



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

151601

Human Resources Division

B-257173

May 4, 1994

The Honorable John D. Rockefeller, IV
Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter provides information that you requested on March 25, 1994, concerning veterans' service medical records. After discussions with your staff we agreed to (1) describe the service medical records control procedures followed by the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) after a servicemember is discharged and (2) identify some of the reasons that some records may be hard to find. We agreed to focus on procedures applicable to Persian Gulf veterans, basically those followed since 1991.

To obtain this information, we reviewed documents prepared by each military service that outlined the procedures that were in place in 1991. We obtained updated information from interviews with DOD officials. We also reviewed applicable portions of the VA claims processing manual and interviewed VA officials. Some of the information is based solely on interviews with DOD and VA officials. These officials reviewed the flow charts that we developed and agreed that the charts present an accurate overview of the service medical records control procedures.

As requested by your office, attached are the following:

- Flow charts, with explanatory text, illustrating the service medical records control procedures. There is a chart for each of the four military services. As shown on the charts, services have implemented new procedures that transfer records directly to VA. The new procedures have simplified the process. However, the possibility of medical records being misplaced, which has been a longstanding problem, remains because there are still many locations where records could be found within the new system.
- A map indicating the locations of facilities included in the procedures as well as other places officials said that records are sometimes found. There are 126 U.S. facilities shown on the map. There are over 10,000

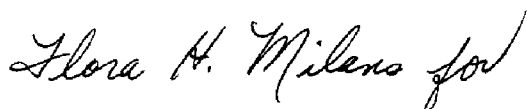
B-257173

other places where records might be found, including Reserve and National Guard units and over 600 medical treatment facilities that are not identified on the map.

- Data on the estimated number and age of Persian Gulf veteran compensation claims pending at the Louisville VA Regional Office--the office responsible for adjudicating all Persian Gulf claims involving environmental issues. VA reported that there are about 1,100 Persian Gulf claims pending, of which 37 percent are over 1 year old, 33 percent 6 months to 1 year old, and 30 percent less than 6 months old.
- A chart illustrating examples of VA's inability to obtain service medical records for 20 veterans who have filed compensation claims with the Louisville VA Regional Office. With two exceptions, Louisville has made at least two requests to the U.S. Army Reserve Personnel Center (ARPERCEN) for these records since January 1993; these claims are still awaiting service medical records as of March 1994. The officials reported that they were awaiting records from ARPERCEN for many other claims.

In addition, we are providing enlarged copies of the Army flow chart and the map for possible use during upcoming hearings. If you have further questions about this information, please call Ruth Ann Heck of my staff on 202-512-7007.

Sincerely yours,



David P. Baine
Director, Federal Health Care
Delivery Issues

Attachments - 4

SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS CONTROL
PROCEDURES AFTER DISCHARGE, ARMY RECORDS

The separation point assembles records from the medical treatment facility.

Before October 1992

1. The separation point sends the record to the Reserve or Guard unit if the servicemember is joining the Reserves or Guard. The Reserve unit will send the record to the U.S. Army Reserve Personnel Center (ARPERCEN), St. Louis, Missouri, when the servicemember leaves the unit; the Guard unit will send the record to the State Adjutant General, who will then send the record to ARPERCEN.
2.
 - a. The separation point sends the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence, if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA.
 - b. Since December 1992, the Louisville VA Regional Office has been responsible for adjudicating all claims involving Persian Gulf environment issues. Other regions were to forward all such claims filed before that date, and associated medical records, to the Louisville office.
 - c. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate Federal Records Center (FRC) when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA Records Processing Center (RPC), St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies.]
3. The separation point sends records for all other officers (those not filing claims or joining the Reserves or Guard) to the U.S. Total Army Personnel Command (PERSCOM), Alexandria, Virginia. PERSCOM will send records to ARPERCEN.
4. The separation point will send records for all other enlisted members (those not filing claims or joining the Reserves or Guard) to the U.S. Army Enlisted Records and Evaluation Center (EREC), Ft. Benjamin Harrison, Indiana. EREC will send the records to ARPERCEN.
5. ARPERCEN maintains records of retirees and members of the Individual Ready Reserve and of others who still have a service obligation. When the obligation ends or the veteran

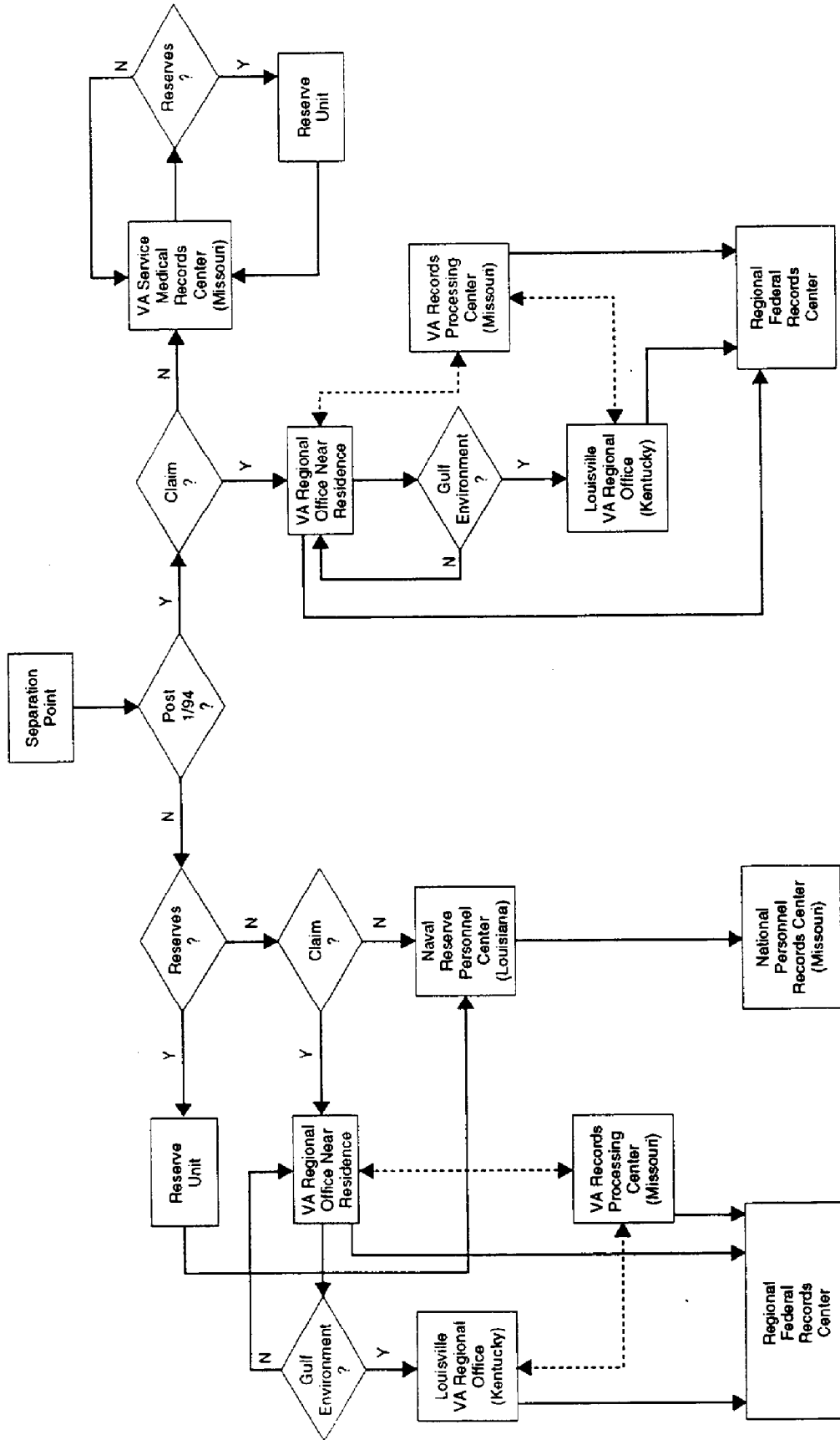
dies ARPERCEN will send the record to National Personnel Records Center (NPRC).

". . . Because of delays in forwarding records from one point to another, the records may not be where they are supposed to be. It is also possible that the records might never have left the separation center or treating facility or that the records might be in the veteran's possession. If the veteran had a terminated Reserve/Guard connection, the veteran's records might never have left the Reserve/Guard Unit." (Veterans Benefits Administration Manual M21-1, Part III, p. 4-I-3.)

After October 1992

1. The separation point sends records to the VA Service Medical Records Center (SMRC), St. Louis, Missouri, if the servicemember does not indicate he/she is filing a claim with VA. [Note: VA has made no decision concerning how long SMRC will maintain records. The military services have not decided whether records will be retired to NPRC or to them.]
2. SMRC sends the record to the Reserve or Guard unit if the servicemember is joining the Reserves or Guard. The Reserve unit will return the records to SMRC after the servicemember leaves the unit; the Guard unit will send the record to the State Adjutant General, who will then send the record to SMRC.
3. The separation point sends the record to the VA regional office nearest the separation point if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA. [Note: Initial implementation of this procedure was a test. An Army official said that the Army will be issuing guidance to change the procedures to send the record to the regional office nearest the servicemember's residence if he/she indicates a claim is being filed.]
4. The VA regional office nearest the separation point will send the record to the Louisville VA Regional Office if the claim involves Persian Gulf environment issues; otherwise it will send the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence.
5. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA RPC, St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the records.]

Figure I.2: Service Medical Records Control Procedures After Discharge, Navy Records



SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS CONTROL
PROCEDURES AFTER DISCHARGE, NAVY RECORDS

The separation point assembles records from the medical treatment facility.

Before January 31, 1994

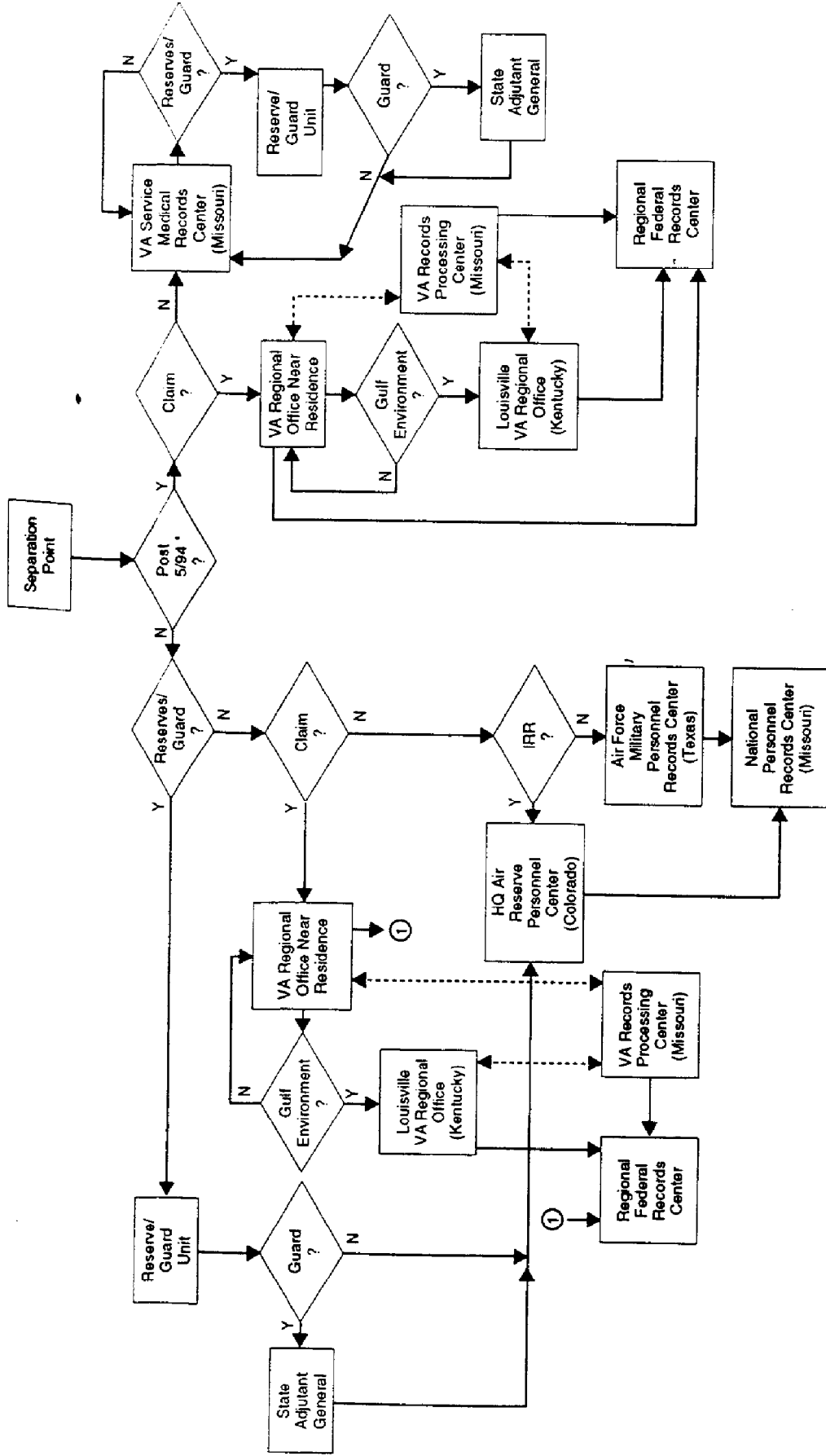
1. The separation point sends the record to the Reserve unit if the servicemember is joining the Reserves. The Reserve unit will send the record to the Naval Reserve Personnel Center (NRPC), New Orleans, Louisiana, when the servicemember leaves the unit.
2.
 - a. The separation point will send the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA.
 - b. Since December 1992, the Louisville VA Regional Office has been responsible for adjudicating all claims involving Persian Gulf environment issues. Other regions were to forward all such claims filed before that date, and associated medical records, to the Louisville office.
 - c. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA RPC, St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies.]
3. The separation point will send records of retirees, members of the Individual Ready Reserve, and all other discharged members to NRPC. NRPC will retain records of those who still have a service obligation.
4. NRPC sends the record to NRPC when no service obligation remains or the veteran dies.

". . .Because of delays in forwarding records from one point to another, the records may not be where they are supposed to be. It is also possible that the records might never have left the separation center or treating facility or that the records might be in the veteran's possession. If the veteran was in a Naval Reserve unit, the veteran's service records might never have left the Reserve unit." (Veterans Benefits Administration Manual M21-1, Part III, pp. 4-I-3, 4.)

After January 31, 1994

1. The separation point sends the record to the VA SMRC, St. Louis, Missouri, if the servicemember does not indicate he/she is filing a claim with VA. [Note: VA has made no decision concerning how long SMRC will maintain records. The military services have not decided whether records will be retired to NPRC or to them.]
2. SMRC sends the record to the Reserve unit if the servicemember is joining the Reserves. The unit will return the records to SMRC after the servicemember leaves the unit.
3. The separation point sends the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA. If the claim involves Persian Gulf environment issues, the record is sent to the Louisville VA Regional Office.
4. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA RPC, St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the records.]

Figure I.3: Service Medical Records Control Procedures After Discharge, Air Force Records



* Air Force is expected to implement the new system by May 1, 1994.

SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS CONTROL
PROCEDURES AFTER DISCHARGE, AIR FORCE RECORDS

The separation point assembles records from the medical treatment facility.

Before April 30, 1994

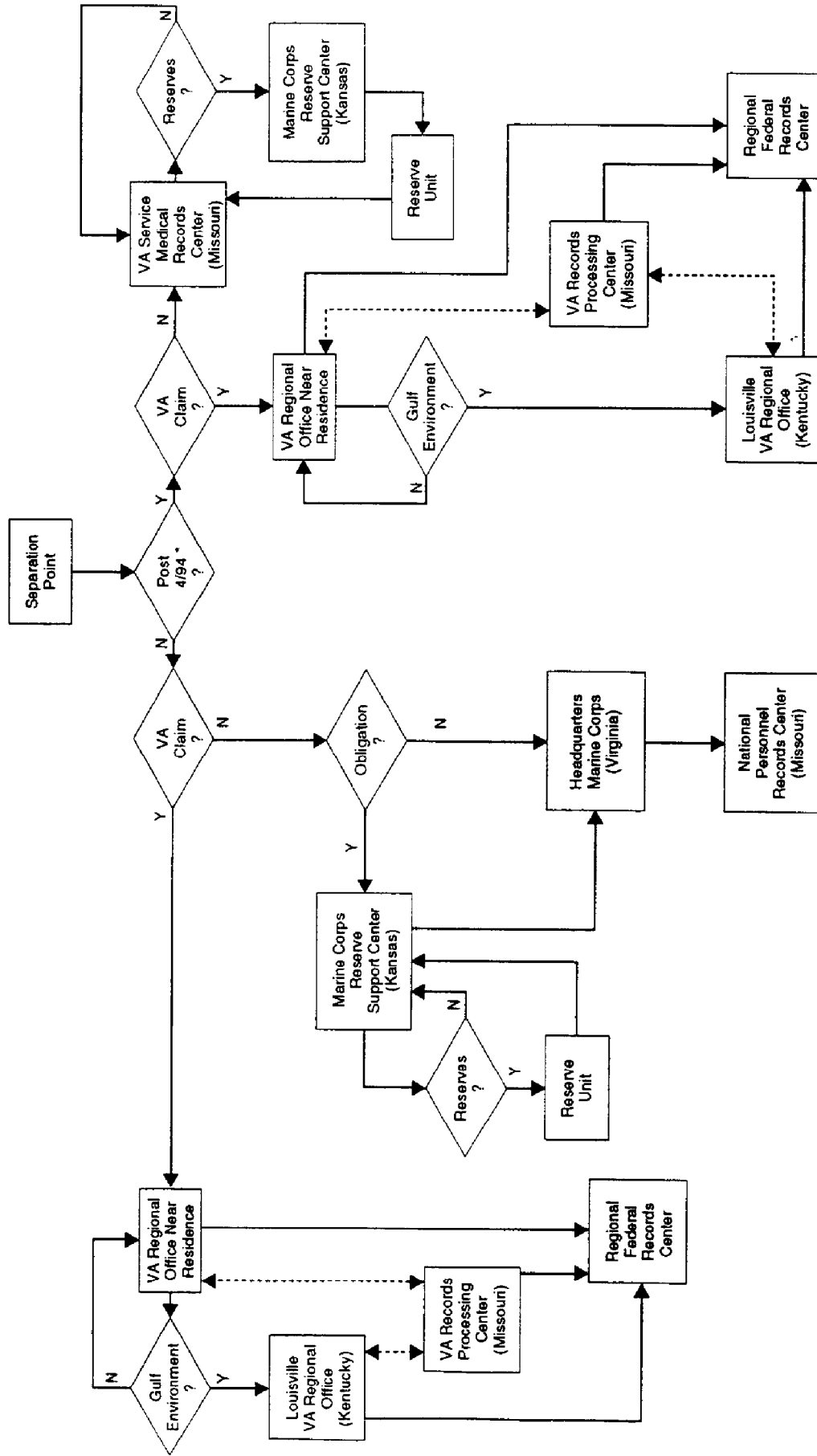
1. The separation point sends the record to the Reserve or Guard unit if the servicemember is joining the Reserves or Guard. The Reserve unit will send the record to Headquarters, Air Reserve Personnel Center (ARPC), Denver, Colorado, when the servicemember leaves the unit; the Guard unit will send the record to the State Adjutant General who then sends it to ARPC.
2.
 - a. The separation point will send the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA.
 - b. Since December 1992, the Louisville VA Regional Office has been responsible for adjudicating all claims involving Persian Gulf environment issues. Other regions were to forward all such claims filed before that date, and associated medical records, to the Louisville office.
 - c. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA RPC, St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies.]
3. The separation point sends the record to ARPC if the servicemember is a member of the Individual Ready Reserve. When the obligation ends, ARPC will send the record to NPRC.
4. The separation point will send the records of retirees and others discharged without further obligation to the Air Force Military Personnel Center (AFMPC), Randolph AFB, Texas. AFMPC will send records to NPRC.

". . .Because of delays in forwarding records from one point to another, the records may not be where they are supposed to be. It is also possible that the records might never have left the separation center or treating facility or that the records might be in the veteran's possession." (Veterans Benefits Administration Manual M-21-1, Part III, p. 4-I-4.)

After April 30, 1994

1. The separation point sends the record to the VA SMRC, St. Louis, Missouri, if the servicemember does not indicate he/she is filing a claim with VA. [Note: VA has made no decision concerning how long SMRC will maintain records. The military services have not decided whether records will be retired to NPRC or to them.]
2. SMRC sends the record to the Reserve or Guard unit if the servicemember is joining the Reserves. The Reserve unit will return the records to SMRC after the servicemember leaves the unit; the Guard unit will send it to the State Adjutant General, who will then send it to SMRC.
3. The separation point sends the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA. If the claim involves Persian Gulf environment issues, the record is sent to the Louisville VA Regional Office.
4. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA RPC, St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the records.]

Figure I.4: Service Medical Records Control Procedures After Discharge, Marine Corps Records



* Records of those discharged after 1/31/94 will be sent to SMRC retroactively.

SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS CONTROL PROCEDURES
AFTER DISCHARGE, MARINE CORPS RECORDS

The separation point assembles records from the medical treatment facility.

Before April 30, 1994

1. a. The separation point will send the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA.
 - b. Since December 1992, Louisville VA Regional Office has been responsible for adjudicating all claims involving Persian Gulf environment issues. Other regions were to forward all such claims filed before that date, and associated medical records, to the Louisville office.
 - c. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA RPC, St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies.]
2. The separation point sends the record to Headquarters, Marine Corps (HQMC), Quantico, Virginia, if the servicemember has no remaining service obligation.
3. The separation point sends the records to the Marine Corps Reserve Support Center (MCRSC), Overland Park, Kansas, if the servicemember has any remaining service obligation.
4. MCRSC retains the records of those members of the Individual Ready Reserve, and of retirees and others who still have a service obligation remaining. When the obligation ends or the veteran dies, MCRSC will send the record to HQMC.
5. MCRSC will send records to the Reserve unit if the servicemember is joining the Reserves. When the servicemember leaves the Reserve unit, the unit will return the records to MCRSC.
6. HQMC sends the record to NPRC.

". . . Because of delays in forwarding records from one point to another, the records may not be where they are supposed to be. It is also possible that the records might never have

left the separation center or treating facility or that the records might be in the veteran's possession." (Veterans Benefits Administration Manual M-21-1, Part III, p. 4-I-5)

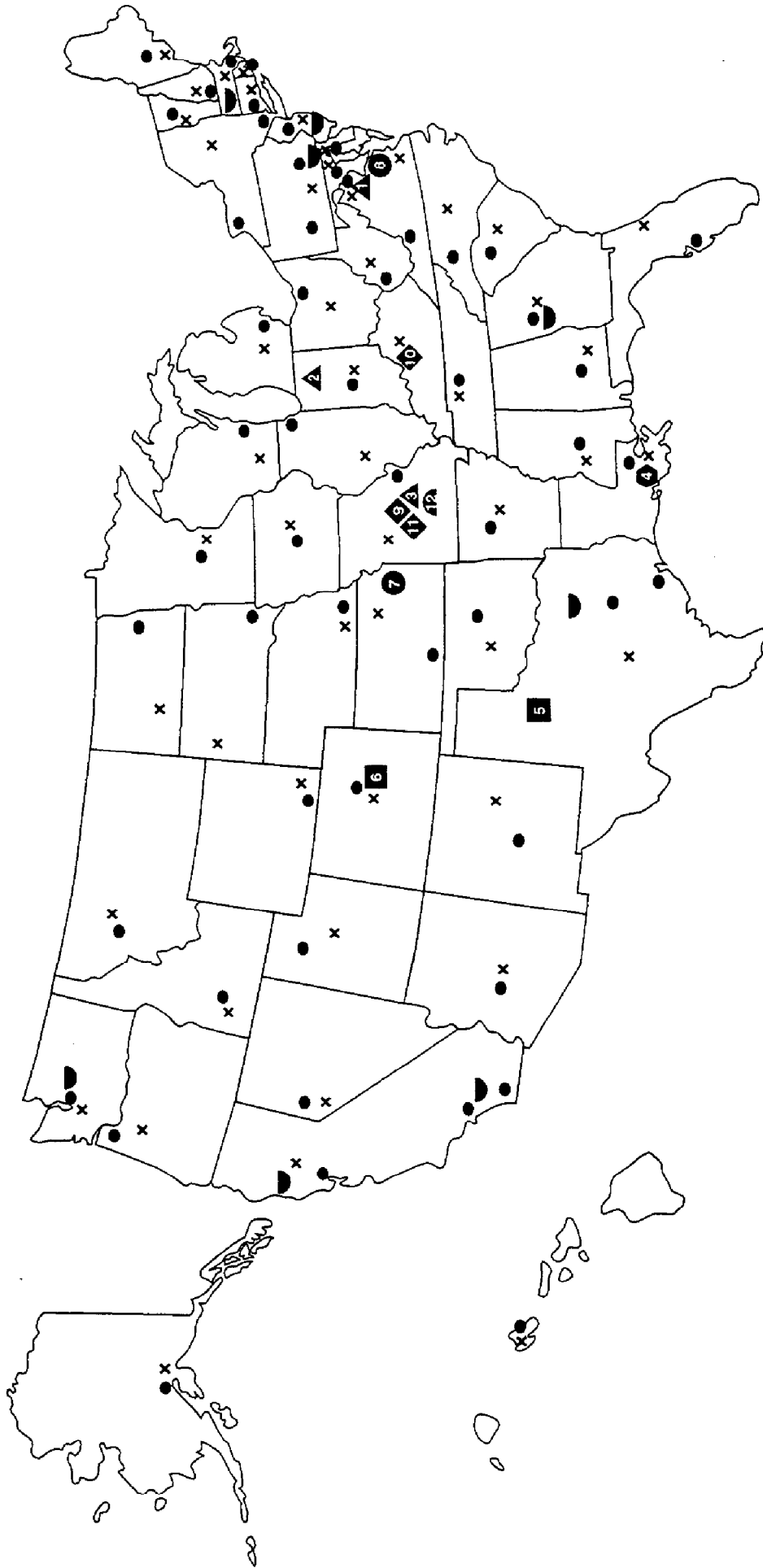
After April 30, 1994¹

1. The separation point sends the record to the VA SMRC, St. Louis, Missouri, if the servicemember does not indicate he/she is filing a claim with VA. [Note: VA has made no decision concerning how long SMRC will maintain records. The military services have not decided whether records will be retired to NPRC or to them.]
2. SMRC sends the record to MCRSC if the servicemember is joining the Reserves. MCRSC sends the record to the Reserve unit, which will return it to SMRC when the servicemember leaves the unit.
3. The separation point sends the record to the VA regional office nearest the servicemember's residence, if the servicemember indicates he/she is filing a claim with VA. If the claim involves Persian Gulf environment issues, the regional office sends the record to the Louisville VA Regional Office.
4. The cognizant VA regional office will send the record to the appropriate FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the record. [Note: If the record becomes inactive, the regional office will send the record to the VA RPC, St. Louis, Missouri. RPC will return the record to the regional office if a claim is filed or retire it to the FRC when the veteran dies and VA no longer needs the records.]

¹The Marine Corps began implementing the new system on April 30, 1994. But to be consistent with the Navy, records of those separating after January 31, 1994, will be sent to SMRC, retroactively.

LOCATIONS WHERE SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS MIGHT BE FOUND

Figure II.1: Locations Where Service Medical Records Might Be Found



- 1, 2, 3 ▲ Army
- 4 ● Navy
- 5, 6 ■ Air Force
- 7, 8 ◆ Marine Corps
- 9, 10, 11 ● Dept. of Veterans Affairs
- 12 ● National Personnel Records Center
- Regional Federal records Centers
- Dept. of Veterans Affairs Regional Offices
- × State Adjutants General Offices

- OTHER LOCATIONS RECORDS MIGHT BE FOUND**
- Reserve/Guard Units (over 10,000)
 - Medical Treatment Facilities (over 600)
 - Employers (e.g. first employer after discharge or most recent employer)
 - In veteran's possession
 - DOD offices – for research purposes

NUMBERED LOCATIONS ON MAPArmy

1. U.S. Total Army Personnel Command
Alexandria, VA
2. U.S. Army Enlisted Records and Evaluation Center
Ft. Benjamin Harrison, IN
3. U.S. Army Reserve Personnel Center
St. Louis, MO

Navy

4. Naval Reserve Personnel Center
New Orleans, LA

Air Force

5. Air Force Military Personnel Center
Randolph AFB, TX
6. Headquarters Air Reserve Personnel Center
Denver, CO

Marine Corps

7. Marine Corps Reserve Support Center
Overland Park, KS
8. Headquarters Marine Corps
Quantico, VA

Department of Veterans Affairs

9. Department of Veterans Affairs
Service Medical Records Center
St. Louis, MO
10. Department of Veterans Affairs
Regional Office
Louisville, KY

ATTACHMENT II

ATTACHMENT II

11. Department of Veterans Affairs
Records Processing Center
 12. National Personnel Records Center
St. Louis, MO
- Regional Federal Records Centers

Unnumbered Locations on Map

- o Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Offices
- x State Adjutants General Offices

Other Locations Records Might Be Found

Reserve/Guard Units (over 10,000)

Medical Treatment Facilities (over 600)

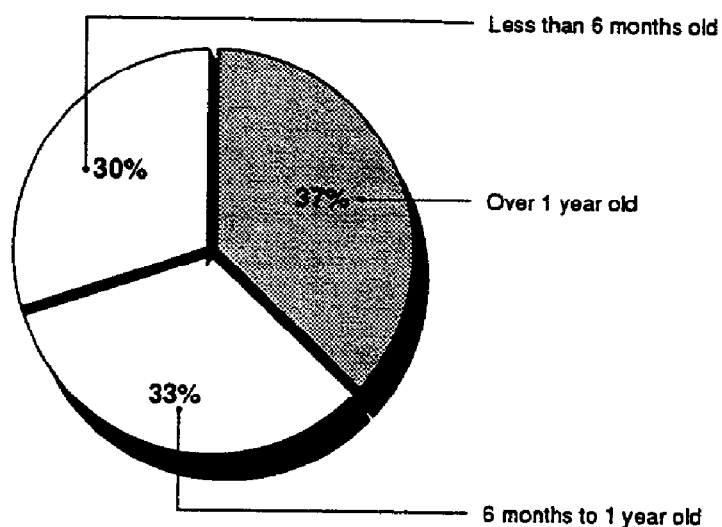
Employers (for example, first employer after
discharge or most recent employer)

In veteran's possession

DOD offices, for research purposes

DATA ON PERSIAN GULF VETERAN COMPENSATION CLAIMS

Figure 1: Estimated Number and Age of Persian Gulf Veteran Compensation Claims at the Louisville VA Regional Office

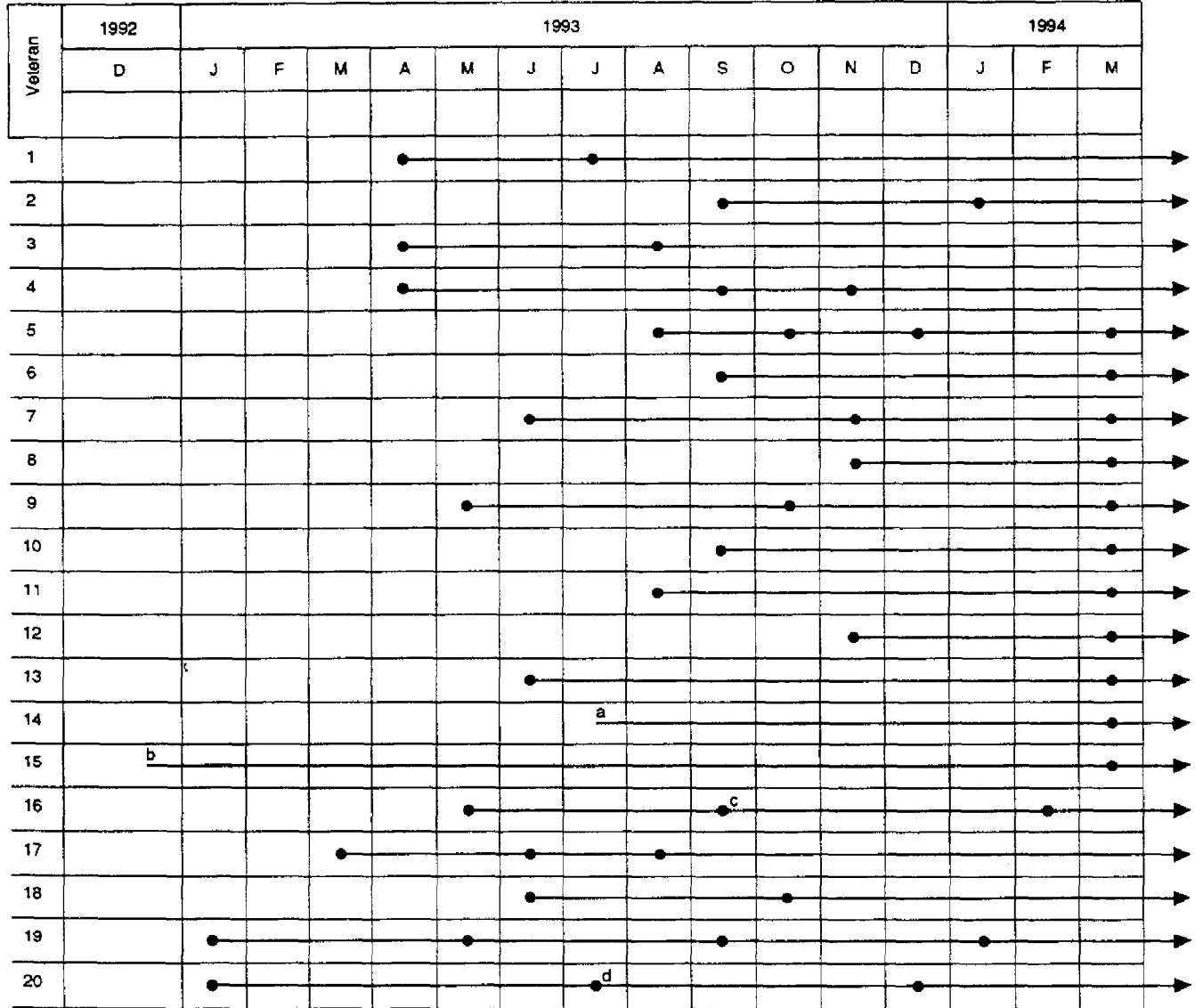


VA reports that there are about 1,100 Persian Gulf veteran compensation claims pending at the Louisville VA Regional Office.

VA reports that many Persian Gulf veteran claims are already over 6 months old when they are transferred to the Louisville VA Regional Office.

TWENTY EXAMPLES OF VA'S INABILITY TO OBTAIN SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS

Figure IV.1: Examples of VA's Inability To Obtain Service Medical Records



Legend

- Number of requests made
- Still awaiting records
- a Transferred to control group within ARPERCEN
- b National Personnel Records Center indicates service medical records charged out to ARPERCEN since December 1992
- c Records not at ARPERCEN as of September 1993
- d Received notice that partial records only were available. Resubmit in 120 days

Note: Examples provided by VA. These requests were by the Louisville VA Regional Office to the Army Reserve Personnel Center (ARPERCEN).

(101452)

