

# National Guard: Wisconsin Air Guard unit moves forward in effort to master new air control tactics

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More than 120 members of the Wisconsin Air National Guard's 128th Air Control Squadron, based at Volk Field, Wisconsin, recently spent two weeks at the Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center (CRTC) in lower Michigan, learning how to integrate a more lightweight, scalable and mobile air traffic control management system in the field.

Historically, units such as the 128th Air Control Squadron manage aircraft from existing structures with large control room floors and other amenities in the rear of a combat zone. But the changing dynamics of the modern battlefield have increased the importance of mobility.

"Mobility helps us disperse and deploy our capabilities faster and more efficiently in combat zones to meet any potential threat on any terrain," said Lt. Col. Shonn Breton, 128th Air Control Squadron commander. "As a result, our forces are more dynamic and able to withstand and counter assaults from enemy threats."

The two-week training mission was separated into two components. In the first week, the team established a main operating base and focused on weapons familiarization, establishing and fortifying field operations, proper radio and communications etiquette, and training in chemically contested environments. This was refresher training for most Airmen in the unit, but more importantly it served to improve the unit's overall readiness in the Air Force's new 24-month rotational deployment readiness cycle.

Once the 128th Air Control Squadron had successfully established its main

operating base at Alpena CRTC, the unit spend the second week establishing multiple forward operating locations approximately two hours away at Michigan's Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center. Unit members learned to operate the new organic Tactical Operations Center-Light (TOC-L) equipment, which expedites the kill chain by facilitating better air traffic control from a lightweight, scalable and distributed battle management system.

"These [agile combat employment] skills are imperative for the unit to prove their ability to conduct rapid and dispersed deployment requests by higher headquarters," Breton said, "within a highly contested environment at a moment's notice."

Each forward operating location organized its own team of operators and maintainers, who then established radar and communications as quickly as possible. The teams explored managing air traffic with off-the-shelf equipment from the back of a government passenger van. They also evaluated the connectivity power of two internet service providers in a field-based location to view and manage overhead aircraft via radar. Additionally, they utilized a unit member's personal 3-D printer to create equipment to help visually detect aircraft using automatic dependent surveillance broadcast beacons for detection.

The average time to set up at the forward operating location was between 10-20 minutes — a fraction of the time typically required to establish visual radar and communications equipment. The unit realized a 100-percent success rate integrating this forward-deployed equipment with A-10 Warthogs from the 107th Fighter Squadron out of Selfridge Air National Guard Base, northeast of Detroit. The forward-based teams of the 128th ensured the A-10s safely entered the airspace, then handed control of the aircraft to Special Operations Command Joint Terminal Attach Controllers to conduct strafing runs on simulated locations where notional U.S. ground troops encountered enemy forces and required air support.

By successfully learning to operate this new equipment in forward locations, the 128th is helping the U.S. Air Force establish air superiority anywhere at any time.

"I could not be prouder of the men and women of the 128th Air Control Squadron," Breton said. "The [agile combat employment] and rapid deployment skills conducted were a complete success and served as a proof of concept as the unit transitions into preparing for the next fight against a peer-competitor."

The unit experienced a training first by convoying more than 500 miles in a single day in 14 5-ton vehicles to Alpena CRTC.

The 128th also spent a day in downtown Alpena, Michigan during their training, where unit members performed community service tasks such as painting fire hydrants and conducting repairs at the city marina.