

FOR THE AMERICAN VETERAN

AN INDEPENDENT GUIDE



VETERAN FIELD MANUAL

ARMY • NAVY • AIR FORCE • MARINE CORPS • COAST GUARD • SPACE FORCE

VOLUME 0 • FIELD ORIENTATION

The field manual the VA never gave you.

AUTHOR

K. A. LIM

VETERAN FIELD MANUAL

VOLUME 0 · FIELD ORIENTATION

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Free to every veteran.

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Start Here — How to Use the Field Manual

Bottom line up front. The Veteran Field Manual is a thirteen-volume library that covers the whole of veteran benefits, one domain per volume. This first volume, Vol. 0, is the on-ramp. It gets a veteran oriented, squared away on the basics every benefit depends on, and pointed toward the right volume for their situation. Nobody has to read all thirteen volumes. Most people need two or three.

What this library is

Each volume owns one part of the veteran world. Vol. 1 covers disability compensation. Vol. 2 covers education. Vol. 3 covers health care, and so on down the line. The volume numbers are permanent labels, not a reading order. A veteran does not start at Vol. 1 and grind to Vol. 12. They find the volume that matches what they need and start there.

Vol. 0 is different from the rest. It teaches no benefit. Its job is to orient and to define: establish who counts as a veteran, get the DD-214 in hand, set up the accounts, learn how the VA is built, and then route each veteran to the volume that does the deep teaching. It is about status and bearings, not about any one benefit.

Two ways to read it

Someone brand new should read Vol. 0 front to back. It is short on purpose, and it builds in order: who counts, the paperwork, the accounts, the map, where to go next, and where to get honest help.

Someone who already knows the terrain can skip to Chapter 5 — Find the Right Starting Point. That chapter is a router. It takes a situation and points to the volume that handles it. Even a seasoned veteran keeps that page and the contacts card in Appendix A — Glossary & Key Contacts within reach.

How each chapter is built

Every chapter opens with the bottom line, lays out the ground truth in plain language, quotes the actual law or regulation where it matters, and closes with an Action Steps box. When a topic belongs to another volume, this one gives the short version and points there rather than repeating it.

A word on accuracy

Benefit rules, dollar figures, phone numbers, and web procedures change. Everything in this volume was checked against a primary source at the time of writing, and the sources are listed at the end of each chapter. Before acting on anything time-sensitive, confirm the current details at VA.gov.

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Chapter 1 — Who Counts as a Veteran

Bottom line up front. Not everyone who wore the uniform is a "veteran" in the eyes of the VA. The answer turns on two things: the kind of service performed, and the character of the discharge. Most people who served honorably clear both without a second thought. The ones who need to read closely are those with training-only service, or a discharge that was something other than honorable.

The legal definition

The word has a precise meaning in federal law, and most VA benefits hang on it.

By the law. "The term 'veteran' means a person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable." — 38 U.S.C. § 101(2)

Two pieces do the work there: *active service*, and a discharge under conditions *other than dishonorable*. Take them one at a time.

What counts as active service

For almost everyone this is the simple part: full-time active duty is active service. A veteran does not have to have been sick or injured to qualify. Serving the time is enough. A Guard or Reserve member who was activated on federal orders counts the same way, because that federal service is active duty.

The one exception is Guard and Reserve members whose service was training only. Whether that time counts as active service depends on the specifics of each period, and it is decided case by case.

Guard & Reserve note: those training-time rules are their own subject, covered in full in Vol. 1, Ch. 2A — Guard & Reserve. A Guard or Reserve member should settle their status there, not from this orientation chapter.

Character of discharge

The second gate is how the service ended. A period of service counts when the discharge or release was under conditions other than dishonorable. An Honorable or a General (under honorable conditions) discharge clears this gate, and an honorable discharge is binding on the VA.

An Other Than Honorable discharge is not an automatic wall. The VA reviews the character of the discharge to decide whether that period of service qualifies. A few kinds of discharge are a hard bar, including a discharge as a conscientious objector who refused to serve, one by

sentence of a general court-martial, and desertion. Even those carry an exception: the bar does not apply if the VA finds the person was insane when they committed the act that led to the discharge.

How a bad discharge interacts with a specific benefit, and how to pursue a discharge upgrade, is covered in Vol. 1 — VA Disability Benefits and Vol. 11 — Records & Corrections.

Action Steps

- Pull the DD-214 and read block 24, the character of service. Honorable or General clears the character gate.
- If the discharge is Other Than Honorable, do not assume the door is closed. Ask an accredited representative about a character-of-discharge determination (see Chapter 6 — Get Help the Right Way).
- Guard or Reserve service only? Note which periods were active duty, ACDUTRA, or INACDUTRA, and go to Vol. 1, Ch. 2A — Guard & Reserve.
- A discharge that seems wrong or unfair may be upgradable. Start with Vol. 11 — Records & Corrections.

Source

- The definition of "veteran" is set in federal law at 38 U.S.C. § 101.

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Chapter 2 — The DD-214

Bottom line up front. The DD Form 214, the Report of Separation, is the master key to nearly every benefit in this library. The VA, lenders, schools, and state benefit offices all ask for it. A veteran who cannot lay hands on their DD-214 should fix that before anything else, and it costs nothing to get a copy.

What it is

The DD-214 is the single document that proves what a person did in uniform and how they left. It records the dates of service, the character of that service, the reason for separation, awards and decorations, and time in specific assignments. Almost every claim, application, and benefit office starts by asking to see it.

The blocks that matter

A few fields carry most of the weight:

- Dates of service. These establish periods of active duty and total time served, which many benefits key off of.
- Character of service (block 24). Honorable, General, Other Than Honorable, and so on. Chapter 1 — Who Counts as a Veteran explains why this block decides eligibility.
- Narrative reason for separation and the separation code. These explain why the service ended, and they can affect eligibility and any future upgrade request.
- Decorations and campaign awards. Some benefits and preferences ride on specific awards or service in specific operations.

Errors happen, and they matter. A wrong date, a missing award, or an incorrect separation reason can cost real benefits. Correcting the record is its own process, handled in Vol. 11 — Records & Corrections.

How to get a copy

Veterans and their next of kin can obtain free copies of the DD-214 and other service records. The records are held at the National Personnel Records Center. There are two standard ways in:

- eVetRecs, the National Archives online request system, is the fastest route for most people.
- Standard Form 180 (SF-180) is the mail-in request form, used when the online system does not fit the situation.

Response times vary with the age and complexity of the request. Recently separated service members often already have a copy in their separation packet, and should store it somewhere safe and backed up.

Action Steps

- Locate the DD-214 now. If it is missing, request a free copy through eVetRecs or by mailing an SF-180 to the National Personnel Records Center.
- Save at least two copies: one digital, one on paper, both somewhere they will not get lost.
- Read block 24 and confirm the character of service, then check the dates, separation reason, and awards for errors.
- If anything on the form is wrong, do not just live with it. Go to Vol. 11 — Records & Corrections to fix it.

Cited sources

- National Archives, National Personnel Records Center — requesting military service records (eVetRecs, SF-180); free copies for veterans and next of kin

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Chapter 3 — VA.gov and ID.me Accounts

Bottom line up front. Most of the VA runs through one website, VA.gov, and one secure login. As of the current sign-in rules, that login is either an ID.me or a Login.gov account. The old My HealtheVet and DS Logon sign-ins no longer work for VA.gov. A veteran who sets up a verified account once can file claims, check status, message providers, and pull documents without standing in a line.

VA.gov is the front door

VA.gov is where a veteran applies for benefits, tracks a claim, refills prescriptions, downloads records, and updates contact information. Setting up access is the single highest-value hour a new veteran can spend, because nearly everything else routes through it.

The sign-in rule

The VA consolidated its logins. Two account options remain.

From VA. "You'll need to use an ID.me or Login.gov account to sign in to all VA websites and apps." And: "You can no longer use a My HealtheVet user ID and password or DS Logon username and password to sign in to VA.gov, VA mobile apps, or other VA online services."

Anyone still holding an old My HealtheVet or DS Logon sign-in has to move to ID.me or Login.gov. Either one works across VA sites.

Getting verified

Both ID.me and Login.gov require identity verification, which is a one-time step to prove the account holder is who they say they are. It usually means confirming an email, adding a phone number, and verifying identity with a document such as a driver's license or passport. The verification protects the account, since it guards medical records and benefit payments. It is worth doing carefully and once.

A veteran who gets stuck on identity verification can call for help rather than abandon the process. Chapter 4 — How the VA Actually Works lists the number to call.

Action Steps

- Go to VA.gov and create or sign in with an ID.me or Login.gov account. Do not try to use an old My HealtheVet or DS Logon password.
- Complete identity verification the first time through, and store the recovery method (phone, backup codes) somewhere safe.
- Once signed in, confirm the mailing address, email, and direct-deposit information on file are current.
- Bookmark VA.gov and install the VA mobile app for status checks on the go.

Cited sources

- VA.gov — creating an account and signing in (ID.me / Login.gov; retirement of My HealtheVet and DS Logon sign-in)

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Chapter 4 — How the VA Actually Works

Bottom line up front. The Department of Veterans Affairs is really three departments under one roof. Knowing which of the three owns a problem saves a veteran hours of transferred calls. And there is one phone number that reaches all of it: 1-800-MyVA411 (1-800-698-2411), staffed around the clock.

The three administrations

The VA splits into three branches, each with its own mission.

- VBA, the Veterans Benefits Administration. This is the money and paperwork side: disability compensation, education benefits, home loan guaranty, pension, and life insurance. Most of the volumes in this library deal with VBA programs.
- VHA, the Veterans Health Administration. This is health care: enrollment, clinics and hospitals, mental health, and community care. VHA is the largest health system in the country.
- NCA, the National Cemetery Administration. This handles burial in national cemeteries, headstones and markers, and memorial benefits.

When a veteran knows which administration owns their need, the phone tree stops being a maze. A rating question is VBA. An appointment question is VHA. A burial question is NCA.

One number to reach all of it

The VA built a single front-door line so nobody has to memorize a dozen numbers.

1-800-MyVA411 (1-800-698-2411) reaches the VA for help of almost any kind, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It can route a caller to the right office or answer directly. For callers using TTY, the relay is 711.

Two numbers deserve their own place in memory:

- Veterans Crisis Line: dial 988, then press 1. It is free, confidential, and available every hour of every day for a veteran in crisis, or for someone worried about one. A veteran does not have to be at the worst moment to call. The moment before counts too.

The alphabet, decoded

The VA runs on acronyms. The ones worth knowing on day one are structural: VBA / VHA / NCA (the three administrations), VSO (a Veterans Service Organization, the free help in Chapter 6 — Get Help the Right Way), and the DD-214 (the Report of Separation, from Chapter 2 — The DD-214). The terms tied to a particular benefit, like the exams and forms of a claim, are defined in that benefit's volume. Appendix A — Glossary & Key Contacts collects the ones a newcomer meets first.

Action Steps

- Save 1-800-698-2411 (MyVA411) in the phone as the go-to VA number.
- Program the Veterans Crisis Line, 988 then press 1, and share it with family.
- Before calling, decide whether the question is benefits (VBA), health (VHA), or burial (NCA). It gets the call to the right desk faster.

Cited sources

- VA — 1-800-MyVA411 (1-800-698-2411), the single VA contact line, available 24/7; TTY 711
- Veterans Crisis Line — 988, then press 1

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Chapter 5 — Find the Right Starting Point

Bottom line up front. This is the map room. A veteran does not need to know which of the thirteen volumes to read. They only need to name their situation, and this chapter points to the volume that handles it. Most people land in two or three.

How to use the router

Find the row that matches the situation best and go to the volume named. If more than one row fits, that is normal. A veteran with a service-connected condition who is also buying a home will use both Vol. 1 and Vol. 4. Start with the most pressing one.

Some topics touch more than one volume. When that happens, the volume that owns the topic gives the full treatment, and the others give a short mention with a pointer. Nobody has to read the same thing twice.

Table O-1. Find the Right Starting Point.

If the veteran...	Start with
has a service-connected injury or illness, or thinks they might	Vol. 1 — VA Disability Benefits
is separating from service or just separated	Vol. 5 — Transition & Separation
wants to use school, training, or GI Bill benefits	Vol. 2 — Education & Training
needs VA health care or wants to enroll	Vol. 3 — VA Healthcare
is buying, building, or refinancing a home	Vol. 4 — VA Home Loan
is retiring from the military	Vol. 6 — Retirement & Military Pay
is the survivor or dependent of a veteran	Vol. 7 — Survivors & Dependents
has low income and needs support	Vol. 8 — Pension & Aid + Attendance
has life-insurance questions	Vol. 9 — Life Insurance
is looking for work or starting a business	Vol. 10 — Employment & Business
needs to fix records or upgrade a discharge	Vol. 11 — Records & Corrections
wants state or local veteran benefits	Vol. 12 — State & Local Benefits

Before opening any volume

Two things in this Vol. 0 apply no matter which volume comes next. Get the DD-214 in hand (Chapter 2 — The DD-214), and set up the VA.gov login (Chapter 3 — VA.gov and ID.me Accounts). Those two make every other volume go faster.

Carry one habit in as well. The VA system runs on clocks. Many benefits start paying from the date a veteran first acts, not the date a claim is finally settled, so moving early can be worth real money. Each volume flags the deadlines that matter for its own benefit. The move is to open a volume, find its clocks first, and not sit on them.

Action Steps

- Circle the row or rows that fit, and open the named volume first.
- If two or more fit, start with the one tied to money or a deadline.
- Confirm the DD-214 and the VA.gov account are handled, then find the deadlines in the volume opened before diving deep.

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Chapter 6 — Get Help the Right Way

Bottom line up front. No veteran has to figure this system out alone, and the best help is free. The VA formally recognizes trained representatives who guide veterans through the process at no charge. Knowing they exist, and knowing to be wary of anyone who wants money up front, is part of getting oriented.

There is a free guide built into the system

A veteran does not have to become an expert to get what they earned. Veterans Service Organizations employ representatives whom the VA has formally recognized, and they help veterans for free. A VSO representative can walk a veteran through their options, help with the paperwork, and act as their representative in dealings with the VA. Using one is the normal way through the door, not a fallback for hard cases.

Free is the standard, not the exception

The people allowed to represent a veteran before the VA are ones the VA has formally recognized: representatives of recognized Veterans Service Organizations, and accredited claims agents and attorneys. VSO representatives do this at no cost.

The orientation point to carry into every other volume is simple. Getting started, and getting help to get started, should not cost a veteran anything. Anyone who asks for money up front to "sign you up" or "handle your paperwork" is a reason to stop and check their credentials before going a step further.

Where to find a guide

The VA can point a veteran to a recognized representative. The single line to call, from Chapter 4 — How the VA Actually Works, is 1-800-MyVA411 (1-800-698-2411). Many state and county veterans offices also staff recognized representatives who help for free.

Action Steps

- Treat a free, VA-recognized VSO representative as the default first stop, not a last resort.
- Confirm that anyone offering help is recognized by the VA before signing anything.
- Be suspicious of any up-front fee just to get started. Free help is the norm.
- Call 1-800-698-2411 to be pointed to a representative.

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Appendix A — Glossary & Key Contacts

Glossary of universal terms

These are the orientation terms a veteran meets first. Terms tied to a specific benefit are defined in that benefit's volume.

- **ACDUTRA (Active Duty for Training).** Full-time training duty, common for Guard and Reserve members. Whether a given period counts toward veteran status is worked out case by case. See **Chapter 1 — Who Counts as a Veteran**
- **Character of discharge.** How a period of service ended (Honorable, General, Other Than Honorable, and so on). It gates veteran status, and through it, eligibility for benefits.
- **DD-214 (Report of Separation).** The document that proves service and how it ended. See **Chapter 2 — The DD-214.**
- **INACDUTRA (Inactive Duty Training).** Drill-weekend-type training. Like ACDUTRA, whether a given period counts toward status depends on the specifics. See **Chapter 1 — Who Counts as a Veteran**
- **NCA (National Cemetery Administration).** The VA branch handling burial and memorial benefits.
- **VA.gov.** The VA's main website and the front door to most benefits and records. Sign in with ID.me or Login.gov. See **Chapter 3 — VA.gov and ID.me Accounts.**
- **VBA (Veterans Benefits Administration).** The VA branch handling disability, education, home loans, pension, and insurance.
- **VHA (Veterans Health Administration).** The VA branch handling health care.
- **VSO (Veterans Service Organization).** An organization with VA-recognized representatives who help veterans navigate the VA for free. See **Chapter 6 — Get Help the Right Way.**

Key contacts & links card

Confirm current details at VA.gov before relying on them.

- **VA main line — MyVA411:** 1-800-698-2411 (1-800-MyVA411), 24/7. TTY relay: 711.
- **Veterans Crisis Line:** dial 988, then press 1. Free and confidential, 24/7.
- **VA website (front door):** VA.gov. Sign in with an **ID.me** or **Login.gov** account.
- **DD-214 and service records:** National Archives, National Personnel Records Center. Request online through **eVetRecs** or by mailing **Standard Form 180 (SF-180)**. Free for veterans and next of kin.
- **Find an accredited representative (VSO):** ask through MyVA411 or a state or county veterans office.

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Start here. Before the claims and the benefits, this volume gets a veteran squared away: who counts as a veteran, the DD-214 that proves it, the accounts that open the system, how the VA is built, and where to go next. Plain orientation, no jargon, the front door to the whole field manual.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. A. Lim spent nearly three decades in the U.S. Army and retired as a Staff Sergeant. He is rated 100 percent permanent and total, and he is paralegal-trained. He went through the claim process himself, then spent years helping other veterans make sense of rules the VA rarely explains. He writes the way a good NCO teaches a battle buddy: direct, honest, and always tied back to the law.

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