

**How To Research and Write Your Military Memoirs
(Or Your Father's or Grandfather's)
8 Answers to Frequently Asked Questions
by William L. McGee**

When Bill McGee retired in 1989, one of the goals on his "bucket list" was to write for his U.S. Navy Personnel Service Records from World War II. When the records arrived about three months later, they triggered a lot of memories and questions... particularly about the two major air and torpedo attacks by the Japanese he was subjected to in June 1943 in the Solomon Islands. His search for answers took him on a journey that lasted more than 25 years, and inspired him to write five WWII military histories, or "memoirs within a history" as he likes to call them. Bill is frequently asked how to go about researching and writing one's military memoirs—or those of a father, mother, grandfather or grandmother. Here are his answers...



1. How do I get started?

Request your Military Service Records online, by mail, or by fax from the National Archives' National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). The NPRC honors information requests at no charge for veterans and members of their immediate families. Response will be by mail and could take 90 days.

Online: <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records>

Mail: National Personnel Records Center
Military Personnel Records
1 Archives Drive
St. Louis, MO 63138

Fax: 1-314-801-9195

2. What kind of information is included in the Service Records?

Everything you need to create a broad-strokes outline for your memoir, ranging from swearing in, to specific dates of arrival and departure from duty assignments worldwide, to discharge. This key information is guaranteed to refresh fading memories and trigger questions from friends and family.

3. What is the best way to create an outline from the Service Records?

1) For starters, photocopy each personnel record sheet on standard 8½-by-11-inch paper, and 3-hole punch them. All WWII Navy records were on 3½-by-9-inch paper, and I assume this holds true for the other service branches.

2) Put the records in a ring binder in chronological order – from swearing-in to discharge; number the pages, and create a Table of Contents. My records were a mess when they arrived, and if they were ever in chronological order, you would never have known it.

3) Create ring binder tabs by year, type of duty, etc. My ring binder is divided into two main parts, with subsections behind each part. Part I is "Enlistment & Early Training" and is subdivided into 3 subsections. Part II is subdivided into 11 subsections and details my duty on 5 ships, plus 9 months in the Pacific Fleet on a heavy cruiser for Operation "Crossroads" (the postwar atomic bomb tests at the Bikini Atoll in 1946)—not to mention a hospital stay in Hollandia, New Guinea, and Shore Patrol duty at Subic Bay, the Philippines.

Allow several weeks for this phase of the project because it's such a fascinating memory jogger. Be sure you make notes and jot down questions as you go, especially if you're writing someone else's story.

4. What are some key naval military information sources?

- The National Archives at College Park, Maryland (just outside Washington, D.C.) – The majority of WWII War Diaries, Operational Plans, Action Reports, and Damage Reports are now kept there. If you visit in person, ask to speak to someone with naval expertise. (<https://www.archives.gov/dc-metro/college-park>)
- Naval History & Heritage Command (NHHC) at the Washington Navy Yard – Formerly the Naval Historical Center, this facility houses the Navy Library, Ship Histories Branch, Operational Archives Branch, and a Photographs Section. The Navy Library has an extensive collection of WWII publications, such as the “Combat Narratives” generated by the Office of Naval Intelligence. The Ship Histories Branch contains a wealth of data on individual ships, such as action reports, war diaries, and deck logs. (<http://www.history.navy.mil>)
- National Archives – You’ll be pleasantly surprised at what you’ll find, I promise. (<http://www.archives.gov>)

Similar military information sources for the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, Merchant Marine, and Coast Guard may be found by searches on the Internet. (If you are not computer savvy, ask a family member or friend to help with this research.)

5. How do I decide what to write first?

The Table of Contents, plus the notes and questions you hopefully made while reviewing your service records, will help you make this decision. Consider this: Our lives consist of a full range of short stories—some happy, some sad, some funny, others frightening, or downright boring. A military memoir will probably include all of the above emotions and then some.

Think of each short story as a building block and the completed memoir as a house.

Pick a favorite short story and break it down into a rough outline—which will no doubt change several times—and start writing. After you pick a story, create a list of talking points or questions. Don’t worry about spelling, grammar or punctuation; that will come later. Handwritten copy works just fine—I’m proof of that. However, you will eventually want your story keyed on a computer.

If you’re interviewing someone in person or by telephone, consider recording the interview (ask for permission first) for accurate transcription later. Limit each recording session to one short story – or one segment of a longer story – to avoid over-talking.

Keep good records of the contact information for everyone you interviewed or talked to.

6. What if I have arthritis in my hands and cannot write or type?

You can record your memoir on audiotape and/or videotape, or you can use a computer voice recognition software such as Dragon Systems.

7. What do I do with my recorded interviews?

An excellent oral history can be produced from a quality audio recording with careful editing. Video histories are more complex, but can certainly be produced with the help of someone with the proper expertise.

If you want to convert your audio recordings into a print manuscript, the next step is to have a typist transcribe the audiotape. Now you can edit your manuscript. Freelancers are available in most markets to type, copyedit, and/or proofread your manuscript. But first, enlist the help of interested older children or grandchildren; they have the most to gain from your stories.

8. How do I convert a typed manuscript into a print book or an ebook?

When your final copy edits are done and you’ve inserted any photos, maps, or other illustrations, it’s decision time:

- How do you want to reproduce and distribute your memoir?

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I hope I've answered your questions and inspired you to get started researching and writing your own military memoirs—or those of someone you know.

Wishing You Fair Winds and Following Seas,

Bill McGee

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