



VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

DISCHARGE UPGRADES

A step-by-step guide to requesting an upgrade to your military discharge status

SELF-HELP GUIDE CHECKLIST

☐ **Step 1: Understanding the Basics of Discharge Upgrade Applications**

- Review the two reasons the Boards will upgrade a veteran's discharge
- Understand the special rules for applications related to mental health, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

☐ **Step 2: Collect Documents & Supporting Evidence**

- Request all relevant records and documents to support your application
- Gather support letters from friends, family, and those you served with

☐ **Step 3: Write Your Personal Statement**

- Write a detailed statement explaining what happened in service and why your discharge status should be upgraded

☐ **Step 4: Fill Out & Submit Your Application**

- Determine which Board you should apply to based on your branch of service and what you want changed on your DD-214
- Know the deadlines for applying for a Discharge Upgrade
- Decide whether to request a hearing
- Make a copy of your entire application, and send it in via certified mail and/or e-mail

☐ **Step 5: Receive the Board's Decision**

- Respond to any negative Mental Health Advisory Opinions
- Appeal a Discharge Upgrade denial

BEFORE YOU START

VA Benefits Eligibility

Despite your current discharge status, you may still qualify for VA benefits through a process called VA's Character of Discharge Determination (COD). Many veterans with less than honorable discharges are able to receive VA healthcare and monetary disability benefits without ever getting a Discharge Upgrade. If your reason for getting a Discharge Upgrade is to receive VA benefits, you may want to first check out Swords' other self-help guide on the [VA's COD process](#).

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Upgrades

If you were discharged under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" or a previous homophobic military policy, we have a guide on the special rules that govern those Discharge Upgrades. For more information, see Swords' other guide on [DD214 Corrections for Veterans Discharged Under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and Prior Policies](#).

Name Changes for Transgender Veterans

If you're a trans veteran looking to change your name on your DD-214, we have a guide on how to request that correction. For more information, see our guide on [DD214 Name Corrections for Transgender Veterans](#).

For more help, here's a list of organizations that assist veterans with Discharge Upgrades:

<https://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/resources/referrals>

STEP 1: UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF DISCHARGE UPGRADE APPLICATIONS

What is a Discharge Upgrade?

A Discharge Upgrade is a request to the Department of Defense for a better discharge status than the one you received when you got out of the military. Upgrading your discharge can open doors to VA benefits, job opportunities, and other resources. And, it can help heal dignitary harm caused by having received a less than honorable discharge.

Your Discharge Upgrade application is the opportunity to tell the Boards about your accomplishments in service, any explanation for the misconduct in service, and your positive contributions since getting out of the military.

To request a Discharge Upgrade, you will submit an application form, your personal statement, and other supporting evidence to either the Discharge Review Board or the Board for Correction of Military Records (referred to as the “Board”).

Once you submit your application, you will likely **wait 1-2 years**, sometimes longer, for a decision back from the Board, so be prepared that this might take a while.

This guide will walk you through the Discharge Upgrade application process from start to finish.

STEP 1: UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF DISCHARGE UPGRADE APPLICATIONS (continued)

What are the reasons the Board will upgrade my discharge?

The Boards can only upgrade your discharge if they find that your **discharge was unjust or inequitable**, or your discharge was made **in error or improperly**. In your Discharge Upgrade application, you'll want to give the Board information and supporting evidence to show that your discharge was unjust/inequitable, erroneous/improper, or both.

- **Unjust/Inequitable:** This means that it was unfair that you received the discharge status that you did.

EXAMPLE

The misconduct occurred after a traumatic experience in service, and was the result of PTSD symptoms you were experiencing at the time. Or, you made a minor mistake at the end of service, but otherwise had many years of good service.

- **Error/Impropriety:** This means the military didn't properly follow its own procedures or policies, and had it followed them correctly, you would have received a better discharge status.

EXAMPLE

Under military regulations, you had a right to an admin separation board hearing prior to discharge but one was never offered to you.

IMPORTANT NOTE: You don't need both types of arguments in order to get upgraded. In fact, it's fairly rare to find an error/impropriety reason. Most Discharge Upgrade applications will be granted solely because the Board found that the discharge was unjust/inequitable.

STEP 1: UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF DISCHARGE UPGRADE APPLICATIONS (continued)

Special Rules for Mental Health–Related Applications

Many veterans were unfairly discharged for struggling with mental health symptoms that made it difficult to serve in the military. **If your discharge circumstances relate to mental health struggles you were having at the time**, such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, psychosis, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or experiences of military sexual trauma (MST), there are **special rules** designed to help your Discharge Upgrade case.

Boards must be more lenient with veterans seeking a Discharge Upgrade when there's a link between the misconduct and the veteran's mental health issues.

Here are a few examples of cases where this might apply:

- You smoked weed to manage your PTSD symptoms after coming back from deployment.
- You went AWOL after you were sexually assaulted to get away from the perpetrator.
- Your brain injury from service caused a sleep disorder and mood problems. This made it hard for you to arrive at work on time and to get along with others.
- You started having bipolar symptoms, which made it hard for you to judge situations well. As a result, you made rash decisions that led to your discharge.
- You experienced daily sexual harassment, and you began drinking heavily to cope. This resulted in your discharge for alcohol-related misconduct.

If this sounds like it applies to you, explain how your mental health links to the misconduct. Do this in your personal statement and in the supporting evidence you give to the Board. This will greatly improve your chances of getting your discharge upgraded.

STEP 2: COLLECT DOCUMENTS & SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

A lot of the evidence to support your Discharge Upgrade application will be in your military records. You will want to include excerpts of these records with your application to support that your discharge was unjust or in error. Some of these records can take a while to receive, so we recommend you start here.

Types of records to support your application:

Official Military Personnel File (OMPF)

Your OMPF will likely contain information crucial to your application, such as evidence of good things you did in service (promotions, accolades, deployments) and also information about any misconduct. For information about ordering your OMPF, review Swords' self-help guide on [Requesting Your Military Records](#).

Medical Records

Service treatment records (STRs) may have important evidence, especially if the misconduct was related to mental or physical health struggles you were having at the time. You may want to provide the Board with diagnosis information or proof of symptoms. To request your STRs, see our self-help guide on [Requesting Your Military Records](#). In addition, post-service medical records, such as mental health treatment records that discuss your military service, may be helpful to support that you were experiencing mental health struggles at the time of discharge.

Courts-martial Transcripts

Courts-martial transcripts and records of military investigations may also be helpful to your Discharge Upgrade application. For information about ordering these documents, including sample request letters you can use, review our guide on [Ordering Courts-Martial Transcripts and Military Investigative Records](#).

Rap Sheet

The Boards like to see that you haven't had any recent issues with the law. You can [request your rap sheet from the FBI](#) and include that to show you've stayed out of trouble. (As a rule of thumb, avoid any criminal justice issues for 5 years before applying for a Discharge Upgrade.)

STEP 2: COLLECT DOCUMENTS & SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

(continued)

Other Documentation

Depending on your situation, you may want to gather additional documents that can help show that your discharge was unjust or erroneous. These documents can help corroborate your story, explain what happened, and help prove to the Board that your discharge should be upgraded. **Some common examples:**

- Newspaper articles
- Obituaries or death certificates
- Divorce records
- Private, off-base mental health and/or medical records
- Police reports
- Civilian court records
- Naval ship logs or cruise books

Corroborating Statements

Oftentimes, there's an explanation for the misconduct that led to the less than honorable discharge. If people you served with or who knew you at the time can corroborate your explanation, ask them to write letters explaining what happened. Ask that they explain in their own words what you were experiencing or what happened. The more letters you can get, the easier it will be for the Board to believe your account of what happened.

Character Reference Letters

In addition, the Boards also care about what your life looks like today and all the good contributions you've made since getting out of the military, whether that's in your family, at work, at school, or in the community. You can include with your application letters from people in your life today who can speak to your honorable qualities and good character.

You'll want to include anything that will help the Board to believe your account of what happened and to see that you are deserving of an Honorable discharge today.

STEP 3: WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

In addition to records and support letters, perhaps the most important piece of support to your Discharge Upgrade application is **your personal statement**.

This step goes over how to effectively and clearly tell your story and make your case for a Discharge Upgrade.

Why does your story matter?

Your personal statement is important to **explaining to the Boards what you want changed on your DD214 and why the Board should upgrade your discharge**.

Remember, the Boards can only upgrade a discharge if it was unjust or an error was made – your statement can directly explain that to the Board so they understand why you should get an upgrade.

Things to Consider:

- You can write your statement out by hand, but it may be easier for the Boards to read if you type it out.
- We suggest you limit the length of your personal statement to 5 pages or less.
- Conclude your statement with this declaration: ***I certify under penalty of perjury that the foregoing statement is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.***
- Sign and date the statement.

STEP 3: WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

(continued)

How should I begin?

You'll want to start your statement by explaining in 1–2 sentences what you want changed on your DD214. For most applicants, this will be a request for:

1. An upgrade to an Honorable discharge status
 2. Change of narrative reason for separation to "Secretarial Authority"
 3. Change of RE-Code to RE-1
- **Discharge Status:** Most folks will want to request a fully Honorable discharge. Even if you think you only deserve a General Under Honorable, there's no harm in asking for a fully Honorable discharge.
 - **Narrative Reason for Separation:** Many want this change because the reason is hurtful and might sway employers or anyone else who sees your DD214 against you. It may currently say "Pattern of Misconduct" or "Drug Abuse" or "Misconduct-Serious Offense." You can ask to replace it with "**Secretarial Authority**" – this is the default category the Boards use. This is important because correcting the narrative reason can better reflect your true service and help you in future situations, such as job applications or accessing benefits.
 - **RE-Code:** For those familiar with DD214s, like employers, having an RE-Code of 3 or 4 may raise questions, as it indicates you're likely ineligible for re-enlistment. As part of your Discharge Upgrade application, you can request this be changed to RE-1 (meaning you're immediately eligible for re-entry) in order to remove this risk of raising suspicions and prompting invasive questions.

Note: You'll also want to list your requested changes on the Application Form as well, which we'll discuss in the next step.

STEP 3: WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

(continued)

What should my Personal Statement say?

After you clearly state what you want changed on your DD214, you'll want to begin your story to the Boards about what happened in the military.

There are generally **three things** that the Boards wants to hear about –

- **Your Military Service:** All the good things you did while in the service,
- **Explanation of Misconduct:** What explanation there is for the misconduct that led to the less than honorable discharge, and
- **Post-Service Life:** Positive contributions you have made since you got out of the military.

If it's helpful, you can organize your statement into these three parts:

Part 1: Your Military Service

- What led you to join the military?
- Describe your work in the service and any positive contributions you made.
- Did you get any accolades, early promotions, awards, or honors in the military?
- If you deployed, what was your experience like?

Overall, provide the Board with a sense of the good things you accomplished while in the military and if it feels honest, any feelings of pride for what you did and/or gratitude for the experiences.

STEP 3: WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

(continued)

Part 2: Explanation of Misconduct

Explain to the Board whatever the misconduct was that led to your discharge, and any other misconduct from your time in the service.

- **Tip:** *Reviewing your military record can help refresh your memory about these events.*

The Board will want you to be up-front and honest about what happened, and if it feels authentic, express any regret for the misconduct.

For example:

- Did you have a strong reason for going AWOL or UA?
- Were you using drugs or alcohol at the time to cope with anxiety, depression, PTSD, or other mental health symptoms?
- Have the policies changed since your discharge that would have led to a different outcome if discharged today?
- Were you facing personal challenges, such as family issues, that affected your ability to serve?
- Was discrimination a factor in your receiving a less than honorable discharge?
- Were you experiencing mental health struggles that made it difficult to serve?

STEP 3: WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

(continued)

Part 3: Post-Service Life

Lastly, you'll want to give the Boards a sense of what life has looked like since you got out of the military.

- Since separation, have you gone to school? Started a family? Built your career?
- Have you done any volunteering in the community? Have you served as anyone's mentor?
- Have you stayed free of any criminal justice involvement?
- Are you active in your church or other community space?
- If your misconduct was drug- or alcohol-related, and you are now sober, that would be helpful to share with the Board.

Include any information that will help the Boards understand that you are living honorably today and deserving of an Honorable discharge.

STEP 3: WRITE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

(continued)

If your Discharge Upgrade request is related to PTSD, TBI, MST, or other mental health issues:

Make sure to explain the connection between your mental health and the misconduct in your personal statement.

In cases where there's a link between the veteran's mental health struggles and the misconduct, the Boards will be looking for your answers to these **four** questions:

1. Did you have a mental health issue or experience that could explain or lessen the discharge?
2. Did that condition or experience occur during military service?
3. Does that condition or experience actually excuse or mitigate the discharge?
4. Does that condition or experience outweigh the discharge?

In your personal statement, specifically in **Part 2: Explanation of Misconduct**, you can address these four critical questions. Feel free to copy the questions directly into your statement and provide your responses immediately beneath each one. This way the Boards will get the exact information they need from your statement.

STEP 4: FILL OUT AND SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION

Where to Apply?

Once you have all your supporting evidence collected and your personal statement written, the next step is to fill out the Discharge Upgrade Application.

First, you'll need to figure out which Board to apply to. The service branches have two Boards that hear Discharge Upgrade applications – the **Discharge Review Boards** (DRBs) and the **Boards for Correction of Military/Naval Records** (BCMRs/BCNRs).

You will apply to your branch's DRB or BCMR/BCNR. There are two exceptions to this rule:

- Marine Corps veterans will apply to the Navy DRB or Navy BCNR.
- Space Force veterans will apply to the Air Force DRB or the Air Force BCMR.

STEP 4: FILL OUT AND SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION

Which Board to Apply to?

To figure out if you should apply to the DRB or BCMR/BCNR, please check off the statements that apply to you:

- ☐ I was discharged **more than** 15 years ago.
- ☐ I was discharged by a General Court Martial.
- ☐ I am asking to be retroactively medically separated or medically retired.
- ☐ I already applied to the DRB and was denied **and** I don't want a personally hearing or I was denied after my personal hearing.

If **any one** of those boxes is **checked**, you will apply to the BCMR/BCNR. Everyone else will apply to the DRB.

Important Note: If you're coming up close to the 15 year mark since separation, but you don't have all your documents in order yet, submit the DRB's application form now and then send the supporting documents in ASAP.

Which Forms to Use?

Once you know where to apply, you'll need to fill out the correct form:

- **DRB:** Use DD Form 293
- **BCMR/BCNR:** Use DD Form 149

Make sure you are using the most up-to-date version of the form, which will be available online from the DOD's website. You'll see the form is pretty straight forward. Fill in all the information clearly, and check all the boxes that apply. Be sure to list out what you want corrected on your DD214, and list any evidence you're attaching in support of your application. And remember – **sign the form before you submit it.**

STEP 4: FILL OUT AND SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION

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BCMR/BCNR: 3-Year Deadline

If you're applying to the BCMR/BCNR, you'll see on the DD149 a section asking you to provide a "date of discovery" for the error or injustice, and to explain your "delay" in applying for an upgrade if it has been more than three years since this date.

What does the "date of discovery" mean?

Technically, you are required to apply to the BCMR or BCNR within three years of the date you first realized the "error" or "injustice" that you're looking to correct on your DD-214. For most veterans, this is your date of discharge. But, the BCMR or BCNR has the power to ignore, or "waive," this three-year deadline "in the interest of justice"— and **it often does**.

If it's been more than three years since you were discharged, don't worry – you should still apply for a discharge upgrade.

The Board will almost always ignore this deadline if you give them a strong reason for upgrading your discharge, **or** a good explanation for why you waited to apply.

In this part of the form, explain why you couldn't or didn't know how to apply before, and ask them to review your request now **"in the interest of justice."** If you need more space than the form allows, you can add this information to your personal statement.

STEP 4: FILL OUT AND SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION

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Choosing to Request a Hearing

You'll see there's a section on the application form asking if you want a hearing. Here's some information about how to make that call:

Discharge Review Board:

If applying to a DRB, you have the option to request a hearing, which will likely be conducted over the phone. It's an opportunity for you (and if applicable, your attorney or representative) to share your story directly with the Board, but requesting a hearing may significantly delay getting a decision on your application.

You only get **one hearing** with the DRB. If you have a hearing and your upgrade denied, you can't ask for another one. But if you don't request a hearing and your application is denied, you can then ask for a hearing to have the Board reconsider their decision to deny you — as long as you're still within 15 years of discharge. This gives you a second chance to make your case. Because of this, it may be better to wait on requesting a hearing in case you need that second chance.

Board for Correction of Military/Naval Records:

These Boards very rarely grant hearing requests, but if they do, it will be in-person. You'll need to pay to travel to the Board headquarters, in or near Washington, D.C.

STEP 4: FILLOUT AND SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION

(continued)

Submitting Your Application

You will submit your application as one packet to the Board. The packet should include:

- Application Form DD149 or DD293
- A copy of your DD214
- Your personal statement
- Supporting evidence, such as:
 - corroborating letters
 - character reference letters
 - portions of your military records
 - mental health records, and
 - any other corroborating or supporting evidence to prove to the Boards that you should receive a Discharge Upgrade.

Important Info:

- **Keep Copies:** Make sure to keep copies of everything you submit. This is crucial in case anything gets lost or you need to reference your application later.
- **Certified Mail:** Send the application in via certified mail with tracking, and keep a copy of the tracking information as proof of filing.
- **Moved?** If you move or change your contact information while your application is pending, be sure to update the Board. This ensures you receive their decision and any further communication.
- **Check Status Regularly:** Stay in touch with the board to track the status of your application. This can help you address any issues quickly if they arise.

STEP 5: RECEIVE THE BOARD'S DECISION

Mental Health Advisory Opinions

If your application shows how your mental health contributed to the misconduct in service, the Board may get an opinion from a mental health professional. They will advise the Board on whether your mental health struggles at the time outweigh or help explain your misconduct.

The Board must send you a copy of that opinion **before** it reaches a final decision about your upgrade. (A lot of veteran confuse this opinion with the Board's decision, but it's not the same thing.) **If you disagree** with what the mental health professional's opinion says, you should write the to Board immediately explaining why you disagree and send them any additional supportive evidence.

Receiving the Board's Decision

It can take 1-2 years to get a decision back from the Board. The Board will review everything you've sent them and issue a letter to you explaining their decision whether to grant your Discharge Upgrade. If they agree to upgrade your discharge, they'll send you a new DD214 within the next few weeks or months.

What if my Discharge Upgrade is denied?

If the DRB denies your application and you are still within 15 years of your discharge, you can request a telephonic hearing to plead your case. If you don't want a hearing or are past the 15-year limit, you have three years to appeal the denial to the BCMR or BCNR.

If the BCMR denies your request, you can ask for reconsideration if you have new evidence. You can also appeal the denial to Federal District Court, but you must file within six years of the BCMR/BCNR decision. For additional help with an appeal, here's a list of organizations that help with Discharge Upgrades: <https://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/resources/referrals>.

NOTES

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Disclaimer

This memorandum provides general information only. It does not constitute legal advice, nor does it substitute for the advice of an expert representative or attorney who knows the particulars of your case. Any use you make of the information in this memorandum is at your own risk. We have made every effort to provide reliable, up-to-date information, but we do not guarantee its accuracy. The information in this memorandum is current as of September 2025.

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