Flight Record Fidelity: Perils and Pitfalls

Are your military flight records Secure?

by Chris and Kim Uhland

In October of 2018, Hurricane Michael devasted Tyndall AFB, FL causing more than $5 billion in damage. That same month, Hurricane Florence battered Camp Lejeune as well as Marine Corps Air Stations New River and Cherry Point. Only five months later, Offutt AFB, NE experienced a similar catastrophe where flooding as high as 8 ft. destroyed 137 structures; current restoration timelines are estimated to be at least five years. While costly, these facilities will be replaced or upgraded. However, some of the assets lost may be irrecoverable. As paper records are vulnerable to many different types of loss or corruption, one should consider the risks involved with having only one official copy residing in a specific location. For any service member who one day aspires to fly in the commercial sector, be-it Air Force, Army, Marine or Navy, military flight records are the only evidence that they meet minimum requirements set by the FAA and major airlines to qualify for employment. So…are they secure?

For some SA on the Air Force record management architecture specifically, the following is an overview of the Air Force flight record management system prior to December of 2019. The Aviation Resource Management System (ARMS) is the system of record used to maintain an Airman's daily military flights. However, only flights from an operator's current assignment resided on the system digitally. All other historical flight records lived on paper, in a folder, at the base's Host Aviation Resource Management (HARM) office. The ARMS software, having been designed decades ago, faced limitations by today's standards. Due to data storage restrictions, the system purged its memory at approximately 18-month intervals and could not retain individual sortie data in perpetuity. Incidentally, this is one of the reasons for the annual flight review requirement. When the system purged these individual sorties, the only data remaining was a "Summary Total", which was then used as a starting point when the next batch of individual sorties was entered. Of note, once the system purged of individual sortie data, there was no way for the HARM to verify, or correct, historical errors. Consequently, the totals on a Flying History Report (FHR) are actually the sum of multiple combined "Summary Totals" over the course of one's career. After converting tens of thousands of pages of records, MilKEEP has found that nearly 99% of all records processed have included duplicate sorties which were not properly identified and removed from ARMS during the annual records review process. This serves as an excellent example to highlight the importance of correcting any errors during annual flight record reviews.

The data retention limitations above necessitated paper copies as a primary record source which not only made records susceptible to loss from natural disasters like those experienced at Tyndall, Cherry Point or Offutt, but other common occurrences like theft, fire or loss during a PCS—all of which could have serious ramifications in the commercial aviation application process.

A memo just released from the Air Force Director of Training and Readiness stated that effective December 16, 2019 all historical aviation service documents will no longer be maintained by the HARM. Instead, these records will be available to Airmen electronically via their Air Force portal. HARM offices have already begun uploading flight records to a personnel system so they can return the paper copies to their respective aircrew members. The Automated Aircrew Management System (AAMS) will now allow for the storage of up to ten years of line-by-line flight reports. This is progress for sure, but line-by-line flight record storage doesn't appear to be retroactive, meaning only data not already purged from ARMS will be available in AAMS. It does nothing to help those poor souls who've lost all or a portion of their records prior to now.

Other bases are now using digital AFTO 781s to record their flight information. Unfortunately, the data from a digital 781 is still transcribed into ARMS for official record keeping. Consequently, if paper records are lost or destroyed, pilots could be left with nothing but a single page summary sheet to reflect decades of experience. This is not an Air Force only problem either. The Army, Navy and Marine Corps all have digital systems, but the data has to be transferred at every PCS and re-input into their respective systems on arrival at the new duty station. We've spoken to more than a few pilots from different services who have had pages and pages of their records lost with no ability to recover them.

There may be an assumption that one can simply present a one-page Flying History Report with summary totals at an airline interview and explain that their records were lost, destroyed or otherwise breached. While this is possible at some airlines (United has recently announced that it won't accept flying history summaries anymore in place of full records), pilots must perform multiple military-to-civilian calculations to submit for an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificate even before beginning the airline application process. These conversions are complex enough even with a complete flight record. Trying to calculate these times with only a one-page summary makes conversions much more difficult because summary totals aren't delineated by critical dates, such as an aircraft commander certification date. Attempting to estimate civilian Pilot in Command (PIC) time can be wildly inaccurate if the summary total presented does not separate the number of hours flown before and after aircraft commander certification.

Beyond the application process, the interview itself has been known to go either one of two ways depending on the quality of the logbook. Those with professional-looking records and a detailed explanation of conversion methods are less scrutinized and have a leisurely conversation with the interviewer. Those with haphazard or incomplete records and unverifiable conversion methods end up feeling like they are taking a

counter-intel polygraph. Additionally, some airlines are now asking for additional breakdowns of flight times beyond what was submitted in the application. Southwest, for example asks applicants during the interview for annual breakout totals going back to up to five years. Determining flight times to that specificity is an impossible task with incomplete records.

Bottom line: you should look to safeguard against a loss of such critical data…and a thorough annual review is critical. Otherwise, errors existing in the ARMS database are much more difficult or impossible to fix if left uncorrected. Creating a second paper copy or scanning to a digital file are two inexpensive and fast ways to safeguard records, but paper has many limitations. You don't keep a paper ledger for your checking account anymore. Air Force personnel records are all digital. Health professionals now maintain your health records in the cloud. It's time to get into the 21st century and treat flight records like the rest of our data. Online, secure, accessible at any time.

https://www.dvidshub.net/video/714063/tyndall-hurricane-michael-1-year-later

Debris indicaes the high-water mark left by March flooding in the 55th Wing Headquarters buildling at Offutt Air Force Base.

Chris Machian (The World-Herald)