World War II Research Guide

Jennifer Holik- *WWII Researcher*

If you have World War II veterans in your family, you can honor them by documenting their service in your family history. Unfortunately, due to privacy restrictions, many family historians have the misconception that it's a lost cause trying obtain the records of WWII veterans. Fortunately, there are ways to uncover details of your World War II ancestor's service. By constructing timelines, and seeking out the records of their service in online and offline repositories, you can tell the story of their service to our country.

Fire and Devastation! Reconstructing World War II Service

Myth and misunderstanding surround World War II records access and reconstruction due to the 1973 Fire at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis, Missouri. Eighty percent of the Army, Air Corps, and National Guard Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) were lost in the fire. Do not worry though because all is not lost, contrary to what you may have heard. Rather than rehash the fire and record loss, you can read about it on the National Personnel Records Center website.

You may ask, how do I find information if the records burned? Am I entitled to receive any information if I'm not the next-of-kin? And, where do I start?

The first place to begin is the same place you would if you were doing any other type of genealogical research. Start with what you know and record everything. To help you record information and locate sources, download my Military Service Questionnaire and some research checklists. Begin filling them out, including source citations. Military records, like all other records, sometimes contain errors and conflicts with dates and information.

Research Fact: The majority of the records you need to reconstruct World War II service are not online. The OMPFs at the NPRC have not been digitized and are not available online. There are however many databases, indexes, maps, photographs, and various unit-level reports you can use on Ancestry and Fold3 to guide you on your journey, create service timelines, navigate to offline resources, and honor service.

To help you move along the research path after completing the Military Service Questionnaire you've downloaded, let's explore the myths and misunderstandings of World War II research.

Myth & Misunderstanding #1: You must be the next-of-kin to receive records.

This is partially true. If your soldier, sailor or Marine, died or was discharged by 1953, the Official Military Personnel File (OMPF,) also known as service records, are available to anyone. If your soldier died or was discharged after 1953, you still must be the veteran or next-of-kin to receive access.

Medical records are a different story.

It is important to understand that medical records are kept separately from the OMPF. These records have different rules for access. For Army, Air Corps/Army Air Forces, and National Guard, the medical records are available to anyone.

For Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps, you must be the veteran or next-of-kin to access medical records. Even if a sailor or Marine has been dead 100 years, you cannot access those records unless you are next-of-kin. If you have the opportunity to access these medical records, I encourage you to do so, because future generations will be unable to do so.

Myth & Misunderstanding #2: I do not have a serial number/service number so I cannot attempt a record search.

The serial number/service number was a number issued to every serviceman and woman. This was not their social security number. Social security numbers were used in the military post-WWII.

There are several ways to attempt to locate a serial number or service number.

1. For Army personnel, search the Ancestry collection of U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946 to see if your soldier enlisted. If he or she did, the serial number will be within the indexed record.
2. For Marine Corps personnel, search the U.S. Marine Corps Muster Rolls, 1798-1958 on Ancestry. If you locate your Marine, the serial number will usually be found within the Muster Rolls.
3. For Navy personnel, search the U.S. World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949 on Ancestry.
4. If your soldier, sailor, or Marine died in service during the war, you can check the U.S. Rosters of World War II Dead, 1939-1945 on Ancestry.
5. If you are unable to locate a serial number through those sources, the NPRC in St. Louis has a Veterans Affairs (VA) index on microfilm. To access the information, send a letter to them with $5 requesting a search for your soldier. They will mail you a copy of a VA index card with the name, address, serial number, service branch, sometimes a unit, and dates of enlistment, discharge, and sometimes death. Mail your letter to: NPRC, 1 Archives Drive, St. Louis, Mo. 63138.

Myth & Misunderstanding #3: If the OMPF burned, there is no way to trace service or reconstruct service, because there are no records online.

First, whether the OMPF burned or not, unless someone hands you a serviceman's file and all resources to tell their story, you will need to reconstruct the service history. Everyone basically begins in the same place, but those without the OMPF have to do a little extra work.

Second, in our age of digital records, with more resources available online daily, we have become a society conditioned to believe it all exists online. The reality is, it does not. We should approach our World War II research from the collaborative standpoint of using both online and offline resources to reconstruct service history.

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The NPRC in St. Louis has several record sets that can help you reconstruct a timeline of service, so that you'll know where your soldier was at any given time. Utilizing those resources and continuing to build on that information with unit records from the National Archives in College Park, Md., and [Ancestry](#) and [Fold3](#) record sets, the possibilities to tell a soldier's story are endless.

Myth & Misunderstanding #4: I can search online for information, because I know the exact unit in which my soldier served. Or, he was in the 1st Division. That's all I need to know.

It is not a good idea to assume the one unit you believe your soldier was in, was the only unit – or the correct unit – and go look for everything about that one unit. You could be chasing the wrong lead. It is also important to locate unit information down to the company, as many records are kept by the company.

There are many reasons we may believe we know the exact unit in which our service member served.

- It may be listed on a discharge paper or in the Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF). Unfortunately, this final unit could be a unit in which soldiers were placed for their return to the U.S. for discharge. They may have never seen combat with this unit.
- Soldiers who died, like my cousin James Privoznik, was only in an infantry regiment 14 days before he was Killed In Action (KIA), because Patton needed replacement soldiers during the Battle of the Bulge. The rest of the nine months he was overseas, he was in the Ordnance Company.
- The veteran or a family member told us. Over time, memories fade. It has been my experience in speaking with people and conducting research for clients, that veterans tell a story one way or pass it to their children, with some facts jumbled. This is not to say the veteran or the family member lied, only that war was full of chaos and change. It is easy to confuse which unit you were with and when.

In addition, soldiers were often transferred between companies and units for various reasons. Never assume what you've found is the final answer. The best advice I can give you, is to follow every lead and compare what you learn against other records.

Building a WWII Timeline of Service

Researching an individual in our family tree often requires us to create a timeline of the individual's life. On that timeline we place important events such as birth, marriage, education, residence, and death. We follow the same process for a World War II soldier, except we are specifically looking at the time in which he served in the military.

Creating a timeline of service allows us to see where there are gaps in our research. Understand errors with dates or information, which may be due to our incorrect data entry or transcription or the records themselves. Timelines also help form the foundation for writing the soldier's story when our research has progressed.

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Creating the Timeline

Creating a timeline of service is simple. Start with the information you know from family stories, talking to the veteran, or what you compiled from the Military Service Questionnaire we discussed in [September's post](#).

To give you an example, let's use some details from my cousin James Privoznik's service history. The family said he entered service in 1943. He was Killed In Action 11 January 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge. He served in the 90th Division. His unit was part of the Utah Beach D-Day landing. The timeline looks like this:

1943   James enters the Army

6 June 1944   The 90th Division enters France through Utah Beach on D-Day

16 December 1944   Battle of the Bulge begins

11 January 1945   James is Killed In Action during the Battle of the Bulge

With this rough outline, where do we go from here? We look at home sources.

Military Home Sources

There are many places to locate military information within your home. These home sources may be a variety of things which contain clues to military service. To review genealogical home sources, please read Ancestry.com's Wiki article on [Home Sources](#). You can also download a list of military home sources on my [World War II Research and Writing Center](#).

In searching James Privoznik's home sources, I located a longyard unit photograph which provided the date January 1944, Camp Butner, NC 126th MM Ordnance. I found a Purple Heart awarded posthumously. A burial flag still in the original box dated 1948 from Hamm Cemetery in Luxembourg. These items allowed me to add to his timeline which began to take a fuller shape.

1943   James enters the Army

January 1944 James is in Camp Butner, NC in the 126th MM Ordnance Company

6 June 1944   The 90th Division enters France through Utah Beach on D-Day

16 December 1944   Battle of the Bulge begins

11 January 1945   James is Killed In Action during the Battle of the Bulge

1945   James is awarded the Purple Heart

1948   James is buried in Hamm Cemetery in Luxembourg

Knowing these details helps direct my research path. My next steps are to request James' Official Military Personnel File and continue research into his death using Ancestry.com's databases:

- [S. Rosters of World War II Dead, 1939-1945](#)
- [S. Headstone and Interment Records for U.S. Military Cemeteries on Foreign Soil, 1942-1949](#)
- [World War II and Korean Conflict Veterans Interred Overseas](#)

A word of caution. The information provided for James and his service state he was in the 358th Infantry Regiment, 90th Division. This was the final unit in which he served. This information is contained in his Individual Deceased Personnel File. However, Morning Reports show he was transferred from the 790th Ordnance Company 90th Division to the 358th Infantry Regiment 90th Division only 14 days before his death. General Patton needed replacement infantrymen and men from the rear echelons were transferred. To fully understand James' military story, both Companies will need to be researched. To learn more, his Official Military Personnel File should be requested.

Requesting Military Records

The next step in creating a timeline of military service is to order the Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) from the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis, MO. The soldier's Separation and Discharge record is the primary place to locate the information requested to begin a search. You will need at least the following, if you can find it:

- Soldier's full name
- Date and place of birth
- Service Number (this is not the individual's Social Security Number)
- Branch of service and unit(s)
- Dates of service (enlistment, discharge or death)

There are three ways to request the OMPF.

1. Mail in Form 180

The least expensive way to begin a search is to fill out Form 180 on the [NPRC website](#) and see if the file survived. If records are discovered, NPRC will send you a letter indicating such, as well as your fee for copies. Form 180 will ONLY search the OMPF and medical records. This will not search Morning Reports, Payroll, IDPFs, or other records.

2. Visit NPRC In-Person

Visit the NPRC website for current rules regarding making an appointment to visit and view records. Learn what is allowed in the research room and how to request files and microfilm.

3. Hire a Researcher

Another option is to hire an independent researcher who knows their way around the NPRC records. There are many additional records at the NPRC besides the OMPF which can be accessed by hiring a researcher.

Requesting Death Records

If your soldier, sailor, or Marine died while in service (not after discharge,) there will be an Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) available. The IDPF varies in length, on average between 20 pages and over 100. It documents the death of a soldier, burial, disinterment and final burial location. In cases where the soldier was Missing In Action (MIA) and recovered days, weeks, months, or years after his death, there will also be search and recovery documentation.

For the European Theater, if the deceased was a Prisoner of War (POW), his POW card with photograph will usually be found in the IDPF. POWs in the Pacific, under the Japanese, do not have cards in the IDPFs. These are stored at National Archives in College Park, MD. Was your soldier a POW? You can find out on NARA's POW Database.

To order the IDPF, send an email to the U.S. Army at Ft. Knox at USARMY.KNOX.HRC.MBX.FOIA@MAIL.MIL or write a letter indicating your request is under the Freedom of Information Act. The address is:

Department of the Army
U.S. Army Human Resources Command
ATTN: AHRC-FOIA
1600 Spearhead Division Avenue, Dept 107
Fort Knox, KY 40122-5504

Provide the following information in your request: Soldier's Name, branch of military, military service number, date of death, unit. Also provide your contact information including email. When the IDPF is scanned, an email will be sent to you with a download code. While these files are free, they usually take up to 48 weeks to receive.

Conflicting Information and Your WWII Timeline of Service

Last month I discussed Building a WWII Timeline of Service. This month, I'd like to take that a step further. When clients come to me seeking help to trace their soldier's service, they often have very little information. As long as I can obtain a name, service number, unit and point in time when the soldier, sailor or Marine was in that unit, I have a starting point. If he was Killed In Action (KIA), then there are two avenues by which I immediately begin work.

Recently I have been working on Army Soldier Adolph Weeks' history, in which he had two Army enlistments. Based on the information provided for both enlistments, I followed my usual research path to request the Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) and Morning Reports through my
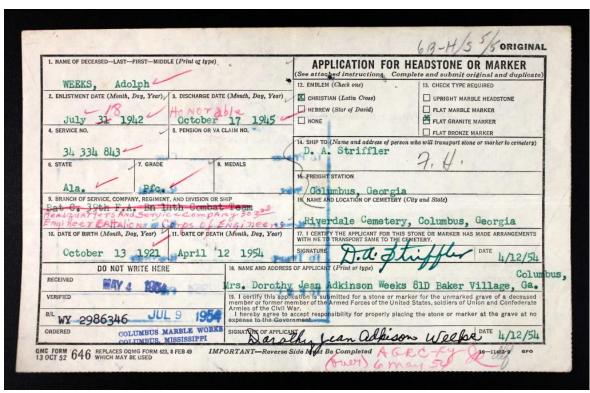
researcher at National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis. He pulled the Morning Reports, but unfortunately the OMPF burned. The Morning Reports obtained show Adolph coming from a Replacement Depot into the 78th Infantry Division in February 1945. However, we cannot, *yet*, find him in the Replacement Depot records to trace his service backward to 1942. More research must be done to locate him.

The client did provide me with the Headstone Application after I received the Morning Reports. Often, when a veteran dies, the family completes a Headstone Application so a government issued military stone can be placed at the gravesite. Ancestry has these applications digitized in the [U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1963](#) record set.

The family applied for a marker. However, the information is confusing when both the front and back of the application are viewed. The information on the form points to both his first and second enlistments, but do not specify which enlistment was WWII on the front. The information shown adds confusion to his timeline of service. Just what unit was he really in during his enlistments?

Adolph Weeks Application Information, Front Side

The applications were either handwritten in blue or black ink or typed. The military used a red pencil to check the information (sometimes). In the first few years after the war ended and remains were being shipped home, the military did not do a thorough job in checking information. My cousin
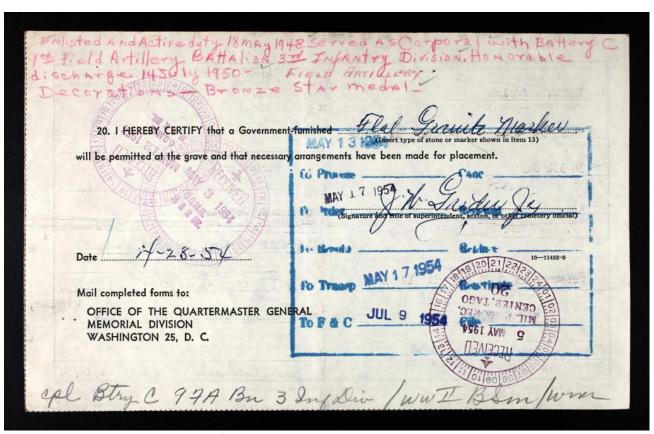
Visit the Ancestry Support Center at **help.ancestry.com**.

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Frank Winkler's headstone application shows the wrong unit, one which never existed, because his father wrote it down incorrectly. The military did not check it and carved his stone.

In Adolph Weeks' case, they did check the information. His enlistment date for World War II does match the VA Index card I received from NPRC. The Branch of Service in box 9. Written in pencil, shows his final combat unit for World War II. Had he not served a second time, this is the unit that would have been etched on his grave stone.

The other unit typed on the form says Bat C, 39th F.A. Bn 14th Combat Team. This means Battery C, 39th Field Artillery Battalion, 14th Combat Team which was part of the 3rd Infantry Division, if you do some research. This is crossed out. Was it incorrect?

Adolph Weeks Application Information, Back Side

Now flip to the back side of the application and we see written in red pencil on the top, information about his second enlistment and a different unit. Enlisted and active duty 18 May 1948. Served as Corporal with Battery C 9th Field Artillery Battalion 3rd Infantry Division. Honorable Discharge 14 July 1950. Field artillery. Decorations – Bronze Star Medal.

Written in regular pencil at the bottom of the page we see Cpl Btry C 9 FA Bn 3rd Inf Div / WWII BSM. This is what was etched onto his grave marker.

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Three Different Units! Now what?

If this was a record you found at the beginning of your research, your timeline of service might look like:

- 13 October 1921 – Adolph Weeks birth
- 18 July 1942 – World War II enlistment and induction. Army service number 34334843.
- 17 October 1945 – World War II discharge
- 18 May 1948 – Army Reserves, second enlistment induction
- 14 July 1950 – Army Reserves, second enlistment discharge. Corporal with Battery C 9th Field Artillery Battalion 3rd Infantry Division.
- 12 April 1954 – Adolph Weeks death. Headstone Application Completed.

Combining this information with the Morning Reports, we do know the other unit, Headquarters and Service Company 303rd Engineering Battalion, Corps of Engineers is the final combat unit in which he served. And we could add to his timeline:

- 2 September 1945 – Headquarters and Service Company 303rd Engineering Battalion, Corps of Engineers

Next Steps

I'm currently waiting for my researcher to pull the second enlistment Morning Reports since we have this new information. I believe since both the 39th Field Artillery and 9th Field Artillery were part of the 3rd Infantry Division, they will show his transfer between units. Adolph's child also provided a few pieces of information from family letters which indicate this transfer. Now I wait to see what the records show.

To learn more about records and how to use them and Adolph's case, please visit my [World War II Research and Writing Center](#) where I'll post articles and tips.

Combining World War II Research on Fold3 with Your Ancestry Family Tree

Ancestry family trees provide researchers with a wealth of resources to help locate names, dates, and places within records, that can help us build a story about an individual and his or her family. Genealogical research should be more than a collection of names, dates, and places. Luckily, Ancestry family trees help us move beyond collecting dry facts, to writing a story using historical context.

Historical context places relevant events and details around a person based on the time and place in which he or she lived. We can apply this to our World War II research when we learn about the training of a soldier, sailor, or Marine. We have access to unit level histories and analyses of battles fought. All of these pieces add to our soldier's story.

Visit the Ancestry Support Center at **help.ancestry.com**.

For account questions or technical help, call **1-800-262-3787**.

Fold3.com is a good resource for finding those pieces that add context. Primarily a military records site, Fold3.com provides access to documents and images from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam. There are additional Commonwealth records, a few non-military record sets, and newspapers, as well.

With it's focus mainly on military records, Fold3 dives deeper into contextual records. Some of the background information you may find may be on collections that may not specifically name of your soldier, unless he was an officer.

Record collections for World War II on Fold3 include:

- Unit level histories.
- Monographs written after the war which analyze major battles or units.
- Donated records from military associations.
- Naval War Diaries.
- USMC Mission Reports.

Important Research Note! Fold3 does not have the Official Military Personnel Files for a soldier. You still have to get these records from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri.

Searching Fold3.com Collections

There is an art to finding the best contextual information on your soldier's service. To do so, researchers must move beyond the searching by name only and searching *within* record collections. How do we do this?

Searching within a record set means you browse the Fold3 Collections to a specific publication. Then, use the search box at the top of the form to search for a unit, soldier's name, battle, or some other relevant piece of information.
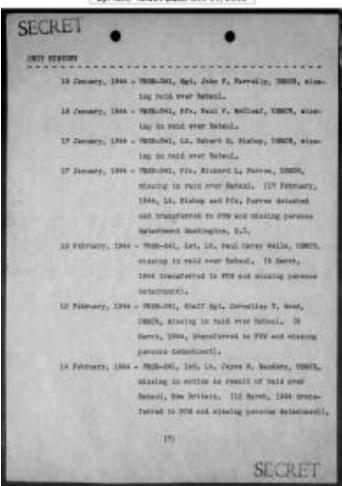
Let's use 1st Lt. Robert E. Bishop as an example for what we can find in Fold3 records. Robert E. Bishop was a Marine Corps aviator and member of the VMSB-341, MAG-21, 2nd MAW, lost at sea near New Britain on 17 January 1944. Serial Number O-21059.

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WWII War Diaries - MMAR AIR GR 21 - War History - Image courtesy of Fold3.

Three matches appear when you search only Bishop's name and focus on **WWII War Diaries**. They are:

- WWII War Diaries - MMAR AIR GR 21 - War History - Page 11
- WWII War Diaries - CCOMAIR SOLOMONS - Mission Reps for 1/1/44 to 5/31/44 - Page 14
- WWII War Diaries - VVMSB-341 - War Diary, 1/1-31/44 - Page 10

Important Research Note! The Marines during World War II were under the authority of the U.S. Navy. Therefore, many of their records and aviation mission reports will be contained within WWII Naval War Diaries.

Documenting Facts in Ancestry Trees from Fold3 Records

When you locate records which name your soldier, Fold3 allows you to attach records to a tree on Ancestry. Be careful when you do this as you are often only providing one page of what could a lengthier packet of documents. Attaching only one page could cause context to be lost. People who browse trees on Ancestry may not understand what the record really means in the big picture.

Research Tip! Put a description of the full document in the fact description area on your Ancestry tree and note the number of pages so researchers can reference the full report.

Focusing on the Documents in Fold3

Once we link the three WWII War Diaries cited above to a tree for Robert E. Bishop, we have one small piece of the puzzle documented in the Ancestry tree. We can move the research further by reading the reports and writing our analysis of what Bishop experienced as part of VMSB-341 or MAG-21. When you cite the sources from the reports in your writing and upload a document to your tree on Ancestry, you are providing greater context for other researchers who browse your tree.

Adding Facts and Writing the Context Helps Everyone

There are thousands of people around the world who are just beginning their research on Ancestry and have little to no experience in military research or writing. When you write up an analysis of records you find on Fold3 and attach those notes to your tree with source citations, it serves as a guide to those who are unsure how to start or what to do. Your write-up will help them better understand this part of the research process. And of course, as you add these contextual pieces to your tree, you are also slowly building the story that helps bring that individual and his family to life.

Attaching Correct Information to Your World War II Veterans

Last month I wrote an article called Combining World War II Research on Fold3 with Your Ancestry Family Tree. This month we will look at Ancestry family trees in another way.

Ancestry family trees offer researchers a way to organize their research and share it with the world. We can search for a multitude of records and attach them to individuals on our tree, creating facts about their lives. One question we should ask ourselves is, "Are we attaching records correctly?"

Genealogy is a learning process for all of us, and many of us started by attaching everything, regardless of whether it was accurate, until our education developed further. Ancestry offers researchers information through this blog and Ancestry Academy. Ancestry Academy offers many courses to help new and experienced researchers learn about the records and help them create more accurate family trees. Understanding the records and how to properly attach them to our tree, benefits everyone.

I have seen many cases of World War II research where the facts are partially or completely incorrect, leading those browsing trees to assume, and often attach, incorrect information to their own trees. Using a few tips, researchers can better document their World War II ancestors in their family trees. Let me illustrate what I mean.

William F. Cowart

William F. Cowart was a Marine during World War II. Born. 21 February 1922 at Reform, AL. Killed In Action on 20 November 1943 at Tarawa. Remains never recovered. Serial number 471443. Final unit: C Company 2ndAmpTrBn, 2ndMarDiv. (Source: *USMC Casualty Card for William F. Cowart*, serial no. 471443. Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. *Death Certificate for William F. Cowart*, serial no. 471443. Individual Deceased Personnel File, AHRC Ft. Knox, KY.)

William F. Cowart

One family tree for William F. Cowart contains information attached about his military service, death, and burial which is somewhat inaccurate. There are ways to improve on this information by looking at the records more carefully.

Death Fact: The date of death listed is 21 November 1943. However, this date is incorrect due to indexing. If you examine the Headstone Application it has typed 21 November 1943 as the death date. But the military examined this record to ensure the facts were correct and crossed out 21 and wrote 20. According to his Individual Deceased Personnel File and USMC Casualty Card, he was Killed In Action the 20th of November. Cowart's father completed or helped complete this Headstone Application. Families made errors all the time. Usually the government checked the information, but not always.

Fixing the Fact in the tree: The date should be changed to 20 November 1943. A notation could also be made in the Description Field of the fact to explain why the date is 20 and not 21 November. Unfortunately the death date cannot be changed in the index because the only change allowed is the year.

Burial Fact: The Burial is listed as Ethelsville, Pickens County, Alabama. Three sources "prove" this fact. Two *Find A Grave* entries and the U.S. Headstone Application. However, if the headstone/marker is examined when the researcher goes to FindAGrave, they will see it says "In Memory Of." This is a memorial stone only. Cowart is not buried in Alabama.

Continuing the examination of *Find A Grave* entries for Cowart, we will also see several which were created by various sources, including the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) for all those buried overseas or listed on a Wall or Tablet of the Missing, as Cowart is. One issue with *Find A Grave*, that I have no idea how to solve, is the multiple entries for Cowart make him look like he is his own sibling.
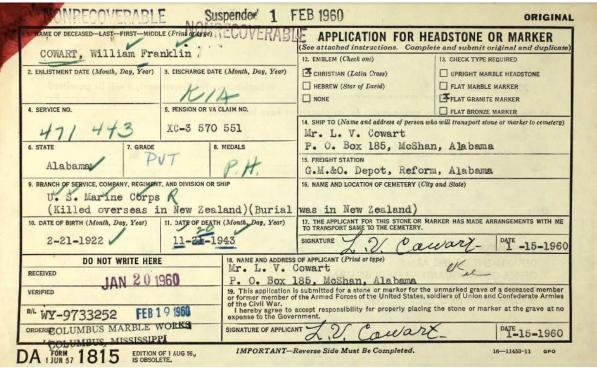
Researchers should examine all entries for Cowart because they provide different details. Together, they help paint a picture of Cowart's life.

Further examining the Headstone Application, we see at the top it says NONRECOVERABLE. This means Cowart's remains were never found.

U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1963 for William Franklin Cowart

Fixing the Burial Fact in the tree: Without the Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) obtained from Ft. Knox, KY, Ancestry users will not know Cowart was actually identified and buried soon after the Battle of Tarawa, ON Tarawa. Unfortunately with the chaos of war, when the Marines left the island and the Navy Seabees arrived, they "beautified" the cemetery and many of the identified dead were now "lost." Families received letters after the war stating their sons could not be found. Most are still "lost" today.

The burial fact can remain but the place of burial should not say Alabama. At the very least, until or if Cowart is recovered, it should say Tarawa or Gilbert Islands. If a researcher has the IDPF and can document a burial date, then it should be added.
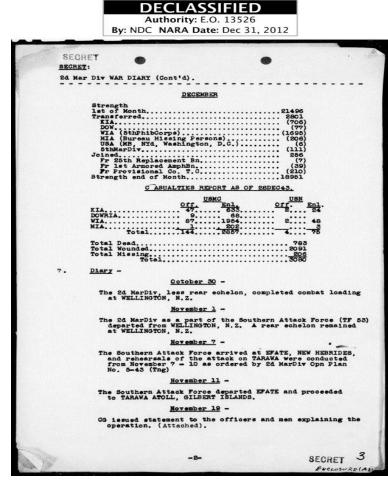
A note in the description field of the fact could indicate Cowart's remains were not recovered and he is not buried in Alabama. Only a memorial stone exists for him there.

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Fold3.com Records: Finally, Fold3.com offers researchers the ability to search for documents which help tell the story of their soldier. When we search for only William Cowart's name on Fold3, a couple of entries appear, which we can also find on Ancestry. However, if we search *within* the WWII War Diaries for Tarawa, 2nd Marine, we find the [Second Marine Division War Diary for November 1943.](#)

World War II War Diaries, 1945. Record courtesy of Fold3.

This document likely does not list Cowart by name, but provides historical context to his story. These records may also be attached to individuals in our family trees.

Fixing Fold3 Records in the tree: Each page of a record can be attached individually and will create a new fact unless we download the document and then add it to a specific fact. If you only attach one page out of a full document, consider adding a note in the description field as to what this is and what other information it contains. You might also consider writing up a short document in Word summarizing the information, and attaching that to the fact.

We all have a lot to learn about our families, the records available, and how best to document this in our family trees. Being as accurate as possible helps to build more accurate trees and on some level, educate others how to do the research. It also further builds our relatives stories as we continue to honor their memories with our research.

Jennifer Holik is an international WWII researcher, speaker, and author of the only authoritative books on the market, "Stories from the World War II Battlefield," which teach individuals how to research WWII service across any branch. She can be found at her website [The World War II Research and Writing Center](#) or on [Facebook](#).