



CONR - 1 AF/AFNORTH

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@America's_AOC](https://www.facebook.com/Americas_AOC)

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Canadian general bids 'au revoir' to Tyndall

By Lt. Col. Susan A. Romano, AFNORTH Public Affairs

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – After more than three years with the Continental U.S. North American Aerospace Defense Command Region, Brig. Gen. André Viens is moving on to become the Director General of Military Careers for Canadian Forces at Canada's National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa.

As CONR's deputy commander, General Viens was responsible for overseeing more than 10,000 people who operate and sustain fighter alert and surveillance assets throughout the Continental United States under Operation Noble Eagle, U.S. Northern Command's response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Since that day, CONR has been the lead agency to protect the U.S. from further airborne aggression from both inside and outside America's borders.

General Viens elaborated on CONR's role in homeland defense.



"Since 9/11, at least 24 terrorist attacks have been thwarted by the collective efforts of all agencies operating under the auspices of homeland defense and security. But make no mistake -- we will continue to be called upon in the future and consequently, we must remain steady, tirelessly vigilant, and be on close watch regardless of the time of day or night to deter, prevent and, if necessary, defeat hostile air attacks on North America."

During his tenure, the career CF-18 Hornet pilot was directly involved with numerous National Special Security Events, including the Democratic and Republic National Conventions, the presidential inauguration in Washington, D.C., nine space shuttle launches, two Super Bowls, half a dozen G-8 and G-20 summits, the United Nations General Assembly and two State of the Union addresses – all of which were patrolled and protected by CONR aircraft.

As America's national elections approached in 2008, so did hurricane season. Hurricanes Gustav and Ike lined up in the Atlantic and were just two of six named tropical storms in a row to make landfall in the United States – a new record.

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“Some people don’t know that Hurricane Gustav was the second most destructive hurricane during the 2008 Atlantic hurricane season, and Hurricane Ike was the third costliest ever to make landfall in the United States,” said General Viens. “It triggered the largest evacuation in U.S. history, with more than three million people fleeing the oncoming hurricane. Canada deployed three transport aircraft, including a CC-177, to support that effort, and Air Forces Northern was heavily involved in personnel recovery and emergency preparedness during those events.”

As with any military assignment, success is always the desired outcome, but hurdles and obstacles are also part of the mix.

“One of the biggest challenges for me here at CONR was the inherent difficulty of information sharing and communication between the U.S. and Canada,” said General Viens. “As a foreign national working in an extremely sensitive organization that has the eyes of the National Command Authority all the way up to the President of the United States, sometimes classified or protected information could not be immediately shared with me or other Canadian Forces personnel involved in assuring the air defense of the CONUS. I’ve worked hard to change that for the future, and to some degree I hope that I’ve been able to knock down some of those barriers. But it’s still a challenge, and I sincerely wish that we can increase accessibility between the U.S. and Canada.”

Despite the obstacles and challenges, the general said his assignment has been a very rewarding experience as a Canadian.

“I’m thankful for the role and responsibility I’ve been given during my tour here,” said General Viens. “This reflects well on the relationship between Canadians and Americans. It’s a relationship people have built upon for more than 50 years.”

He added, “I never saw myself as totally in charge of air domain operations as the CONR deputy – rather, I was part of the CONR team. One of the greatest strengths of this organization is showing what a fully integrated team can do. It’s a great success story.”

Nationality notwithstanding, General Viens has proven to be an extremely well-liked and highly respected commander among his subordinates, peers and senior leaders.

“André is a national treasure to both the United States and Canada,” said Maj. Gen. Garry C. Dean, CONR commander. “Our mission, whether protecting our sovereign airspace or providing federal assistance to civil authorities, is an extremely busy and important one. His devoted leadership over the past three years exemplifies the steadfastness and success of the 52-year old NORAD agreement in defending the air sovereignty of North America. We wish him and his wife Sylvia clear skies and continued good fortune throughout his travels and military career.”

And as much as the military officer of French-Canadian descent has missed his native homeland, he is quick to point out that an assignment is not necessarily based on geography.

“It is the people you work every day who make an assignment valuable, memorable and worthwhile, no matter where that assignment may be,” said General Viens. “But don’t get me wrong – my wife and I will truly miss the balmy Florida winters!”

Brig. Gen. Chris Coates, a Canadian helicopter pilot, will replace General Viens effective Aug. 5.