



## FOR INDEPENDENT MEDICAL PROVIDERS

# Military Context Quick Reference

A one stop desk reference for examiners working with veterans. Use it for the things you reach for most: how to read a military date, rank structures across all six branches, how to work through a service records package fast, and the lingo that comes up in the exam room. The companion article on our site explains the why behind each section.

## Reading a military date

Standard format	DDMMYYYY. Example: 07JUN2004 is the 7th of June 2004. The three letter month removes ambiguity.
All numeric trap	03/04/05 may read as 3 April, not March 4. Confirm with a spelled out month or ask the veteran.
24 hour clock	1400 = 2:00 PM. 2230 = 10:30 PM. Midnight is written 0000 or 2400.
Zulu time (Z)	Coordinated Universal Time, so units across time zones share one clock. A Z marking is not local time.

Tip: restate a date in full to yourself before charting it. Reading 07JUN2004 as “the seventh of June” guards against flipping day and month.

## Working the records you are given

The package arrives through the prime’s platform, usually as one large merged PDF that can run past a thousand pages in no useful order. You are not reading all of it. You are finding the few pages that speak to the conditions on your tasking. With a method this is a fifteen minute job.

What is usually in the package

- Service treatment records (STRs): in-service medical history, including entrance and separation physical exams. Usually the most useful part for your opinion.
- Claims file (C-file): the full folder, with personnel records, prior DBQs and exam reports, rating decisions, and lay or buddy statements.
- Private and VA treatment records: care after service and current severity.
- Tasking and DBQ: names the exact conditions and questions you must address. Read this first.

A fifteen minute method

1. Turn the tasking into search terms. A knee claim becomes knee, patella, meniscus, ACL, effusion. Tinnitus becomes ringing, audiogram, hearing, noise.
2. Search the text, do not thumb through. Open in a real PDF reader and use Ctrl+F (Cmd+F on Mac). Step through each hit. If nothing is found, the file is scanned (see below).
3. Anchor on entrance and separation exams first. Read those two. A condition noted at separation often answers the question; one on the entrance exam points to pre-existing. Tab both.
4. Dig into the body only if needed. Read day to day notes only when the two exams do not settle it. Tab the page you find, and resist tabbing everything.
5. Use bookmarks and dates. The bookmark sidebar splits the file into sections. Dates run day month year, so searching a year or month jumps you to the right era.
6. Confirm it is the right person. Match name, service number, and date of birth. Merged files sometimes mix in a similar name.
7. Note the PDF page you relied on. Cite it, for example “right knee complaint, May 1998 STR, PDF page 412.” Traceable beats vague.

When Ctrl+F finds nothing. Older records are often scans, so the search has nothing to read. Run text recognition in your PDF reader (often labeled OCR or Recognize Text) to make it searchable, or use the bookmark panel and dates to jump to the right era and scan by eye. Either way, find the entrance and separation exams and the pages touching your claimed conditions, and stop there.

## Rank structure across all branches

Three families of rank share one pay grade system: enlisted (E), warrant officer (W), and commissioned officer (O). A higher number means more seniority within that family. When rank matters for your notes, anchor on the pay grade rather than the title.

### Enlisted ranks (E-1 to E-9)

Grade	Army	Marine Corps	Navy	Air Force	Space Force	Coast Guard
E-1	Private	Private	Seaman Recruit	Airman Basic	Specialist 1	Seaman Recruit
E-2	Private (PV2)	Private First Class	Seaman Apprentice	Airman	Specialist 2	Seaman Apprentice
E-3	Private First Class	Lance Corporal	Seaman	Airman First Class	Specialist 3	Seaman
E-4	Corporal / Specialist	Corporal	Petty Officer 3rd Class	Senior Airman	Specialist 4	Petty Officer 3rd Class
E-5	Sergeant	Sergeant	Petty Officer 2nd Class	Staff Sergeant	Sergeant	Petty Officer 2nd Class
E-6	Staff Sergeant	Staff Sergeant	Petty Officer 1st Class	Technical Sergeant	Technical Sergeant	Petty Officer 1st Class
E-7	Sergeant First Class	Gunnery Sergeant	Chief Petty Officer	Master Sergeant	Master Sergeant	Chief Petty Officer
E-8	Master Sgt / First Sgt	Master Sgt / First Sgt	Senior Chief Petty Officer	Senior Master Sergeant	Senior Master Sergeant	Senior Chief Petty Officer
E-9	Sergeant Major / Command Sgt Major	Master Gunnery Sgt / Sgt Major	Master Chief Petty Officer	Chief Master Sergeant	Chief Master Sergeant	Master Chief Petty Officer

Leadership begins in the middle grades. The terms noncommissioned officer (Army, Marines, Air Force, Space Force) and petty officer (Navy, Coast Guard) apply there. Each service has one top enlisted advisor.

### Warrant officer ranks (W-1 to W-5)

Grade	Army	Marine Corps	Navy	Coast Guard
W-1	Warrant Officer 1	Warrant Officer	Warrant Officer 1	Warrant Officer 1
W-2	Chief Warrant Officer 2	Chief Warrant Officer 2	Chief Warrant Officer 2	Chief Warrant Officer 2
W-3	Chief Warrant Officer 3	Chief Warrant Officer 3	Chief Warrant Officer 3	Chief Warrant Officer 3
W-4	Chief Warrant Officer 4	Chief Warrant Officer 4	Chief Warrant Officer 4	Chief Warrant Officer 4
W-5	Chief Warrant Officer 5	Chief Warrant Officer 5	Chief Warrant Officer 5	Chief Warrant Officer 5

Warrant officers are technical specialists between the enlisted and commissioned ranks. Only the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard use them. The Air Force and Space Force do not currently appoint them.

### Commissioned officer ranks (O-1 to O-10)

Grade	Army, Marines, Air Force, Space Force	Navy and Coast Guard
O-1	Second Lieutenant	Ensign
O-2	First Lieutenant	Lieutenant Junior Grade
O-3	Captain	Lieutenant
O-4	Major	Lieutenant Commander
O-5	Lieutenant Colonel	Commander
O-6	Colonel	Captain
O-7	Brigadier General	Rear Admiral (lower half)
O-8	Major General	Rear Admiral (upper half)
O-9	Lieutenant General	Vice Admiral
O-10	General	Admiral

Two title traps: a Captain in the Army or Marines is an O-3 (junior), but a Captain in the Navy or Coast Guard is an O-6 (senior). The word Lieutenant also shifts meaning between the sea services and the rest.

## Lingo you will actually hear

ETS / EAS	The date someone left active service. ETS is Army; EAS is common in the Navy and Marines.
PCS	Permanent change of station, a move to a new duty location. Frequent moves matter for exposure and stress.
TDY / TAD	Temporary duty away from the home station. May not show clearly in records.
Deployment	Time away on an operational mission, often overseas or in a combat zone. Ask where and when.
MOS / rate / AFSC	The person’s job. Army and Marines use MOS, Navy uses rate, Air Force uses AFSC.
In country	Serving inside a combat theater, e.g. “in country in Iraq.”
C and P exam	Compensation and Pension examination, the structured evaluation you likely perform.
Service connection	The link between a current condition and something that happened in service.
NCO	Noncommissioned officer, an enlisted leader.
CO / XO / NCOIC	Commanding officer; executive officer (second in command); noncommissioned officer in charge.
Battle buddy / shipmate / wingman	A fellow service member.
Garrison vs the field	Garrison is life on base; the field is training or operations away from it.

One habit beats any glossary: when a veteran uses a term you do not know, ask. “Help me understand what that meant for you day to day” is respectful and gets you better information than nodding along.

## A few more things worth knowing

- Character of discharge is sensitive. The DD–214 lists how someone left service. Note what you need and handle the topic with care.
- Component matters. Active duty, National Guard, and Reserve service differ in records and exposure history.
- Eras shape exposures. Vietnam raises Agent Orange; Gulf War era raises burn pits; earlier service can involve radiation or asbestos.
- An older file may be incomplete for a reason. A July 12, 1973 fire at the NPRC destroyed an estimated 16 to 18 million files, hitting many Army (discharged 1912 to 1960) and Air Force (1947 to 1964) records. Read a gap as a records loss, not as proof the person did not serve.
- Mind assumptions about gender and role. Women have served in every branch and in combat roles.
- Let the veteran’s framing lead. Match their language rather than correcting it.
- Confidentiality applies. Records and the exam are protected health information.

### Interested in independent evaluation work?

If you are a licensed provider who wants to support veterans through independent 1099 evaluation work, visit [onestoppeoplesolutions.com](https://onestoppeoplesolutions.com) or call (919) 801-8974.

### Sources

Rank structures and pay grades: U.S. Department of War, Military Rank Insignia, [war.gov/resources/insignia](https://war.gov/resources/insignia); U.S. Air Force study guides, [studyguides.af.mil](https://studyguides.af.mil); Military.com officer rank structure, [military.com](https://military.com).

Working the records: VA Compensation Service training on reviewing service treatment records, [vbatraining.org](https://vbatraining.org) STR review lesson; what a claims file contains, California Dept. of Veterans Affairs, [calvet.ca.gov](https://calvet.ca.gov); VA, About Disability Benefits Questionnaires, [benefits.va.gov](https://benefits.va.gov). The 1973 fire: National Archives, [archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html](https://archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html).

This quick reference is general guidance, not legal, medical, or tax advice. Titles and procedures vary by branch, era, and individual record.