Conservation and Preservation of Military Records of the Vietnam Era

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Definitions

Conservation: Activities which include examination, documentation, treatment, and preventive care of cultural property, supported by research and education.

Preservation: Protection of cultural property by minimizing chemical and physical deterioration and damage and that prevent loss of information content.
Some Potential Problems in Preserving Vietnam-era Records

- Paper quality
  - Especially typical of materials printed in Vietnam before and during the war
- Ink
  - Can be sensitive to water, limiting treatment options
- Binding structures
  - Poor design or use can cause damage
- Adhesives
  - Tape, glues, “magnetic” photo albums, etc.
Single-item Treatment
Decision Making
What Do You Do When You Have So Many Things Can’t Individually Treat Every Single Item?

NARA’s National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) is the largest archive outside the Washington, D.C. metro area.

Currently houses approximately 57 million records in three facilities (over 4 million cubic ft.).

Houses both archival records (open to the public) and records center records (restricted access).

In 2008-2010 will move into two new facilities which are compliant to NARA 1571 (Archival Storage Standards).
NPRC Holdings

- Military personnel, health, and medical records of discharged and deceased veterans of all services during the 20th century
- Personnel records of separated civilian Federal employees
- Medical records of retirees and family members at Naval medical facilities and military family members treated at Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard facilities
NPRC

- Three facilities in St. Louis County
- Military Personnel Records (MPR) in Overland
- Annex also in Overland
- Civilian Personnel Records in south St. Louis
MPR Building

- Completed in 1956
- 728 feet long, 282 feet wide, 6 stories high
- Extensive facades of glass and aluminum on all sides
- In designing building, Dept. of Defense was more concerned about water damage than fire damage and the architect opted to leave out sprinkler systems
- The building also had few fire breaks
July 12, 1973: Single Largest Archives Disaster in the U.S.
July 12, 1973 Fire

- 12:16 a.m.: First alarm
- Ultimately 42 districts involved in fighting fire
- 1:05 a.m. firemen had reached 6th floor, but unable to locate source
- 3:15 a.m. internal firefighting abandoned
- July 14, 2:44 a.m. firemen able to access 6th floor again
- July 16th, one company remained
- Contract firemen were still using water until late July to stop rekindling
Records Lost

- 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files destroyed
- 80% of Army files for personnel discharged between Nov. 1, 1912 and January 1, 1960
- 75% of Air Force files for personnel discharged between Sept. 25, 1947 and Jan. 1, 1964
- Every floor of the building had several inches of standing water, with heaviest damage on the 5th floor
Salvaging Records

About 4 million records were salvaged from the 6th floor.

For records destroyed, alternative records are used to reconstruct information lost.
Ongoing Salvage
Problems With Our Current Building
Problems With Our Current Building
New Facilities

NARA is in progress of preparing to move all records from current buildings to new sites in the St. Louis area.

The new main facility will be located in North St. Louis County and will include a Research Room:
- This facility will house records which are archival and permanent records that will become archival.

The annex facility will be located in Valmeyer, Illinois and will house temporary records.
NARA 1571

Directive issued in 2002, setting specifications for structural, environmental control, fire safety, preservation, and security standards for archival storage conditions.

Both new buildings will meet or exceed this directive.

New storage standards and removal of records from current buildings are necessary to ensure preservation of all OMPFs.
NPRC Facts

- Staff responds to more than 2 million requests for information every year.
- Records are owned by the military service which created them until they pass into archival status.
- Records become archival 62 years after the last date of discharge.
- Until records become archival, requests for access is restricted to the veteran or a deceased veterans next of kin.
Access to Non-archival Records

- Limited information is provided to requestors who can identify the record sought.
- Information not releasable under the Privacy Act can only be released with the veteran’s written authorization.
- Veterans and next of kin of deceased veterans can request records through eVetRecs at https://vetrecs.archives.gov/
- Form SF-180 can also be used.
OMPFs

- Official Military Personnel Files
- Have been appraised as permanently valuable historic records of the federal government
- Over time, all OMPFs will be accessioned as archival (62 years after date of discharge)
- Can contain enlistment contracts, duty locations, performance evaluations, award citations, training records, and the Report of Separation (DD 214)
Persons of Exceptional Prominence

OMPFs of individuals designated as “Persons of Exceptional Prominence” (PEPs) are available to the public 10 years after the individual’s date of death.

These records are the only exception to privacy guidelines otherwise restricting access to OMPFs until 62 years after the date of discharge.
Vietnam related PEPs

Service in Vietnam:
- Creighton Abrams
- Michael Blassie
- Joe R. Hooper
- Mary Klinker
- Barry Sadler
- Lance Sijan

Service during Vietnam War:
- Arthur Ashe
- Lewis B. Hershey
- Grace Hopper
- Hyman Rickover

Persons of possible interest serving before Vietnam War:
- Spiro Agnew
- John M. Birch
- Thomas Dooley
- John Foster Dulles
- Lyndon Johnson
- John F. Kennedy
- Robert F. Kennedy
- Steve McQueen
- Richard Nixon
**DD 214**

- Most often requested form
- Contains dates and character of service, final rank, awards earned, and military occupation specialty
- Needed for benefits such as home loans, civil service appts., education, and medical care
- Most requests worked in 10 workdays
Other Common Requests

- Replacement or newly authorized medals
- Verification for entitlement for burial in a national cemetery
- Records of one’s own (or a family member’s) military service
- More complex requests may take up to five weeks to process
For More Information

Pick up a copy of the St. Louis Archival Research Room guide

http://www.archives.gov/research_room
http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/
http://www.nara.gov
http://vetrecs.archives.gov/