



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Victim Impact Statement

Defendant's name: Antonin DeHays
Victim's name: David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States
National Archives and Records Administration

In 2017, The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) learned that Antonin DeHays, a private researcher, systematically stole, over the course of several years, hundreds of identification tags of U.S. servicemen whose airplanes had crashed during World War II and other records from the National Archives at College Park.

It is written on our Main Archives Building that the National Archives "holds in trust the records of our national life," and we expect every researcher to respect that trust. It is, thus, with great anger and frustration that I submit this Victim Impact Statement describing the tremendous damage that Antonin DeHays has caused the National Archives.

The materials stolen by Mr. DeHays are unique and irreplaceable, with a cultural, research, and educational value that far outweighs any monetary value ascribed to them. It is hard to fathom that anyone would steal records and artifacts documenting those captured or killed in the service of their nation. But that is exactly what happened in this case.

Some of these ID tags and other items bear evidence of damage sustained during the crashes, such as dents and charring due to fire. Perhaps even more egregious is that Antonin DeHays, as a WWII historian and recognized expert on the D-Day invasion, had a deep understanding of the tremendous sacrifices of these servicemen. He chose to systematically steal items that had been removed from the bodies of deceased American servicemen, while simultaneously promoting himself in public as an advocate for American soldiers who died in Europe during WWII. Worse yet, Antonin DeHays then sold these items for his personal gain, in some cases highlighting the damage inflicted during war to increase the value of the items. One text message to a potential buyer stated that certain ID tags for sale were "burnt and show some stains of fuel, blood . . . very powerful items that witness the violence of the crash."

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One of the most significant impacts of the theft has been to compromise the fundamental integrity of the National Archives holdings and rob certain materials of context and provenance. Underlying the mission of the National Archives is the trust that our researchers have in us to preserve our records and make them accessible for research. Before selling the ID tags, DeHays often removed markings believed to have been made in pencil by the German military after they had taken the tags from the deceased or captured American servicemen. On one occasion, DeHays stole two ID tags that were linked together with a wire loop. One of the tags was issued to 1st Lt. Julian Columbus, who died when his plane crashed on June 20, 1944, in Germany. The other tag had been issued to his father, who had served in World War I. After stealing these tags from the National Archives, DeHays removed the wire loop, forever separating these items that had been linked together by a son in memory of his own father, who had recently passed away before he left to serve his country. Fortunately, we've recovered the dog tags themselves. DeHays appears to have disconnected them for his own personal, selfish gain and, in doing so, disrespected the memory of an otherwise inseparable bond of father and son. To date, the investigation has been unable to recover the metal loop. With each of the thefts by Antonin DeHays, our essential trust has been eroded, and researchers cannot have complete confidence that the National Archives is providing them all that it should. In fact, a theft of this magnitude compromises the evidentiary content and context of the entire collection from which it came.

Another major impact on the National Archives is the time and resources that have been spent investigating this case, and that will continue to be spent trying to recover the stolen items. The National Archives has already expended hundreds of person days, and tens of thousands of dollars, reviewing the materials that DeHays stole and seeking to recover what we can identify from third party purchasers. Unfortunately, because we are not able to maintain an itemized list of each and every of the individual records in the National Archives, we may never know the full extent of the loss. But what is even more damaging in this respect is how this whole incident has taken these resources away from where they squarely belong—processing and preserving NARA's archival holdings and making them accessible to the public that we serve.

Even when we know what is missing, recovery is difficult. The stolen records are hard to find for many reasons. Many similar items are legitimately for sale in the open market. Therefore, dealers do not suspect that they are stolen. Once an item was sold, it may have been resold one or more times. In some cases there is no detailed record of the exact identity of a purchaser, and therefore it is difficult to follow the trail.

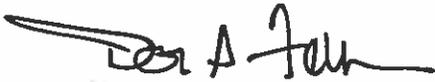
Ultimately, it is the American people that are most greatly victimized when records from the National Archives are stolen. Antonin DeHays' selfish acts have robbed the public of a part of its collective history. Records are no longer available for consultation by scholars, family members of the servicemen, and other researchers who use them. The implications of Mr. DeHays' theft therefore extend far beyond the present moment, as the loss to future scholarship and to future generations' understanding of our nation's history is severe.

Despite whatever cooperation Mr. DeHays may have provided in this case, he proved his intrinsic character when he used his expertise as a respected WWII historian to target and steal these items. Like the crimes he committed, any cooperation he has provided since being apprehended seems intended to provide for his personal well-being, and nothing more.

Mr. DeHays actions have undermined the integrity of the National Archives and the records we hold in trust for the American people. We believe that Mr. DeHays' behavior warrants a maximum prison term both as a consequence of the crime's impact on the National Archives and in order to send a message to others about the serious nature of this offense. The court has an important opportunity to let the public know that anyone caught perpetrating a crime against institutions like the National Archives that preserve cultural heritage will be punished to the full extent of the law. By imposing the steepest possible sentence, the court will justly punish an admitted criminal and also deliver a message that will help deter anyone contemplating such a crime in the future. Antonin DeHays undoubtedly understood the implications of his acts when he committed them and must accept the consequences of those actions.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this victim impact statement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David S. Ferriero". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

DAVID S. FERRIERO
Archivist of the United States