

To The Colors

by
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When the Air Force Left Town



The Chandler Air Force Station (CAFS) radar site perched on the Buffalo Ridge above Chandler, Minnesota from 1951 to 1969. We've explored what it did and how the military community mixed with the civilian community. It only remains to explore what happened when the Air Force left town.

The years of living and working with one another changed the two communities – military and civilian. They became neighbors and helped one another in large and small ways. Former Airman Clayton French described one such incident, “I can remember one time in 1955 when they had a massive fire down there (downtown Chandler) and they called us in the middle of the night to go down there - we put the fire out, but I think 3 or 4 guys came back with frozen ears and all that - I think it was 30 degrees below zero that night.”

The Chandler Airmen again showed they were good neighbors in July of 1968 when a major tornado devastated Tracy. Former Airman Jack McClure, now of rural Garvin, recalled how the Airmen responded, “. . . a lot of GIs after that tornado happened probably for the next 2-3 weeks would daily go over there and run bulldozers or try and load the dump trucks . . . the people were in trouble . . . it is a small community and that Base . . . pitched in

and helped just like all the other communities around here . . .”

The Soviet Union's successful launch of the world's first artificial satellite on October 4, 1957 spelled the end of the Chandler Air Force Station. Congress quickly authorized construction of a ballistic missile warning system and the Department of Defense found the radar defense against bombers provided by the 787th and its sister radar squadrons obsolete.

The Air Force inactivated the unit effective the end of September 1969. The final unit history of the 787th contains the following entry: “At 1230 hours local time on 2 July 1969 the operations section ceased its function.” With these words, the Air Force shut down the Chandler air defense radars that had been operating continuously since 1952.

Air Force teams dismantled and removed the radars and communications equipment throughout the summer of 1969. The domes came down from the two height-finder radars, leaving only one dome remaining over the search radar. A small unit stayed behind for over a year to run that radar for the Federal Aviation Administration.

The government subsequently sold the radar site to a developer and the housing area to a group of investors from Fulda. Buyers removed the homes and the developer salvaged materials from the radar site, but was unable to find a commercial tenant or buyer.

The housing area site returned to agricultural production, but the buildings on the radar site stood empty and fell prey to vandalism. Local teens found the old radar site an irresistible attraction for clandestine exploring, beer parties, and paintball competitions. Eventually,

Murray County purchased the land at a forced sale

Chandler survived the loss of the radar station, but took a hard blow on June 16, 1992 when a tornado tore through the town. The abandoned radar site also took a hit when lightning from the storm struck one of the barracks and started a fire that gutted the building.

The tornado provided one final opportunity for the radar site to be of service to the surrounding community. Ray Talsma lived across the highway and described what happened, “They brought all the debris from Chandler out here in mounds 20’ high - they carried it out for days . . .” The huge mounds of building debris caught fire a couple weeks later and burned for months.

The following summer, Murray County demolished the remaining Air Force buildings, then buried their remains on the site. The foundations for the last two radar towers constructed in the early 1960’s defied the best efforts of the demolition crews and remain standing, skirted by weeds and containing debris from the heaviest of the radar antennas.

Longtime Chandler businessman, Casey Lolkus, was a young boy when the Air Force came to town. He saw the installation under construction and attended the Chandler school while the Air Force Station was new. He met many Airmen over the years and conducted business while the Air Force was in town. He sent his own children to school with Air Force kids and then watched the Air Force leave town again. Casey reflected on what he learned from his association with the Chandler Airmen:

“Well, being I was so involved from childhood all the way up, I learned you can accept people. That’s one thing

I really did learn and enjoy. I mean we had some very, very good times. Like I say, if you want to get along, you can fit anyplace. I think we had that attitude, I did, and they did – everybody I met.”

Two formerly separate communities learned about one another and grew. When the Air Force came to town, we changed.

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