

The National Personnel Records Center



Photography:
Kansas City Star

What was the name of the Army Air Force captain who signed the World War II discharge of a well known actor?
Stumped?

Well, here's a hint.

The captain, himself no mean thespian, went on to become famous in an unrelated field, while the former major died in 1960.

Give up? The captain was Ronald Reagan, later the 40th President of the United States, and the major was Clark Gable.

Now that may sound like something from a game that might be called Hollywood Trivia, but Gable's separation record with Reagan's signature is one of several on display at the National Personnel Records Center at 9700 Page Boulevard in the St. Louis suburb on Overland, Mo.

There are others in the case with Gable's like Elvis Presley's and Joe Louis' under his proper name of Barrows and Glenn Miller's.

"We get a lot of inquiries about Elvis Presley and Glenn Miller," said John Gerfen, chief of the center's records reconstruction branch, but the

Despite the '73
fire, there's a
good chance the
archives in
St. Louis can
replace your lost
or misplaced
documents.

Privacy Act bars release to the public of anything more than name, dates of service and awards and decorations.

Stored in the vast five-story building are the records of men like Douglas MacArthur and Omar Bradley, Jimmy Carter and the Kennedys, George Bush, Reagan and Lee Harvey Oswald — the great, near great, the infamous and the average Johnnie Q. Veteran.

"We've got them all," said Paul Gray, assistant director of the center's military section.

But they don't have Vice President Dan Quayle's. He was in the Indiana National Guard, so his records most likely would be filed in his home state.

Of course, the files on 8,000 notables like Presidents, actors, famous generals, baseball players and so forth are kept in a special VIP vault off limits to all but a few employees. Their records are kept there, too.

Privacy laws require the signature of the veteran, next-of-kin or authorized representative before information or records can be released.

The Fire of 1973

The center had six floors until July 12, 1973. That was when perhaps 18 million records stored on the sixth floor were destroyed in a fire that took 4½ days and 26 fire departments using five miles of hose to extinguish.

Wendy Hollingsworth, who works in Gerfen's department, recalled the fire as "the worst thing I have ever seen." One reason she remembers the disaster so vividly was that she was married only a few days earlier.

Later, such records as could be salvaged were placed on the center's grounds in tents in hopes that they would dry out, but it rained for several days afterwards. Then approximately 5 million were restored by using a freeze-dry process at McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corp. in St. Louis. A chamber that had been employed to stimulate the pressure and temperature of the Mercury and Gemini space missions was utilized by the company. Some were dried at a NASA facility in Ohio.

Destroyed were 80% of the Army personnel records from 1912 to 1959 and 75% of the Air Force records from 1947 to 1963 of persons with

surnames from Hubbard through ones beginning with "Z." Establishment of a computer index for all recovered and reconstructed records was an important part of the restoration effort. Dried and ready to be refiled, the records were punched into a "B" registry system and then sorted in a special temperature-controlled area set up to protect the damaged records.

Alternate sources were important in reconstructing records. Important ones are VA claims files, individual state files, Selective Service classification records, Government Accounting Office pay records, military hospital records, organization records and X-rays.

In a center fact-sheet, it is explained that when a record is not in its files at present, and it would have been in the area that suffered the most damage in the 1973 fire, employees cannot determine for certain whether it was burned.

Reason is that there were no indexes to the blocks of records involved. They were filed merely in alphabetical order within each major block: World War I, Nov. 1, 1912, to Sept. 7, 1939; World War II, Sept. 9, 1939, to

Dec. 31, 1946, and post WWII, Jan. 1, 1947, to Dec. 31, 1959, for the Army, and Sept. 25, 1947, to Dec. 31, 1963, for the Air Force.

If veterans who ask about their records are told they probably were lost in the fire, they may send to the center any documents they may have, especially separation records, and these will be added to the computerized index and filed for permanent retention.

At the May conference of Department Senior Vice Commanders and Adjutants/Quartermasters, Gray explained that the center often can reconstruct a veteran's record sufficiently to issue NA Form 13038, considered equivalent to the DD Form 214 separation report to establish eligibility for veterans' benefits.

Again, using alternate sources is the solution.

If veterans do not have their service data, the VA, for instance, has records of veterans whose material was destroyed by the 1973 fire if they filed a claim before July 1973. Then there are morning reports, sick call lists, payrolls and military orders at the center.

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State adjutants general offices also have much information, as do state veterans' service offices.

Center employees can reconstruct a veteran's beginning and ending dates of active duty, character of the service, time lost while on active duty and periods of hospitalization.

To get the investigation started, the information usually needed is the veteran's full name used during service, branch of service, approximate dates, service number, place of discharge, last unit assigned to and place of entry into the service.

One thing for the veteran to remember, however, is that the Army and Air Force changed from serial numbers to Social Security numbers on July 1, 1969 while the Navy and Marine Corps followed on Jan. 1, 1972 and the Coast Guard on Oct. 1, 1974.

Records of past National Guard service are not kept at the center, but they are maintained in the appropri-

ate state adjutant general's department.

Your Department service officer should be able to assist you in obtaining the Standard Form 180, from which the NA Form 13038 can be prepared. He also can assist in filling it out.

Most of Gerfen's 86-member staff, out of the 475 center employees, prepare answers to requests based on information obtained from alternate sources. Last year, 270,000 were processed by Gerfen's people.

Gray said approximately 70 million military records are on file. Of these, 27 million are Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard and nearly 21 million are Army and Air Force.

Then there are nearly 36 million in the Military Personnel/Medical Auxiliary Records. Included in these are 4.5 million records of World War II and Korean War soldiers and some from other branches admitted to

Army hospitals that were discovered in June of last year.

In the 1950s, the National Research Council analyzed Army hospital records from admissions punchcards prepared by the Army's Surgeon General's Office. The original cards had been destroyed, but the information was placed on computer magnetic tapes. The 91 tapes contained information for 1942 to 1945 and 1950 to 1954 on a large sampling of Army personnel.

Veterans or their survivors have been advised to contact their VFW Department service officer to find out whether denied claims would be affected by these records. Each service officer has been provided with a packet of information regarding this find.

Each of the records was filed by serial number, not name.

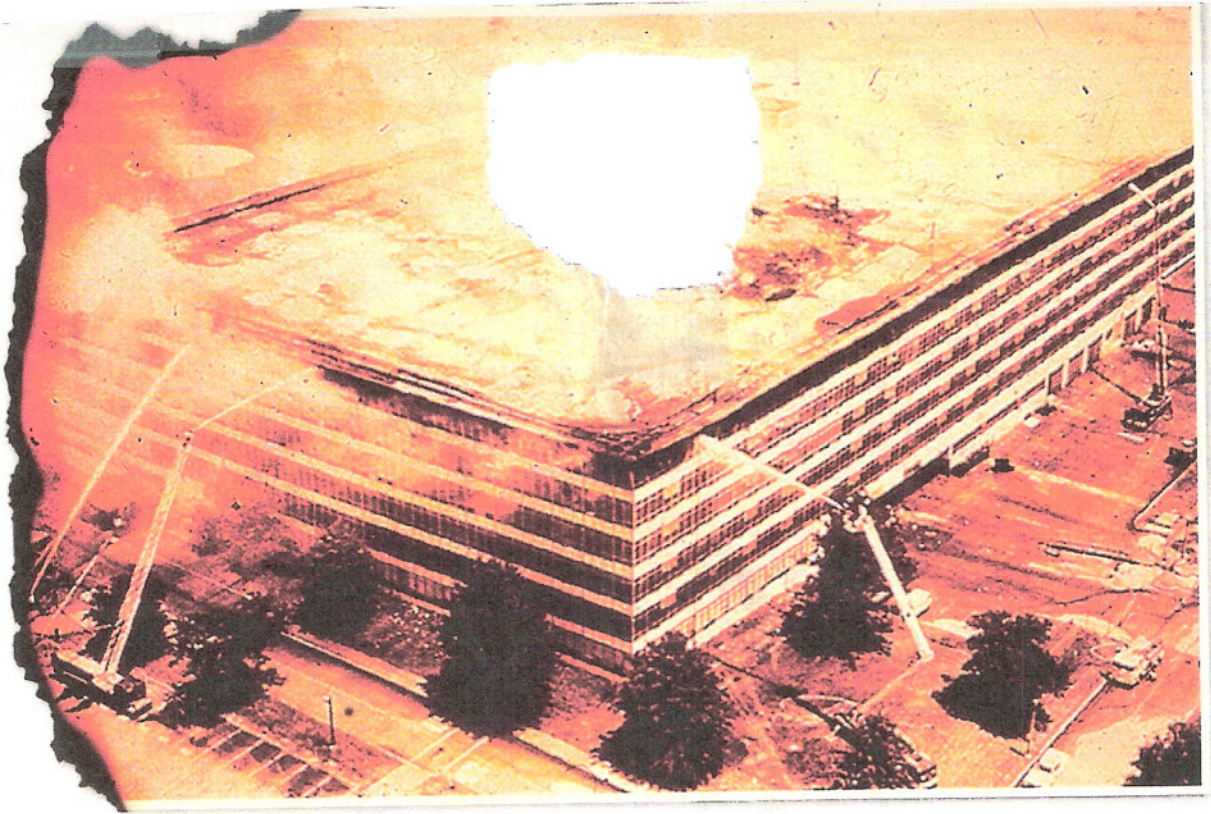
While visiting the center recently, this writer obtained his Army hospital record in file for 1944. It gives the rank; arm of service; age; race; years of service; month and year of admission; final treatment facility but not its number, only "general hospital;" type of case; line of duty, and other information, such as battle casualty and days spent in the hospital.

Also found was the original final payment record issued on the writer's day of discharge, Oct. 28, 1945, at Camp Swift, Texas. Although the information does not contain a listing of campaign medals as required for VFW membership, it does include this notation: "Arrived in U.S. 19 July 45."

Gray expects soon to have more space than the present 1.2 million cubic feet in the five-story building. Construction is underway on an addition to the building. The new area will be used by an Army Reserve records unit that occupies some of the center's area.

If you are one of the veterans whose Army records went up in flames in 1973, you are in the same boat as Gerfen. After he completed his reserve obligation, his records were shipped to St. Louis from Denver in 1972 and placed in the vault then on the sixth floor. A year later, his were wiped out with the other 18 million. ■





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:

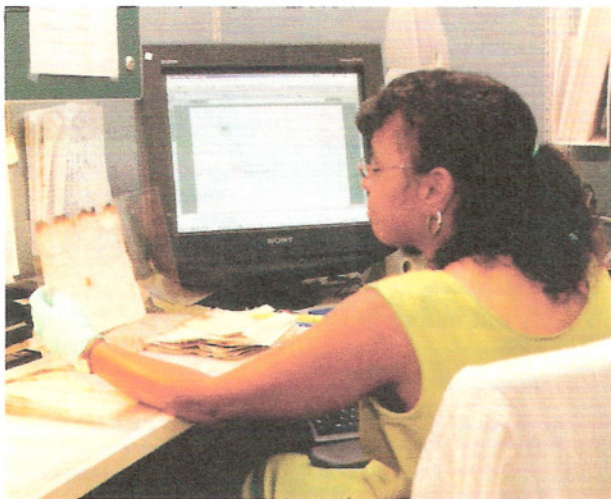
- Full name used during military service
- Date of birth
- Branch of service
- Approximate dates of service
- Service number
- Place of entry into the service
- Last unit of assignment
- Place of discharge

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