

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard's partnership with Papua New Guinea continues to blossom

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The Wisconsin National Guard entered into a new partnership with Papua New Guinea as part of the State Partnership Program in 2020, and despite a global pandemic and long travel distances, the relationship has only continued to blossom.

The two partners have made significant progress in recent months, with a Wisconsin National Guard delegation conducting its first visit to Papua New Guinea and Wisconsin's adjutant general traveling to Hawaii for a series of meetings and conferences with his counterparts from Papua New Guinea and other military leaders in the region.

Over the course of five weeks in July and August, the first in-person senior leader engagement between the Wisconsin National Guard and the Papua New Guinea Defense Force took place.

During the trip, Col. Raymond Ripberger, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's deputy chief of staff for operations and training, Lt. Col. Derrek Schultheiss, State Partnership Program director, Maj. Steven Harteau, deputy state training officer, and Command Sgt. Maj. John Dietzler, 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team

command sergeant major, discussed the five-year plan, shared information with military allies and key stakeholders in the region, and aligned strategic objectives.

They also were given tours of the Basilisk Naval Base, the Papa New Guinea Defense Force's (PNGDF) engineer base, and multiple barracks locations. Additionally, the leaders visited local sites such as the Papa New Guinea National Museum and the Kokoda Trail.

As a whole, the trip was a great success.

"We were able to conduct multiple leader engagements with PNGDF directors and establish excellent personal relationships," Schultheiss said.

Harteau agreed and noted that the relationships the team built with their new-found friends in Papua New Guinea were the most meaningful part of the trip.

"The PNGDF leaders and their staffs were extraordinarily gracious hosts," Harteau said. "During the engagement we established an excellent foundation for future training opportunities that will mutually benefit the PNGDF and the WIARNG. Even more special were the personal connections we made with our counterparts and meeting their families."

Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin's adjutant general, also had a successful trip of his own when he traveled to Hawaii in September to meet with Maj. Gen. Gilbert Toropo, the PNGDF Chief of Defense, at the U.S. Commander's Conference and Indo-Pacific Armies Chief's Conference.

This was the first visit by the Adjutant General since the partnership began just over

a year ago, and it represented an excellent opportunity to conduct a face-to-face key leader engagement with Papua New Guinea's senior defense official. Knapp said the visit was very beneficial and met all of his objectives.

"Our Wisconsin National Guard is a tremendously professional force, and we look forward to many years of engagement with Papua New Guinea and the lessons and experiences we can exchange to benefit both their military forces and our own National Guard troops," he said.

The recent visits from both the adjutant general and the Wisconsin National Guard delegation are the latest in a string of other engagements with Papua New Guinea. Since the partnership began, the Wisconsin National Guard and PNGDF have conducted several virtual engagements including one focused on the PNGDF's women, peace and security initiatives. In addition, Wisconsin Army National Guard Capt. Chris Meza spent six months as part of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Task Force Oceania in Papua New Guinea, building relationships with the people there as well as officials with the United States Indo-Pacific Command.

The Wisconsin National Guard has a long history with Papua New Guinea. During World War II, the 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Division - which consisted of the entirety of the Wisconsin National Guard and some of the Michigan National Guard - engaged in intense fighting against the Japanese through multiple campaigns in Papua New Guinea. Three Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers earned the Medal of Honor posthumously for their actions in New Guinea. The Red Arrow would go on to spend 654 days in combat during World War II - more than any other division in the war.

It's now come full circle with the State Partnership Program, which links individual states with armed forces of partner nations around the world to forge lasting cooperation, friendship, and mutually beneficial relationships.

Wisconsin also has a partnership with Nicaragua, which began in 2003.

Through the program, the National Guard conducts military-to-military engagements in support of defense security goals but also leverages whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary engagements spanning military, government, economic and social spheres. The partnership program creates a relationship in which states work with countries on a variety of levels via exchanges, shared knowledge, and resources.

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