

The Blaze of '73

Decades ago, a raging fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis wiped out the military histories of nearly 18 million Americans.

BY DAN ALLSUP

At 12:16 a.m. on July 12, 1973, an alarm sounded at a suburban St. Louis firehouse. The National Personnel Records Center, home to 38 million sensitive U.S. military records, was burning.

The first firetrucks arrived on the scene within minutes, but the blaze on the top floor of the six-story government building was already raging out of control. Forty-two fire districts eventually responded and fought the fire for nearly four days before containing it. No lives were lost.

What remained of the 200,000-square-foot facility was a sodden, smoldering swamp of burnt and waterlogged papers. An estimated 16 million to 18 million personnel files – military life histories of those who'd served, including enlistment and discharge papers, training forms and performance reports – were lost forever.

As Walter Stender and Evans Walker pointed out in their definitive 1974 article in *The American*

Archivist, this wasn't the first time that fire ravaged important U.S. historical records. A fire at the War Department in 1800 destroyed irreplaceable historical records of the nation's first decade. In 1836, a blaze at the U.S. Patent Office destroyed models and blueprints of inventions that formed the technological backbone of the nation. Invaluable art and other relics were lost in an 1851 fire in the U.S. Capitol. In 1890, the entire Decennial Census was lost in a fire at the Census Bureau.

Last May, when a laptop computer containing personal information about more than 26.5 million veterans and their families was stolen from a VA employee's home, officials feared that the Social Security numbers of millions would fall into the hands of identity thieves. The computer was later recovered, and authorities believed the sensitive information had not been accessed. But the event raised national concern over the security of

Up in smoke

The 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis destroyed about 80 percent of the records for Army personnel discharged between Nov. 1, 1912, and Jan. 1, 1960. Also destroyed were about 75 percent of the records for Army Air Force and Air Force personnel, with surnames from "Hubbard" through "Z," discharged between Sept. 25, 1947, and Jan. 1, 1964.

Officials have never determined what exactly was lost in the fire because there are no indices to the blocks of records involved. They were simply filed in alphabetical order for the following groups:

- World War I (Army) – Sept. 7, 1939, to Nov. 1, 1912
- World War II (Army) – Dec. 31, 1946, to Sept. 8, 1939
- Post-World War II (Army) – Dec. 31, 1959, to Jan. 1, 1947
- Post-World War II (Air Force) – Dec. 31, 1963, to Sept. 25, 1947

government-controlled personal records and the potential for disaster if they should be destroyed or mishandled.

Placing Blame. Arguably, no tragedy in the history of U.S. records management devastated more people than the St. Louis National Personnel Records Center fire of 1973. Conspiracy theories abound concerning the fire's origin. Some believe it was a terrorist attack by an anti-government organization (coincidentally, the fire took place the same week the military draft ended). Others believe the federal government itself started the fire to destroy unwanted and sensitive files, or to erase certain World War II records. Although millions of dollars have been spent reconstructing the damaged records, some go so far as to say the government intentionally set the blaze to reduce budget costs by destroying an entire floor of a federal building.

Few take such accusations seriously, but more than three decades later, the exact cause of the NPRC fire is still a mystery. FBI investigators looked for evidence of arson, but they never determined the fire's time or point of origin. They did find cigarette butts in trash cans on the sixth floor, but agents were not convinced that cigarette embers started the conflagration. A 1975 investigation indicated that the NPRC's top floor had insufficient ventilation and that air pressure in the overcrowded space may have caused the dry records to catch fire.

Although no one claims to understand exactly how the fire started, there is little argument today that it could have been prevented.

In 1951, the Department of Defense asked a St. Louis firm to design a building that would become the National Personnel Records Center on a 70-acre site near the city. Teams from the firm visited several records centers around the country to study their operations. One visit was to a U.S. Navy-operated facility at Garden City, N.Y., and another to a records center in Alexandria, Va., operated by DoD.

The two facilities offered opposing fire-safety plans. The Navy center was fully equipped with sprinklers for fire safety, and officials there strongly urged the St. Louis architects to include them in their facility. Senior DoD officials disagreed. More concerned about water damage than fire, they advised against installing a sprinkler system.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the St. Louis facility in 1956, at a cost of \$12.5 million – more than \$86 million in today's dollars. DoD won the fire-safety argument. The building not only lacked a sprinkler system, but most of its more than 1 million square feet were designed like an open warehouse, with huge areas uninterrupted by firewalls or compartments. By 1973, wiser officials had prevailed and plans were in the works to install a sprinkler system. By then, it was too late.

More records may have been damaged by water than by the fire itself. Firefighters pumped millions of gallons of water into the building, and every one of the center's six floors had several inches of standing water on the floor. Carton after cardboard carton full of paper records melded into a mushy mess. DoD's fear of water damage was realized in a manner no one could have predicted.

The same year the NPRC building was completed, the National Archives and Records Service – NPRC's parent organization – decided that future facilities under its control would be equipped with sprinklers, smoke-detection systems and adequate firewalls. It was a decision made 17 years before the 1973 fire, but still too late to protect the sensitive records stored at the NPRC.

Could It Happen Again? Today, the National Personnel Records Center is still one of the National Archives and Records Administration's largest operations. It remains the central repository of U.S. military and civil-service personnel records. Is a repeat of the fiery 1973 disaster possible? Ronald L. Hindman, director of the



Efforts to reconstruct military records damaged in the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis continue today. Dan Allsup

NPRC, makes no guarantees. But current safeguards make a recurrence highly unlikely, he said.

“An efficient sprinkler system is installed, food and drinks are prohibited in the storage area, smoking within the facility by employees is cause for immediate dismissal, and firewalls are now placed strategically throughout the building,” Hindman said.

Scott Levins, the center’s assistant director, described other improvements. “Current facility standards require a fire-suppression system designed to limit the loss due to a single fire incident to fewer than 300 cubic feet of records.” And the safeguards work. “Within the past 10 years, there have been two separate fires in a Washington, D.C., records center. In each instance, the fire-suppression systems confined the damage to far fewer than 300 cubic feet.”

Efforts to recover as many records as possible began within days after the 1973 NPRC fire was finally extinguished. When 90,000 cubic feet of soggy records were finally removed from the building, officials began what may be the largest records-drying operation in history.

Some records went through a freeze-drying process, but McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corp. in St. Louis took the project high-tech when officials offered the use of their vacuum-drying facility, developed as part of the space program. Designed

If your records were lost

The National Personnel Records Center will attempt to reconstruct a veteran’s records only if asked by the veteran or by the next of kin of a deceased veteran. Next of kin are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, husbands or wives. Given sufficient information, NPRC may be able to reconstruct a file. This includes:

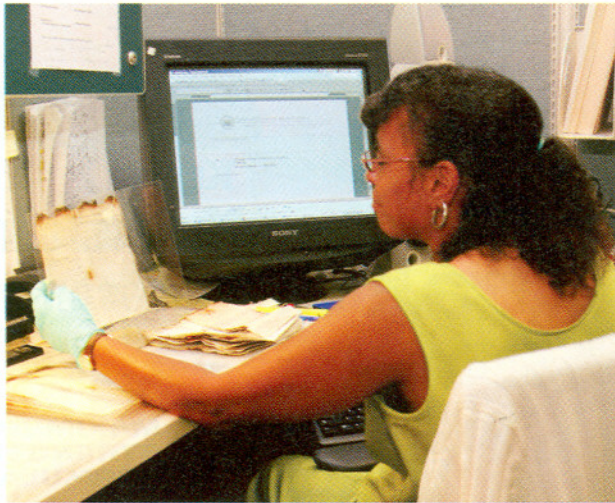
- Full name used during military service
- Date of birth
- Branch of service
- Approximate dates of service
- Service number
- Place of entry into the service
- Last unit of assignment
- Place of discharge

Send this information to:

National Personnel Records Center
Military Personnel Records
 9700 Page Ave.
 St. Louis, MO 63132-5100

If a veteran doesn’t have any of the necessary documents or information, they may be available from VA or a state veterans service officer.

Veterans or next of kin may also submit a request for records online at www.vetrecs.archives.gov. NPRC can also be contacted at (314) 801-0800 or by e-mail at mpr.center@nara.gov. NPRC cannot accept e-mail requests for records. E-mail queries should only be sent to ask for general information, such as procedures or hours of operations.



Of the 1 million requests the National Personnel Records Center receives annually, many are for files destroyed in the '73 fire. Thirty full-time employees handle the requests.
Dan Allsup

to simulate conditions in outer space for astronauts, the chamber-drying method allowed treated records to be safely opened page by page. The experiment was so successful that NASA pitched in to help by offering the use of its own vacuum chamber in Sandusky, Ohio.

Reconstruction efforts continue today. "The fire was in 1973, but we're still responding today," said William G. Seibert, NPRC's chief archivist. "We know what records we've recovered, but unfortunately, we still don't really know what we lost."

It might still be possible for veterans to obtain their records even if they were damaged in the fire, Levins said.

"The center receives more than 1 million requests each year for military records, and many of these are requests to reconstruct records that were lost in the 1973 fire," he said. "The number is dwindling as the years go by, but we still receive enough requests to staff 30 full-time employees. Reconstruction efforts will go on indefinitely."

An untold number of veterans may never have their records restored. Carl Yurek, 86, is one of the lucky few whose records were recovered and partially salvaged. A native of Wyoming, Pa., Yurek is a World War II Army veteran who served in the European theater. He was discharged in 1945 after suffering severe injuries in a vehicle accident.

"I just decided I wanted to review my time in the service," Yurek said, "so I wrote and asked for my records. I got a letter back telling me they had been burnt in the fire, but they would give me what they could. It only took a few months. Even

though some of the records were still missing, there was enough there for me to see and remember what I did in the war. I saw records of me being in countries I had forgotten. They told me things that I didn't even know about myself. It made me feel real good to remember how I had served my country."

A switch to electronic records storage began in 1994, and since 2003 each military service branch has maintained its own records electronically. The NPRC still maintains Coast Guard personnel files among its 57 million paper records.

"We simply can't afford to scan all of our documents because it would cost hundreds of millions of dollars," said William Seibert, the NPRC's archivist. "Because the records are a combination of onionskin, carbon paper and multifold documents that would have to be hand-fed into a scanner, the task would be unmanageable."

And at a time when technology can put millions of sensitive files into a computer hard drive smaller than a briefcase and just as transportable, the challenge of personal data security has only evolved into new dimensions over the past 33 years. New fire-safety measures may have greatly reduced the risk of another fire like the blaze of '73, but the confusion that still smolders today over lost and damaged records amplifies the value of official government data and what it might mean to lose it. 🌿

Dan Allsup is a St. Louis-area freelance writer.

What's in store today

Records now stored at the National Personnel Records Center cover military personnel discharged on or after these dates:

- Air Force officers and enlisted, Sept. 25, 1947
- Army officers, July 1, 1917
- Army enlisted, Nov. 1, 1912
- Navy officers, Jan. 1, 1903
- Navy enlisted, Jan. 1, 1886
- Marine Corps officers and enlisted, Jan. 1, 1905
- Coast Guard officers and enlisted, Jan. 1, 1898

Military personnel records for individuals separated before these dates are on file at the **National Archives and Records Administration, Old Military and Civil Records Branch (NWCTB), Washington, DC 20408**. For more information, e-mail requests to inquire@arch2.nara.gov.

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs