-214 if it has been more than 15 years since you were discharged

If applying to the DRB is right for you, you will need to apply to the DRB for **your specific branch of service**. The Army, Coast Guard, and Air Force each have their own DRBs, while the Navy and Marine Corps have a joint DRB.

Boards for Correction of Military or Naval Records (BCM/NRs)

If you were in the Air Force, Army, or Coast Guard, the other review board you can apply to is called the **Board for Correction of Military Records (BCMR)**. If you were in the Marine Corps or the Navy, this board is called the **Board for Correction of Naval Records (BCNR)**. The guidelines for both boards are the same.

You should apply to the BCMR or BCNR if:

- You have applied to the DRB or the BCMR before and been rejected.
- It has been over 15 years since you were discharged.
- You want to change your reason for discharge to or from medical retirement or separation
- Your discharge was the result of a General Court Martial.

You should NOT apply to the BCMR or BCNR if:

- You can apply to the DRB, and you have not done that first. The BCM/NR will only review your discharge if you want a change that the DRB is not allowed to make, or the DRB has already rejected you.

Deadlines:



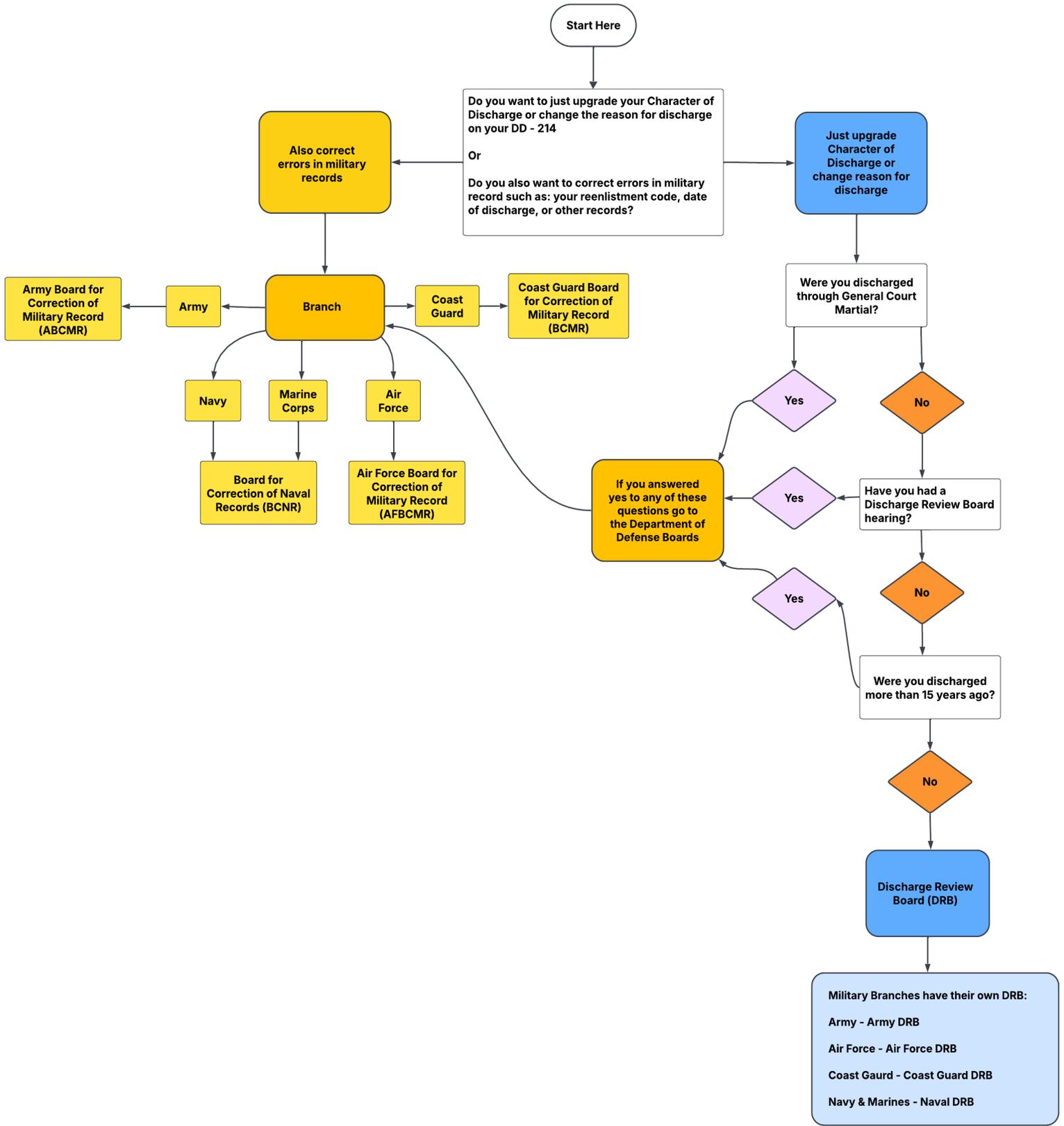
The way BCMR and BCNR deadlines work can be confusing.

- A BCMR or BCNR requires you to apply within three years of discovering the problem you are asking the Board to fix, however, the BCMR or BCNR can and **typically will waive this deadline** if you explain why it should consider your request for an upgrade.
- By comparison, the DRB cannot waive its 15-year deadline. This means that if your discharge was **more than 15 years ago, you should apply to the BCMR or BCNR** and explain why they should waive the deadline for you.
- Similarly, you should apply to the BCMR or BCNR if you need something changed that the DRB does not have the power to fix, even if it has been more than 3 years since you discovered this.



Deciding whether to apply through the DRB or BCM/NR can be confusing. There is a lot of information to consider. The flowchart on the next page can help you decide which option is best for you.

Should I go to the DRB or to the BCMR?



What are my chances of getting an upgrade?

It is difficult to get a discharge upgrade, but you may be able to use the **Kurta Memo** and the **Wilkie Memo**, available online, to improve your chances. The Department of Defense has released these memos to guide the Boards on how to look at applications for discharge upgrades. Read the Memos to learn more!

Liberal Consideration (Kurta Memo)

The Kurta Memo says that if the circumstances of your discharge were related to a **mental health condition**, a traumatic brain injury (**TBI**), or a sexual assault or sexual harassment, or domestic violence that you experienced while in the military (**MST**), your application will be given "liberal consideration" by the DRB or BCM/NR. The Kurta Memo says that the Boards must ask the following:

1. Do you have a mental health condition or TBI, or did you experience MST?
 - *VA or other medical records of diagnoses, treatment can help prove this.*
2. Did you have that condition or experience MST in service?
 - *Service records are best, but VA service connection, medical opinions, buddy statements, or evidence of behavioral changes in service can help.*
3. Did your mental health condition or MST contribute to your misconduct?
 - *Doctors' letters, buddy statements, and medical journal articles can help.*
4. Is your misconduct too serious to be excused by your mental health or MST?

Applications given "liberal consideration" have the highest grant rates.

Second Chances (Wilkie Memo)

The **Wilkie Memo** instructs DRBs and BCM/NRs to think about "fundamental fairness" when looking at an application for discharge upgrade and consider many factors such as whether you accept responsibility for your misconduct, character references, and your conduct after discharge. Unlike the VA in a COD, **the DRB or BCM/NR cares who you are and what you have done after service**. If you can show that you have been rehabilitated or have not committed any misconduct after service or in a very long time, the Boards will likely consider this favorably.

Step 2. Gather all the documents you need.



If you are applying to the DRB, the form you need is a **DD-293**. If you are applying to the BCMR or BCNR, you need a **DD-149**. You can find these forms online.

In addition to the filled-out form, you should submit other evidence that will help the board make its decision:

- **Include a detailed personal statement about why your discharge should be upgraded, or your reason for discharge should be changed.**

A DRB or BCM/NR will generally change a discharge if it finds that the discharge is unfair in your circumstances, or the military didn't follow its own rules when it discharged you. Under the standards of a DRB, this is called "equity" or "propriety", but under a BCMR or BCNR this is called "injustice" or "error". Both of these standards basically mean the same thing, but it is helpful to note the different terms.

- If you apply to the DRB, your statement should explain why your discharge is inequitable or improper.
- If you apply to the BCMR or BCNR, you should explain why your discharge was unjust or illegal.

- **A complete copy of your official military personnel file (OMPF).**

Even if you think you already have a copy of your OMPF, it is best to order a new one to put in your application to make sure there are no missing documents. To do this, you can fill out **Form SF-180**, available online. Where to mail your SF-180 depends on your branch of service and which records you need. Look at page 3 of the form for a list that will tell you which address you need.

You can also request a copy of your OMPF using the eVetRecs site, at vetrecs.archive.gov.

- **Privacy Act Requests**

If you have applied for a discharge upgrade before and been denied, you should submit a **Privacy Act request** for all records the Boards already have about you along with a **Privacy Act waiver** so that you can try to address the reasons that the Board denied you in the past. Where to submit your request depends on your branch of service and which board you applied to in the past.

A Privacy Act Request should state that:

- it is made "pursuant to the Privacy Act Privacy Act, 5 U.S.C. 552a"
- state that "I, (your name), do hereby certify that I am the individual to whom the records in question pertain.", and
- have your signature on it.



Army

If you applied to an Army DRB or BCMR in the past, you should write a letter to the Army Review Board Agency requesting all records the Boards have about you and mail it to:

Army Review Boards Agency
251 18th Street South, Suite 385
Arlington, VA 22202-3531



Navy

If you applied to the Navy DRB in the past, you should mail a letter requesting all records the DRB has related to you along with a Privacy Act waiver to:

720 Kennon St. SE, Suite 309
Washington Navy Yard, Washington DC
20374-5023

If you applied to the Navy BCNR in the past, you should mail a letter requesting all records the DRB has related to you along with a Privacy Act waiver to:

701 S. Courthouse Road
Building 12, Suite 1001
Arlington, VA 22204-2490



Air Force

If you applied to the Air Force DRB or BCMR in the past, you should mail a letter requesting all records the Boards have related to you along with a Privacy Act Waiver to:

Air Force Review Boards Agency
3351 Celmers Lane
Joint Base Andrews, MD 20762-6435



Coast Guard

If you applied to the Coast Guard DRB or BCMR in the past, you should mail a letter requesting all records the Board has related to you along with a Privacy Act Waiver to:

Commandant (CG-6P)
Attn FOIA Officer
US Coast Guard Stop 7710
2703 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave SE
Washington, DC 20593-7710
Or submit it via email to EFOIA@uscg.mil

- **Health records**

You should give the Board access to your medical records while in service. To do this, you should fill out **Form DD-2870**. Once you have filled out this form, mail it to:

TRICARE West Region
Priority Services Department
PO Box 7074
Camden, SC 29021-7074

You also likely want to give the Board access to any medical or dental records for any treatment at the VA after you were discharged, or submit the records yourself. If you want to authorize the Board to get your records, fill out **VA Form 10-5345**. Once this form is done, it should be mailed to:

Washington VA Medical Center
Release of Information Office
50 Irving Street
N.W. Washington, DC 20422

- **Any court martial transcripts or military investigation records**

Remember, if your discharge is a result of a General Court Martial, you cannot apply to the DRB.

For more information on how to access court martial transcripts and military investigative records, click here, or type <https://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/guides/ordering-courts-martial-transcripts-and-military-investigative-records> into your browser.

- **Post Service Police or Criminal Records**

While these records may not be positive, it is important to be honest with the Board and disclose them.

- **Letters of Support**

You likely want to submit letters of support from people who know you well, such as friends, people you served with, family members, coworkers, and religious leaders. These letters can help explain what happened to you in service, or can tell the Boards about your good character since service.

- **Educational Documents**

If you've gotten a degree or attended college post-service, you may want to include a copy of your transcript or diploma.

- **Documents showing hardship in-service**

If your statement talks about stressors in your life that lead to your discharge, you want to include documentation of those things. This might include divorce papers, death certificates, or hospital records.

- **Any positive post-service history**

Remember, a DRB or BCM/NR cares about what has happened in your life since you were in service. You can include any records, photographs, or news articles about your work or role in your community.

Where Do I Find the Forms I Need?



Requesting your records and applying for a discharge upgrade usually requires several forms, which can be hard to find. Don't panic, you can do this!

Find the form you need below and follow the guide to find out where to download it:

Form DD-293

- Form DD-293 is for applying to the Discharge Review Board (DRB).
- You can find the DD-293 form by clicking [here](#), or typing <https://www.esd.whs.mil/portals/54/documents/dd/forms/dd/dd0293.pdf> into your browser.
- You can also find this form on the Department of Defense website, at www.defense.gov.
- Once you get to the DoD website, you will need to go to **Resources** in the top right corner of your screen.
- From there, a menu will pull down. From the Menu, select **Contact**. Then, scroll down to where you see **Help Center** in the bottom right corner of your screen and click **FAQ**.
- Once you're on the **FAQ** screen, click **Military/Civilian Records, DEERS, and DOD ID Cards** on the left side of your screen, beneath the words **Filter By**.
- Then, click **Request Correction of Military Records** on the right side of your screen.
- Finally, Click **Form DD-293** in the drop-down.

Form DD-149

- Form DD-149 is for applying to the Board of Corrections for Military or Naval Records (BCM/NR)
- You can find the DD-149 form by clicking [here](#) or typing <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/forms/dd/dd0149.pdf> into your browser.

- You can also find this form on the Department of Defense website, at www.defense.gov.
- Once you get to the DoD website, you will need to go to **Resources** in the top right corner of your screen.
- From there, a menu will pull down. From the Menu, select **Contact**. Then, scroll down to where you see **Help Center** in the bottom right corner of your screen and click **FAQ**.
- Once you're on the **FAQ** screen, click **Military/Civilian Records, DEERS, and DOD ID Cards** on the left side of your screen, beneath the words **Filter By**.
- Then, click **Request Correction of Military Records** on the right side of your screen.
- Finally, Click **Form DD-149** in the drop-down.

Form SF-180

- Form SF-180 is for requesting a copy of your Official Military Personnel File (OMPF).
- You can find form SF-180 by clicking [here](#), or by typing <https://www.gsa.gov/reference/forms/request-pertaining-to-military-records> your browser.
- You can also go to the General Services Administration Website, at www.gsa.gov.
- From there, scroll to the very bottom of the home page. You will see several columns of options. Under the column that says "Reference", click **Forms**.
- Then, type **SF180** into the box that says **Form Name or Number**.
- Finally, click **Request Pertaining to Military Records**. This will bring up the option to download the correct form.

Form DD-2870

- Form DD-2870 is for requesting your medical records while in service.
- You can find form DD-2870 by clicking [here](#), or by typing <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/forms/dd/dd2870.pdf> into your browser.

VA Form 10-5345

- VA Form 10-5345 is for requesting your medical records for treatment at the VA after service.

- You can find form 10-5345 by clicking [here](#), or by typing https://www.va.gov/vaforms/medical/pdf/va_form_10-5345_fillable.pdf into your browser.
- You can also find this form by going to the VA website at www.va.gov
- Then, scroll to the very bottom of the page. You will see several columns of options. Under the column that says "More VA Resources," click **VA Forms**.
- Then, type **10-5345** into the box that says **Enter a keyword, form name, or number** and press search. This will pull up the option to download VA Form 10-5345.

Step 3. Put your application packet together and submit it.

What order should I put my documents in?



1. Your **DD-293** or **DD-149** should be the first page in your packet.
2. After the form you are using to apply, your personal statement should come next. These two things should be at the top of the packet.

Finally, you should put your documents in order of how important they are. You want the most important documents to be first in the packet. This order will be different depending on your story and what is most important for the Board to know about you.



Where do I send my application packet?



Where to send your application depends on which branch you served in and which board you are applying to. Check the chart on the next page to find the right address to mail to or link to apply online.

ARMY	
Army Review Boards Agency 251 18th Street South Suite 385 Arlington, VA 22202-3531 http://arba.army.pentagon.mil/online-application.html	Army Review Boards Agency 251 18th Street South Suite 385 Arlington, VA 22202-3531 http://arba.army.pentagon.mil/online-application.html
NAVY and MARINE CORPS	
Secretary of the Navy Council of Review Boards Attn: Naval Discharge Review Board 720 Kennon Ave S.E., Suite 309 Washington Navy Yard, DC 20374-5023 http://www.secnav.navy.mil/mra/CORB/pages/ndrb/ha.aspx Submit applications via email to: ndrb@navy.mil	Board for Correction of Naval Records 701 S. Courthouse Road Suite 1001 Arlington, VA 22204-2490 http://www.secnav.navy.mil/mra/bcnr/Pages/Start_Application.aspx Submit applications via email to: BCNR_Application@navy.mil
AIR FORCE	
Air Force Review Boards Agency SAF/MRBR 550-C Street West, Suite 40 Randolph AFB, TX 78150-4742 http://www.afpc.af.mil/Separation/Discarge-Review-Board/ Submit applications via email to: saf.mrbr.tier1@us.af.mil	Board for Correction of Air Force Records SAF/MRBR 550-C Street West, Suite 40 Randolph AFB, TX 78150-4742 http://www.afpc.af.mil/Career-Management/Board-for-Correction-of-Military-Records/ Submit applications via email to: saf.mrbr.tier1@us.af.mil
COAST GUARD	
Commandant (CG-133) Attn: Office of Military Personnel US Coast Guard Stop 7907 2703 Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave., S.E. Washington, DC 20593-7907	Department of Homeland Security Office of the General Counsel Board for Correction of Military Records 245 Murray Lane, Stop 0485 Washington, DC 20528-0485

Additional Resources and Templates

Personal Statement Guide

The questions in this guide should help you think through the circumstances that led to your discharge. Your personnel record will have the military's view of what happened. The purpose of your personal statement is to help the person reading to understand your full story, and see things from your perspective.

General Information

1. What is your name? What branch(es) did you serve in and when?
2. Why did you join the military? Was your mental health good before service?
3. What was your service like prior to the incident? Did you receive any awards or recognition? Did you rarely receive reprimands? Share any positive details about your service.

Getting Specific – Chronology is helpful.

When describing the circumstances that led to your discharge, try to tell what happened in the order it happened. You want a beginning, a middle, and an end.

What led to the behavior that led to your discharge?

- Was something going on in your personal or professional life?
- Did you or a family member have a serious physical or mental health condition? Were you sexually assaulted or harassed?
- Did you witness or experience something that impacted you?

If the circumstances that led to your discharge were related to a physical or mental health condition or to a sexual assault or sexual harassment, describe how that condition or experience has continued to affect you since you were discharged.

- Have you continued to experience symptoms or behavioral effects?
- Have you received or are you currently receiving any treatment for your symptoms?

Who knew about what you experienced or were experiencing?

- Was anyone there with you?

- Did you tell anyone about what was going on? *e.g. a friend or family member, your commanding officer, or a medical professional.*
- Did you try to get help? If so, from whom? If not, why not?

What happened that led to you being discharged?

Try to show as much detail as possible. If you're not sure about a detail, say you're not sure or leave it out.

- Where were you at the time and what were you doing there?
- Who were you with?
- Describe the incident(s), and what you were thinking or feeling at the time.
- When did military leadership get involved? Describe each interaction and what was said.
- What discipline did you face because of what happened?

After Discharge

If you are applying for a discharge upgrade, how has your life and behavior improved since you were discharged? Below, we have listed some examples of the kinds of positive changes that you might want to include.

- Are you involved in your community? E.g. volunteer work, coaching sports, or involvement faith-based organization like a church or mosque.
- Have you started receiving treatment for alcohol or substance use?
- Have you kept a clean criminal record since discharge or for an extended period of time?
- Have you pursued additional education, like college or trade school?
- Have you had a successful career or family life?

Sample Personal Statement

Personal Statement of John Doe

I respectfully ask the Board to upgrade my military discharge from Other Than Honorable to General (Under Honorable Conditions). I take full responsibility for the mistakes that led to my separation from the Army, and I deeply regret the choices I made. However, I hope you will consider the personal hardships that affected my behavior, as well as the steps I have taken to rebuild my life since my discharge.

I joined the Army on October 15, 2011, looking for structure, discipline, and a meaningful career. After finishing Basic Training I became a 91B Wheeled Vehicle Mechanic. In 2013, I deployed to Iraq as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, where I worked as a convoy mechanic, making sure vehicles were mission-ready and could safely transport soldiers and supplies.

In 2015, after I returned home from deployment, I got devastating news—my identical twin brother, who had battled mental illness for years, had taken his own life. Losing him was overwhelming and disorienting. My twin and I had always been extremely close, and it felt like I had lost part of myself. After his death, I began having dissociative episodes. I would “lose time” for hours or even days, unable to remember what had happened. Sometimes, I would wake up in unfamiliar places with no idea how I got there. I also experienced vivid hallucinations where I saw and heard my brother as if he were still alive. I later learned that these symptoms were signs of PTSD and prolonged grief disorder, but at the time, I didn’t understand what was happening and thought I was losing my mind.

Out of fear and confusion, I didn’t ask for help. Instead, I tried to cope by drinking heavily, but that only made things worse. By early 2016, I had started using synthetic hallucinogens introduced to me by an acquaintance. This led to unpredictable and reckless behavior, including going AWOL and acting in ways that did not reflect the soldier I had been. During a random drug test, I tested positive

for illegal substances, which led to an investigation and my discharge under Other Than Honorable conditions in August 2016.

In 2017, after my life had spiraled to a low point, I checked into an inpatient psychiatric program in Phoenix, Arizona. I was diagnosed with complex PTSD, dissociative disorder, and prolonged grief disorder. Through trauma-focused therapy and medication, I began working through the pain and trauma I had buried for so long. It was a difficult but necessary step in my journey toward healing.

After completing treatment, I focused on turning my life around. I have been sober for over five years, and I continue to attend therapy and stay committed to my mental health. Since 2019, I have been steadily employed and now volunteer with a crisis support organization that helps veterans dealing with PTSD and mental health challenges.

I don't want to erase my past—I simply want my full story to be heard. While my actions in my final year of service were serious mistakes, I served honorably before that, including during my deployment. I respectfully ask the Board to consider the tragic and unusual circumstances that led to my misconduct and the hard work I have done to rehabilitate myself since then. Thank you for taking the time to consider my request.

If you feel comfortable, you may add this oath to strengthen your credibility.

I attest under penalty of perjury that the above statement is true and correct.



John Doe

04/03/2025

Date

Buddy Statement Questionnaire

This questionnaire is intended to help friends or peers from service write a statement on behalf of someone applying for VA benefits. You may use the questions to guide you as you write your statement, or you can write a first draft directly on the questionnaire, then type your answers in a separate document (without the questions) to submit as your statement.

1. What is your name?

2. How long did you serve and in which branch(es)?

3. How do you know the VA benefits applicant? When did you first meet?

4. If you have been asked to write about something that happened while you and the applicant were in service together, please describe the event below. Use as much detail as you can remember. Be sure to include:

a. When the event happened. Any of the examples below are okay depending on how much you remember – if you’re not sure, don’t guess!

i. *On July 15, 2000 . . .*

ii. *In July of 2000 . . .*

iii. *During the summer of 2000*

iv. *During basic training . . .*

v. *While we were serving together . . .*

b. Where you were when the event happened and who else was there.

c. What happened. Try to explain from start to finish. Feel free to talk about what you thought or felt about what happened.

d. If relevant, what happened after the event. For example, did leadership say anything or make a policy change (or not)? Did anyone start acting differently? Were you or members of your company impacted by what happened?

Sample Friend/Family Statement

Statement of Pauli Almoni in support of John Doe

1. I, Pauli Almoni, declare, under penalty of perjury, the following in support of John Doe's application for a discharge upgrade.
2. I have been friends with John Doe since we were kids. We grew up together in Pittsburgh and have been close throughout our lives.
3. We remained in regular contact when John joined the Army in 2010. Serving his country had always been his dream, and he hoped to achieve great things in the military.
4. In 2015, John's wife Sarah was diagnosed with bone cancer. This took a toll on him and John told me about the stress of caring for Sarah and worrying about her health often. He told me that he was extremely depressed and could not sleep most of the time. When I saw him during that period, I could tell that he was not doing well and was agitated.
5. Around the same time, John and Sarah's daughter Jessica began having major seizures. This contributed further to John's stress and mental health problems.
6. In the summer of 2016, John was discharged from the military. He told me that because of the stress he was under caring for Sarah and Jessica, he had lashed out at others in the military and been AWOL several times and this was why he had been discharged.
7. After being discharged, John moved back to Pittsburgh.
8. I encouraged John to come to church, and he became a regular member of our congregation. After several months, John started going to counseling that the church offers and his mental health began to improve.
9. In 2017, John began working with me at a nearby manufacturing plant. He has always been a reliable coworker who does his job well. In 2018, he won an award for being a top employee in the department he works in.

10. Since 2019, John has led a church counseling group for people going through difficult times. He has made a difference in the lives of so many people in our community by encouraging open conversations about mental health problems and supporting people caring for sick and disabled loved ones.

11. John is an honest, hard-working man who cares deeply about his community and his family. Since being discharged from the military, he has turned his life around and gotten help with his mental health problems. John's behavior in the military that led to his discharge does not reflect who he is now or the man that I and many others know.

12. I can be reached at XXX-XXX-XXXX or by email at Paulialmoni@yahoo.com

Date Executed:

Don't forget to sign!

Pauli Almoni