

National Guard: 128th Air Control Squadron reinventing training in preparation for the next peer-competitor

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VOLK FIELD, Wis. – The Wisconsin Air National Guard’s 128th Air Control Squadron recently completed training at Volk Field and Hardwood Range that few, in any, in the command and control community across the nation are doing.

From July 11-25, Airmen were in the field training in a way that proactively prepares them for future mission sets within the air control community. The training was geared toward accelerating unit readiness, more flexible in mission capability, and tactically mobile in supporting today’s changing threat environment.

Training starting with packing all necessary equipment and loading it into trucks as quickly and safely as possible. Then the squadron immediately convoyed four hours across Wisconsin, dug foxholes and set up perimeters, concealed and camouflaged their trucks and tents, and set up their radio and other control stations in the field. The training culminated in testing out equipment for functionality, and finally self-evaluating their stealth and concealment through the use of overhead drone and thermal imagery.

“We’re really looking to test our abilities for the first time in a couple decades on how well we as an Air Control Squadron are getting back to the basics and providing a more mobile and capable command and control element to the aerial fight,” said Capt. Bradley Kelly, interim commander of the 128th Air Control Squadron.

This annual training differed greatly from past unit training events with the most

notable change coming from many of the lessons learned currently coming out of Eastern Europe and what a war in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command region may look like against a near-peer competitor nation.

For example, the unit explored the possibility of setting up equipment and controlling the aerial fight out in the field rather than in a large open-floor control center, inside of a highly secure building far away from the forward line of troops or battle.

Another notable change was that the Airmen assembled their tents spread out in tree lines under cover from the forest canopy. This is in comparison to the historical trend of tents lined in a row out in an open field which could create a highly consolidated and easy to find target.

The motive behind operating so differently was to simulate working near troops at the front line and moving with them as the battle space shifts, according to Kelly.

“Now we’re looking at, potentially, the future fight being Air Control Squadrons getting out in the field, having a leaner overall footprint, being faster and more mobile, and controlling from very close to that front line where the fighting is happening,” he said.

The strides toward a more mobile force are directly in line with Kelly’s previous assignment as the Air Force’s lead planner for agile combat employment (ACE) operations in support of U. S. Northern Command and NORAD missions into the far Canadian arctic. The unit is taking many of those same concepts, along with the Multi-Capable Airmen concept, which emphasize the ability to be adaptable and maneuver quickly as the battle space rapidly changes. These doctrinal concepts, commonly referred to as the ACE and MCA concept, respectively, are in line with the Air Force’s vision of operating in modern and contested environments.

Coincidentally, these are all strategies and core skills that the 128th Air Control Squadron used approximately 20 years ago and haven’t touched on since entering the post-9/11 era, where the U.S. Air Force has not faced an adversary with a comparable air component. Fortunately, the unit still has a handful of Airmen who were around when core field skills development was regularly trained. Those Airmen took the lead on training newer troops over the annual training period.

“Some of the unit members are near the end of their military careers so

unfortunately a lot of wealth of knowledge is about to leave the unit," Kelly said.

"Therefore, what I'm really excited about during this training is seeing some of our more

experienced Service Members passing down that wealth of knowledge to the younger troops, and the next generation of Airmen pick up the torch and lead the charge into the future."

The Volk Field-based 128th Air Control Squadron consists of two elements - an operations section that controls aircraft, and a maintenance section that response to operational needs and supports equipment requests. The Wisconsin Air National Guard unit provides a variety of capabilities, including combat search and rescue, close air support, offensive and defensive counter air missions, and air to ground missions.