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Continental United States NORAD Region – First Air Force (Air Forces Northern)
Office of Public Affairs

1210 Beacon Beach Road * Tyndall AFB FL 32403-5549
(850) 283-8080 * FAX (850) 283-3376 * DSN 523-8080

afnorthpa@tyndall.af.mil * www.1af.acc.af.mil * [twitter@1staf](https://twitter.com/1staf) * [Facebook@AmericasAOC](https://www.facebook.com/AmericasAOC)

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AFNORTH hosts North American Air Chiefs Conference

By Mary McHale, Air Forces Northern Public Affairs

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – With a focus on enhancing cooperative assistance and security both within and throughout the region, guests at the North American Regional Air Chiefs Conference exchanged information and ideas during the three-day event July 12-15.

Hosted by Continental U.S. North American Aerospace Defense Command Region - 1st Air Force (Air Forces Northern), both military and civilian representatives from across the continent participated in the multinational conference. Along with the United States, countries represented included Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands.



The purpose of the conference was to give attendees the opportunity to foster relationships between members of Air Forces Northern and many other military and civilian organizations throughout North America with particular emphasis on air defense, homeland security and border security.

“Our goal was to open the aperture to include all these countries and generate a diverse and dynamic discussion,” said Col. Kelly Noler, AFNORTH’s director of Plans and Policy. “Personally, I think developing good, strong professional relationships and gaining an understanding of how each of the countries’ particular agencies operates is invaluable.”

Through whole-group briefings and break-out sessions, guests discussed each others’ approaches and techniques regarding contingency and crisis response. Briefings also included material about recent and ongoing operations such as Haiti earthquake recovery efforts and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response operations.

“Significant strides in understanding each other’s capabilities and limitations, and how we can work together, were made during the conference,” Colonel Noler said. “Topics that generated a lot of interest and discussion included ‘Search and Rescue,’ ‘Airspace Considerations’ and ‘National Security,’ things that are of equal concern for all of us.”

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One guest who was particularly impressed with the conference was Lt. Cmdr. Marcus Evans of the Royal Bahamas Defence Force.

“This conference has been unbelievable – very informative and exactly what we were looking for,” he said. “My expectations have been exceeded.”

For Maj. Gen. Yvan Blondin, commander of the 1st Canadian Air Division, the conference was an opportunity to interact with regional partners and discuss established policies and procedures about air operations especially where it concerned U.S. – Canadian border coordination. In addition to being an attendee at the conference, the Canadian officer also gave a lessons-learned presentation about airspace coordination and operations during the Vancouver Winter Olympics.

“Canada is a large country, but 90 percent of the population lives within 200 miles of the U.S. border, so chances are when there are airborne activities, they are going to be close to the U.S. border so we need to coordinate,” the general said. “At the same time, when we have special security events like the winter Olympics or a political summit, we’ve got to coordinate the best possible security for those events so the events are not about security but they’re about being the sporting or political event they’re supposed to be.”

He added, “Given the nearly 200-year old friendship between Canada and the U.S., it’s only natural to share assets and be able to help when asked.”

But briefings and break-out sessions were not the only activities the conference guests participated in. They also received a tour of the 601st Air and Space Operations Center and an F-22 Raptor static display at the 43rd Fighter Squadron.

“They really seemed to enjoy the tour,” said Maj. Stephen Cox, 43rd FS assistant director of operations who led the tour. “One comment I heard from a guest was, ‘a fighter jet should look like a Ferrari and the U.S. fighters always look like the best sports cars!’ I thought that was pretty insightful.”

According to Colonel Noler, the wide array of participants also offered a valuable and wide spectrum of perspectives.

“I believe the conference went very well, said Colonel Noler. “We had great representation from our partner nations, both civilian and military agencies and excellent representation from our sister services and U.S. agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration, Customs and Border Protection and Department of Homeland Security.”

“This conference was intended to continue to forge the strong relationship we share with our North American mission partners,” said Maj. Gen. Garry Dean, AFNORTH commander. “Our aim, through open and frank discussions, was to positively impact regional air domain issues and to advance relationships with other organizations. We believe the conference was enormously successful in achieving our goals.”

Chief Master Sgt. Joseph Thornell, AFNORTH’s Command Chief, agreed.

“Relationships were built that will benefit future generations and future country-country experiences,” the chief said. “This was a great experience that will assist my duties as senior enlisted leader in our rapidly changing military environment. I am confident my enlisted counterparts felt the same way.”