

Oct. 3& 4, 2010 - Chanute Air Force Base and Museum

Well, as the saying goes, all good things must eventually end. So, On Friday, Oct. 1st, I packed my plane into its trailer, strapped the motor scooter to the front of the RV and began my long 2,000 mile trek from SD, back to SC, with intermediate stops along the way. On my second travel day, with over 1,000 road miles behind me, I arrived at Rantoul, IL, home of Chanute Air Force Base (now decommissioned) with its own RV park adjacent to Runway #27. My purpose in this 2 day stop over was to visit with a friend and part time neighbor at my Hilton Head condominium, as well as tour the base museum.

This military field had its origination in 1917 as a aeroplane facility for the Army's Air Service training of WW I pilots. Named for Wright Brothers friend and advisor, Octave Chanute, it was transferred from the Army Air Corps to the US Air Force after WW II. It was also an early training facility for the Tuskegee Airmen, the first all Black American squadron of fighter pilots, prior to their relocation to Alabama's Maxwell Field.

Before its closing in 1993 Chanute trained literally tens of thousands of airmen in various technical courses including fire fighting, life support specialists, airframe repair and non-destructive inspection personnel, piloting and navigation, bomb sighting, and even ICBM launch technicians for the Minuteman I missile program (see my July 17, 2010 article on Ellsworth AFB, Rapid City, SD for further information on the Minuteman missile).

After the base closing in 1993 the economy of Rantoul was pretty much devastated with the loss of so many jobs. The base was turned into a City owned General Aviation airport which provides two very nice long runways, orientated both north/south & east/west. Precision Aviation is the FBO on the field and Manager Corky Vericker offered exemplarity service and allowed me to park my large trailer directly on his ramp. Airport manager Bill Clayton also did much to make my 2 day stay comfortable and meaningful, and I thank them both. The base golf course is still adjacent, as is the RV Park which was also once used by military personnel. Both now having been transferred to civilian use. In addition to the aircraft there is also a very active sport automotive presence on the field including classic car shows, autocross and precision driving displays, including "drifting".

Upon my arrival at Rantoul, I was met by Barbara Bohen and her friend Michael, for a tour of the Museum. Now, during my long-time affinity for things that fly through the air, I have seen a lot of aviation museums and static aircraft displays. But I have to say that the Octave Chanute Aerospace Museum is certainly one of the more informative. The interior exhibits takes one back to the base's WWI formation with historical photos, displays and commentary, through WWII, Korea and even Viet Nam. There are over 40 aircraft on display both inside the massive hanger as well as on the expansive outside grounds. I was especially intrigued by the tri-tailed Lockheed EC-121 Constellation which had been converted to a AWAC (Early Warning Aircraft) and fitted with a tremendous underbelly radar pod. I also enjoyed the ultra-large 1970's era McDonnell-Douglas F-15A, Eagle which is currently undergoing extensive renovation. Then there was the



In front of the Chanute Air Museum at Rantoul



Friends Barbara and Michael with my Highlander



The F-15A inside of the Air Museum Hanger



A few of the WW II & Korean Conflict aircraft

B-52 Stratofortress front nose cone on display. Lets face it, I actually enjoyed all of the aircraft at this museum and only regret that I did not have more time in my limited visit to savor each and every one in greater detail than the two hours I had.

As I mentioned, one of my purposes for this stopover was to visit with Barbara, a very interesting lady. Originally a British subject she arrived in the US as a teenager to complete her education, eventually gaining her Doctorate Degree. Specializing in early Greek Civilization she has published several scholarly writings on this subject and has spend many years in that country on "digs" as a forensic anthropologist. She now lives in Champaign, IL, home to Illinois State University where she retired as a Professor as well as Director of its Spurlock Museum a decade or so ago. We spent time touring her old Campus, which now contains over 1,000 individual buildings and over 50,000 in staff.

On Monday I took Barbara for a 45 mile flight over to Central IL, Regional Airport in nearby Bloomington. My "\$100 Hamburger" directory showed a nice restaurant located on the airport in the old terminal building. BMI is a small commercial airport with regional service offered by AirTran, American, Delta, United and USAirways. The flight over was relatively smooth in very clear skies and excellent visibility. The thing that immediately caught my attention was the total flatness of the terrain with its endless array of farms. Having just come from 4 months of flying in rolling prairie lands, foothills and even vertical mountains, the difference was in stark contrast. However, it was intimidating flying over the large windmill farms where literally a hundred or more of these 500 foot high behemoths with slow turning tri-propeller blades would offer little in the way of clear open space to land on in case of an emergency. Fortunately this was not a problem that day and in a bit over a half hour later I was on final approach to runway 01 at BMI. Although not one of my better landings, we did eventually manage to touch down after a bit of a bounce. It took about 5 minutes to taxi over to the general aviation terminal where [CJ's Restaurant](#) is located. The interesting thing about this eatery is that you park your airplane literally right outside of its door, on its own private ramp, and walk past an outside patio (which would be delightful on a warm summer's day) that offers a spectacular view of approaching and landing aircraft.

The flight back to Rantoul was equally as enjoyable, but the landing was similarly as poor. It was finally time to fold up the wings and put the airplane back into its travel trailer. Normally this operation takes about 30-45 minutes, for me to accomplish...or just about the the same time as each leg of today's flight.

I still have three more stops before I reach home. My motor home has to receive some needed service in Knoxville, TN, I will be dropping the plane off at the factory in the Clemson, SC area for a cowl modification to increase engine cooling, and I have a flight scheduled in the EAA's B-17 bomber, *The Aluminum Overcast*, while it is touring around the eastern US. That exciting adventure will take place next Tuesday, 10/12 at the Greenville SC downtown airport, and I will be posting a photo article after I complete the flight. Then its back to real world problems and challenges. But it's been a great summer and an experience that I wouldn't mind doing again...maybe even next year.



Barbara and me in a University of Illinois garden



Flying over a windmill farm on the Illinois prairie



Lunch at CJ's Restaurant at the BMI airport



Packing the trailer for my travel home