World War I Service Records

By Michael Knapp

For researchers of pre-twentieth-century U.S. military service records, locating records is a relatively straightforward process. Those looking for records dating from World War I have a more difficult path to follow, complicated by limited availability of some records. This quarter’s “Genealogy Notes” attempts to explain what you may or may not find in a search for twentieth-century records.

The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, and by the conclusion of hostilities (April of 1920), when the Allied intervention in Siberia ended, a total of 4,734,991 Americans had served in the armed forces. That number includes the regular army, the National Guard troops who were called into federal service from 1913 to 1916 for duty on the Mexican border, and the men called in by the Selective Service Law passed on May 19, 1917, to form the National Army. This last group alone accounted for 77 percent of the total army strength in World War I. This phenomenal growth of the military, twice the number of men who served in the Union forces in the Civil War, was accompanied by an expansion of military recordkeeping duties. When war was declared, there were only 200,000 men in the regular army. It was the policy of all the services to accept only those men who were physically fit to fight and assign them to duties as soldiers or sailors. The massive task of producing equipment and munitions was accomplished by civilian men and women. The rapid growth of the armed forces was achieved by the universal draft decreed by the Selective Service Act. Under this act, 24,294,021 men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one were registered, and more than 2,800,000 were inducted into the military service. By the third registration (September 12, 1918), the age limits were extended to include those between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. This was the army of citizen-soldiers that would “make the world safe for democracy.”

World War I, unlike previous wars, generated a seemingly endless procession of forms, lists, and other means of tracking individual servicemen from the moment they joined through training, overseas duty, and even death. Records were created for all members of the army, navy, and Marine Corps (including army nurses, navy nurses, navy yeomen (F) [females] popularly known as “yeomanettes,” and Marine Corps women reservists known only as “Marinettes”). These were the first real examples of the modern personnel file. Generally, these files contain basic information on the individual at the time of enlistment such as full name, age, and a brief physical description. In some cases, city and state of birth and occupation at the time of enlistment are given, but there is usually no information regarding parents, spouses, or children. These files were also updated to include information on decorations or major disciplinary action the enlistee received.

The Army Transport Service of the Quartermaster Corps was responsible for most of the transport of troops and supplies to and from Europe during the war. There are lists of passengers (in the form of troop manifests) on these transport ships, which provide the name and address of the next of kin for each individual. These lists also provide the service number of each soldier, something crucial for twentieth-century military genealogy.

Of those who served, 116,516 died, either as a result of combat or from other causes. For these casualties, there are lists arranged by branch of service. There are also burial files for those persons who died overseas. These files and the navy and Marine Corps casualty lists provide
the addresses of the next of kin. The burial files further designate which bodies were repatriated to the United States and which ones were interred on foreign soil in permanent American Military Cemeteries.

The Personnel Files

The personnel files for World War I service-men and women are located at the National Personnel Records Center, Military Personnel Records, 9700 Page Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63132. These records, however, are by no means complete. In July of 1973 a fire at the center destroyed about 80 percent of the records for army personnel discharged between November 1, 1917, and January 1, 1960. Of the approximately twenty-five million records affected by the fire, some five million, many in poor shape, were recovered.

The approximately eighty million service records stored in the center, a branch of the National Archives, are the legal property of the branch of the service to which the veteran belonged. The primary function of the center is to provide reference services to the veterans, the military, or government agencies.

Requests for information contained in files must be made on a Standard Form (SF) 180, Request Pertaining to Military Personnel Records. Access to these files is governed by the Privacy Act of 1974, which allows the veteran, or his next of kin if he is deceased, to obtain copies of the information in the file. Only very limited information on the veteran is released to third-party researchers. This usually consists of the name of the veteran, branch of service, dates of service, and awards received.

In the case of records that were destroyed in the fire (virtually all those for World War I army personnel), the Records Reconstruction Branch will attempt to find specific information requested, such as dates of service and rank held, from other sources in its custody. These alternate sources include sick lists, pay vouchers, and unit morning reports. The starting point for those attempting to reconstruct a file is the information on the SF 180. Be as detailed as possible in your request. The basic data needed in order to attempt to reconstruct a file is: full name used during service, branch of service, approximate dates of service, service number, place of discharge, last unit of assignment, and place of entry into service.

Requests for information about navy and Marine Corps veterans are also made using the SF 180 and require the same information as for army personnel. These records did not suffer losses in the 1973 fire.

In some instances, for soldiers of the regular army who entered service before 1912, there may be records in the National Archives. Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, contains regular army enlistment papers, 1894–1912. These files are arranged alphabetically by surname and contain only the information taken at enlistment and sometimes a record of service prior to 1912. Any service subsequent to 1912 will not be included. National Archives Microfilm Publication M233, Register of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1789–1914 (81 rolls), contains a full listing of enlistments, which are arranged chronologically, thereunder alphabetically.

Army Transport Passenger Lists

The Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Record Group 92, contain lists of outgoing passengers, 1917–1923, and lists of outgoing passengers, 1917–1926, which can provide the service number for veterans and the name and address at the time of sailing of the next of kin. These records are arranged alphabetically by name of ship, thereunder chronologically by date of sailing (either outgoing or returning), thereunder by regiment, thereunder by company. Because the number of men on one ship is overwhelming, it is necessary to have all this information to search for an individual among these records.
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Casualty Lists

World War I army casualty lists are arranged by state as well as by division. They provide the name of the casualty, his rank, service number, unit, and date of death. Soldiers of the Great War (1920) is a three-volume work that lists casualties by state, giving rank, cause of death (killed in action, died of wounds, died of disease), and hometown. It also contains many miniature photographs of soldiers.

Navy and Marine Corps casualty lists are arranged alphabetically by surname of casualty. They provide cause of death, date of death, rank, unit, and name and address of next of kin (as of 1919).

Burial Case Files

Record Group 92 also contains correspondence, reports, telegrams, applications, and other papers relating to burials of service personnel ("Burial Case Files"), 1915–1939. These burial files are arranged alphabetically by surname of deceased person. The files range in size from as little as two pages to fifty pages or more and contain information relating to the location of graves both during the actual fighting and after recovery of remains in the 1920s and 1930s. One may also find correspondence between the army and the next of kin regarding the repatriation of bodies to the United States after the war. In some instances there is information concerning the cause of death.

Availability of Records

With the exception of M233, Register of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798–1914, there are no indexes to the records under discussion. Likewise, M233 is the only one of any of the above listed series on microfilm, and it is available for on-site research in Room 400 at the National Archives Building in Washington and also in the Central Plains, Southwest, and Pacific Northwest regional archives.

A small room is available to researchers at the National Personnel Records Center, but the majority of requests for personnel files are received by mail on the SF 180, available from the NPRC or the National Archives. The World War I casualty lists and regular army enlistments are textual records located in the National Archives Building in Washington and are administered by the Military Reference Branch.

The burial case files and army transport lists of passengers are located in the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Maryland (five miles from the National Archives Building), in the custody of the Suitland Reference Branch.

To order copies of these records, it is necessary to provide all possible information in order to determine if a file exists for the veteran in question. Should a file exist, the branch that has custody of the records will provide a Quotation for Reproduction, NATF Form 72, with instructions for ordering copies.

Though sometimes difficult and often frustrating to use, records relating to personnel files for World War I can be found. The tragic loss of records in St. Louis makes this process time consuming and renders the information available scanty at best. With perseverance, one can find some information on the men and women who went "over there" and served their country in the first real World War.
Sergeant Joyce Kilmer was transferred to this regiment from the Second Regiment of the New York National Guard, early in the fall of 1917. For some time he was assigned to duty in the statistical department. He felt that this work did not give him the opportunity for real soldiering, and at his own instance, was transferred to the regimental intelligence section. In this section he displayed qualities of initiative, intelligence and real ability in the obtaining and classifying of information concerning the enemy. He was soon made Sergeant and took part in many patrols. He was on duty with the Intelligence Section at the commencement of the Battle of the Scarpe.

At his own request, he was sent to my battalion which was the assaulting battalion in that fight, for the purpose of collecting information of value for the intelligence section. On the days of July 27th - 28th he was very active in that service and sent back very full and complete reports.

On July 9th, the battalion was obliged to march by the flank and pass a narrow draw, through which heavy German machine gun fire was penetrating. Sergeant Kilmer materially assisted the battalion on that occasion in bringing up the various elements, in maintaining order among the several groups and in getting the men through the narrow draw. On this day and on the day following, heavy losses were sustained among the officers, particularly on the battalion staff. The battalion adjutant has been killed and I called upon Sergeant Kilmer to act as Adjutant. During the remainder of the 29th and all through that night he worked unceasingly and efficiently. On the afternoon of the 30th, we started an attack and ran into a freshly launched German counter-attack. The officer commanding the company making the attack was wounded and I went forward to take charge. Sergeant Kilmer, at his own instance, went with me. We were lying together along the Bois Colas. Machine gun fire was coming down the draw from the village of Seringes. A bullet hit him full in the head killing him instantly.

Not only did Sergeant Kilmer find a soldierly joy in the conflict and actually seek danger, but he was a cool headed soldier. On the day of his death and the day preceding, he performed the very trying duties of adjutant and was full of eagerness at all times to give his full measure of service.

I cannot pay too high a tribute to the soldierly qualities he displayed while serving under my command.

WM. J. DONOVAN
Lt. Col. USA, 165th Inf.

A true copy,
Charles C. Pierce
Ensf. Col. Q.M.G., USA
Chief, G.E.S.

This report regarding the death of Sgt. Joyce Kilmer is not typical of the Burial Case Files in RG 92. Because Kilmer was a well-known poet and also brave, a personal letter was written to his next of kin.