

FWD ASSIST HQ / CLAIM TOOLKIT / NO. 12

Two Boards

There are two of them, they run on different clocks, and the clock most people think ran out decades ago does not start where they think it starts.

Most people who could ask never ask. Not because they were told no. Because somebody once said there was a time limit, and the number sounded small, and that was the end of it.

The number is real. It is also not counted from the day you think, and it is not the same number on both boards, and one of the two can be waived outright.

WHAT IS IN HERE

1. The two boards and the two clocks
2. Three misreadings that stop people cold
3. The record worksheet
4. A check before you file

This is general education. It is not legal advice and it is not a promise about any board result. Nobody can promise you an outcome. VA accreditation covers VA benefit claims; a discharge board is a different forum, so look for a veterans law clinic or an attorney who does discharge work. Many law school clinics take these at no cost. FWD Assist HQ is not affiliated with the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, or any government agency.

Two boards

Different bodies, different questions, different clocks.

	Discharge review board	Records correction board
What it does	Reviews the discharge or dismissal itself and, subject to review by the Secretary concerned, can change it or issue a new one.	Corrects any military record where the Secretary considers it necessary to correct an error or remove an injustice.
The clock	Within 15 years after the date of the discharge or dismissal.	Within 3 years after discovering the error or injustice.
Can the clock be waived?	No. This one is written as a hard limit.	Yes. The board may excuse a failure to file within three years if it finds that to be in the interest of justice.
A limit worth knowing	Does not reach a discharge or dismissal by sentence of a general court-martial. For a discharge adjudged by court-martial, its action extends only to clemency.	Reaches records the other board cannot. Court-martial records are not off limits, but what it may do with them is: reflect what reviewing authorities did, or act on the sentence for clemency.

THE ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

Three years from discovering it. Not three years from getting out.

That is the sentence people have been misreading for thirty years. And even that period can be excused in the interest of justice. The fifteen-year one is the clock that actually closes.

There is also a sequence worth knowing. Where the discharge review board does not grant a request to upgrade the characterization of a discharge, the statute says that declination may then be considered under the records correction provision. A no from the first board is not automatically the end. It runs the other way too: while you are still inside the fifteen years, the correction board generally expects you to go to the review board first for a discharge upgrade.

Three misreadings

Each of these stops somebody who had a real case.

MISREADING 1 / "IT HAS BEEN THIRTY YEARS, I AM OUT OF TIME"

The three-year period runs from discovering the error or injustice, not from the discharge. And the board may excuse a late filing in the interest of justice. Age of the case is something to address in the filing, not a reason to skip filing.

MISREADING 2 / "THEY ALREADY SAID NO"

Where the discharge review board does not grant a request to upgrade the characterization of a discharge, the statute says that declination may be considered under the records correction provision, or under the separate review authority in section 1553a where that applies. Different board, different question. A denial is a fact in the file, not a locked door.

MISREADING 3 / "WHAT I WAS GOING THROUGH DOES NOT MATTER"

It is written into the statute, for a defined group. Boards are directed to review with liberal consideration that post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury potentially contributed to the circumstances resulting in the discharge or to how it was characterized. The statute limits who that duty covers: broadly, members deployed in support of a contingency operation and diagnosed as a consequence, and members whose condition is related to combat or military sexual trauma as determined by the Secretary concerned. Read it rather than assuming either way.

It also sets requirements about who sits on or advises the board in those cases, including where the claim is based in whole or part on sexual trauma, intimate partner violence, or spousal abuse.

In plainer words: if what happened to you was an assault, the statute has you in view. People leave that out of these applications because it is the hardest part to write, and it is also the part the law is directing the board to weigh.

SUPPORT THAT IS NOT A CRISIS LINE

Working on this can take weeks, and most of that is not a crisis, it is just hard. The DoD Safe Helpline, at safehelpline.org, is confidential and is for sexual assault in the military community. Every VA medical center has a military sexual trauma coordinator, and MST-related care is available whether or not you ever filed a report and whether or not you are service connected. That is at va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/military-sexual-trauma.

If it does become a crisis, the Veterans Crisis Line is 988 then press 1, or text 838255.

WHAT THAT MEANS FOR THE WRITING

It means the part of the story you have been leaving out because it sounds like an excuse is the part the statute specifically tells the board to weigh. Not as a plea. As a fact about what was happening at the time and how it connects to what ended the service.

The record worksheet

Answer what you can. Blanks are fine. This is what you hand to whoever helps you, so you are not building the whole story out loud from scratch every time.

The example answers below are somebody else's service. They are there to show the shape of a useful answer, not to be borrowed. Only what actually happened to you belongs in a filing.

NAME

DATE

WHAT THIS PAGE IS, AND IS NOT

It is a worksheet, not a privileged document. Anything you write here that goes to VA or to a board becomes part of a file other people read. Write what you need to establish what happened. You do not have to write more than that, and what you leave off this page you can still tell a representative or a clinician out loud.

If working on it is bringing things up, the Veterans Crisis Line is 988 then press 1, or text 838255. You can stop and come back to this.

1. What is on the discharge now, and what date?

Character of service, the narrative reason and separation code if you have the DD-214 in front of you.

2. What happened, in order?

The incident or incidents. Dates or approximate months. What the command did. Keep it factual.

3. What was going on with you at the time?

Deployments, injuries, what changed in you and when. What you were not saying out loud back then and why. Plain is better: "I came back in March and stopped sleeping. I was drinking most nights by summer. I never told anyone because I wanted to stay in."

The record worksheet, continued

4. When did you learn something was wrong with the record?

This is the date the three-year period runs from. If it was recently, say so and say what prompted it. If you are past three years, this is also where the interest-of-justice argument lives: when you learned, why you could not act sooner, and what changed. "I only learned the narrative reason was wrong in 2025, when a service officer read my DD-214 to me. I had never been shown it."

5. Who saw it, and what records exist?

Names, units, medical or counseling contact, anybody who could write a statement. Also anything you have from after service.

6. What exactly do you want changed?

Character of service, narrative reason, separation code, re-enlistment code. Name the ones you want moved and say why each is wrong.

Before you file

- ☐ I checked both boards rather than assuming only one applies.
- ☐ I found the discharge date and whether the fifteen-year window is open.
- ☐ I identified when I discovered the error or injustice, which is a different date.
- ☐ If I am past three years, I said why and asked for it to be excused in the interest of justice.
- ☐ I included what was going on at the time instead of leaving it out.
- ☐ I said what I want changed, specifically, not just that it is unfair.
- ☐ I did not describe events that did not happen.
- ☐ I have my DD-214, or I noted that I need to request it.
- ☐ I asked a veterans law clinic or somebody who does discharge work to look.

ONE HONEST NOTE

Nobody can tell you how a board will decide, and anyone who promises you an outcome is not being straight with you. What is knowable is whether a door is actually closed, and for a lot of people it is not closed the way they were told.

Where this actually goes

THE TWO APPLICATIONS

Discharge review board: DD Form 293, Application for the Review of Discharge from the Armed Forces of the United States.

Records correction board: DD Form 149, Application for Correction of Military Record Under the Provisions of Title 10, U.S. Code, Section 1552.

Both live at esd.whs.mil, where each shows its current edition date. DD 293 carries the 15-year rule on its own first page: discharged more than 15 years ago and the review board is closed to you, so the correction board on DD 149 is the route.

The boards are organized by service, though some cover more than one branch. Send the form to the board that handles the branch you served in, at the address printed on the form. Editions change. Confirm before you send, and keep a copy of everything.

If you do not have your DD-214, request it with SF-180, Request Pertaining to Military Records, through the National Archives, and check the current revision there. Start that first, because the two dates everything here runs on come off it.

What a board can actually change

Ask for something specific. The things on the table are the character of service, the narrative reason for separation, the separation code, and the re-enlistment code. They are separate items and a board can move one without moving the others, so say which ones you want changed and why each one is wrong.

AND THE ROAD THAT DOES NOT RUN THROUGH A BOARD

If what you actually want is VA benefits or VA health care, there is a separate question VA decides on its own: whether your character of discharge bars you from them. That determination does not require a board upgrade first, and it can be pursued at the same time as one. People wait years on a board for something they could have been asking VA about in parallel. Ask an accredited representative about it specifically, by name.

A WORD ABOUT WHO CHARGES FOR THIS

Discharge upgrade help is a market with predators in it. Before you pay anybody, try the free options: accredited representatives at Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion and your state or county veterans service office, and law school veterans clinics, many of which take discharge cases at no cost. The accredited search is at va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative/find-rep.

Separately, on the VA benefits side: nobody may charge you a fee for helping with a VA claim before VA issues its first decision. That is 38 USC 5904(c)(1), and what an accredited agent or attorney may charge after that is set by 38 CFR 14.636, measured against past-due benefits, meaning the back pay owed for the stretch before the decision. Only an accredited agent or attorney may charge you anything, and you can report anybody who breaks that to the VA Office of Inspector General at 1-800-488-8244.

Where this is written down

The discharge review board, its fifteen-year limit, the exclusion of a discharge or dismissal by sentence of a general court-martial, the clemency-only limit for a discharge adjudged by court-martial, the provision that a declination on an upgrade request may then be considered under section 1552 or section 1553a, and the liberal consideration and board composition requirements for post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and other mental health conditions, with the definitions of who they cover, are in 10 USC 1553. The limits on what the records correction board may do with court-martial records are in 10 USC 1552(f). The records correction board, the three-year period running from discovery of the error or injustice, and the authority to excuse a late filing in the interest of justice are in 10 USC 1552.

Statute: uscode.house.gov, Title 10, sections 1552 and 1553. Each service publishes its own board procedures. Confirm current forms and filing addresses before you send anything.

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Current as of October 2026. Statutes and board procedures change. Check for a newer version before you rely on this.

If working on this is bringing things up, the Veterans Crisis Line is 988 then press 1, or text 838255. Family members can call it too.