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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health

2.1 Separation From the Military

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Separation from the Military

Separation from military service and discharge are two different concepts.



Figure 2.1a

Release and Separation from Military Service

Source

U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training, n.d.

Separation is a general term encompassing “discharge, release from active duty, release from custody and control of the military services, transfer to the Individual Ready Reserve, or similar changes in active or reserve status.” Separation could be voluntary and may occur at the end of the term contract or when a service member decides it is time to do it. On other occasions, service members must leave the military service (involuntary) for medical, administrative, disciplinary, or punitive reasons.

Discharge, on the other hand, is when a service member is released from military service obligations; this is a complete separation from all military status. There are many types of military discharges, such as honorable military discharge, general discharge, under other than honorable conditions, bad conduct discharge, dishonorable discharge, and entry-level separation. Most medical or disability releases are identified as “honorable.”

If an individual leaves the military before completing at least 180 days of service, they receive an **entry-level separation status**. This type of military discharge can happen for various reasons, such as medical or administrative, and is neither good nor bad. However, in many cases, service of less than 180 days may prevent some people from being classified as Veterans (U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training, n.d.).

Assigning Veteran Status

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, a Veteran is considered to be someone who has served on active duty and was released or discharged from service (Figure 2.1b).

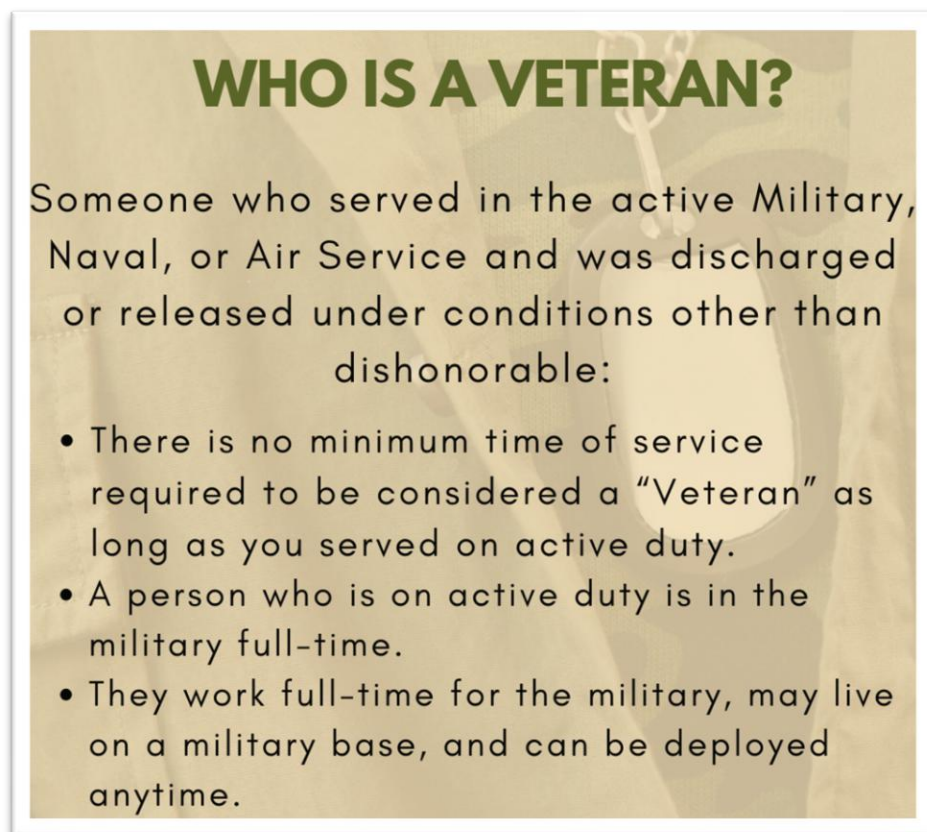


Figure 2.1b
Determining Veteran Status
Source
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019

Reservists or National Guard members called to federal active duty, or those disabled from a disease or an injury or had an injury aggravated in the line of duty or during training can also be considered Veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). National Guard and reservists are considered Veterans and are eligible for VA benefits if they are

- Deployed on federal active duty for at least 180 days, **AND**
 - Were discharged other than dishonorable or for bad conduct
- OR**
- Served for at least 20 years and
 - Were discharged other than dishonorable or for bad conduct (Law for Veterans, 2024)

Military Retirement



There are different types of military retirements (Figure 2.1c). According to the Department of Defense (DoD), service members with 20 or more years of active service are eligible for retirement (active-duty retirement) (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.a). Reserve retirement is for service members with 20 or more years of qualifying service. They are eligible for reserve retirement at 60 or a lesser qualifying age (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.b). Reservist officers also may qualify for retirement through the Qualified Reserve Component “as a contract surgeon or acting dental surgeon.” Service members can also retire medically from the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Air Force or Marine Corps.


Types of Military Retirement

- **Regular retirement:** eligible with at least 20 years of active service.
- **Reserve retirement:** eligible if they reach 60 and 20 years of active service.
- **Temporary disability retirement list (TDRL):** The service member has a temporary disability rating and is placed on retirement rolls by their military branch of service for a maximum of five years.
- **Permanent disability retirement list (PDRL):** The service member has a permanent disability rating and is placed on the retirement rolls by their military branch
- **Temporary early retirement authority (TERA) programs:** The Department of Defense authorizes early retirement options for those serving at least 15 years of service between 2012 and 2025. This particular program, which will expire on Dec 31, 2025, would allow qualifying troops to apply for early retirement:
 - Based on force readiness goals
 - Based on salary and service information submitted by the member's Branch of Service
 - Based on the legislation governing this unique program
 - Offered at the discretion of the service secretary

Figure 2.1c
Different Types of Military Retirements
Source
Ousley, 2023

What Veterans Need to Do to Prepare for Retirement

Transitioning from military life to retirement requires preparation. The DoD recommends that service members prepare for retirement at least two years in advance. Before separation, they must attend an initial counseling and pre-separation counseling brief, attend transitional assistance planning (TAP) workshops, schedule medical exams and final move (Figure 2.1 d).



WHAT VETERANS SHOULD DO BEFORE THEY RETIRE

- Schedule an initial pre-separation counseling session where they have to complete a self-assessment and initiate a personal transition Plan to learn about benefits, entitlements, and resources
- Attend a mandatory workshop from the transition assistance program (TAP) that provides information about how Veterans can translate their military skills when applying for civilian jobs, to learn about financial literacy and planning, and employment and benefits offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
- Schedule medical exams. Service members must complete a medical and dental exam at least 90 days before their retirement date.
- Schedule their final move. Service members can complete their final move up to 1 year following their retirement date.

Figure 2.1d
Everything that Veterans Must do Before Retirement

Source
Military One Source, 2022

If service members plan to work after retirement, they need to find a job and starting earlier is the best recommendation. According to Military One Source, service members can attend the two-

day track for employment in TAP, the Department of Labor Employment Workshop on their installation or through the TAP Online Learning Portal two years before retirement. Later, they can retake the workshop as often as needed (Military One Source, 2022).

Another recommendation is to plan their post-retirement budget by reviewing their military retirement pay, benefits and expenses so they can plan their budget and calculate how much money they will have available monthly (Military One Source, 2022).

[Active-duty Retirement https://militarypay.defense.gov/Pay/Retirement/ActiveDuty.aspx](https://militarypay.defense.gov/Pay/Retirement/ActiveDuty.aspx)

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