

Joining the Military: WHAT TO EXPECT

For a lot of people who join directly after high school, the Military means being away from home for the very first time. For others, adjusting to the “military way of life” is a complete 180-degree turn from the life they are currently used to. Either way, the more you know about what to expect, the easier it will be to settle in and prepare for success in your new career. This information is a good place to start, and then a recruiter can give you more information about specific Service branches.

ENLISTMENT

How the Enlistment Process Works

Joining the Military is not as simple as signing on the dotted line. Once you’ve decided this is something you want to pursue, you must meet all of the requirements at the Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). There’s a MEPS in every state where candidates for all Service branches come to enlist. This process usually takes about two days.

As a recruit, you must do the following at MEPS:

- Take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test
- Pass the physical and medical examinations
- Meet with a counselor and select a career path
- Take the oath of enlistment (swear in)

What Happens After MEPS

After finishing at MEPS, you will follow one of two paths:

- **Direct Ship** – This means you will report to Basic Training shortly after finishing your MEPS requirements.
- **Delayed Entry Program (DEP)** – This means that you are committing to Basic Training at a time in the future, generally within one year. For example, you can go through MEPS the summer after your junior year in high school, and then commit to Basic Training following your senior year.

It’s important to note that the time period between being “sworn in” and entering Basic Training could be as short as two days or as long as two months. It varies based on job assignment and branch.

BASIC TRAINING

How you can prepare for Basic Training

Preparation can make Basic Training a lot easier to handle. Here are some things you can do to get ready.

Get into physical shape by incorporating cardio workouts, weight training, sit-ups and pushups into daily routines. Jogging, bike riding and exercise classes can also help improve your cardiovascular fitness.

Get your personal matters in order prior to leaving. Figure out who will handle day-to-day issues such as paying bills, minding your mail and dealing with your bank accounts. Ask your parent or guardian for help.

Arrive early for everything. It seems like a small thing, but the Services take punctuality very seriously. In the Services, men and women are expected to be where they’re supposed to be at least five minutes early.

Increase your discipline. During initial training, every aspect of your life will be regimented. There is no activity during any given day that does not have a specific amount of time allocated — from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night. Get accustomed by establishing a regular schedule.

Take some time to learn about military culture. Military life is quite different from civilian life. For example, in the Services people use a lot of acronyms, salute higher-ranking members and get promoted via a rank structure. The more you learn now, the easier the transition will be. Look for books and websites about the Military, or talk to someone who is serving or has served recently.

Packing for Basic Training

There are strict rules covering what you can and cannot bring to Basic Training. This list is a good starting point. Since requirements vary from Service to Service, you should talk to a recruiter to make sure you're including the right items. Any contraband (items not allowed) will be taken from you when you arrive on base.

Do Bring:

- Toiletries (toothpaste, shaving supplies, shampoo, soap and soap case, shower shoes, etc.)
- Eyeglasses, if needed (contact lenses are not permitted by most Services)
- Underwear and athletic socks
- Casual, comfortable clothes for leisure time
- Pair of comfortable shoes
- Luggage (small suitcase or gym bag)
- Important paperwork pertaining to prescriptions
- At least \$10, but no more than \$50, in cash
- ATM or debit card
- Family mailing information to keep in touch by U.S. Postal mail

Do Not Bring:

- Family
- Pets
- Expensive personal items — cameras, MP3 players, radios, laptop, jewelry, etc.
- Nonprescription drugs or drug paraphernalia
- Weapons of any type, including pocket knives
- Obscene or pornographic material
- Alcoholic beverages
- Playing cards/dice/dominos
- Cigarettes/tobacco products

What happens during Basic Training

This can be a very emotional time, since you will have limited contact with your family and friends while away. You'll be allowed a brief phone call home to let your family know you've arrived safely. After that, phone calls are restricted, and you will have to rely on postal mail. Remember, this can be a tough time for your family, too, and they will appreciate getting mail from you as much as you do from them!

The first few days at Basic Training are known as orientation (also referred to as Processing Week, Reception or 00 Week). This is where you will get acquainted with your fellow recruits, adjust to your new life and learn the dos and don'ts of your Service branch. Also during orientation, you might:

- Turn in enlistment packages (paperwork from MEPS)
- Receive dental and medical exams
- Get immunizations
- Receive uniforms and training gear (shorts/sweats, t-shirts, etc.)
- Receive required haircuts (women may keep their hair long provided it can be neatly pulled back)
- Create direct deposit accounts for military paychecks

Basic Training overview

View the chart below for details on Basic Training within each of the individual Services.

Service Branch	Location(s)	Length	Subsequent Training Opportunities
Army	Fort Jackson COLUMBIA, S.C. Fort Leonard Wood WAYNESVILLE, Mo. Fort Still LAWTON, Okla. Fort Benning COLUMBUS, Ga.	10 weeks	Advanced Individual Training
Marine Corps	Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island PARRIS ISLAND, S.C. Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego SAN DIEGO, Calif.	12 weeks	Infantry or Combat Training Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) Training*
Navy	Naval Station Great Lakes GREAT LAKES, III.	7–9 Weeks	“A” School
Air Force	Lackland Air Force Base SAN ANTONIO, Texas	8.5 Weeks	Technical Training School
Coast Guard	Coast Guard Training Center Cape May CAPE MAY, N.J.	8 Weeks	Class A School*

*This type of training is only available for those in specific career fields.

Keeping in touch

Recruits are generally not allowed to make phone calls or use email during Basic Training. You can, however, send and receive postal mail. Once you've completed Basic Training, you will be able to communicate by phone, email or instant message, just like everyone else.

What happens after Basic Training

Once you successfully complete Basic Training, you have become an official member of the Military. Encourage your friends and family to come to your Basic Training graduation ceremony if tickets are available — you've come a long way and deserve to celebrate!

As a servicemember, you'll go on to receive additional training — such as Advanced Individual Training (AIT) — to develop the skills you'll need to do a specific job. Once finished, you'll transfer to your first duty station to put all that training to good use.