

203rd AERO SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE

203rd Aero Squadron
Demobilized, 1 Dec 1918

STATIONS

Chanute Field, IL, Mar 1918

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The two squadrons finally left Rantoul on 10 February 1918, a full six weeks after having been ordered to be ready at a moment's notice. Two days later the 173rd and 174th squadrons also

left for Garden City. Immediately after their departure, Chanute began recruitment for three new squadrons designated the 83rd, 267th, and the 268th Aero Squadrons. In mid-February 1918, 175 men came from Camp Custer, Michigan, and were divided between the 267th and the 268th. On 26 February, 150 men arrived from Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri, to augment the 83rd. On the same day the 831st and the 832nd Aero Squadrons arrived from Kelly Field bringing the total number of squadrons at Chanute to six. The new squadrons prompted a flurry of activity as the field prepared for a resumption of flying training. Nearly 1,500 men were crowded into barracks built to house 1,000 men. A new wing was built on the hospital, and Chanute's first five nurses arrived on 9 March 1918. "Daily sick call . . . increased noticeably." The nurses arrived just in time to help prepare the 83rd, the 831st, and the 832nd for departure. Those going to France were given a series of six shots and had their teeth examined. Any teeth thought possible of giving any trouble in France were pulled. The camp dentist in March was pulling 25 to 50 teeth per day. The 83rd Aero Squadron left on 23 March 1918 for Langley Field, Hampton, Virginia, and the 831st and 832nd left the following day for Hempstead and Garden City, New York, respectively. While these three squadrons prepared to leave, Chanute began to organize its fifth new squadron. Designated the 203rd, it was to be a school squadron composed largely of mechanics. On 19 March, it was augmented by 15 men from the Marmon Auto School in Indianapolis, Indiana. Three Rantoul ladies organized the mess for the new squadron.

Sometime in late July 1918, the squadrons were given letter designations rather than numerical ones. The 38th became A; the 112th, B; the 203rd, C; the 287th, D; and the 288th, E. To avoid confusion, the numeral designation has been retained in this narrative.

And then the war ended. The ringing of the fire bell and the blowing of the light plant whistle at 2 a.m. on 11 November 1918 informed the people of Rantoul of the armistice. Pandemonium broke loose. The energy reserved for so long for the war effort suddenly found a new release. Every conceivable object that would make a noise was brought out and put into use. A huge bonfire was built near the village flagpole and the Kaiser was hung in effigy. Monday was declared a general holiday and a parade was held in the afternoon. There was a victory dance in the evening. Chanute for some reason remained aloof from the initial celebration, and during the morning of the 11th, training continued as usual. The soldiers did not join the village's celebration until the afternoon. There can be at least two explanations for the hesitancy on the part of Chanute. Perhaps the officers in charge remembered the false rumors of the week before, and waited for official confirmation or perhaps they waited until the armistice took effect at 11 a.m. before relaxing. With the armistice, the need for aviators disappeared, and on 19 November 1918 a dispatch from Washington, DC closed Chanute to flying. Cadets already in training had the option of continuing at another field or receiving their discharge. Many wanted out, but still others wanted to go overseas with an occupation army. None wanted to return to Texas. The 38th and 203rd Aero Squadrons were demobilized on 1 December, and by 4 December 1918, the airplanes were being crated up and shipped out. All restrictions were removed on the comings and goings of the remaining soldiers, and rumors on the future of Chanute were rampant. On 15 December 1918, the 112th and the 287th Aero Squadrons left the field for Americus, Georgia, one of the chief winter flying fields outside of the fields at San

Antonio, Texas. Their departure depleted the field's complement to less than 400 men. The two squadrons were amalgamated into the Aviation General Supply Depot Detachment once they reached their destination. Chanute's contribution to the winning of the Great War was highly commendable. Although the exact number of flyers produced by Chanute could not be determined, the local press noted that of the 8,688 aviators produced at all fields in the United States, Chanute graduated twice as many as the average field while being one of the smallest. In addition, the field had played host to 18 Aero Squadrons, five of which had been recruited and organized at the field. Of the 18 squadrons, the 10th, the 16th, the 152nd, the 153rd, the 173rd, the 174th, the 210th, the 267th, the 268th, the 831st, and the 832nd reached Europe. At least three of the aviators who received training at Chanute became aces by shooting down a minimum of five of the enemy's aircraft.

Between December 15 and April 1, flying ceased at Chanute Field, and all instructors and students were transferred to southern camps to continue training during the winter months. Instruction of ground crews and administrative personnel from various aero squadrons continued as before. The training planes, though unused, were serviced and maintained by student mechanics, riggers, and electricians just as they had been during the busy flying season. Early in January, the 153d and 210th Aero Squadrons received orders to prepare for overseas shipment, and two more squadrons left the Kelly Field depot to train at Rantoul. Before the end of that month, all but the 38th, the headquarters squadron, were alerted for shipment. In spite of the steady drain of units and personnel, the number of men at the field did not fall below 500. After the 83d, 268th, and 269th Aero Squadrons were organized in February and were followed to Chanute by the 831st and 832d Squadrons, the field reached its capacity of 1,500 men. In mid-March, the 83d Squadron, composed mostly of local recruits, reported to Langley Field, Virginia, to serve as school squadron; a new unit, the 203d Squadron, was recruited and organized to fill the vacancy. During the wartime program, 19 squadrons received training at the field; of this number, 12 served overseas, 10 in Europe.

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.