



## The Chanute experiment

Nation's first all-black squadron trained at Rantoul base

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By DAWN SCHABING, Features Writer  
[dschabbing@jg-tc.com](mailto:dschabbing@jg-tc.com)

Prior to 1941, African Americans were not allowed to serve in the Army Air Corps.

But with some pressure by The Pittsburgh Courier newspaper, and by groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and black lobbyists, things began to change.

And many of these historical changes happened in Rantoul on what was then considered one of the best technical training grounds for the U.S. Army Air Corps.

Ken Trevarthan/Staff Photographer -- The swept wing and front fuselage of a Republic F-84F Thunderstreak are illuminated by the translucent hangar door panels in the Chanute Air Museum's static display hangar.

The Octave Chanute Aerospace Museum in <sup>Ken</sup> Rantoul opened in 1994, a year after the closure of the military base, said Mark Hanson, curator.

Volunteers and professionals at the museum have spent the past few years building the historical significance and preserving Chanute's legacy.

One exhibit in this effort focuses solely on an important part of Rantoul's Chanute Air Force Base and its history with the 99th Pursuit Squadron, an all-black group of airmen. The exhibit features Cornelius Coffey, Chauncey E. Spencer, Anthony Jones and William R. Thompson.

Encompassing about 1,000 square feet of exhibit space, this display allows visitors to view items and read about the 99th Pursuit. Artifacts and photographs help tell their story. The exhibit includes two model dioramas and integrated artwork.

"The 99th Pursuit Squadron, From Rantoul to Ramitelli and Beyond" exhibit received a superior achievement award in September 2006 from the Illinois Association of Museums, Hanson said.

The exhibit focuses on history prior to World War II.

The objective was to preserve and interpret the story of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, from its beginnings at Chanute field through its service in World War II, Italy and beyond. According to its history, black lobbyists met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940.

“Due to the heavy pressure from activist groups and even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the War Department announced the formation of an all-black pursuit squadron to include the training of pilots and ground crewmen,” said Hanson.

On Jan. 16, 1941, the War Department announced the formation of the squad. The unit was to be segregated and it encountered criticism at first. But many young African Americans held onto their love of aviation and determination to become some of the best airmen in the nation.

“They wanted to have a full squadron, so they had to train both pilots and ground crew. The ground crew training was at Chanute field, while the pilots trained at Tuskegee, Ala.,” said Hanson.

Eventually, they all came together to form the 99th Pursuit Squadron. In 1944, it was assigned to the 332nd all-black fighter group with their primary mission to become bomber escorts.

“At that time there weren’t many bases willing to take on the all-black squadron, and Rantoul was already renowned for its technical training and it was a supporter of the movement. But Chanute didn’t train in the communicational required fields, and other bases wouldn’t allow the African Americans to train there,” said Hanson.

So instructors were transferred to Rantoul to complete the ground technical training. On March 19, 1941, the airmen were activated with Lt. Col. Raymond E. O’Neil overseeing at Chanute and Capt. Harold R. Maddux commanding the 99th Pursuit Squadron.

More than 250 enlisted men were trained at Chanute in aircraft ground support trades. This small number of enlisted men was to become the core of other black squadrons forming at Tuskegee and Maxwell Fields in Alabama — the famed Tuskegee Airmen.

“It was a so-called ‘experiment,’ but it turned out that the black airmen were doing just as well, if not better than, their white counterparts,” said Hanson.

Chanute was the training ground for parachute rigging, metal workers, weather forecasters, fire school, aerial photography, mechanics and more.

The military base was considered relaxed in following the segregation policy. It found the separation of blacks and whites to be impractical, and eventually all trainees were placed together for instruction.

Chanute Air Force Base served the U.S. military for 75 years. Funding cuts caused its closure in 1993.

Contact Dawn Schabbing at [dschabbing@jg-tc.com](mailto:dschabbing@jg-tc.com) or 238-6864.