



Doughboys of H Co., 58th Inf. Regt., 4th Inf. Div., pose with their Colt .45s at 3rd Army Headquarters in Coblenz, Germany, February 1919. The unit performed occupation duty after the Armistice.

HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR WWI VETERAN ANCESTORS

With the 100th anniversary of U.S. involvement in WWI only a few years away from now, a primer on how to track the Doughboy in your family is most timely.

BY MARGARET MOEN

More than 24 million men registered in the three separate U.S. draft registrations held in 1917-1918. About 80% of those 24 million did not serve during World War I.

But you still stand a good chance of having ancestors who did. According to VA statistics, U.S. personnel totaled 4,734,991—2,171,563 of whom went overseas mostly to France.

And, as WWI is relatively recent, says Juliana Smith, social community manager for *Ancestry.com*, “The fact that they served may be something that has been well documented in the family—there may be photographs of them [in a WWI uniform],” for

example.

But you “always want to try and verify that [WWI] service,” says Smith, and “so far as what they did while they were there, that’s what you want to go into a little more detail on.”

To mark the centennial of The Great War and the approaching 100th anniversary of U.S. involvement (1917-1918), here are some basic ways to document and detail an ancestor’s service.

DOCUMENTING SERVICE

While draft registration does not equal war service, draft cards are accessible and a good place to begin. Search at www.ancestry.com (subscription), search.ancestry.com/search/, or familysearch.org (free), familysearch.org/search/.

Cards from any of the three draft registrations will provide basic biographical information about the registrant.

Smith notes that if your WWI ances-

tor enlisted earlier, he won't have a draft card.

Also check the 1930 U.S. Census. Its "veterans" box asks if the respondent served and, if so, in which conflict. "WW" indicates World War I. (See www.archives.gov/research/census/1930/general-info.html on where to view the census. The 1930 census records also can be viewed at [ancestry.com](http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=6224), <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=6224>.)

If you have a forebear's medals you need to identify, visit www.homeofheroes.com/medals. Also, go directly to medals on that site for a specific service, like the Army, at www.homeofheroes.com/medals/by_branch/medals_army.html.

Headstones often cite the deceased's military service. See <http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov>.

Ancestry.com has electronic scans of these records: <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=8750>.

The original paper records are in St. Louis, Mo., at the National Archives there.

If you might have a WWI ancestor buried overseas, search for him at the American Battle Monuments Commission website, www.abmc.gov. Included there are:

- Service and branch;
- Regiment and division;
- Death date;
- Burial place; and
- Where he entered the service.

THE 1973 FIRE

Next, try to obtain a copy of his military personnel record from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in St. Louis.

Bryan McGraw, director of the National Archives at St. Louis, co-located with the National Personnel Records Center, says you can request a copy of the record(s) by completing a *Standard Form 180* (www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/standard-form-180.html) and sending it to the National Archives via mail at 1 Archives Drive, St. Louis, MO 63138, or you can fax it to 314-801-9195.

You can view the record in person at the same address, but must first make an



PHOTO COURTESY BILL GIBSON

Pvt. Earl Edward Gibson registered on June 5, 1917. Gibson trained at Camp Funston at Fort Riley, Kan., before heading overseas. In France, he served as a mail truck driver with G Co., Headquarters Bn., American Expeditionary Forces in 1918.

appointment by phone at (314) 801-0850. Provide as much information as possible on your WWI vet so NARA can verify that it has the record.

McGraw warns that a devastating 1973 fire at the St. Louis office destroyed an estimated 18 million records. Relative to WWI research, 80% to 85% of Army (including Army Air Corps and Army Air Force) records for individuals discharged/retired/killed in service between 1912 and 1959 were destroyed.

The fire, however, did not affect Coast Guard, Marine Corps or Navy personnel records.

McGraw explains: "We typically have a variety of surrogate material—rosters, rolls, pay vouchers, award cards, general orders and other material—on individuals affected by the 1973 fire," so "we usually have some record material if they served."

As WWI records are now archived and publicly accessible, you do not have to be next-of-kin to request them. NARA charges a fee for archived records if you wish to receive a photocopy. Military personnel records usually require either a \$25 fee (for records of five pages or fewer), or \$70 (for records of six pages or more). These fees are collected prior to providing copies.

But if you wish to view the original record in person, bring a camera or digital scanner and photograph or scan the record for free, McGraw suggests. Or you also can pay a per-page copy fee in the research room for only what you photocopy, which can save money, versus a copy of the entire record.

Also see www.archives.gov/st-louis and www.archives.gov/veterans.

UNIT RECORDS IN MARYLAND

With this background on your WWI ancestor, you can learn more about his unit's service by contacting the NARA facility at College Park, Md.

Tim Nenninger, chief of the Textual Records Reference Branch, explains that NARA at College Park holds organizational records for World War I, as opposed to personnel records. These organizational papers include the records of the units that constituted the

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Further Resources For Finding WWI Ancestors

Cyndi's List (free) on the U.S. in WWI: www.cyndislist.com/ww1/us/

Ancestry.com (subscription) for numerous World War I collections, including: Georgia, World War I Service Cards, 1917-1919:

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3129>

New York, Abstracts of World War I Military Service, 1917-1919:

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3030>

U.S. National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, 1866-1938:

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1200>

www.Fold3.com (subscription) has World War I collections.

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1878-CC	369	1883	63	1890	59
1878-S	67	1883-CC	279	1890-S	69
1879	59	1883-0	59	1891	75
1879-0	119	1884	63	1891-0	149
1879-S	69	1884-CC	279	1891-S	79
1880	59	1885	59	1896	59
1880-0	69	1885-0	59	1897	59
1880-S	69	1886	59	1897-S	75
1881	65	1886-S	295	1898	59
1881-CC	689	1887	59	1898-0	69
1881-0	59	1887-S	119	1899-0	69
1881-S	69	1888	59	1900	59
1882	65	1888-S	359	1900-0	69
1882-CC	285	1889	59	1900-S	249



ABOUT UNCIRCULATED

DATE:	PRICE:	DATE:	PRICE:	DATE:	PRICE:	DATE:	PRICE:
1883-S	\$139	1890-CC	\$269	1893	\$475	1895-0	\$1,250
1884-S	198	1891-CC	269	1894	2,250	1896-0	159
1885-S	135	1892	85	1894-0	269	1897-0	98
1886-0	89	1892-0	85	1894-S	439	1898-S	119
						1901-0	\$75
						1902	85
						1902-0	69
						1903	89
						1903-0	549
						1904	79
						1904-0	69
						1921	49
						1921-D	69
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American Expeditionary Forces.

NARA at College Park is therefore your source for researching the actions of your ancestor's unit—battles it fought and where it was located.

College Park can document, for example, a unit's activity in the Meuse-Argonne offensive "with some clarity," says Nenninger. It might be able to find some limited information on somebody's ancestor, such as "he was sent away on guard duty for two weeks."

Researchers should come to College Park with "as much specificity" as possible—saying "my uncle was in France in World War I" doesn't help.

Saying he was in the 42nd Infantry Division doesn't help, either, as WWI divisions were large, Nenninger says.

The College Park staff can assist on-site researchers with "a variety of different finding aids." And the staff can respond to off-site inquiries with "narrowly defined specific bits of information."

Nenninger notes that the Washington, D.C., NARA offices hold the WWI Navy and Marine Corps organizational records, while College Park holds those for the Army, the preponderance of all WWI documents.

Contact information: 8601 Adelphi Rd, College Park, MD 20740; 1-866-272-6272. See: www.archives.gov/dc-metro/college-park/.

To enliven your WWI vet's history, suggests Juliana Smith, search online newspapers, especially for the times his unit left and returned home.

Two possibilities:
www.newspapers.com (subscription);
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> (free).

In a new venture announced in August, the National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Mo., and Fold 3, the U.S. military record website in the *Ancestry.com* family, will now allow the public to create and share memorial pages. The online program is a wonderful opportunity for families to learn more about their WWI ancestors through stories and photos.

"Talk about the fanfare," says Smith. "Those are the kinds of things that make family history come alive." ★

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