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Fire destroys Army Hall



Power lines hold roof up and save firemen

By LISAH HENRY

Power lines narrowly averted tragedy in a blaze that destroyed New Plymouth's Army Hall early today.

Half the roof collapsed into the building at the height of the fire, flicking another section on to nearby power lines, says Area Fire Commander Peter Smith, New Plymouth.

Firemen were surrounding the building, in a block bounded by Gill St, Elliot St and Molesworth St, when the roof catapulted towards them.

The burning timber and iron bounced on to lines — saving the men underneath.

No one was injured during the blaze which took several hours to control.

About 30 firemen and civilians battled the fire in strong wind and pouring rain.

New Plymouth police confirmed today they are treating the blaze as suspicious.

The New Plymouth Fire Brigade was called to the fire at 2am by a woman who reported she smelled smoke from the building as she was walking past.

By 1.15am two pumps had arrived at the site, and firemen reported that further assistance would be needed.

A further two pumps were sent from New Plymouth and the first emergency shift was also called out.

Shortly after 1.30am Oakura Fire Brigade, a second emergency shift

and the Waitara brigade were all alerted.

Hawera brigade was alerted about 2.30am for additional breathing apparatus and Ingwood went on to standby at New Plymouth.

The fire started in the basement of the building and firemen were

Person interviewed

Police were interviewing a person this afternoon in connection with the fire at the New Plymouth Army Hall.

New Plymouth CIB head Detective Senior Sergeant Ross Pinkham says the person is being interviewed in relation to several matters.

Several other people have been interviewed in the course of inquiries today, he says.

totally committed to that area for 1 1/2 hours, said Mr Smith.

Air gaps within the basement shut flames up the walls to the roof, he said.

He said the flames would creep up between gaps in the walls and only be visible from the roof.

The building's construction made it difficult to locate sections of the fire.

Large beams in the roof were the only things that stopped the whole building from caving in, Mr Smith said.

"The building was made to burn," he said.

A small explosion shortly after 1.50am caused some panic, and forced the firemen out of the building.

Later, intense heat also forced firemen out a number of times.

Several vehicles within the building were destroyed. One crashed through the floor of the upper section of the building while another was engulfed in flames where it stood.

Ambulance men stood by in case of injuries and a barbecue and drink station was set up at a nearby business.

Police alerted Civil Defence and prepared to evacuate residents should the fire have spread.

The fire destroyed the Army building, but the adjacent Queens Hall extension was saved.

A few burn spots and water damage are all that remained.

Fortunately a sprinkler system that separates the buildings helped, said Mr Smith.

"It highlights the importance of fire safety," he added.

Mr Smith said he was very impressed with the control and response of all concerned.

He said it was a case when all the systems worked at the right time.

Firemen were on standby at the site for the rest of the day to cope with any hot spots.

Today

Taranaki weather

● **FORECAST:** Fine periods.
● **AT NOON:** New Plymouth Airport: Temperature 17.8C; humidity 50%; barometer 996.9 hPa, rising; wind: light variable, 15 kph.
● **Full weather:** page 9.

Rain delays cricket

No play was possible before lunch on the opening day of the first cricket test between Pakistan and New Zealand in Dunedin today. Steady overnight and early morning drizzle kept the covers on the pitch. Neither side has announced its first XI. That will not be done until the captains meet shortly before the start of play. But Pakistan has announced the four players to be omitted. Bateman Umar Ahmed has been left out due to a strained back. The others not playing are offspinner Tameez Ahmed, who has an injured left ankle, seamer Sikhandar Bakht and opener Moiz-Ul-Ahmed. The 12 includes opening batsman Bismillah Khan, who only arrived in New Zealand yesterday. (England tour off: Back page).

Spymaster dies

Wartime spymaster Sir William Stephenson, the man whom Winston Churchill called "Intrepid", died at his Bermuda retirement home and was buried in a secret ceremony yesterday, a local undertaker said. Stephenson (80) was the subject of the book *A Man Called Intrepid*, a history of his World War II espionage activities. As British security co-ordinator in the Western Hemisphere during the war, Stephenson launched a programme of Anglo-American co-operation and espionage that was decisive in the fight against the Nazis. Stephenson stayed out of the public eye until the 1987 scandal over Spycatcher, a book written by former intelligence agent Peter Wright that the British Government sought to suppress.

In receivership

Commercial Securities Ltd has been placed in receivership by trustees for the property investment company's bankers. Announcing the receivership today, Commerce directors said the bankers had acted to increase their stake and strengthen positions in Sir Ron Brierley's recently-restructured empire. "We're almost certainly seeing part of an overseas play," one analyst said. "But the reasons behind it are hard to fathom. The rumours are that someone is interested in acquiring or increasing stakes in Brierley." (More finance: Page 9, 10)

Brierley moves baffle

The heavy trade in Brierley Investments Ltd shares on the Australian sharemarket, which continued yesterday, is believed to be part of an overseas play. Analysts are baffled by the large parcels of Brierley stock, and that of its offshoot Industrial Equity Ltd (IEL), changing hands during the last two days. But they believe European investors may be moving to increase their stake and strengthen positions in Sir Ron Brierley's recently-restructured empire. "We're almost certainly seeing part of an overseas play," one analyst said. "But the reasons behind it are hard to fathom. The rumours are that someone is interested in acquiring or increasing stakes in Brierley." (More finance: Page 9, 10)

Nuclear tests blamed

Nuclear testing could be responsible for the dramatic rise in the price of uranium.

Assessors coming to check hall

By GEOFFREY DARLING

New Zealand Army assessors are due in New Plymouth this evening to inspect the major fire that gutted the Army Hall early today.

Although the building appears to be destroyed — with demolition imminent — the damage and loss of Army vehicles and equipment has been minimised by the current major exercise Operation Golden Place.

The Army Hall normally houses all vehicles, field equipment and weapons for New Plymouth rifle company attached to the Wellington-West Coast Taranaki regiment.

But these are now somewhere on the Napier-Taupo road as the company exercises in one of the largest peacetime operations ever undertaken by the New Zealand Army.

Army public relations officer Major Peter Fry said from Wellington today no future plans can be assessed at this stage.

Nor can the loss be quantified, he said.

Our immediate concern is ensuring weapons and ammunition in the store have been accounted for. And we have done that," Mr Fry said.

However, the Garrison Club at the Molesworth St end of the hall housed many irreplaceable photographs, shields, trophies and assorted memorabilia. The club was totally destroyed.

Body found

ROTORUA, Today (NZPA). — Police have appealed for public help in identifying a dead man whose body was found in the Waikato River near Huka Falls yesterday. The man's naked body was found at the hands and feet and is thought to have been in the water for about a week.

Several vehicles stored in the Army Hall had little chance, either from the intense heat or the collapsing roof and floor. Photos: GLEN FERGUSON



New Plymouth firemen tearing down the roof sheet by sheet as they work to make the Army Hall at least comparatively safe.



The section of the Army Hall roof which would have landed on firemen if power lines had not broken its fall.

PLO recognition sought

WELLINGTON, Today (NZPA). — The new Egyptian Ambassador to New Zealand has urged the Government to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation and to "do business with them."

Nabil Mohammed Badr also said attempts by the Israeli Government to label the PLO as terrorists were "slandersous" and "absolute bullsh*t."

Mr Badr, who is Canberra-based, presented his credentials to Governor-General Sir Paul Reeves on Wednesday and has held talks with Foreign Minister Russell Marshall, the Chamber of Commerce and business leaders.

Roof cave-in cuts power

New Plymouth City Energy's faults section was called to the Army Hall fire at 2am — an hour after the fire alarm was raised — when part of the hall roof was blown on to electricity wires.

The roof destroyed an 11,000 volt line and surrounding 400 volt lines, cutting power to consumers within a 300m to 400m radius, says distribution engineer, Martin King, New Plymouth.

Power was restored to most consumers early this morning, using jumper leads.

City Energy workers today temporarily re-routed electricity to consumers across Elliot St from the Army Hall and the department is working on overhead lines to restore normal supplies to the rest of the area as soon as possible.

Fire scorches venue plans

Sports bodies considering the Army Hall as a possible indoor sports stadium venue were to meet in New Plymouth this afternoon to discuss their options in the wake of the fire.

The bodies, who are represented by an informal group, had four alternatives on the short-list of indoor centres, according to a spokesman.

The centre would cater for 11 sports.

Two options are confidential, the Army Hall was the third and the fourth the Haccourse complex.

Although plans have advanced somewhat from the talking stage the group is not prepared to make any of them public at this point.

Catering firm under pressure

The French Cake Kitchen, resident caterer in the adjacent Queen's Hall had a lucky escape from serious damage in the Army Hall fire.

Damage to the operation was minimal, which a spokesman Vince Moores says is fortunate.

"We are overcoming present difficulties," he says. "We will be able to meet our catering commitments over the weekend and all operations will be fully functioning on Tuesday."

"Our wholesale plant and retail shop on the hill in Devon St will be closed until Tuesday morning."

Kiwis leaving

More New Zealanders bailed out and left the country last year than in any year since 1979, the latest immigration figures show.

The exodus resulted in a net loss of 23,030 — the difference between permanent arrivals and departures noted by the Immigration Department.

It was the worst figure since 1979's net loss of 26,321.

It was a big turnaround from the 1987 situation which saw a net gain of people to New Zealand of 4913.

The 1986 have seen fluctuating levels of immigration and emigration. The decade started out with a net loss of 11,642 in 1980, followed by a smaller loss of 6691 in 1981. The next three years saw net gains of 10,777, 14,612 and 3885 respectively before switching back to a net loss of people in 1985 and 1986 of 12,896 and 11,455.

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