

Minneapolis-St. Paul Air Reserve Station

HOME NEWS PHOTOS LIBRARY UNITS QUESTIONS



JOIN THE AF RESERVE

News > Home away from home at MSP

Home away from home at MSP

Posted 9/30/2009 Updated 9/30/2009

Email story Print story

SHARE

by Tech. Sgt. Jeffrey Williams
934th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

9/30/2009 - **MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL** -- The Armed Forces Service Center at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport expects to hit an important milestone around Labor Day when the 750,000th military member walks through their doors.

Since the center's opening in 1970 through Aug. 1, 2009, 748,609 military personnel have utilized the facility, which has never been closed despite snowstorms, strikes, airport evacuations, aircraft groundings and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Now located on the Mezzanine level before the security checkpoints, it is one of only eight airport service centers in the United States that is always open day and night.

"We have never, ever closed our doors in our entire history," said Debra Cain, the center's executive director. "We had 16 Marines that were stranded here for five days when the airport closed following the Sept. 11 attacks. We even maintained our operations during the move to our present location back in 2002. We have never been closed."

The center (formerly known as the Armed Forces Servicemen's Center) was the brainchild of a young sailor from Minneapolis, ATN3 Ralph "Scott" Purdum. He stopped at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport service center run by the Travelers Aid Society in 1969, and thought it would be fitting to have a similar center at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. Due to his active duty commitment, he enlisted the help of his mother to get the project moving.

He never lived long enough to see his dream come true.

At 11:25 a.m. on Mar. 16, 1970, ATN3 Purdum was a crewmember aboard a Lockheed EC-121M "Warning Star," tail number 145927, that was on an emergency approach into Da Nang Air Base, Vietnam, due to a malfunctioning No. 4 engine. The aircraft was waved off when another plane arrived onto the runway, but it was too late. The No. 3 engine quit, the aircraft banked, and then crashed into a revetment before striking a hanger 300 yards east of the runway on the Air Force side of the base. The Warning Star disintegrated, leaving only the tail section intact. Twenty-three crew members, including ATN3 Ralph "Scott" Purdum, lost their lives in the accident. It was his first flight.

In a letter written two months after ATN3 Purdum's death, his mother, Marjery, wrote, "We were told that he was one of the eleven that was taken from the plane alive, but he did not make it to the hospital. He died of a head injury and he was not burned."

Keeping the promise she made to her son, Marjery increased her efforts in making the Armed Forces Service Center a reality. "I wanted to finish the center even more then because one of his last letters said, 'Mom, don't give up on the room, it's so needed,'" she said at the time.

Working with Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport's Dorothy Schaeffer, who rose to the position of assistant director of the airport four years later, Mrs. Purdum was given a space of 600 square feet in the southeast corner of the main floor in the airport in order to operate the center. A Traveler's Aid representative assisted her with the early organization and fundraising necessary to cover the costs of a volunteer coordinator and a small emergency fund.

On Nov. 22, 1970, four days before Thanksgiving Day, the Armed Forces Service Center at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport became a reality.

An 8th grade teacher, Jeanne Morford, volunteered for the very first shift. She later became the center's board president and nearly 40-years later, can still be found volunteering there every Monday.

In a letter written on Jan. 31, 1971, Marjery wrote, "I've been very tied up with the Serviceman's Center. It is just a wonderful thing. We have had 3500 service people there since Nov. 22 and they are so grateful. They can't believe that people really care."

She passed away in 2005.

Active duty military personnel and their dependents, guardsmen and reservists on active duty orders, DoD personnel and Dept. of Public Health on orders, as well as uniformed allied military personnel from all around the world are eligible to use the facility.

"We have 20 bunks, ironing boards, starch and emergency clothing available and we provide wakeup service for these guys," said Jerry Connolly, a volunteer from St. Paul. "They have to sign in and then we know they are in here so we can wake them up when the time comes. We can have dependents in either room. They don't necessarily have to be women, but it seems to be mostly wives and kids. We have six bunks in here for women and a crib."

Whether it be a free meal, place to rest or the need to make a phone call, the AFSC is here to help.

"A majority of the little support centers that are around the nation have pretty much the same standard of stuff - they have a little bit of food and a little bit of water," said Spec. Thadd Cunio, a Hawaii National Guard member who recently stayed at the facility while waiting for his connecting flight to North Dakota. He had returned from an 18-month tour in Iraq only four days earlier.

"They try to make televisions, internet connection and phone usage the focus of the service. Very few have the sleeping areas and a majority of them are small. This one is bigger and they have the 20 man sleeping area. They have the little amenities. It's nice here because they are real accommodating. It makes you feel a little more at home knowing that it is not going to be a hassle to find a bunk or take a shower. It's all right here," he added.

"It's the small amenities here that make it nice. It's nice that it's outside of the security checkpoint because if you have friends or family here, if you do have five hours, your friends and family can sit with you instead of having to wait alone at the gate. I appreciate all the support we can get. It seems to be getting harder and harder and these servicemember centers are really nice to have around," the specialist concluded.

The center has a two-person part-time staff, relies heavily on volunteers, and is governed by a board of directors.

"Our volunteers are some of the most dedicated people that I've ever met in my life. You have people who have volunteered here for 20-30 years," said Cain. "We have people now that work full time jobs and still work on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. They are also very involved with their fraternal organizations. That's what I think people don't realize."

The center is privately funded by fraternal organizations and is not part of the United Service Organization, which runs other airport service centers.

"We always need funds. Everything in our facility is free and we can extend our courtesies to people who are displaced for 72 hours. We are always in need of volunteers, especially from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. Just go to our website at www.mnafs.org volunteer link and download an application," said Cain.

Inside Minn-St. Paul

Search

search 934AW

Find it

Advanced Search

View All RSS

Forty years and three-quarters of a million people later, ATN3 Purdum's legacy is still alive.

 Comments

No comments yet.

[Add a comment](#)

The Official Web Site of Minneapolis-St. Paul Air Reserve Station

[Site Map](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Questions](#)

[Security and Privacy notice](#)

[E-publishing](#)