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Chanute Air Force Base – the Air Force’s Legacy of Lies in the Heartland - DC BureauDC Bureau

Chanute Air Force Base – the Air Force’s Legacy of Lies in the Heartland

By **Bob Bajek**, on March 31st, 2014

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RANTOUL, IL – Chanute Air Force Base, closed for more than two decades, remains an environmental threat to the health and safety of hundreds of thousands of Illinois residents. It is a case study of how the Air Force and Pentagon use their national security clout to break agreements that can break local communities.

Chanute's History

The United States Army decided in 1917 that East Central Illinois was the ideal location for its third training airfield to support the World War I effort. It intended Chanute Field (later renamed Chanute Air Force Base) to be a temporary installation. But like so many other government installations, it survived and grew, largely because it served a practical function. It was centrally located and had superior training officers and distinguished alumni. The temporary barracks of the 1930s became permanent during World War II.

In the early 1950s, Chanute AFB prepared tens of thousands of airmen for the Korean War. During the Vietnam War, it served as a training center. In the 1960s, as the Cold War heated up, it became home to the **Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missile maintenance program** and the Air Force’s fire training program, located in the center of the base and the southeast corner known as the “900 area” (named after the buildings’ addresses).

Military flight operations ceased in 1971 – an indication of Chanute’s waning strategic importance. The base almost closed in 1979, but the U.S. government decided to keep it open. Capital expansion projects were completed in the 1980s, costing taxpayers tens of millions of dollars. But these projects did not stop the Department of Defense in 1988 from listing Chanute as one of 17 bases to be closed. The base, having trained more than two million servicemen and women over the years, was decommissioned on Sept. 30, 1993 in the first round of DOD base closures designed to save the federal government money after the Cold War ended.

When Chanute was decommissioned, it took away the nearby village of Rantoul’s major economic driver. The base was the largest employer in Champaign County, second only to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

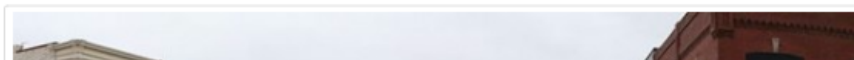
The Air Force downplayed the environmental contamination it was leaving behind and emphasized the “economic boom” that could happen if the base’s land was transferred to the town.

Former Mayor Katy Podagrosi told the crowd at Chanute’s closing ceremony that there’s “a new beginning in our community and redevelopment is on the way!” according to *The Chanute Air Force Base 75 Year Pictorial History* by Donald O. Weckhorst, published in 1992.

The economic boom never happened.

Rantoul Today

Just off Interstate 57, Rantoul is an economically-challenged, blue-collar community in a predominantly agricultural region. The village shrank from about 25,000 to under 13,000 citizens after the base closed. With the surplus of vacant rental properties and homes, the school district lost a large portion of its tax base. It went from economic prosperity to poverty in quick succession. Vacant housing became occupied with Section 8 low-income tenants. Crime sharply increased. Large businesses were reluctant to invest in the community. In the ghostly downtown, several of the buildings are vacant or dilapidated. Some businesses are only open part-time.





Downtown Rantoul, IL

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City-Data.com states Rantoul’s median household income in 2011 was \$32,498 (well below \$53,234 for Illinois and Champaign County’s \$41,198) while the median home value was \$85,327 (\$178,500 for Illinois). The Census Bureau estimates that Rantoul’s poverty rate from 2008-2012 was 27.1 percent (well above Illinois’ 13.7 percent). More than 40 percent of Rantoul’s residents are African-American, Asian, Latino, or bi- or multi-racial.

The village increased its police force to 33 fulltime officers to control the violent, drug-fueled crime. It purchased numerous vacant properties suspected of being used for drug trafficking and some gang-like activities, only to demolish them. Village leaders argued it was necessary for safety and economic reasons.

Rantoul failed to attract United Airlines and other big businesses in the 1990s and 2000s. In the early 2000s, Rantoul did everything in it could to attract a pork plant. It secured a grant worth millions of dollars from the state, and the company received some tax incentives. The regional plant went bankrupt in 2009, laying off 215 employees. The village recruited Rantoul Foods, a pork supplier, in 2010 to replace most of those lost jobs.

Over the past six years, the only other noticeable economic developments were the Wal-Mart Supercenter on the town’s west side and Easton-Bell Sports, a manufacturer of sports equipment and clothes, on the east. The jobs at these companies are mainly minimum wage up to \$15 an hour. Managerial positions are scarce. There is a doctor’s office, a couple small private law practices, and a dental office, but Dr. Douglas White, the dentist, retired in January after 56 years. Police are paid well, and the school districts provide decent salaries, but teachers are compensated well below Illinois averages.

At the sprawling former air force base, AT&T set up some operations by the base’s hangars. A couple of base facilities store overstock items, and there is an aerospace museum at Grissom Hall. Farmers grow crops on base property. Its golf course is open to the public. Some land has been bought for residential development and people continue to live on base.

But a key reason Rantoul, only 130 miles south of Chicago, cannot get major economic investment is because Chanute AFB remains highly contaminated. Most of Chanute’s land has residential building restrictions and is so polluted that no one legally can sell it for residential development.

Cover-Up Rather Than Cleanup

Top Air Force and Illinois officials, including members of the governor’s office, state environmental and local community leaders have been engaged in a cover-up of a major environmental threat from the long shuttered base. The local newspapers, the Rantoul Press and News-Gazette, rarely report on Chanute’s environmental contamination. No one wants to scare away possible investors or bear the cleanup costs. The responsible authorities downplay the problems even though Chanute’s closure has left Rantoul and the surrounding community an economic cripple. The motive for keeping news of Chanute’s toxic legacy quiet is simply part of a so far futile effort to attract so far non-existent business expansion.

Most area residents know Rantoul as the place where Chanute Air Force Base was located. Most of the former base’s 2,174 acres of land have been transferred to Rantoul, private businesses, and residential developments.



In the early 2000s, Rantoul unknowingly bought structures containing asbestos from the Air Force and burned the buildings without remediating the problem. The village paid fines to the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. The Air Force numerous times tried to sell land to Rantoul without remedying the environmental problems and also constantly fought the village and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on what areas to study or cleanup.

The village and its residents would like to think Chanute does not concern them anymore – that the old military installation is a withering relic of a bygone age. But Chanute’s toxic legacy is still seriously threatening the health of those who remain in the area.

Eyewitness testimony, coupled with countless federal and state documents, show Chanute Air Force Base still has massive chemical contamination with continuing polluted ground water migration. There is also an indication the ground water contaminants have seeped a mile or so south of the base’s property lines, polluting several private wells with carcinogenic **dioxin**. These wells soon might also be threatened by trichloroethylene (**TCE**), an industrial solvent used by the military to degrease metal.

In 1980, the U.S. Congress passed **CERCLA** (Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act) — commonly known as Superfund — to investigate how chemicals were used, stored, and disposed of in past and present procedures to see how these practices negatively impacted the local environment. The Superfund program involves some of the most contaminated sites, usually at dumps, former military bases or closed industrial facilities.

Chanute, like hundreds of U.S. military bases around the world, ceased operations to save the federal government money and also to limit the environmental

contamination (euphemistically termed footprint by the armed forces) the military produced with the chemicals utilized during base activities.

One hundred and twenty-four U.S. military bases have been decommissioned during five rounds of closures. More than 130 bases are Superfund sites. The law stated liability for any chemical and environmental contamination occurring during or from base operations would fall on DOD. Almost every major military base has a Superfund site with TCE and other contamination, but by design or omission, the Chanute Air Force Base did not receive that designation. As a result, the area's ground water supply is threatened by dangerous chemicals seeping into a creek, a manmade lake and several aquifers that provide water to the region.

Chanute Should Have Been A Superfund Site

Like most bases, Chanute was inspected under CERCLA's provisions in 1983, and the resulting environmental impact study showed extensive contamination from herbicides, pesticides, chemical burning and spills and disposal practices. Investigations continued through the 1980s and 1990s, even after the 1993 closure.

Chanute received a 48.3 **Hazardous Ranking System** out of a 100, which is significantly higher than the 28.5 minimum required for possible inclusion on the Superfund's National Priority List (NPL). If an area was approved for NPL status, it received a better financed and more concentrated cleanup effort.

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