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Newsletter

Avoiding F-16s in MOAs

Viper Flyways

By Major Edward "Ned" H. Linch, III
Photos Courtesy of Luke AFB



Luke AFB, known as "Fighter Country," flies an average of 160 F-16 sorties each day utilizing Arizona airspace from Yuma to Phoenix and up to Winslow. The 56th Fighter Wing owns over 200 jets and is the largest F-16 training wing in the world, conducting initial training for all USAF F-16 pilots and some foreign countries. In addition, the 944th Reserve Fighter Wing flies F-16s. The F-16 "Fighting Falcon" (unofficially nick-named by the pilots as Viper), is a multi-role fighter, meaning it can do everything from dropping bombs to providing air superiority.

Our (Arizona) Flyways

The majority of student training takes place in the Barry M. Goldwater Range, the Gladden/Bagdad and Sells Military Operating Areas (MOAs), and the Luke AFB traffic pattern. In addition, F-16s utilize many Military Training Routes (MTRs) operating at speeds of 500 knots from 500 ft. to 1,500 ft. AGL. Jets from Davis-Monthan (A-10s), Tucson Air National Guard (F-16s), and Yuma (Marine jets) utilize some of the same airspace.

Luke flight operations are normally conducted from 0630-2200 hours local Monday through Thursday, and 0700-1800 hours on Friday. The 944th FW flies limited operations on two weekends a month. The 56th FW occasionally flies on weekends during special exercises and to make-up training lost for weather. Luke AFB is closed to all civilian traffic except during our annual Civilian Fly-In (to be held Sept. 25, 1999).

Viper Formations

If you see one F-16, start looking for more – the chances are high there will be another F-16 within two to three miles. Most Luke jets travel in pairs, usually a formation of two or four aircraft, except in the local pattern where single ship operations take place. In the traffic pattern, 300 knots is normal. Airspeeds from 150 knots to supersonic are flown in the MOAs.

How to avoid a conflict with an F-16 Viper

1. Avoid Restricted Areas, MOAs, and MTRs.

Restricted Areas:

The Barry M. Goldwater Range (Restricted areas R2301W & E, 2305, and 2304) is easy to avoid. If you stay north of Interstate 8, you will remain clear of the range, but be aware of jets entering the ranges from the low-level MTRs. The range is where students learn to drop bombs. Flying through the range complex could be very "hazardous to your health."

Military Operating Areas (MOAs):

On an average day, the Gladden/Bagdad and Sells MOAs have 10 to 12 jets conducting air-to-air combat training continuously. Although MOAs are not restricted areas and you can legally fly through them VFR, you take a huge risk in doing so. We highly recommend you avoid these MOAs when active. During a 9-G turn in a dog-fight, an F-16 pilot's total focus and concentration is on killing and surviving, not watching for light aircraft enroute from Phoenix to Las Vegas.

The Gladden/Bagdad airspace is from 7,000 ft. MSL to FL 330 and the Sells MOA is from 3,000 ft. AGL to FL 510. In addition, we have limited operations in the Sunny MOA just north of Flagstaff.

Military Training Routes (MTRs):

Luke conducts low altitude navigation and formation training on eight VR (Visual Routes). I consider the routes "hidden military airways" because little is known about them. These routes (VR 223, 231, 239, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245) are depicted on the sectional chart as light gray lines. The gray lines represent the centerline of the route and not necessarily where the jets may actually be flying.

As a rule of thumb, avoid these gray lines by +or- 10 nm either side horizontally and 3,000 ft. vertically. The route corridors vary in width from +or- 2nm to 20 nm and from 500 ft. AGL to 9,000 ft. MSL. The majority of our training is from 500 ft. to 1,500 ft. AGL.

The area where we have had the most conflicts with light aircraft has been where our routes cross I-8 enroute to the bombing ranges.

We ask you to be vigilant when flying between Gila Bend and Dateland along I-8. If you find yourself near an MTR, avoid flying parallel to the route. In addition, contact the nearest FSS for information on active routes. A good technique is to always assume the route is "Hot." The Viper pilots are using their eyeballs and radar to search the skies, but that does not guarantee your safety. Note: only a few specially equipped F-16s can interrogate your squawk. Davis-Monthan and Yuma own many MTRs as well, so flight plan accordingly around these routes.

2. Avoid the Luke AFB traffic pattern and Class D airspace.

Unfortunately, Luke does not have Class C airspace for our busy traffic pattern. Expect to see Vipers from Surface to 11,000 ft. MSL within 10 nm of the field. The recommended technique is to call our approach control or tower for traffic advisories. The preferred routing is North of Sun City at or below 5,500 feet MSL or South of the V16 Airway. Other potential conflict areas include airspace between 3,500 ft. and 6,500 ft. MSL within 10 miles of the White Tank mountain range, near the town of Buckeye, and to the west of the Estrella mountain range.

Luke frequencies are:

Approach: 120.5

Arrival: 125.45

Tower: 119.1

ATIS: 134.925

3. Avoid the Alert Area A-231.

In the alert area, expect to see F-16s from Surface to 16,000 ft. conducting instrument procedures training. Jets operating in this airspace are usually practicing approaches at Aux-1, an abandoned airfield.

Civilian Fly-In.

The 1998 Civilian Fly-In was the largest in the history of Luke AFB. We appreciate all the participants for taking time to learn more about our operations. The 1999 Fly-In is planned for September 25. Check out the Luke web site for information as the time draws near.

How to Contact Us:

For Safety related concerns or to report an encounter, Contact the 56th Fighter Wing Safety Office at (623) 856-6943 or 6942 or e-mail: 56fwse.cq@luke.af.mil

Mailing address: 56FW/SEF
7046 N. Fighter Country Ave.
Bldg 470 Room Flight Safety
Luke AFB, AZ 85309-1636

Visit our Internet site located under "Safety" on Luke's WWW page at www.luke.af.mil/se/FlightSafety.htm

In the near future we will have a page dedicated to our Mid-air Collision and Avoidance (MACA) program.

For airspace concerns or questions, contact Mr. Hansen or Blake at (623) 856-5855, or email: garyblake@luke.af.mil or terryhansen@luke.af.mil

For Questions regarding the Luke Aux-1 ILS or Air Traffic Control, contact the Chief Air Traffic Controller at (623) 856-7139.

Major Lynch is an F-16 Instructor Pilot/Flight Safety Officer, recently stationed at Luke AFB.



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