

To The Colors

by
Bill Palmer

When the Air Force Came to Town – Part II



Chandler Air Force Station (CAFS) was a small radar site perched on the Buffalo Ridge above Chandler, Minnesota. The 787th Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron watched the skies over our region from 1951 to 1969 with a staff of as many as 213 or as few as 98 airmen. The station was home and a workplace for these young men and a schoolhouse on teamwork and on how to find their way with others.

The unit's small size had a significant influence on life at the 787th. Gary Wozniak of Tyler, found a strong bond between the airmen when he served there during the late 1960's, "Everybody had a great relationship . . . the entire base – the little radar site there – it was more like a close-knit family."

Those bonds led to close cooperation in the unit's mission and in off-duty pursuits as well. The first order of business when off-duty, though, was housekeeping. Paul Ward of Edgerton explained the lengths they took to maintain the barracks, "The floors in the barracks would just shine - we'd use our blankets to keep them polished up and we didn't wear our shoes in the barracks except the commander - he didn't take his off, but everybody else took their shoes off when they came in."

Once the barracks were "squared away", the Airmen turned their attention to other activities. Sometimes they

settled into the dayroom scene described by Clayton French, [T]here was a lot of card-playing out there and watching TV – Arthur Godfrey and stuff you wouldn't dream of watching today. . . everybody always sent you cookies and stuff at Christmas – people you never even knew . . . I really enjoyed that."

Gary Wozniak of Tyler explained other, typical off-duty activities, "Peer groups were buddies and we'd do things together. We lived in the barracks together; we'd go out at night together; and we'd spend the weekends together."

Off-duty destinations varied, but former Airmen named local ballrooms at Lake Shetek, Hatfield, and Marshall; restaurants in Chandler, Lake Wilson, and Slayton; bars in Lake Wilson and Slayton; roller skating rinks in Edgerton and Pipestone, and lakes throughout the region as favorite off-duty destinations. They were, after all, young men and their consistent, off-duty objectives were twofold: to find ways to have fun and to meet girls.

Any discussion of life at Chandler Air Force Station would be incomplete without mention of winter on Buffalo Ridge. The radar site was a bare, windswept hilltop that became particularly bitter during the winter cold. Bob Downing described a typical recollection of winter snowstorms up on the ridge, "At times the snowstorms were so bad we had to run ropes between the Mess Hall and radar operations so we could find our way to work."

Winter weather also changed the Airmen's off-duty activities. The commander tried to prepare the Airmen for winter driving conditions, but the message did not always translate well. "I used to get the most comic impression when a 2nd Lieutenant from Alabama would give me my winter driving

briefing,” Gary Wozniak recalled, “There is irony in there someplace.”

Properly equipped with winter driving warnings, the Airmen ventured forth for winter adventures. “I was from Florida and we went tobogganing,” Bob Nama remembered, “They told me to sit up front so I could see good – well, when I got to the bottom, I was alone and covered in snow.” Larry Smith recalled that the unit’s intramural sports program expanded to include ice hockey on the flooded tennis court, “I saw guys from Florida who had never seen ice crawl out to the net to play goalie.”

The young Airmen were a high-spirited group and the long, slow hours on radar, radio, or maintenance watch begged for activities to fill the time. One method, favored by both the Chandler airmen and the fighter pilots, was the “Bubble Check.” The Radar crew OIC radioed a fighter pilot in the area whether he could perform a “Bubble Check.” Orville Johnson explained what happened next, “You’d just kind of watch them on the scope and when they started getting close, everybody would run out of the Ops Room and here would come an F-86 right over Chandler; up the hill; up over the housing; and up over the bubble . . . it was a buzz job, is what it was and the pilots thought it was great.”

Naturally there was more than one perspective on “Bubble Checks.” Vern Long, a local farmer near Pipestone described his experience, “It was noon. I was outside. We didn’t hear it (an F-86 fighter) until it was a little past us. I’m guessing it was 50’ off the ground – a little bit higher than my silo. My wife said every dish in the house rattled.

Next week we’ll explore the relationships that developed between the

Chandler airmen and the local communities.

An anthology of my columns from 2004 is available at Bound to Read Bookstore and the Lyon County Museum.

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