



Military Records and Claims Without Records

How to request your records, what to do if they burned in the 1973 fire, how to prove what you went through, and how to get rated when records are missing

Missing records are not the end of the road. This printable guide shows where your records are and how to request them, what to do if they were destroyed in the 1973 fire, what VA must do when records can't be found, the other evidence VA must consider, and how to push forward through delays and denials. Every underlined item is a live link to the official source. Use the checklist and worksheets at the back to track your progress.

Don't wait for your records to file.

File a claim, or at least an [intent to file](#), before your records arrive. It can protect an earlier start date for payments. A free [accredited representative](#) can help, and VA recommends one for claims involving reconstructed records.

Key contacts

Who	Contact	What for
National Personnel Records Center	866-272-6272 or 314-801-0800 1 Archives Drive, St. Louis, MO 63138	Request records online or by SF-180
Records requests by fax	314-801-9195	Standard SF-180 requests
Urgent records requests	Fax 314-801-0764	Surgery, funeral, or other deadline (emergency requests)
National Cemetery Scheduling Office	800-535-1117	Records for burial in a VA national cemetery
VA benefits hotline	800-827-1000 (TTY: 711)	Claims, records, and evidence
VA supplemental hotline	855-948-2311	Issues not resolved through normal VA channels (White House VA Hotline)
Your congressional office	Your U.S. Representative or Senator	Caseworker inquiries to NPRC or VA when delays continue
Veterans Crisis Line	Dial 988, press 1 or text 838255	24/7 support



1. Which records matter, and where they are

Record	What it shows	Where it's usually kept
DD214	Dates and character of service, assignments, awards, overseas service	National Archives for older separations; branch or DoD systems for recent ones. Many Veterans recorded a copy at their county courthouse
Personnel file (OMPF)	Orders, assignments, evaluations, awards, training, discipline, separation papers	National Archives for most Veterans, or the branch for recent separations
Service treatment records	In-service medical and dental care, entry and exit exams	Depends on branch and separation date: National Archives, VA (many 1990s to 2010s records), or DoD electronic records
VA claims file (C-file)	Everything VA has, including service records it already got	VA. Request with VA Form 20-10206
Unit records, morning reports	Unit locations, daily personnel changes, events	National Archives and branch historical offices
VA and private medical records	Treatment after service	VA facilities and private providers; authorize VA with VA Form 21-4142

Tip: if you've filed a VA claim before, VA may already have your service records. Request your C-file first.

2. How to request your records

Who can request: the Veteran; next of kin of a deceased Veteran (unremarried surviving spouse, father, mother, son, daughter, sister, or brother) with proof of death; or an authorized representative. Records become **archival and open to the public 62 years** after separation ([National Archives](#)).

Method	How
Online	eVetRecs through the National Archives request page ; print and sign the signature page
Mail	Standard Form 180 or a signed letter to National Personnel Records Center, 1 Archives Drive, St. Louis, MO 63138, or the address in the form's location table
Fax	SF-180 to 314-801-9195
Emergency	Explain the emergency and deadline in the SF-180 "Purpose" section or eVetRecs comments; fax to 314-801-0764 . For burial in a national cemetery, call 800-535-1117
Archival (62+ years)	Anyone can request; copy fees may apply (archival requests)

What to include

- Full name used in service, Social Security number, and service number (if used)
- Branch and dates of service; date and place of birth if you don't know the service number
- Exactly what you want: **"the complete personnel file and service treatment records,"** not just the DD214
- The purpose ("VA disability claim") and any deadline
- Copies of service documents you have, and your signature

Cost and status: generally no charge to Veterans, next of kin, and authorized representatives for basic non-archival personnel and health information. Allow about 10 days, then use the online status update form or call 314-801-0800 ([response times and status](#)).



3. The 1973 fire: were your records affected?

On July 12, 1973, a fire at the National Personnel Records Center destroyed an estimated 16 to 18 million personnel files. No duplicate or microfilm copies existed ([National Archives](#)).

Branch	Discharged between	Estimated loss
Army	November 1, 1912, and January 1, 1960	80%
Air Force	September 25, 1947, and January 1, 1964, last names alphabetically after "Hubbard, James E."	75%

- **Not every record in those groups was lost.** Request yours anyway.
- VA notes the fire didn't involve records of **retirees and Reservists alive on July 12, 1973** ([VA](#)).
- **Many records had been loaned to VA** before the fire.
- The National Archives uses **auxiliary records** (pay records, VA files, unit records) to reconstruct basic service information.
- If your file can't be found, complete [NA Form 13075, Questionnaire About Military Service](#), if the records center sends it.

4. Reconstructing fire-damaged records for a VA claim

1. **Fill out [NA Form 13055](#)**, Request for Information Needed to Reconstruct Medical Data. VA uses it as its request to the records center.
2. **Give as much detail as possible:** unit, company, battalion, regiment, squadron, group, or wing, and where and roughly when you were treated.
3. **The records center searches other sources**, such as unit records, morning reports, and hospital admission records from the Surgeon General's office.
4. **Gather supplemental evidence yourself** (section 6).
5. **Submit your claim with NA Form 13055 and your evidence**, ideally with an accredited representative ([VA: reconstruct records](#)).

5. What VA must do when records are missing

VA has a legal **duty to assist** ([38 U.S.C. § 5103A](#); [38 CFR § 3.159](#)).

VA's duty	What it means for you
Get federal records	Keep trying to get service and other federal records until obtained, or VA concludes they don't exist or more efforts would be futile (§ 3.159(c)(2))
Help get private records	Reasonable efforts to get records you identify and authorize, generally an initial request and a follow-up (§ 3.159(c)(1))
Tell you when it can't get records	Notify you, identify the records, explain what it tried and will do next, and explain you're ultimately responsible for providing evidence (§ 3.159(e))
Provide an exam when needed	When there's a current condition, an in-service event, and an indication they may be related, but not enough to decide (§ 3.159(c)(4))
Give the benefit of the doubt	When evidence is about evenly balanced, decide in your favor (§ 3.102 ; 38 U.S.C. § 5107(b))
Extra care when the government lost records	A heightened obligation to explain findings and carefully consider the benefit of the doubt (<i>O'Hare v. Derwinski</i> , 1991)



Ask for the formal finding

When VA decides records are unavailable, it documents a **formal finding of unavailability** in your file. Ask VA or your representative for a copy. It shows what VA tried and confirms the gap to fill with other evidence.

6. How to prove what you went through

Evidence	Examples and tips
Your own statement	What happened, when, where, your unit, who was there, and symptoms since. You're competent to describe what you experienced (§ 3.159(a)(2)). VA Form 21-4138
Buddy statements	People who served with you or saw the event: their dates, unit, and how they know. VA Form 21-10210
Family and friends	What you told them, letters home, how you changed after service
Documents from service	Statements from service medical personnel, accident and police reports, letters, photos, orders, pay and prescription records
Early post-service records	Private doctors, hospitals, clinics, employment and insurance exams, pharmacy records
Proof of service	County-recorded DD214, state Veterans agency records, discharge certificates, awards
Unit and location records	Unit histories, morning reports, ship logs, deployment records
Medical opinion	A doctor's opinion that the condition is "at least as likely as not" related to service, with reasons (Disability Benefits Questionnaires)

Special rules that can replace records

- **Combat Veterans:** your statement can establish an injury or disease in combat when consistent with that service ([38 U.S.C. § 1154\(b\)](#); [38 CFR § 3.304\(d\)](#)).
- **PTSD from fear of hostile military or terrorist activity:** a VA or VA-contracted psychologist or psychiatrist can confirm the stressor when consistent with service ([§ 3.304\(f\)](#); [VA PTSD claims](#)).
- **MST and personal assault:** VA accepts evidence from outside service records and behavior changes like transfer requests or performance changes ([VA: MST claims](#)).
- **Presumptive conditions:** prove qualifying service, not the cause ([§ 3.307](#); [§ 3.309](#); [hazardous exposures](#)).
- **Chronic conditions:** symptoms continuing from service to today can support service connection ([§ 3.303\(b\)](#)).



7. Getting rated without records

1. Submit an [intent to file](#) to protect your effective date.
2. Request your records and C-file, but don't hold the claim for them.
3. File [VA Form 21-526EZ](#) and state that your records may be missing or destroyed.
4. Include **NA Form 13055** if the 1973 fire may have affected your records.
5. Submit your statement, buddy statements, and alternate evidence, and point out any special rule that applies.
6. Get a medical opinion linking your condition to service, if you can.
7. Authorize VA to get private records on VA Form 21-4142.
8. Go to your VA exam and describe events and symptoms clearly and consistently.
9. Read your decision. Severity is rated on your current condition and exam, which doesn't depend on old service records.

8. Pushback, delays, and denials

If your records request is slow

- After about 10 days, use the National Archives online status form, or call 314-801-0800 or 866-272-6272.
- For a real emergency or deadline, fax an urgent request to **314-801-0764**.
- Ask your accredited representative or your **congressional caseworker** to send an inquiry.
- If you've filed a VA claim, **ask VA to request the records** under its duty to assist.

If VA is slow or says records can't be found

- [Check your claim status](#) online.
- **Send your alternate evidence now**; don't wait for VA to finish searching.
- **Ask for the formal finding of unavailability** and the notice required by § 3.159(e).
- **Log every call**: date, name, and what was said.
- **Contact VA** at 800-827-1000 or through [VA contact options, including Ask VA](#); for unresolved issues, the White House VA Hotline at 855-948-2311.
- **Ask your congressional office** for a congressional inquiry to VA.

If VA denies your claim

You have **1 year from the decision letter** to request a review and keep your effective date ([VA decision reviews](#)).

Option	When to use it	Form
Supplemental Claim	You have new and relevant evidence (buddy statement, medical opinion, records that arrived later)	VA Form 20-0995
Higher-Level Review	No new evidence, but VA made an error, like ignoring evidence, not applying the benefit of the doubt, or not meeting its duty to assist	VA Form 20-0996
Board Appeal	You want a Veterans Law Judge to review, with hearing or evidence options	VA Form 10182

Common errors worth raising: VA didn't try hard enough to get federal records; didn't notify you records were unavailable; ignored your statements or buddy statements; didn't provide a needed exam; or didn't apply the heightened duty when records were destroyed.



9. Mistakes to avoid

- Waiting to file until records arrive
- Requesting only the DD214 instead of the complete file and treatment records
- Assuming your records burned without checking
- Vague statements without names, units, places, and dates
- Inconsistent accounts between statements and exams
- Sending originals instead of copies
- Missing the 1-year decision review deadline
- Paying someone to file an initial claim

Records and claim checklist

Request records

- ☐ Submitted an intent to file to protect my effective date
- ☐ Requested my complete personnel file and service treatment records (eVetRecs or SF-180)
- ☐ Requested my VA claims file with VA Form 20-10206 (if I've filed before)
- ☐ Checked my county courthouse and state Veterans agency for a recorded DD214
- ☐ Wrote down my request date and checked status after about 10 days

If the fire may have affected my records

- ☐ Confirmed my branch and discharge dates fall in the affected periods
- ☐ Completed NA Form 13055 with unit details and treatment dates and places
- ☐ Completed NA Form 13075 if the records center sent it

Evidence

- ☐ Wrote my personal statement on VA Form 21-4138 with dates, places, units, and symptoms since service
- ☐ Collected buddy statements on VA Form 21-10210
- ☐ Gathered letters, photos, orders, pay records, and service documents
- ☐ Gathered early post-service medical, pharmacy, employment, and insurance records
- ☐ Authorized VA to get private records on VA Form 21-4142
- ☐ Got a medical opinion linking my condition to service
- ☐ Checked whether combat, PTSD, MST, presumptive, or chronic-condition rules apply

File and follow up

- ☐ Filed VA Form 21-526EZ and noted that records may be missing
- ☐ Worked with a free accredited representative
- ☐ Attended my VA exam and described events and symptoms consistently
- ☐ Asked for the formal finding of unavailability, if VA couldn't find records
- ☐ Kept a log of every call and letter
- ☐ Asked my congressional office for help if delays continued
- ☐ If denied, chose a decision review within 1 year



Records request tracker

Track every request so you know when to follow up.

Date sent	Sent to (NPRC, VA, branch, county)	What I asked for	How sent	Follow-up date / result

Service details for requests

Name used in service

SSN / service number

Branch and component

Dates of service

Date and place of birth

Units (company, battalion, squadron, ship)

Where and when treated in service

VA file or claim number



Evidence tracker

List each piece of evidence, what it proves, and when it was sent to VA.

Evidence (statement, record, photo, opinion)	From whom	What it shows	Date sent to VA



[illegible]

Official sources

What	Where to find it
Request military records (Veterans and next of kin)	National Archives
Standard Form 180	SF-180 (PDF)
Emergency records requests	National Archives
Archival records, response times, status	National Archives
The 1973 fire	National Archives
Reconstructing records for a VA claim	VA
NA Form 13055 and NA Form 13075	13055 13075
Duty to assist: 38 U.S.C. § 5103A; 38 CFR § 3.159	5103A 3.159
Benefit of the doubt: 38 CFR § 3.102; 38 U.S.C. § 5107	3.102 5107
Service connection: 38 CFR §§ 3.303, 3.304, 3.307, 3.309	3.303 3.304 3.307 3.309
Combat Veterans: 38 U.S.C. § 1154(b)	law.cornell.edu
Evidence needed for a claim	va.gov
PTSD and MST claims	PTSD MST
VA forms	21-526EZ 21-4138 21-10210 21-4142 20-10206
Intent to file	va.gov
Claim status and VA contact	claim status contact VA
Decision reviews	va.gov/decision-reviews
Find a free accredited representative	va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative

Veterans Crisis Line: Dial 988 then press 1 · Text 838255

Free, confidential, 24/7. Chat at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](#).

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