Military Records are chock-full of answers and clues you won’t find anywhere else. But before you can dive into the details, you’ll want to be sure you’ve found the right record and the right person. Here are some tips to make the task smoother:

Read carefully. Searching through draft registration cards and other documents could turn up numerous results that seem to match your ancestor, so consider details on the record carefully. Note birth date, names of any relatives listed, location of draft board, employer, occupation and more. Then compare these to details you know to be true about your ancestor (note, however, that occupations may have changed) and plot it all on your timeline. Do the facts add up? Then you may have found the right person.

Keep an open mind. Your ancestor may have contributed to a military cause without ever serving in the military itself. Local historical and genealogical societies or even a quick Internet search may indicate other ways in which your ancestor supported the war effort and where you can locate related records.

Start with a simple search through military records only. To get to the military collection at Ancestry.com, click on the Search tab. Then choose Military from the Special Collections box on the right. Put your ancestor’s name, birthplace and birth date, if known, in the Search box and see what’s returned. Too many or too few results? Tackle this challenge with the help of the next six tips.

Make a timeline. Determine the approximate range of years your ancestor could have been in the military. Also plot military history during his (or her!) lifetime – conflicts large and small could have influenced the likely age at enlistment or amount of time served. This will help you pinpoint likely years of service.

Fill in with family clues found at home. Listen to family stories – do they indicate your ancestor was in the military? Also look for photos, uniforms, letters and other evidence. Brothers or cousins may have served or enlisted together so pay close attention to anyone in the family who is said to have served. Each of these can help you determine if you’re on the right track.

Check obituaries, cemeteries and newspapers. Headstones may include military details. Plus small-town publications – and some larger ones, too – often included announcements about military service. Use information found here to fine-tune your search.

Look for clues in nonmilitary records at Ancestry.com. Both the 1910 and the 1930 census indicate prior military service in major conflicts. (You’ll find that info on the far right side of the page.) The 1840 census lists Revolutionary War pensioners. You may find similar information in state censuses, too. Apply these clues to a search of the specific conflict mentioned at www.ancestry.com/military.

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Where Next?

Military documents can hold valuable clues that can point you to even more answers about your family. See what we did with just one draft registration card.

“Folger” is an uncommon middle name. But additional family research indicates this was a middle name of Roland’s cousin, too. These facts could indicate that this was a family name, possibly the mother’s or grandmother’s maiden name.

Montana didn’t start recording births until 1907, but Roland’s WWI draft registration card makes a nice stand-in, noting his date and place of birth.

Occupation information can be used to help you quickly identify a soldier in other records, too, although not every male who registered for the draft picked up the same occupation upon his return stateside.

Key details on this card make identifying Roland in other records much simpler. A search for Roland Folger Dubois born in Montana in 1894, for example, leads directly to a 1920 census, which reveals the names of his wife and children plus other details.

Surprise! That 1920 census record plus the details on this draft card make it simple to find Roland living with his parents in 1910 and 1900.

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