

Veterans still battling 1973 fire that wiped out millions of service records

By Cristina Corbin

Published June 08, 2014

While the Veterans Administration struggles to repair the damage caused by shoddy -- and in some cases fraudulent -- handling of health care for American service members, benefits for millions who served their country in four wars were wiped out in a fire more than 40 years ago, leaving many battling to this day to collect their due.

The blaze that ripped through the National Personnel Records Center in a St. Louis suburb shortly after midnight on July 12, 1973, consumed 16 million to 18 million official military personnel files long before computers kept such records safe from harm. Few could have predicted the harm it would visit on the veterans who were denied VA benefits -- some to this day -- because they could not reconstruct their military service files.

Tom Morrow, a 67-year-old Vietnam veteran, suffered a head injury while training at Fort Benning, Ga., prior to his deployment to Saigon in 1967 at age 20. The side effects that followed were debilitating for Morrow: seizures and cold sweats followed later by panic attacks and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The VA never acknowledged Morrow's head injury, telling him all his military service records were destroyed during the fire that engulfed the federal facility in Overland, Mo. Morrow's son, Shawn, told FoxNews.com the VA, "repeatedly ignored his head injury and gave him no compensation." "When he told them about it, they said they had nothing on file about the head injury," Morrow said. "My Dad was never able to reach his full potential because he had these health injuries that just weren't taken care of." It was not until the early 1990s that the Morrow family was told a fire destroyed Morrow's records, as well as the records of countless other military members, mainly those who served in the Army. The VA said the blaze had "erased" Morrow's record, his son claims.

The blaze, blamed on a carelessly discarded cigarette butt, tore through the NPRC's military personnel records building, burning with such ferocity that it was not fully extinguished until four and a half days later.

According to the National Archives, the fire destroyed the files of 80 percent of Army personnel discharged between Nov. 1, 1912 and Jan. 1, 1960. It also wiped out the files of 75 percent of Air Force personnel discharged between Sept. 25, 1947 and Jan. 1, 1964.

"No duplicate copies of these records were ever maintained, nor were microfilm copies produced," the government states on the National Archives website. "Neither were any indexes created prior to the fire. In addition, millions of documents had been lent to the Department of Veterans Affairs before the fire occurred. Therefore, a complete listing of the records that were lost is not available."

Yet, some records have been recovered over the years, thanks to archivists at the new National Personnel Records Center. Working with charred documents recovered from the 1973 fire, they seek to restore records of veterans. The center fields more than 1 million requests for documents in some years, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch -- requests that require pinning down information from records damaged by fire, water and mold.

The blackened scraps were salvaged from the burned hulk of the facility in 1973, when front-end loaders scooped up what was left of the military records and deposited them in Dumpsters, according to the paper. Everything salvageable was saved and the painstaking effort to catalogue and restore records continues to this day.

Archivists have been able to help veterans like Morrow, whose son took it upon himself to investigate his father's case. About 10 years ago, Morrow filed paperwork with a VA representative and, in January 2004, the VA sent him his father's "complete military C-file," he said. When Morrow opened the folder, he said he was stunned by what he found. "All the paperwork from 1967 was there, including a detailed drawing a doctor had made of my Dad's head injury," he said.

In December 2004, Morrow said his father finally received a letter stating the VA would begin sending him checks for \$2,600 per month. "They gave him 100 percent disability after waiting 42 years to get anything," Morrow said. A representative from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs did not return phone calls seeking comment in the case.

Tom Morrow, who lives in Ozona, Texas, was too emotional to speak publicly about his ordeal, his family said. In an email sent to FoxNews.com, the older Morrow wrote, "I am not satisfied with the treatment by the VA, but there's nothing I can do about it. The Vietnam vets were not treated fair and are still getting mistreated."

Morrow's story bears striking similarities to those of two other veterans, 87-year-old Norman Geller, of St. Louis, and 89-year-old Milton Rackham, of Belding, Mich. -- both of whom served in World War II. Geller told FoxNews.com he lost much of his hearing as a result of repairing aircraft engines while stationed in Germany as a 19-year-old in 1945.

"I developed a tremendous hearing problem," Geller said, claiming that when he returned home from the war in 1946, the VA "wasn't interested in trying to find health problems with the veterans." "All of us had tinnitus and we didn't even realize it," said Geller, a father of three. "My hearing was deteriorating so bad." When Geller lost complete hearing in his left ear in 1997, he said he filed former paperwork with the VA, requesting disability compensation. "I was told I couldn't get benefits because my records were lost in the fire," he said. "I am very much waiting for those benefits." "The VA needs a major overhaul," Geller said, adding that his granddaughter, who is a lawyer, and Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., are helping him in his pursuit of disability compensation. Anamarie Rebori, a McCaskill spokeswoman, confirmed to FoxNews.com that the senator is "working closely" with Geller in his quest, but declined to comment on the specifics of his case.

Rackham, a Purple Heart recipient, claims he waited 68 years to receive benefits he earned in battle. "They always said, 'We can't help you. Your records were lost in a fire,'" recalled Rackham, a former engine mechanic with the U.S. Navy who suffered serious combat injuries and later struggled to find work. "It made me feel like I was worthless," he told FoxNews.com. Rackham finally received 50 percent disability compensation in 2014 after years of filing applications that he says the VA denied. Despite the VA claim that a fire had destroyed his records, Rackham said the VA uncovered no new information on his record to prompt the payments some 68 years after he left the Navy. "What drove me crazy was that they had the same information in 2008 and they denied me," he said. "That's what blows me out of the water. Ever since 1974, when I first asked for benefits, they've had the same information."

"Sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction," Rackham said.