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Dept. of Military Affairs: Medical services field stands out in partnership between Papua New Guinea and Wisconsin National Guard

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PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea – The recent partnership between Papua New Guinea and the Wisconsin National Guard has proven to be rich in opportunities to witness broader development initiatives, ranging from COVID-19 response strategies, medical services and women's health.

Representatives from the Wisconsin National Guard traveled to Papua New Guinea to strengthen their partnership with the Papua New Guinea Defense Force in March under the National Guard's State Partnership Program, which partners states with countries around the world. The Wisconsin National Guard and Papua New Guinea Defense Force partnership directly supports U.S. Army Pacific and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command efforts to strengthen a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Lt. Col. Derrek Schultheiss, the Wisconsin State Partnership Program director, stated that part of their mission is to look for areas where the two militaries can be mutually beneficial to each other.

"I firmly believe that medical services is one of those areas," Schultheiss said.

Medical service officers in the U.S. military fill many roles including administrative health services, medical allied sciences, preventive medicine sciences, behavioral health sciences, pharmacy, optometry, podiatry, and a variety of other roles. These

officers focus on operational medicine, supporting warfighters, and strengthening the military health system.

Maj. Betsy Arndt, a joint domestic medical operations officer for the Wisconsin National Guard, toured various military medical facilities around Port Moresby with Maj. Roselyn Wia, staff officer two to the director of health services for the Papua New Guinea Defense Force as her guide.

“I think that we have a lot to learn from their team, especially when it comes to preventative messaging,” stated Arndt. “It is important we both identify the most effective ways we can be useful to one another.”

Sgt. Saidi Dixie, a PNGDF medic stationed at the Goldie River Training Depot near Port Moresby, shared with Arndt during the tour that he previously attended medical training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

“I am eager to come back for more training because I serve in a community where people primarily rely on health services from the military,” stated Dixie. “I am interested in building on the skills I learned in America.”

Dixie pointed out a shared interest between the two militaries, stating that he would like to learn midwifery so he can better serve the needs of his military and community.

In April, members of the Wisconsin National Guard met virtually with partners in the PNGDF to discuss military pregnancy policies and other challenges unique to women serving in the military, expanding the organization’s years of advocacy for new mothers beyond state lines and into an international conversation.

The Department of Defense’s Women, Peace and Security Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan aims to ensure that women in partner-nations meaningfully serve at all ranks and in all occupations in defense and security sectors.

Throughout the partnership between the Wisconsin National Guard and Papua New Guinea, there have been many glimpses of this initiative playing out on a tactical level and in individual interactions.

Spc. Samantha Struck, a combat medic with Racine, Wisconsin-based C Company, 132nd Brigade Support Battalion, stepped out of her regular role to help Soldiers to safely search female detainees.

“This kind of training is critical for women’s safety and ensuring trust between the military and surrounding communities,” stated Struck.

In addition to women’s safety and wellness, the two militaries found that they shared similar public health missions over the last two years throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Arndt stated that the two militaries share a lot of the same struggles.

“We often find that we are not integrated into planning early enough,” stated Arndt.

Wia laughed, commiserating with this statement.

“COVID-19 has been a blessing in disguise because it drew attention to the importance of medical services,” stated Wia. “You could say it was our time to shine.”

Wia outlined the strategy she employed to garner support from her leadership early on in the pandemic.

“I told them that the battlefield landscape was now a biological one,” she said. “Medical will be on the front line, wielding masks instead of weapons.”

Wia stated that she is looking forward to the impact that the partnership will have.

Arndt stated that she found the motivation and level of dedication from the medical services professionals to be encouraging.

Arndt witnessed the progression of the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s other partnership with Nicaragua.

“We accomplished so much with our other partner and already in this early stage with this new partner there is an amazing start,” she said.

“We hope that this trip shows us where we can make an impact on each other,” stated Wia.

The Wisconsin National Guard’s partnership with Papua New Guinea began in 2020. Since that time, the two partners have conducted multiple in-person exchanges as well as several virtual exchanges.