

The 1973 Fire, National Personnel Records Center

Overview:

On July 12, 1973, a disastrous fire at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) destroyed approximately 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF). The records affected:

Branch	Personnel and Period Affected	Estimated Loss
Army	Personnel discharged November 1, 1912 to January 1, 1960	80%
Air Force	Personnel discharged September 25, 1947 to January 1, 1964 (with names alphabetically after Hubbard, James E.)	75%

No duplicate copies of these records were ever maintained, nor were microfilm copies produced. Neither were any indexes created prior to the fire. In addition, millions of documents had been lent to the Department of Veterans Affairs before the fire occurred. Therefore, a complete listing of the records that were lost is not available. However, in the years following the fire, the NPRC collected numerous series of records (referred to as Auxiliary Records) that are used to reconstruct basic service information.

The Fire:

Shortly after midnight, on July 12, 1973, a fire was reported at the NPRC's military personnel records building at 9700 Page Boulevard in St. Louis, MO. Firefighters arrived on the scene only 4 minutes and 20 seconds after the first alarm sounded and entered the building. While they were able to reach the burning sixth floor, the heat and the smoke forced the firefighters to withdraw at 3:15am. In order to combat and contain the flames, firefighters were forced to pour great quantities of water onto the exterior of the building and inside through broken windows. The fire burned out of control for 22 hours; it took two days before firefighters were able to re-enter the building. The blaze was so intense that local Overland residents had to remain indoors, due to the heavy acrid smoke. It was not until July 16, nearly four and a half days after the first reports, that the local fire department called the fire officially out.

During the long ordeal, firefighters faced severe problems due to insufficient water pressure. Exacerbating the situation, one of the department's pumper trucks broke down after 40 hours of continuous operation. Numerous times, the fire threatened to spread down to the other floors; but firefighters were successful in halting its advance. In all, it took the participation of 42 fire districts to combat the disastrous blaze. Due to the extensive damages, investigators were never able to determine the source of the fire.

The Aftermath:

The National Archives focused its immediate attention on salvaging as much as possible and quickly resuming operations at the Page facility. Even before the final flames were out, staff at the NPRC had

begun work towards these efforts. All requests and records shipments from other government agencies were temporarily halted, and certain vital records were removed from the burning building for safekeeping. These included the NPRC's operating records, a computer index for a major portion of the NPRC's holdings, and more than 100,000 reels of morning reports for the Army (1912-1959) and Air Force (1947-1959). The latter proved especially important in the days following, as NPRC's officials determined that the fire damage had been worst among the Army and Air Force records for this same time period. As such, on July 23, 1973, the Government issued a Federal Property Management Regulations Bulletin (FPMR B-39) halting Federal agencies from disposing of records that might be useful in documenting military service. Such records have proved vital in efforts to reconstruct basic service information for requestors.

On July 23, the NPRC awarded a construction contract to clear and remove the remains from the ruined sixth floor. That same day, employees, previously on administrative leave, returned to work to assist in recovery efforts and resume reference services. The removal and salvage of water and fire damaged records from the building was the most important priority, and such efforts were overseen by a specially appointed project manager. Their work led to the recovery of approximately 6.5 million burned and water damaged records.

Following the fire, the most immediate concern in the center revolved around water. In order to combat the blaze, firefighters had been forced to pour millions of gallons of water into the building. To stop sporadic rekindling of fire, firefighters continued spraying water on the building until late July. In addition, broken water lines continued to flood the building until they could be capped. Water damage was heaviest on the 5th floor but was spread throughout the building. Standing water, combined with the high temperatures and humidity of a typical St. Louis summer, created a situation ripe for mold growth. As paper is highly susceptible to mold, officials sprayed thymol throughout the building to control any outbreak.

Controlling the spread of mold was one concern; but, so too, was the issue of how to dry the millions of water-soaked records. Initially, NPRC staffers shipped these water-damaged records in plastic milk crates to a temporary facility at the civilian records center on Winnebago, where hastily constructed drying racks had been assembled from spare shelving. When it was discovered that McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corporation in St. Louis had vacuum-drying facilities, the NPRC diverted its water damaged records there for treatment. The vacuum-dry process took place in a chamber that had previously been utilized to simulate temperature and pressure conditions for the Mercury and Gemini space missions. The chamber was large enough to accommodate approximately 2,000 plastic milk cartons of water and fire damaged records. Once inside, McDonnell Douglas technicians lowered the air in the chamber to the freezing point and then filled the room with hot dry air, which squeezed out the water molecules. For each chamber load, they were able to extract approximately 8 pounds of water per container - the equivalent of nearly 8 total tons of water for each session. In addition to utilizing two more supplemental drying chambers at McDonnell Douglas, the NPRC also sent records to a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) facility in Ohio for drying.