

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Applying for a Discharge Upgrade or Correction

Prepare and file a complete discharge upgrade
or correction application.



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A FWD Assist HQ Field Guide

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This guide is education, not representation. It explains how part of the VA system works so you can handle your own business with confidence. It is not legal or claims advice, and reading it does not create any representative relationship between you and the author. The author is not affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and nothing here is endorsed by the VA.

This guide prints no live VA dollar figures and no rating percentages on purpose, because they change. Before you make a decision based on any number, check the current figure at va.gov. No book can promise you a rating; the evidence in your file decides the result. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Officer is always free.

Applying for a Discharge Upgrade or Correction

Prepare and file a complete discharge upgrade or correction application.

Companion to *The Military Discharge Upgrade Manual*.

BEFORE YOU READ ONE MORE LINE

If you're in a mental health crisis, stop and call the **Veterans Crisis Line: dial 988, then press 1**, or text 838255. It's free, confidential, and available 24 hours a day. You don't need a discharge upgrade or VA benefits to use it.

This is general education, not legal or claims advice, and not guidance for your specific claim. It cannot promise you a rating or an outcome, and no one can. For help with your own claim, see a free accredited representative (see [the back of this guide](#)). Nothing here creates a representative relationship.

Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at va.gov.

THE BEST WAY TO USE THIS GUIDE

The strongest position is to be your own informed advocate and to work with a free accredited representative. An accredited Veterans Service Organization, such as the DAV, VFW, American Legion, or a county or state veterans office, helps at no charge. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can help too. They can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim, and after that they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide is here so you understand your own situation and can work with them as a full partner instead of handing it over blind. If you'd rather handle this yourself, and you're comfortable doing that, the guide walks you through every step. Either way, you stay in control.

The Outcome and What You Need Before You Start

The outcome: You'll have chosen the right board, gathered your evidence, written your personal statement, and filed a complete discharge upgrade or correction application on the correct form.

This guide prepares you for the task. It does not and cannot promise a rating, a percentage, or an outcome. The evidence in your file decides the result.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ Your DD-214, so you can read the exact character of service and narrative reason for separation.
- ☐ Your separation date, so you can work out your 15-year Discharge Review Board window.
- ☐ An honest answer on whether PTSD, TBI, MST, or sexual harassment contributed to the conduct.
- ☐ Names or contact leads for former unit members and any treating providers.
- ☐ Access to va.gov and to the National Archives eVetRecs site, vetrecs.archives.gov, for records requests.

When to start: File your records requests on day one. Records requests can take months, so the sooner you ask, the sooner you can build your case. If your 15-year DRB window is closing, file the application now and send supporting documents after.

Start Here: The Basics

A less-than-honorable discharge can block access to VA benefits, but it is not always the final word. Separate military boards can upgrade a discharge or correct a record, especially where factors like PTSD, TBI, MST, or plain error played a role. This is a separate process from a VA claim, with its own forms and boards. VA also makes its own character of discharge decision when you file a VA claim, so you don't have to wait on a board to file with VA.

The Steps

STEP 1

Pull your DD-214 and read the character of service block.

Write down your exact discharge characterization and the narrative reason for separation, word for word. This is the wording you are asking the board to change.

Done when you have your characterization and narrative reason written down.

STEP 2

Calculate your 15-year DRB deadline.

Take your discharge date and add 15 years. The Discharge Review Board (DRB) window is counted from that date, not from the day you apply.

Do not assume you have time. The 15-year DRB deadline is set by statute, and the DRB can't extend it. After 15 years, the Board for Correction of Military Records is still open to you.

Where this is written down: 10 U.S.C. § 1553(a); 32 CFR § 70.8(a)(2).

Done when your 15-year anniversary date is written on a calendar.

STEP 3

Choose the right board.

The DRB reviews discharges within 15 years and can change the characterization, the narrative reason, or both. It can't review a discharge from a general court-martial, and for a discharge from any other court-martial it can act only as clemency. The Board for Correction of Military Records (BCMR) can do what the DRB does, change other parts of the record such as a reentry code, and correct errors and injustices. The Navy and Marine Corps use the Board for Correction of Naval Records (BCNR). The Coast Guard has its own board under the Department of Homeland Security. You file with the BCMR within three years after you discover the error or injustice, but the board can excuse a late filing in the interest of justice.

If you're within 15 years and want a characterization or narrative reason change, **then** file with the DRB first. **If** you're past 15 years, your discharge came from a general court-martial, or you need a change the DRB can't make, **then** file with your service's BCMR or BCNR. **If** your board choice is a close call, **then** talk to a free accredited representative before filing.

Where this is written down: 10 U.S.C. § 1553(a), (b); 10 U.S.C. § 1552(b), (f); 32 CFR § 70.8(a)(3).

Done when you know which board and which form apply to your case.

STEP 4

Request your military records on day one.

Request your records from the National Archives online through eVetRecs, or by mail or fax with Standard Form 180. Ask for your complete Official Military Personnel File, your medical records, and any court-martial or Article 15 records.

Do not wait to start. Records requests can take months, and every day you delay is a day the records aren't moving.

Done when your records request is submitted.

STEP 5

Download your VA records and request your C-File.

Log into va.gov and download your VA treatment records through My HealtheVet on VA.gov, if you get VA care. Request your claims file (C-file) on VA Form 20-10206 (Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or Privacy Act (PA) Request).

Done when your VA treatment records are downloaded and your C-File request is in.

STEP 6

Gather mental health evidence if a condition contributed.

Collect the VA and private records that document your diagnosis, symptoms, and treatment. Department of Defense guidance (the Hagel memo of 2014 and the Kurta memo of 2017) tells the boards to give liberal consideration where PTSD, TBI, another mental health condition, sexual assault, or sexual harassment may have contributed. The Wilkie memo of 2018 adds guidance on equity, injustice, and clemency. The law also requires liberal consideration for PTSD or TBI tied to combat or military sexual trauma, and for PTSD or TBI after a contingency deployment.

If PTSD, TBI, MST, or sexual harassment contributed to the conduct, **then** build your case around the liberal consideration standard. **If** no such condition was involved, **then** focus on record errors, injustice, or clemency factors such as your conduct since discharge.

Where this is written down: 10 U.S.C. § 1552(h); 10 U.S.C. § 1553(d)(3).

Done when your mental health records are in hand and you know which memoranda apply.

STEP 7

Request buddy statements from people who served with you.

Ask for a specific, dated, signed statement describing your behavior and any changes they observed. A plain signed letter with printed name, rank, and contact information works.

Done when you have at least one specific, signed buddy statement.

STEP 8

Get a medical opinion.

Ask a VA or private provider for a written opinion that explains your diagnosis, whether it was present during service, and how its symptoms may have contributed to the conduct. A private provider may charge for this, so ask first.

Done when you have a signed opinion on the provider's letterhead.

STEP 9

Write your personal statement in four sections.

Section One, who you were as a service member. Section Two, the misconduct stated plainly with responsibility taken. Section Three, the connection between your condition and the behavior. Section Four, your growth and stability today.

Do not attack the command or the system, make excuses, or write angry. The boards weigh candor, acceptance of responsibility, and what you've done since discharge.

Done when your statement covers all four sections and takes responsibility without excuses.

STEP 10

Have your statement and form reviewed before you file.

Ask a free accredited representative, a VSO, or an attorney to check your statement for tone and flow and to confirm the basis section states a clear legal theory, not a vague complaint.

Done when a reviewer has read your statement and your completed form.

STEP 11

Organize your evidence package.

Write a one-page cover letter summarizing your argument in a few sentences, then tab and number your exhibits: DD-214 first, then the personal statement, service medical records, personnel file, buddy statements, VA records, private records, nexus letters, and character references.

Do not submit originals. Send copies only, because the board keeps what you send.

Done when your package is tabbed, numbered, and led by a cover letter.

STEP 12

Complete and file the correct form.

Fill out every blank on DD Form 293 (Application for the Review of Discharge From the Armed Forces of the United States) for the DRB, or DD Form 149 for the BCMR or BCNR. In the basis section, state clearly what you want changed and why. On the DD Form 293 you choose a review of the written record or a personal appearance. If your first DRB review is on the record only, you can ask for a hearing later. If you have a hearing first, that second chance is gone. Make this choice with your representative.

If you are filing with the DRB, **then** complete DD Form 293. **If** you are filing with the BCMR or BCNR, **then** complete DD Form 149 and add your injustice and error arguments.

Do not file with both boards at once for the same issue. If you're DRB-eligible, file with the DRB first, then go to the BCMR if you're denied.

Where this is written down: 32 CFR § 70.8(a)(1), (b)(8)(ii).

Done when your complete form and evidence package are submitted to one board.

STEP 13

Track your application and know your next option.

Decisions can take many months, so set a follow-up date and keep copies of everything. If you're denied, read the decision letter for the reasons and for the options it lists.

If the DRB denies you, **then** you can apply to the BCMR, and that first BCMR application doesn't need new evidence. The DRB itself reconsiders only in set cases, such as new, substantial, relevant evidence you didn't have before, or a hearing request after a records-only review. **If** the BCMR denies you, **then** it reconsiders when you bring material it hasn't seen, and after both boards a final Department of Defense review of an upgrade request is available. **If** you're unsure what's new enough, **then** talk to an accredited representative before refiling.

Where this is written down: 10 U.S.C. § 1553(b)(2); 10 U.S.C. § 1552(a)(3)(D); 10 U.S.C. § 1553a; 32 CFR § 70.8(b)(8).

Done when your follow-up date is on your calendar and, after any denial, you know your next option.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ I read my DD-214 and wrote down my characterization and narrative reason.
- ☐ I calculated my 15-year DRB deadline and put it on a calendar.
- ☐ I chose the right board and the form that goes with it.
- ☐ I requested my personnel and medical records from the National Archives.
- ☐ I downloaded my VA treatment records and requested my C-File.
- ☐ I gathered mental health evidence and identified which liberal consideration memoranda apply.
- ☐ I collected at least one specific, signed buddy statement.
- ☐ I got a signed medical opinion on the provider's letterhead.
- ☐ I wrote my personal statement in all four sections.
- ☐ I had my statement and form reviewed before filing.
- ☐ I built a tabbed, numbered evidence package with a cover letter, using copies only.
- ☐ I completed and filed the correct form with one board.
- ☐ I calendared my follow-up date and know my next option after any denial.

Reminder: rules and rates change. Check any current figure at va.gov. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide prepared you for the task. The evidence in your file decides the result.

Get Free, Accredited Help

For anything about your own claim, talk to an accredited representative. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Free help is available through Veterans Service Organizations such as the DAV, VFW, and American Legion, and through county and state veterans offices.

To find one near you, visit va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative. Representation begins only when you sign VA Form 21-22 (for a Veterans Service Organization) or 21-22a (for an individual agent or attorney). With one rare exception for a single unpaid case, only accredited people can represent you before the VA, and only an accredited agent or attorney can charge you a fee. Nothing in this guide creates that relationship.

A warning about claim sharks. Anyone who offers to file your initial claim for a fee, or who guarantees you a rating or a percentage, is selling something you shouldn't buy. Accredited Veterans Service Organizations help at no charge, and accredited claims agents and attorneys may charge only after VA issues its initial decision, within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Report predatory companies to the VA Office of Inspector General at 1-800-488-8244.

Keep Going: The Full Guide

This field guide is the short, do-this-now companion to the book *The Military Discharge Upgrade Manual*. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at fwdassisthq.com/books.

Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at va.gov.

About the Author

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J. Erickson is a service-disabled Air Force veteran. He served as a military firefighter and as a veteran service officer, where he spent years walking veterans through the same claims process he writes about now. He holds an MBA and writes plain-language guides for veterans who want to understand the system without a translator.

He writes the For the Rest of Us series at fwdassisthq.com. This guide is published by FWD Assist HQ as a veteran education resource. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.