

February 6, 2015

The Honorable Chuck Hagel  
Secretary of Defense  
1400 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1400

Dear Secretary Hagel:

I am writing to you today out of concern for the many veterans and their surviving family members who have been unable to collect the benefits they are entitled to when their service records are unavailable through no fault of their own. I am asking that the Department of Defense, in conjunction with the Service branches, work together to reevaluate the type of evidence that can be considered in order to confirm a veteran's record of service when their official record is unavailable. Specifically, I encourage you to develop a system by which the use of unofficial evidence can be included in order to prove one's record of service.

On July 12, 1973, a fire at the National Personnel Records Center in Missouri destroyed approximately 16 - 18 million Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF). No additional copies of these records exist - no microfilm copies were ever produced, no indexes were ever created, and a complete listing of the records that were lost is also unavailable since millions of OMPF were lent to the Department of Veterans Affairs before the 1973 fire occurred. Because of these circumstances, 80% of official files belonging to Army personnel discharged between November 1, 1912 and January 1, 1960 and 70% of official files belonging to Air Force personnel discharged between September 25, 1947 and January 1, 1964 were lost. As you know, this documentation is the only way for veterans and surviving family members to receive the benefits they deserve.

Our nation's veterans should not suffer due to an accident that was beyond their control, yet many of these impacted individuals are still facing unnecessary and unacceptable difficulties. Applying for benefits should not be a stressful or difficult task, especially for those who have sacrificed so much for their country.

I commend you for the work of the Department of Defense in keeping our nation safe and am asking that you work with all of the Service branches to develop a clear and comprehensive system for the use of unofficial evidence to confirm a service record when the official record is unavailable. I implore you to develop a system that ensures fairness and recognizes our brave veterans for their service to this nation.

I appreciate your prompt attention to this important matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

STEVE ISRAEL  
Member of Congress

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