

## **What Didn't Get Burned in the NPRC 1973 St. Louis Fire**

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One of our most frequent requests comes from service members or families of service members after they have received a letter from the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis that the service record they requested had been burned in the 1973 fire and therefore is forever lost—and whether that is indeed the case and if we can do anything to help.

The July 1973 fire in St. Louis, MO at the Military Personnel Records Building has been well documented in numerous accounts, and millions of service personnel and their families have been affected by the devastating event. However, the good news is more was saved than most people are aware and new processes are being developed to recover yet even more of the damaged Army and Air Force records. The building in St. Louis had six floors but the only actual fire damage was on the sixth floor. The greatest number of lost files took place on the fifth floor, due to extensive water damage resulting from the firefighters putting out the blaze. There was little damage to the records in the rest of the facility. Fortunately, NPRC was able to save all of the over 100,000 microfilm rolls of morning reports, all of the NPRC operation records, a computer index for the major portion of the holdings, and many, many more unique records that can help document and recover history for veterans and their families.

Additionally, the fire affected only the military personnel records building which housed none of the civilian personnel files, and most of the medical records for military personnel were on loan to the Veterans Administration at the time of the fire. There are burial files, hospital data cards, awards and decoration files, AGO records, unit histories, QMD (separation) files and a whole host of other records that can help reconstruct and enhance a service record. Perhaps most important for many veterans and their families is that the military personnel affected were exclusively that of Army and Air Force personnel; almost none of the Navy and Marine personnel files were involved in the fire.

We have helped many veterans and their families and our first step is having a NICOM researcher in St. Louis personally request the personnel file. In most cases, even when a "burned in the fire" letter has been received, we are able to get some or all of the military personnel file, or, at the very least, find a way to reconstruct the file. There are varied reasons for the responses you may receive,

but, regardless, NICOM's persistence does pay off, and in the vast majority of cases, something will be recovered for you. In almost 20 years of helping veterans, there have only been a handful of times, on repeated requests, in which there has been no evidence of a personnel file still being available. And even in a unique case like this we can usually locate ample evidence from the other available sources at NPRC or at other record depositories. Remember, then, that if you receive a response from NPRC that the name for which you search "is not in our files," all is not lost. Let NICOM 's track record work for you.



To read more on what the National Archives is doing to recover the damaged personnel files read:

"Burnt in Memory: Looking Back, Looking Forward at the 1973 St. Louis fire."

By Marta G. O'Neill and William Seibert. Spring 2013 issue of *Prologue*

To read an early account of the fire with lots of photos and what initial preservation steps were taken read:

"NPRC Fire: A Study in Disaster." *The American Archivist*, Volume 7, Number 4, October 1974

by Walter W. Stender and Evans Walker