

Records reconnaissance

Military documents for every reporter

Military documents can aid investigations, daily reporting and local military base stories for any journalist. Whether they're provided by sources, gleaned from the internet or wrangled through public records requests, here are a few ways to track down the records you need.

Stolen valor

Avoid being conned by politicians and other sources claiming false military service. Verify an individual's dates of service, places served, branch, final rank and other information through the National Personnel Records Center (archives.gov/personnel-records-center).

During the pandemic, this St. Louis-based agency was down from 800 employees to just 20 on site to process the paper records, so only emergency requests have been handled for the past two years. Normal operations resumed March 7, 2022 — with a backlog of 500,000 requests. A clerk told me there is no telling how long a new request could take to be fulfilled.

Don't be deterred, though. This is basic reporting for covering the military, says T. Christian Miller, a senior reporter at ProPublica. Miller, who has covered four wars and won the Pulitzer several times, suggests talking directly with the clerks.

Journalists can call the special requests office at 314-801-0816. Then fill out the Standard Form 180 (SF-180) (archives.gov/files/research/order/standard-form-180.pdf). Mark it "FOIA" and note that you are a journalist and seek expedited review. Fax it to 314-801-0764. Try emailing, as well, at congressional.status@nara.gov.

To get the record, you'll need the Social Security number of the veteran. If you don't have it, ask the records clerk to cross reference the veteran's name and date of birth in the Veterans Administration system.

Grenades for cops

The military gives its extra guns, trucks and ammunition to local police departments, including university police, through the Defense Logistics Agency's 1033 Equipment Surplus Program.

The agency posts online the police departments



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receiving military equipment through the program. A quick check, for example, shows that the Winston County Sheriff's Department in Alabama received a utility truck, unmanned vehicle, a half dozen guns, and six boxes of grenades. New Mexico State University scored a mine-resistant vehicle.

The Marshall Project and MuckRock hounded the agency for the records in 2014 and embarked on a 50-state FOIA-request blitz of local police departments, ultimately pressuring the agency to begin posting the data online. Download the data at bit.ly/DLAsurplus.

Information barrage

A vast amount of military records are posted online, or mentioned online in a way that can help with FOIA requests or to persuade insiders for copies. Check press release pages, public presentations, congressional hearings and agency FOIA reading rooms. Michael Fabey, longtime military reporter and current writer for Jane's, says reports by the Congressional Research Service and Government Accountability Office are a goldmine, as well as the Office of the Director's Operational Test and Evaluation annual report.

Check out what others have already obtained and posted online.

- The Government Attic provides documents it acquired through FOIA at governmentattic.org/DocumentsDoD.html.
- MuckRock.com assisted thousands of public records requests submitted to the military, with the resulting documents.
- Historical military records have been gathered by the National Security Archive at nsarchive.gwu.edu.

Find out how the military is spending its money in your community. A first stop might be usaspending.gov. Then move to the Federal Procurement Data System (fpds.gov) and search "Department of Defense."

Finally, investigate the U.S. military through every other type of government agency it touches. For example, find environmental pollution from military installations through local and state agencies, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency. Seek local, state and federal health records for soldier health issues. ♦