

A vast portion of military service records were lost because there were no copies.

The Records

A massive orange glow lit up the night sky just after midnight on July 12, 1973, as a devastating fire engulfed the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo.

It took just 4 minutes and 20 seconds after the alarm sounded for firefighters to arrive on scene. Although no one was injured in the horrific fire, it was already too late for millions of official military personnel files. The National Archives estimates that 16 million to 18 million files were destroyed in the blaze, including 75 percent of all Air Force records for personnel discharged between Sept. 25, 1947, and Jan. 1, 1964.

Roughly 80 percent of Army records for personnel discharged between Nov. 1, 1912 and Jan. 1, 1960 also were destroyed.

The exact number of files lost is not known because duplicate copies were never maintained and no indexes existed. In addition, millions of documents had been lent to the Department of Veterans Affairs before the fire, making it even more difficult to tally the loss, states the National Archives website.

The fire burned “out of control” for 22 hours. Firefighters were able to make it up to the sixth floor, where most of the damage occurred, but blazing heat and extensive smoke forced them to withdraw by 3:15 a.m. For the next two days,

The records were not indexed, so no one knows exactly how much was lost.



Workers returned to assist with the recovery effort 10 days after the fire began.

Fire

By Amy McCullough, News Editor

firefighters had no other choice but to battle the blaze from the outside, using fire hoses to drench the exterior of the building and pouring millions of gallons of water through broken windows to combat the fire still raging inside.

“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 operations,” states the website.

Finally, after two days, crews were able to re-enter the building. Still, the fire continued to smolder



until July 16. The blaze was so intense local residents were told to stay inside “due to the heavy acrid smoke.”

A total of 42 fire districts worked to put out the fire, but the damage was so widespread investigators never were able to determine what started it. Staff members worked to recover vital records even as the building burned, including more than 100,000 reels of morning reports for the Air Force and Army. Such records later played a critical role in reconstructing the basic service information for requestors, states the website.

Fire and Flood

On July 23—just 10 days after the fire began—employees who previously were on administrative leave returned to work to assist in recovery efforts.

“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,” states the site. “Their work led to the recovery of approximately 6.5 million burned and water damaged records.”

Although the fire was declared officially out after four and a half days, crews continued to spray the wreckage until late July in an effort to stop sporadic rekindling of the fire. The sixth floor was completely destroyed by the fire, but the fifth floor took the brunt of the water damage.

“In addition, broken water lines continued to flood the building until they could be capped,” states the website.

Staffers shipped water damaged records in plastic milk crates to a temporary facility at the civilian records center on Winnebago. There, “hastily constructed drying racks had been assembled from spare shelving.”

St. Louis-based McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corp. also offered up three vacuum drying facilities as a means of drying water logged records. “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,” states the NPRC site. “The chamber was large enough to accommodate approximately 2,000 plastic milk cartons of water and fire damaged records.”

Once the records were safely inside, McDonnell Douglas technicians lowered the air in the chamber to freezing and then filled the room with hot dry air, “which squeezed out the water molecules.” The equivalent of nearly eight tons of water was extracted during each session—roughly eight pounds of water per container. In addition, an Ohio-based NASA facility also helped dry records.

However, because the experimental vacuum drying process had never been used for records disaster recovery, many of the files were “over-dried, resulting in a higher rate of brittle paper.”



The one-of-a-kind records were threatened by fire, then water, then mold.

In the months following the fire, the NPRC established a new branch tasked with dealing with damaged records and reconstructing records for those requesting service information. The NPRC also established a “B” registry file—or burned file—to index the 6.5 million records recovered from the charred remains of the sixth floor.

Containing the inevitable mold was the next major challenge. St. Louis summers are hot and humid, and paper is especially susceptible to mold. Damaged records were placed in a temperature controlled storage area in an effort to prevent further mold growth. Today, most evidence of mold is dormant, but records still must be carefully handled because increased exposure to heat and humidity can cause mold to become active again.

“In terms of loss to the cultural heritage of our nation, the 1973 NPRC fire was an unparalleled disaster. In the aftermath of the blaze, recovery and

reconstruction effort took place at an unprecedented level,” states the NPRC site. “Thanks to such recovery efforts and the use of alternate sources to reconstruct files, today’s NPRC is able to continue its primary mission of serving our country’s military and civil servants.”

The burned file is still utilized today. In fact, as part of the NPRC preservation program, technicians continue to review, assess, and treat burned records.

Last year, NPRC opened a brand new \$115 million building in North County, Mo., where the archives are now stored. Even today archivists painstakingly work to repair what was lost, using new technology not yet available in 1973 to aid in the process. One archivist told *St. Louis Today* the process of piecing together, disinfecting, and preserving the documents can really only be compared to triage.

Personal Histories Lost Forever

However, the fire is still taking its toll on military families, as the lost records were quite literally one of a kind and irreplaceable. It has sadly become common for military retirees and their family members to run into a dead end when attempting to research or access service records.

In just one example among thousands, Debra Griffith learned first-hand the impact the fire can still have as she tried to access her dying father’s records last year, reported *St. Louis Today*. Army Cpl. Lewis Lower was a Korean War veteran and he wanted to be buried in a military cemetery, but Griffith couldn’t track down his files.

Although Griffith was originally told her father’s records may have been among the millions destroyed in the fire, she received a charred facsimile just 10 days after contacting the NPRC with the information she needed. Lower was buried with full military honors in February 2012.

“People just don’t know the scope of what happens when millions of records are burned,” said archivist Debbie Cribbs, who in 1973 wasn’t even born yet. “It would take more than one person’s lifetime to repair what happened, so we just do what we can.” ■

