

Defining who is a veteran

Over the years I've heard many ideas of what people think a veteran is and what they had to do to get this status. Some people with an honorable discharge do not think they are a veteran because they only served for two years, did not serve in combat or were not injured in the service. Women and people who served honorably in the National Guard and Reserves are often unsure of their status.

I must say the definition of exactly what it takes to be a veteran is not an easy question to answer. I will do my best to give you an idea of the definition of veteran from the perspective of the Veterans Administration. If you are in doubt and you have served in uniform, please call our office.

Under federal law a veteran is any person who served honorably on active duty in the armed forces of the United States. Discharges marked "General and under honorable conditions" also qualify. Other qualifying events are any person who served in the active military, naval, or air service of the United States and was discharged from the service due to a service-connected disability or filed a claim and was service-connected for a disability sustained while in the service. For example, a person could go into the service and injure themselves while in basic training and receive a service-connected disability rating from the Veterans Administration. They would be considered a veteran no matter how long they served.

Certain veterans of the Philippine Commonwealth Army identified as scouts and served between Dec. 7, 1941 and Jan. 1, 1947 are considered veterans of the United States.

Members of the National Guard and Reserves may be considered veterans if they were deployed under title 10 (Federal Orders) and complete that deployment and are issued a DD-214 (discharge) under honorable conditions. Persons who just serve in the Guard and Reserve without a federal deployment are usually not eligible for veterans benefits, unless they were injured during their basic or advanced training or while on weekend drill or the two-week summer training. They must have reported the injury, filed a claim with the Veterans Administration, and was rated as disabled for that injury.

Other types of persons considered veteran are those who served as a commissioned officer of the Public Health Service, the Environmental Science Services Administration or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or its predecessor the Coast and Geodetic Survey. These individuals would have a document similar to a DD-214 as proof of this service.

Eligibility for veteran's benefits also depends on the character of the discharge. There is honorable, general under honorable conditions, other than honorable, bad conduct and dishonorable. Normally only honorable and general under honorable conditions will qualify the veteran for benefits. An uncharacterized discharge may also qualify the veteran, but it is up to the VA and is handled on a case-by-case basis. Officers cannot receive a dishonorable discharge. If they are demoted in rank at a court martial, they are given an officer's discharge that is equal to a dishonorable discharge. There is also an entry level separation given usually within the first 180 days for medical or other reasons. Most times the person is not considered a veteran.

Veterans should never take it for granted that their discharge if not honorable would preclude them from benefits from the Veterans Administration. The wise thing to do is to apply for them unless the character is bad conduct or dishonorable. There is also a process to apply to have the discharge upgraded. This process should take place within three years of discharge, and the veteran should have a rationale for claiming that the discharge should have been honorable. The services have in the past rated people with personality disorders that were found later to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This usually occurred after the service member returned from a combat tour and had trouble dealing with the

authority back in the home unit. Service members who have had this experience should contact our office and let us look into this matter.

Ted Puntillo is director of Veteran Services for Solano County. Reach him at 784-6590 or TEPuntillo@SolanoCounty.com. The Solano County Veteran Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.