

National Guard: Northern Thaw exercise concludes at Volk Field

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by Tech. Sgt. Mary Greenwood

VOLK FIELD, Wis. — Volk Field Combat Readiness Training Center, known for lighting up the skies with the annual Northern Lightning exercise, hosted multiple units from around the country for their first exercise of 2021 from March 22 through April 2.

The two-week Northern Thaw exercise is a total force exercise providing tailored, cost-effective, tactical level, high-end combat training.

Ten F-35A aircraft from Luke Air Force Base, and 200 unit members were stationed to operate out of Volk Field. Joining them were F-16B30 aircraft from the 115th Fighter Wing, F-16B50s from the Duluth, Minnesota-based 148th Fighter Wing, F-16B50s from the 114th Fighter Wing in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, KC-135 Stratotankers from the Wisconsin Air National Guard's Milwaukee-based 128th Air Refueling Wing, as well as the 914th Air Refueling Wing in Niagara Falls, New York, threat emitters from the 266th Range Squadron out of Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho. They were also joined by battle management operators from the Volk Field-based 128th and the 729th Air Control Squadrons and services support from the 151st Air Refueling Wing out of Utah.

Pilots from across the nation praised Volk Field and its surrounding areas for everything it has to offer from the air space and support to the friendliness of the

participating units.

“This is my fourth time flying here, I was at one of the first Northern Lightning exercises in 2017, and the training we got is full scale and professional without being overwhelming like other major exercises,” said Maj. Joshua Jones, 61st Fighter Squadron instructor pilot and Northern Thaw Exercise Director, assigned to Detachment 2 of the 944th Operations Group. “We came back the next year and flew a large test, and it was the same experience. The people are great. The airspace is great. The base is extremely easy to work with.”

Volk Field CRTC is one of the premier training installations in the country due to its expansive airspace and the quality training the installation can simulate. There aren't many bases that offer the same potential and capabilities.

“When we're at Luke (Air Force Base) there are four F-35 squadrons and four F-16 squadrons, and then a surrounding unit also has two or three A-10 squadrons, and we all have to share the same airspace which is about the size of the Volk airspace,” said Lt. Col. Thomas Hayes, the commander of the 61st Fighter Squadron. “Typically when we fly down at Luke we have about 50 minutes of airspace. Here we have two hours of airspace. There is also air refueling available so we can even extend the amount of experience and training they're getting, and it's not over a congested air space.”

Jones also had great things to say about all that Volk Field had to offer.

“The air space is phenomenal,” he said. “They've done a lot of work here to expand it, so we take off from Volk and are immediately in the fight airspace. It's impossible to get the kind of airspace we were provided with back home.”

Northern Thaw provided a capstone event for student pilots going through the F-35A basic course at Luke Air Force Base, as well as fighter integration missions with Midwestern F-16 units.

“The primary mission of the 61st as a FTU (formal training unit) is to train young Airmen right out of pilot training,” Hayes said. “They just got their wings. They've never flown a fighter before, and in about nine months we take them from how to find the F-35 in its parking spot to flying high-end near-peer adversary type engagements that are on a Red Flag level type exercise. Volk is an ideal place for that.”

Jones raved that Volk Field gave the instructors and the course the ability to make the exercise exactly what they needed it to be.

“I had just gotten back from Northern Lightning 2020, and we were looking for somewhere to take our students,” he said. “The experience I received and the air space just stuck out as the best way to go. Everyone was so willing to help. We mentioned the idea of having the exercise, and it just kind of grew legs on its own. It was so welcoming”

Northern Thaw flew two missions per day, and with Federal Aviation Administration approval the afternoon mission also included the exercise high airspace. This adds a great deal of training to get airspace up to 50,000 feet mean sea level for both missions, and negates the need to transit to other training areas like the Big Bear Military Operations Area in Michigan.

“We limit ourselves to going supersonic above 30,000 feet to reduce the environmental impact,” Hayes said. “Going supersonic ties into our tactics. We’re training to employ weapons against and enemy force. As part of that we’re trying to rapidly move around the battle space, which increases weapons kinematics and teaches the students and instructors how to maximize the capability of the aircraft.”

While at Volk the visiting units are given the chance to push their students and their aircraft to limits they may not otherwise experience at home. The airspace and surrounding units offer extra area for them to move around, it also offers them more flying time.

“When we have the opportunity to conduct exercises like this with bases and air space like Volk provides, it’s impressive to see the learning curve and the experiences that they gain,” said Hayes. “The experience of being in a very complex and dynamic environment is something you can’t prepare for until you see it, and you leave with a better understanding of the capabilities of the aircraft and how to employ it. Volk offers that for us.”

The units were not disappointed with the experience their students gained and even mentioned the hopes of making it back in the future to conduct similar exercises.

“I would love to keep coming back,” said Jones. “It’s great for our students so we’ll just have to see where the syllabus leads us and if Volk is available.”