

## Burned Official Military Personnel Files (B-Files)

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### Introduction

In July 1973, fire tore through the sixth floor of the National Personnel Records Center's Military Personnel Records Center (NPRC-MPR) building in Overland, Missouri. The fire, along with the millions of gallons of water used to combat it, destroyed an estimated 16 - 18 million U.S. military personnel files. However, an estimated 6.5 million records, known as Burned Files (B-files), survived and are continually undergoing repair and preservation work at the NPRC.

### The Files

What is an Official Military Personnel File (OMPF)?

*"An administrative record, containing information about the subject's service history, such as: date and type of enlistment/appointment; duty stations and assignments; training, qualifications, performance; awards and decorations received; disciplinary actions; insurance; emergency data; administrative remarks; date and type of separation/discharge/retirement; and other personnel actions."*

(Source: <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/ompf-background>)

OMPFs may also contain information about a personnel member's life prior and concurrent to joining the military, including items like date/place of birth, residence, marital status, education level, employment, personal or professional letters of recommendation, citizenship status and/or naturalization information, and names/residences of close family members, usually listed as emergency contacts and beneficiaries.

### The Building

The Military Personnel Records Center building in Overland, Missouri was designed by the St. Louis architectural firm Hellmuth, Yamasaki, and Leinweber, and construction was completed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1956. The six-story building was 728 ft x 282 ft, and located on a 70-acre site. The structure had neither a sprinkler system nor smoke detectors, and featured an open 'warehouse' design in which 200,000 ft<sup>2</sup> of record storage space had no firewalls, other than one concrete-block wall that separated storage space from office space. Records were kept in metal filing cabinets, as well as in cardboard storage boxes situated on open steel shelving units. When the facility opened, it housed approximately 38 million military personnel records; however, by 1973, the building was home to about 52 million records.

For more information on the history of what is now the National Personnel Records Center, see: <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/history>

## **The Fire**

A fire began shortly after midnight on July 12, 1973 on the sixth floor of the Military Personnel Records building in Overland, Missouri. Forty-two fire districts aided in combating the fire, but it was not fully extinguished until the morning of July 16. For days afterward, firefighters continued to pour water on some areas to prevent rekindling. Throughout the ordeal, firefighters were plagued by inadequate water pressure and, for nearly two days, the inability to fight the fire from the inside due to dangerous conditions. There were no fatalities. The cause of the fire was never officially determined.

## **The Aftermath**

The sixth floor of the building was destroyed. The roof had collapsed, metal shelves and file cabinets were warped by the extreme heat, and there was wet ash where there had previously been boxes of paper records. Millions of gallons of water had been used to fight the blaze, and several of the building's water pipes burst during the fire. Every floor of the building had at least several inches water covering the floor. The records that had escaped the flames were now in danger of deteriorating due to water damage and mold.

Almost immediately, officials began efforts to recover all records possible from the building. Burnt and water-damaged records were removed from the building, initially placed into dry cardboard boxes, but soon repacked into plastic milk crates. Large, temporary tents were set up in the NPRC parking lot for sorting recovered records. The records were sprayed with thymol to help mitigate mold growth. Wet records were taken to the McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corporation plant in St. Louis, where there were large vacuum chambers used to simulate space conditions. The chambers at McDonnell Douglas, as well as a similar one in NASA's Sandusky, Ohio facility, were used to vacuum dry 90,000 square feet of records.

## **The Loss**

Because the OMPFs were never indexed prior to the fire, it is impossible to know exactly how many records were destroyed. The sixth floor had held a total of about 22 million OMPFs. Upwards of 18 million of these 22 million were lost. Approximately 80% of Army files (discharges from 1 Nov 1912 - 1 Jan 1960) were destroyed, and about 75% of Air Force files (discharges 25 Sep 1947 - 1 Jan 1964, names alphabetically after James E. Hubbard) were destroyed.

## **The Preservation Program at the NPRC**

Approximately 6.5 million OMPFs were recovered from the fire. Very soon after the fire, the National Archives created a B-File index for documenting records that fully or partially survived the fire. In 2000, a preservation program along with a dedicated preservation lab, was established at the NPRC to maintain and repair damaged records. B-files are kept separately from other files to prevent mold cross-contamination. When a B-file is requested, it is brought to preservation staff members, who carefully assess and treat the file. Surface cleaning helps to remove mold and dirt. Humidification can help 'relax' distorted clumps of papers and intricate mending methods can repair rips and reattach page fragments. If a file is too charred or fragile to be held or repaired, it may qualify for content recovery (CR) scanning and digitization using infrared cameras.

## **Requesting a B-File From NPRC**

### **Who Can Request OMPFs?**

OMPFs become fully open to the public ('archival') 62 years after the service member's separation from the military (through discharge, retirement, or death).

Source: <https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel-archival>

Non-archival records (separation date less than 62 years) must be requested by the veteran or, if the veteran is deceased, next-of-kin, who must provide proof of death. Next-of-kin includes un-remarried spouse, parent, child, or sibling. Some B-Files are still considered non-archival.

If you are not the veteran or next-of-kin you can get limited information from non-archival records under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) without the veteran's or next-of-kin's approval. Standard Form 180 (SF-180) can be used to request both archival and non-archival records. For advice on submitting a request through FOIA by letter, please reference this article by Geoff Gentilini of Golden Arrow Military Research: <http://www.mymilitaryservicerecords.com/requesting-information-from-a-military-service-record-under-the-freedom-of-information-act/>

NPRC information regarding FOIA: <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/foia-info#page-header>

### **Requesting an OMPF Remotely (mail, fax, online)**

**\*\*There is no separate procedure or form needed for requesting B-Files; Mailing or faxing a completed Standard Form 180 (SF-180) or using eVetRecs is sufficient.\*\***

Online: Veterans and next-of-kin family members may use eVetRecs ([vetrecs.archives.gov](http://vetrecs.archives.gov)) to request records online. See <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/evetrecs-help.html> for help and FAQs related to eVetRecs.

Mail or Fax: To request records through mail or fax, download and complete Standard Form-180 (SF-180), located as a PDF at this link: <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/order/standard-form-180.pdf>

The NPRC receives approximately 4,000-5,000 requests for records per day! Turn-around time can take months. Be patient; reconstructing and repairing personnel files that were lost or damaged in the 1973 fire can take especially long.

### **In-Person Research at the NPRC**

**Make an appointment!** Space is limited in research rooms. B-files must be reviewed and treated by preservation staff. Sometimes, it can take months for a B-file to be retrieved, examined, cleaned, and repaired before it is ready to be viewed by the public. For more information about making an appointment, see: <https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/research-room#appointment>. For more information on planning a visit, see this site: <https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/plan-research-visit>

See the websites below for more information about the research rooms at the NPRC:

- Archival Research Room: <https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/research-room>
- Federal Records Research Room: <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/military-personnel/visitors-services>

## **Hiring an Independent Researcher**

List of Researchers: <https://www.archives.gov/research/hire-help/locations.html?facility=st-louis-military>

### **Benefits of Hiring an Independent Researcher:**

- Familiarity with the process of record retrieval, research rooms and copy equipment, and staff.
- Familiarity with ALL record sets that could potentially hold information about your veteran, especially auxiliary and organizational records.
- Ability to make multiple visits to the NPRC.
- Potentially faster retrieval (but, for B-Files, still at the mercy of the NPRC preservation assessment and repair processes).
- Potentially less expensive to obtain copy of records.
  - For an archival OMPF, NARA charges \$25 if 5 pages or less and \$70 for 6 or more pages. Once requested, you must buy a copy of the complete file.

## **Reference Articles and Blog Posts**

1.) The National Personnel Records Center Fire: A Study in Disaster by Walter W. Stender & Evans Walker: <http://www.americanarchivist.org/doi/pdf/10.17723/aarc.37.4.2881301629107368>

2.) Burnt in Memory: Looking Back, Looking Forward at the 1973 St. Louis Fire by Marta G. O'Neill & William Seibert: <https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2013/spring/stl-fire.pdf>

3.) Burned and Brittle Records Are In Good Hands - Piece of History, A Blog of the U.S. National Archives: <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2013/07/11/burned-and-brittle-records-are-in-good-hands/>

4.) After The Fire: Peter Waters Helps Save Water-Damaged Records - Pieces of History, A Blog of the U.S. National Archives: <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2013/07/16/after-the-fire-peter-waters-helps-save-water-damaged-records/>

5.) One Fire, 5 Days, and 381 Men - Pieces of History, A Blog of the U.S. National Archives: <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2013/07/12/one-fire-22-hours-and-381-men/>

6.) Burned Records - The National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/archival-programs/preservation-program/burned-records.html>

## **Informational YouTube Videos:**

7.) A is for Archives, B is for Burn File by Ashley Cox: <https://youtu.be/ibMfBFhVcGU>

8.) Preservation Lab at the National Archives, St. Louis: <https://youtu.be/2xNvAudiRwU>

9.) Visit the Public Research Room at the National Archives, St. Louis: <https://youtu.be/HA4vU-JoQsE>

10.) Veterans Personnel Records at the National Archives, St. Louis: <https://youtu.be/6WXQMIR5xxk>