

To The Colors

by
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When the Air Force Came to Town – Part I



Drive South on Highway 91 past Chandler, Minnesota and you will find an enormous TV tower in a large alfalfa field. The field is enclosed by a serious-looking, barbed wire-topped fence and contains two large concrete foundations. This is all that remains of the Chandler Air Force Station.

The DoD built Chandler Air Force Station in 1951 on farmer Hemert Schuur's fields. The site occupies high ground on the Couteau des Prairies, also called Buffalo Ridge. The elevation assisted the installation's radars. The higher the radar antennas, the greater their effective range.

The Chandler Air Force Station was one of 85 radar stations built between 1949 and 1952 across the northern tier states. While it is difficult today to appreciate our nation's anxiety during those early Cold War years, Congress approved this system in response to growing concern over our vulnerability to attack by Soviet Russian bombers.

The airmen of the Station's operational unit, the 787th Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron, occupied the installation in September 1951. Former Airmen Gerald Case remembered, "I was surprised by the location in the middle of a corn field, but it was brand new and looked good."

The military creates a community when it builds a military installation, knowing that military personnel need more than just a good workplace. This is why Chandler Air Force Station possessed not only operations buildings and radar domes, but also barracks buildings, a dining facility, family housing, a club, a gymnasium, outdoor sports facilities, military retail and grocery stores, and a two-lane bowling alley.

The 787th was responsible for detecting aircraft within its region and identifying them or directing jet fighters to intercept unidentified aircraft and confirm their status as either friendly or potentially hostile.

The airmen of the 787th manned their radars around the clock, 365 days a year. Orville Johnson served as a radar crew chief and described the radar section, "When a blip would show up on the scope, it would be plotted up on the [Plexiglas] plotting board – manually plotted with crayons. The men had to learn to write backwards because they'd stand behind the board . . . When a blip would show up on the plotting board, (we) would have to try and correlate that with a flight plan . . . It had to be either correlated or aircraft had to be scrambled for a visual [identification]. That was our mission."

The radar crew chiefs called on the South Dakota Air National Guard in Sioux Falls, the Sioux City Air Force Base, the Minnesota Air National Guard in Minneapolis, or the Duluth Air Force Base whenever they had to scramble jet fighters for an intercept.

Orville Johnson described their favorite fighter unit, "The number one resource was the Joe Foss Air Force at Sioux Falls, the South Dakota Air National Guard. There were a couple

reasons for that. Number one, they were the closest, so they were usually in a better position . . . They were a bunch of old World War II pilots [who] knew how to fly that airplane right side up, upside down, forwards, backwards, you name it, they'd do it for you.”

The Air Force changed Chandler's mission in 1961, transferring the identification and intercept responsibilities to the Air Force bases at Sioux City or Duluth. But 787th radars kept sweeping the sky.

The Air Force community at Chandler represented many backgrounds, including airmen from Maine to California and everything in between. The Air Force assigned African-American airmen and airmen from big cities. Airmen came to town who spoke with a Southern Drawl or a New England accent. Suddenly there were Southern Baptists and Radar technicians in the tiny, Dutch farming community. Some of the older airmen had spouses who were German or Korean.

The existing communities were not sure what to expect of the new neighbors. John DeGreeff was Chandler Postmaster for many years. He explained the initial reaction by the local community, “I think when the Air Base first started, they kind of wondered what it was going to do to the town . . .”

Monica Morgan was attending school in Slayton and heard similar feelings in her community, “I think the businessmen were happy . . . some of the townspeople who weren't businessmen I think were very leery - they didn't quite know what was descending on their community.”

This new Air Force community was overwhelmingly young, unmarried, and male. Young local men suddenly

found themselves outnumbered by the uniformed newcomers down the road. This led to the only area of recurring controversy between the two communities – Airmen dating local girls. Chandler farmer Ray Talsma recalled with a laugh that there were definitely some staunch old Dutchmen who did not want local women dating the Airmen

The small military community perched on the Buffalo Ridge above Chandler and watching the skies over North America became a schoolhouse on teamwork for its Airmen and on how to find their way with others. It also became an opportunity for the local community to accept differences and find common ground with others. We'll continue their story next week.

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