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The military's reading room cannot find most of its own decisions

The Defense Department posts the decisions of its administrative review boards online. Each board has its own page, and each page has a search bar. We wanted to test the site's search functionality, so we performed targeted word searches on each page. These are the results and what the law requires.

MEASUREMENTS
October 4, 6 and 7, 2026

BOARDS TESTED
Army, Navy and Marine Corps, Air Force

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FINDINGS

The Defense Department posts the administrative law decisions of its discharge review boards and boards for correction of military and naval records on one website, boards.law.af.mil. On October 6, 2026, the Institute tested the site's search functionality on each of the six boards for decisions containing the word "the." Across the six boards of the Army, the Navy and Marine Corps, and the Air Force, the search returned about 38,600 of the 286,719 published files. It did not return the other 87 percent. At the Naval Discharge Review Board the search reported 237 results for "the" and the same 237 for "discharge," out of 35,940 files. And many of the decisions the boards post cannot be read on the screen. About one in three files, and nearly all Naval Discharge Review Board decisions, are Rich Text or Word documents, which a web browser cannot display. Clicking one does not open the decision. It downloads the file to the reader's computer, where it must be opened in a word processor, one decision at a time. These are legal decisions of the federal government. A correction board's correction is, by statute, except when procured by fraud, "final and conclusive on all officers of the United States." 10 U.S.C. § 1552(a)(4)(A). Yet nearly four in five of the boards' files are plain-text, Rich Text or Word files, and every file is listed only by file name and date, with no summary and no index.

13%

of the 286,719 files posted by the six review boards of the Army, the Navy and Marine Corps, and the Air Force came back when we searched each board for the word "the" (38,605 files, October 6, 2026).[1]

0.7%

of the Naval Discharge Review Board's 35,940 files came back for the same search (237 files). Every result we were able to view, 39 different files in all, was a 2026 Marine Corps decision.

43%

of the decisions the Government Accountability Office checked were missing from the reading room (8,335 of 19,350 cases closed January 2018 through March 2024, GAO-25-107354).

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separate decision summaries or subject indexes we could find on the reading room, though the law requires them.

1.5 years

of full-time reading, at an average adult pace, to read every Naval Discharge Review Board decision once, before counting the time to download and open each file.[2]

WHAT WE TESTED

Each board's page on boards.law.af.mil has a search bar labeled "Enter Search Term(s)." Entering a term takes the reader off the reading room altogether, to search.usa.gov, a site run by a different agency, the General Services Administration, with results limited to that particular board's decisions.[3] The results page then offers to run the same search "from all locations," across every board on the site. On October 6, 2026, we searched each board for two common words, "the" and "discharge." Our copies of the decisions show that "the" appears in nearly every decision of every

board and that “discharge” appears in virtually every decision of the discharge review boards, since every application requests some change to a discharge status.[4] We compared the results with the number of files each board’s online page lists.

BOARD	FILES ON THE BOARD’S PAGE	SEARCH RESULTS FOR “THE”	SHARE	RESULTS FOR “DISCHARGE”
Army Board for Correction of Military Records	125,336	8,465	6.8%	7,311
Army Discharge Review Board	29,319	3,790	12.9%	3,787
Board for Correction of Naval Records	60,687	19,961	32.9%	11,135
Naval Discharge Review Board	35,940	237	**0.7%**	237
Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records	27,286	3,713	13.6%	2,544
Air Force Discharge Review Board	8,151	2,439	29.9%	2,438
All six boards	**286,719**	**38,605**	**13.5%**	**27,452**

Search results are the totals Search.gov showed on October 6, 2026. Each links to its Perma.cc capture. They match our first measurement on October 4 except at the Army correction board, which returned one fewer result for each word on October 6. File counts are the totals printed on each board’s page. Those pages were identical on October 1, 4 and 7, and each count links to its October 1 capture.

Then we tested the search the way an ordinary veteran would. We chose two decisions of the Naval Discharge Review Board of the kind a veteran would want to find and use with her application. In ND23-7300, a Navy veteran discharged for a drug offense argued that post-traumatic stress disorder mitigated her misconduct. The board found that it did not, but changed her characterization to General on the strength of her overall service. In ND24-9423, a veteran made the same argument, the board made the same finding, and it upgraded his discharge to Honorable. Both are listed in their folders (2023, 2024), and both files are posted (ND23-7300, ND24-9423). On October 7 we searched the board’s collection for each docket number, with the hyphen and without it. Every time the result was “Sorry, no results found” (ND23-7300, ND237300, ND24-9423, ND249423). Yet on October 6 the same search bar found a 2026 Marine Corps decision, MP26-03415, by its docket number on the first try (capture). The search can find a docket number. It did not find these two.

POSTED, 2023 NAVY FOLDER

ND23-7300

Search: no results, with or without the hyphen

POSTED, 2024 NAVY FOLDER

ND24-9423

Search: no results, with or without the hyphen

2026 MARINE CORPS PDF

MP26-03415

Search: found on the first try

The results suggest one possible reason. Of the six boards’ 286,719 published files, only about one in five is a PDF. Most decisions are posted as plain-text, Rich Text and Word files, and the Naval Discharge Review Board posts almost all of its decisions as Rich Text. For the two Army boards, the number of results for “the” comes within 2 percent of the number of PDF files each has posted, and at the Naval Discharge Review Board the only results we were able to view were this

year's Marine Corps PDFs. The search appears to reach PDF files far better than the plain-text, Rich Text and Word files in which most of the boards' decisions are posted. Only the Department can say for certain.

The six board pages of the Army, the Navy and Marine Corps, and the Air Force show their last change between June 25 and August 31, 2026, and our copies from October 1, October 4 and October 7 are identical. The reading room's front page says new decisions are added by the end of each quarter, with September 30 the most recent scheduled date. A page date does not prove nothing was added. Again, the Defense Department controls the site, and so only the Department can reliably explain these anomalies.

WHAT THE LAW REQUIRES

Since 2016 the law has required the final decisions of the military's correction boards to be posted on one public website, with personal information removed. On October 1, 2026, an amendment took effect adding that "[t]he information provided shall include a summary of each decision, to be indexed by subject matter . . . ." 10 U.S.C. § 1552(a)(5), as amended by Pub. L. No. 118-159, § 523, 138 Stat. 1773, 1884 (2024).

For the discharge review boards, the Defense Department's own rule has long required decisions to be "indexed in a usable and concise form" so that a veteran or an advocate can find "those cases that may be similar to an applicant's case." It directs that indexes be published quarterly. 32 C.F.R. § 70.8(l)(4). The Navy repeats the duty in 32 C.F.R. § 724.810(d). Congress also requires each discharge review board to post, every calendar quarter, the number of cases it considered, including those in which a mental health condition "is alleged to have contributed, whether in whole or part, to the original characterization of the discharge," and the number of discharges it upgraded, among other figures. 10 U.S.C. § 1553(f).

On October 4 we searched the reading room for the summaries and index the law requires. We checked the front page, all six board pages, the board menus, the 2026 folders, the "Boards Statistics" and "Congressional Reports" pages, and the site's search bar. We found no summary of any decision published apart from the decision itself, and no subject index, in any of those places.[5] The newest quarterly statistics on the reading room cover January through March 2025, and the listing for that file shows April 29, 2025. The law allows the statistics to be posted on other department websites, which we did not search.

What the search does show is a list of file names. Each result is a link labeled only with its docket number, such as MP26-03482, with the file's web address, boards.law.af.mil/NAVY/DRB/2026_Marine/MP26-03482.pdf, and a few lines of the decision's own text. No one at the boards prepares those lines. The search engine generates them automatically each time a search runs, by copying fragments of the file around the words searched for and cutting them off mid-sentence. Search engines call this a snippet. The government's search service shows snippets as a standard feature.

A snippet is not a summary. A summary is a work of judgment. It takes a second step, by someone who has read the decision, to state what was decided and why, and it stands apart from the decision itself. For a familiar example, take an opinion of the Supreme Court. The syllabus printed above it "constitutes no part of the opinion of the Court but has been prepared by the Reporter of Decisions for the convenience of the reader."[6] A snippet is the reverse, a few lines of text lifted from the decision by a machine, with no one deciding what matters. It appears only when the search happens to return the decision, and it is not indexed by subject matter. The statute calls for three things — a summary, of each decision, indexed by subject matter — and the snippets supply none of them.[7]

WHY IT MATTERS

Picture a sailor who was administratively separated from the Navy with an Other Than Honorable discharge after a mental health condition went untreated. Years later she asks the Naval Discharge Review Board to upgrade her discharge status. One of her best arguments would be that the board has granted relief to others in her position, that like cases should be decided alike.[8] If she rests an issue on an earlier unpublished decision, including one "maintained by the Armed Forces Discharge Review Board/Corrective Board Reading Room," then "applicants must provide the DRB with copies of such decisions . . . ." 32 C.F.R. § 70.8(a)(4)(iv)(C).

So she goes looking. On the reading room's front page she chooses Navy Boards, then the Naval Discharge Review Board. That page lists folders by year, split into Navy and Marine Corps. She opens one year's Navy folder. It lists file names such as ND23-7300.rtf, with dates and file sizes, and nothing about what was decided or why. She then tries the search bar and types "discharge," a word that appears in every one of the board's decisions and in the board's own name. It returns 237 of the board's 35,940 files, and every result we were able to view was a 2026 Marine Corps decision. None of them is a Navy decision, and none is one of the Rich Text files in which the board posts nearly all of its decisions. That leaves the folders. Each file she clicks downloads to her computer, because a web browser cannot display Rich Text. She must open it in a word processor, read it, and then do the same with the next, year by year, through thousands of files. GAO reached the same conclusion in July 2025, finding that an applicant "would need a specific docket number" or a long manual review to find comparable decisions.

The board, meanwhile, has its own decisions at hand. The veteran argues from whatever she can find. The decisions that could prove her case are posted, and she cannot find them. That cost falls not on the boards but on the people who served, many of whom were treated unjustly.

What the Institute's Reading Room does instead

The Institute opened its own Reading Room on October 2, 2026, the day after the Defense Department's statutory deadline. It holds more than 305,000 decisions of the military review boards. Every decision carries a summary and is indexed by subject, including outcome, characterization, issues raised, relief sought, separation and reentry codes, year and vote, where the decision states them. The full text of its decisions is searchable, and every record links to the board's own copy. It is free to the public, with no account or subscription required. It is not, however, a substitute for the government doing what the law requires of it.

The Institute has also asked the Defense Department and the services under the Freedom of Information Act how they are carrying out the summary and index requirement. Those requests, and every reply, are on the Institute's Investigations page.

METHOD AND LIMITS

These are dated measurements of one website, taken on October 4, 6 and 7, 2026. Search.gov's totals are its own estimates, and it displays only the first pages of any result list. The government site's counts are of files, not decisions. The boards post some decisions more than once. The 2023 Navy folder, for example, lists ND23-5411 twice, once with a space before ".rtf" and once without. Because the reading room relies on an outside search service whose index can change, it is entirely possible that a search that misses a file today will find it tomorrow. The GAO figure covers liberal-consideration cases closed from January 2018 through March 2024, not what is missing today. The Institute's copies of the six boards' decisions were downloaded from the reading room itself, the same files any veteran can reach. Turning them into searchable text took sophisticated technology, and a degree of technical knowledge, that most veterans and their advocates do not have or use. Tens of thousands were wholly or partly scanned images with no searchable text, which had to be read by optical character recognition. The Institute's Reading Room counts decisions rather than files and also holds Coast Guard and other decisions, so its total of more than 305,000 should not be compared with or subtracted from the six boards' totals. The October 6 searches, the board pages and the docket tests are preserved on Perma.cc and linked where they are cited.

NOTES

1. Each count in the table below links to its capture on Perma.cc, the web archive maintained by the Harvard Law School Library. ↩
2. The Institute's copies of the board's 35,300 decisions contain 45.5 million words. At 238 words a minute, the average silent reading rate of adults reading nonfiction in English, that is about 3,200 hours, or 1.5 years of 2,087 hours, the work year the federal government uses to compute pay. Marc Brysbaert, *How Many Words Do We Read per Minute? A Review and Meta-Analysis of Reading Rate*, 109 J. Memory & Language 104047, at 21 (2019); 5 U.S.C. § 5504(b)(1). The rate measures time spent actively reading. It does not include finding, downloading or opening files. ↩
3. Each board page's search bar sends the query to search.usa.gov. Every results page carries the same banner, "Boards of Review Reading Rooms," whichever board was searched, and even when the search runs "from all locations." It never names the board. The only clue is a line giving the web address searched, such as "boards.law.af.mil/army/bcmr." At the foot of the page is the line "Powered by SearchGov." SearchGov is the General Services Administration's shared search service for federal websites, "the search engine built specifically for federal websites," offered at "no cost to federal agencies." U.S. General Services Administration, Digital.gov, *Optimizing site search with SearchGov*. The reading room appears to have no search engine of its own. ↩

4. In the Institute's copies of the six boards' 289,646 decisions, "the" appears in 289,603. "Discharge" appears in all 35,300 decisions of the Naval Discharge Review Board, in 29,331 of the Army Discharge Review Board's 29,333 and in 7,947 of the Air Force Discharge Review Board's 7,953. The discharge review boards exist to review discharges. 10 U.S.C. § 1553(a). The correction boards also decide other kinds of requests, and "discharge" appears in 51 to 88 percent of their decisions. ↩

5. Some decisions contain a section headed "Summary." About 2,700 Air Force Discharge Review Board decisions dated 2022 or later open with one, and about 13,300 Naval Discharge Review Board decisions, most from 2010 through 2015, contain one. That section is part of the decision itself. It is not a summary published apart from the decision, and nothing indexes it by subject matter. ↩

6. *Loper Bright Enters. v. Raimondo*, No. 22-451, slip op., syllabus note (U.S. June 28, 2024) (citing *United States v. Detroit Timber & Lumber Co.*, 200 U.S. 321, 337 (1906)). ↩

7. 10 U.S.C. § 1552(a)(5), as amended by Pub. L. No. 118-159, § 523, 138 Stat. 1773, 1884 (2024) ("The information provided shall include a summary of each decision, to be indexed by subject matter . . . ."). ↩

8. Lawyers and courts call this principle stare decisis. The boards are not bound by their own past decisions the way a court is, and the term is not used here in its technical sense. But the discharge review boards' rules rest on the same idea. The index they require exists so that a veteran can find "those cases that may be similar to an applicant's case." 32 C.F.R. § 70.8(l)(4). Applicants are not required to cite prior decisions. *Id.* § 70.8(a)(4)(iv). ↩

SOURCES

- Boards of Review Reading Rooms, boards.law.af.mil, front page and the six board pages (Army BCMR, Army DRB, BCNR, NDRB, Air Force BCMR, Air Force DRB), and Boards Statistics. Perma.cc captures of October 1, 2026: front page, Army BCMR, Army DRB, BCNR, NDRB, Air Force BCMR, Air Force DRB.
- Search.gov results for each board, using the search bar on each board's page, October 4 and October 6, 2026. Each October 6 search is preserved on Perma.cc and linked from its count in the table above.
- Naval Discharge Review Board decisions ND23-7300 and ND24-9423, listed in the board's 2023 Navy and 2024 Navy folders, downloaded and searched October 7, 2026. Perma.cc: 2023 folder, 2024 folder, ND23-7300 file, ND24-9423 file, ND23-7300 search, ND237300 search, ND24-9423 search, ND249423 search, MP26-03415 search (October 6).
- U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Military Discharge: Actions Needed to Help Ensure Consistent and Timely Upgrade Decisions*, GAO-25-107354 (July 24, 2025), table 7 and the discussion of the reading room, gao.gov, Perma.cc.
- 10 U.S.C. §§ 1552(a)(5) and 1553(f), § 1552 (Perma.cc) and § 1553 (Perma.cc), United States Code, 2024 edition, GovInfo; Pub. L. No. 118-159, § 523, 138 Stat. 1773, 1884 (Dec. 23, 2024), GovInfo, Perma.cc.
- 32 C.F.R. §§ 70.8 (Perma.cc) and 724.810 (Perma.cc), eCFR.
- The Institute's Reading Room and its page "Required by law."