



Today

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Camp Grayling · Alpena CRTC

Northern Strike 2016



Senior Airman Calab Phillips, a Joint Terminal Attack Controller, 227th Air Support Operations Squadron, Atlantic City, N.J., watches as a C-130, 120th Airlift Wing, Great Falls, Mont., drops a practice bundle out during a resupply support mission, Aug 9, 2016, at Rogers City, Mich., during Northern Strike 2016. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Scott Thompson/released)

NS16 by the Numbers

Sgt. Jim Bennett

9: Types of aircraft flown during NS16.

(Air Force: F-16 Fighting Falcons, KC-135 Stratotankers, A-10 Thunderbolts, C-130 Hercules, E-8 Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System; and Army UH-60 Blackhawks, CH-47 Chinooks, UH-72 Lakota and the RQ-7 Shadow)

230: Size of Camp Grayling in sq miles (147,000 acres)

3,745: Weight in Kg of a lightweight M777 Howitzer

5,000+ : Size of both Northern Strike 2016 and the original Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Northern Strike 16 is a National Guard Bureau-sponsored exercise uniting approximately 5,000 Army, Air Force, Marine, and Special Forces service members from 20 states and three coalition countries during the first three weeks of August 2016 at the Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center and the Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, both located in northern Michigan. The exercise strives to provide accessible, readiness-building opportunities for military units from all service branches to achieve and sustain proficiency in conducting mission command, air, sea, and ground maneuver integration, and the synchronization of fires in a joint, multinational, decisive action environment. (Michigan National Guard Public Affairs Office/Released)

Air Guard Units Provide Critical Comms Link for NS16

Tech. Sgt. Dan Heaton

Squadrons of Airmen from Illinois and Utah are providing the communications backbone for Northern Strike 2016.

within their own squadron, but with the various air assets that engaged in the operation.

The 264th Combat Communications Squadron from Peoria, Illinois, is providing the communications hardware and infrastructure support from the exercise, operating from three locations at the Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center and the Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center in northern Michigan. The 109th Air Control Squadron, based in Salt Lake City, Utah, are utilizing that infrastructure to provide the direct air-to-ground communications needed to allow air and ground assets to coordinate and put bullets, bombs and other weapons on target.

"It is really an integration of a number of units, across service branches, working together to manage the battle space," explained Maj. Leon McGuire, commanding the roughly 135 members of the 109th participating in the exercise.

The 264th, which has about 50 Airmen participating in the exercise, utilized its deployed equipment to provide both secure and non-secure voice and data link communications to the 109th and other exercise participants. In essence, they created the pipe through which units spread throughout the exercise can communicate, explained Major John Parise, officer in charge of one of the 264th's three operating locations.

"Once we get initial capability, it is all about trouble shooting and working through any issues to ensure that all the units can communicate clearly," said Staff Sgt. Patricia Sparks, who is serving as the site engineer for one of the 264th's locations. "We are listening to the customer, in this case, the 109th and hearing what they need to get their job done."

Utilizing the capability provided by the 264th, Airmen with the 109th work with Joint Terminal Attack Controllers on the ground to ensure that the correct aircraft, with the correct weapons load, is available at the right location at the right time to support friendly ground forces and put bombs on target.

"Our Airmen are identifying and tracking threats, coordinating air refueling support and, particularly in this scenario, aiding in the air-to-ground chain of command and control," McGuire said.

Tech. Sgt. Megan Bender, a weapons director with the 109th – and a former trumpet player with the now-defunct Air Force musical group Tops in Blue – said 109th personnel work as an integrated team not only



A communications radar operated by the 264th Combat Communications Squadron stands ready during Exercise Northern Strike at the Combat Training Readiness Center in Alpena, Mich., on Aug. 9, 2016. (Michigan National Guard photo by Senior Airman Ryan Zesli/Released)

Bender said when the opportunity arose, she jumped at the chance to serve as a weapons controller.

"I am able to contribute directly to the fight," she said. "When I first enlisted in 2005 on active duty, I was able to make a direct impact. I have one of the best jobs on the planet."

As an Air Control Squadron, the 109th has 22 different Air Force career fields represented among its assigned Airmen. McGuire said with all those different specialties, the unit is cycling

different people through the exercise to manage the training opportunities. The 109th is also utilizing secure communications to "reach back" via satellite to the Distributed Operations Center for Training, or DETOC, in Iowa, which can provide simulated training scenarios for combat controllers.

"So even if there is a down time for us in the live exercise, we are able to reach back to our National Guard DETOC and conduct simulated training," McGuire said. "We are able to really maximize the opportunities for our people who are here."

"This is providing training in both a hands-on and a simulated environment that allows our Airmen to really maintain that degree of readiness that they need to have," he said.



Senior Airman David Toon and Airman 1st Class Steven Miller, 264th Combat Communications Squadron radio frequency transmissions systems journeymen, make adjustments to a communications radar during Exercise Northern Strike at the CRTC in Alpena, Mich., on Aug. 9, 2016. (Michigan National Guard photo by Senior Airman Ryan Zesli/Released)

Illinois Airman Finds Her 'Niche in Life'

Tech. Sgt. Dan Heaton



Staff Sgt. Patricia Starks stands by a sample communications schematic during Northern Strike, a multi-state National Guard-led exercise based in northern Michigan Aug. 9, 2016. Sparks works with veterans services at the University of Illinois, something she said she felt called to after a deployment to Iraq several years ago. (Michigan National Guard photo by Senior Airman Ryan Zeski/Released)

where she is both an employee and a graduate student.

"After I deployed to Iraq about six years ago, I worked with a number of people in Special Forces and I just saw the dedication and focus they brought to their mission," she said. "Then, back home, as a student, I saw that sometimes my fellow veterans were a little lost on campus, they didn't have the focus because they were outside of their environment." That realization led Starks to serve as the president of a student-veterans organization at the University of Illinois. "What the veterans are looking for is an SOP – a standard operating procedure checklist – on how to succeed in college and beyond," she said. "Well, that doesn't always exist. So we work to translate the college experience into terms and objectives that make sense for our veteran population."

In the meantime, Starks continues to serve as a member of the Illinois Air National Guard, which found her spending two weeks in northern Michigan in August 2016 participating in Northern Strike, a multi-state exercise involving well in excess of 5,000 military personnel. Her job is to provide communications infrastructure support to the exercise.

"Without her, planes don't fly and bombs don't drop," said Master Sgt. Alan Rosenberg, her supervisor in the 264th. "She's keep all these lines of communication open."

After the exercise is over, Starks will resume working on a master's degree in social work at U-I to further enhance her ability to work with the veterans in transition community.

"I just found my niche in life and I love it," she said.

Sitting in a room of computers, routing cables and whiteboards filled with seemingly indecipherable charts and schematics, Staff Sgt. Patricia Starks says communication is the key to a successful mission.

She brings that attitude not only to her duties as an engineer with the Peoria, Illinois-based 264th Combat Communications Squadron, but as a career services specialist at the Center for Veterans at the University of Illinois-Champagne,

'Something Worthwhile' in Guard

Tech. Sgt. Dan Heaton



Staff Sgt. Christopher Laird a cyber support specialist with the 109th Air Control Squadron, Utah Air National Guard stands ready during Exercise Northern Strike at the Combat Training Readiness Center in Alpena, Mich., August 9, 2016, during Northern Strike 16. (Michigan National Guard photo by Senior Airman Ryan Zeski/Released)

Staff Sgt. Christopher Laird was looking for a way to accomplish something worthwhile with his life. If he could pick up a little education along the way, even better. Oh, and he also wanted something with some flexibility, in case his acting career really takes off.

"The Utah Air National Guard gave me those opportunities," said Laird. "I have my associate degree and am working on a bachelor's degree in business administration with an emphasis on IT.

"I asked myself, 'what type of person do I want to be?' And that's how I joined the Guard," he said.

Laird, who has appeared in a number of low-budget films and once had a small part in a Tom Arnold comedy, *The Jerk Theory*, now works as a cyber transport system specialist with the 109th Air Control Squadron, a Salt Lake City, Utah, -based unit that is supporting Northern Strike, a 5,000-personnel-plus exercise based in northern Michigan.

"This squadron is really a family," he said. "The chiefs, the officers, they are emphasize that and they really act like it. They are willing to get right in there and roll up their sleeves to get the job done.

Correction: A photo of Marines from yesterday's edition should have identified Charlie Company, 4th Reconnaissance Battalion.

Northern Strikers



Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Adam Llewellyn, a ground radar technician with the 266th Range Squadron from Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho operates a man-portable aircraft survivability trainer, Tuesday at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Michigan. The MAST fires a signal to trigger aircraft sensors to simulate surface-to-air missile threats and is useful in both equipment testing and crew training. The 266th trains at the Alpena CRTC in support of Exercise Northern Strike 2016. (Michigan National Guard photo and caption by Army Staff Sgt. Nicholas A. Oposnow)

Joint Terminal Attack Controllers looks for enemy targets during a close air support mission, Aug 9, 2016, at Rogers City, Mich., during Northern Strike 2016. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Scott Thompson/released)



Capt Jacob Becker and Technical Sgt. Will Harden, 821st Contingency Response Group, Travis Air Force Base, Calif., waits for the CH-47D Chinook, Detachment 1, Company B, 3/238th Aviation Regiment, Selfridge Air National Guard Base, to land to work on a sling-load with a vehicle, Aug 9, 2016, at Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Alpena, Mich., during Northern Strike 2016. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Scott Thompson/released)