

# Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin and Papua New Guinea renew historic ties by signing State Partnership Program agreement

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PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea — Leaders of the Wisconsin National Guard and Papua New Guinea Defence Force gathered in Port Moresby Dec. 2 to sign a National Guard State Partnership agreement between the two organizations.

This partnership officially began in 2020, but COVID-19 travel restrictions delayed the formal signing ceremony conducted by Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp of the Wisconsin National Guard and Maj. Gen. Mark Goina of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF).

“The Wisconsin National Guard was really excited when Papua New Guinea applied for the National Guard State Partnership Program,” said Knapp, Wisconsin’s adjutant general. “Our history and experience with the Papua New Guinean people during World War II made it the perfect fit.”

The Wisconsin National Guard returns to Papua New Guinea through the National Guard State Partnership Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense. National Guard units from a U.S. state collaborate with partner nations on civil and military affairs, and encouraging person-to-person ties. Program members also collaborate on disaster response preparation and training, which is a primary National Guard mission in the United States.

Papua New Guinea joins 94 other nations from Europe, Asia, South America, North America and Africa in the National Guard State Partnership Program. The program

began in 1991 and has strengthened ties between the U.S. and numerous nations. Collaborative visits between the U.S. and Papua New Guinea began in 2021.

The signing ceremony was held at National Remembrance Park at Port Moresby's Ela Beach. It featured a wreath laying at the site's World War II memorial and remarks by both generals before each signed the agreement.

"While pandemics and other events may have delayed this formal ceremony, they have not delayed us building this partnership over the past two years," Knapp said during the ceremony. "Service members of both of our nations have done important work through virtual conferences and in-person visits here in Papua New Guinea, Hawaii, and Wisconsin."

Knapp explained the State Partnership Program's strategic purpose.

"Militarily, this partnership is very important for the United States," Knapp said. "Papua New Guinea is a strategically important nation in the Pacific, and a secure and peaceful Pacific free from aggression is our nation's primary strategic focus."

Knapp discussed the history of the 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Division in Papua New Guinea in World War II — which Maj. Gen. Goina also recognized in his remarks.

"The relationship between Papua New Guinea and Wisconsin was forged in blood 80 years ago Wisconsin's 32nd 'Red Arrow' Infantry Division arrived in Port Moresby in 1942," Goina said. "The contribution of 'Red Arrow' Division and the ultimate sacrifice paid by many of the young men from Wisconsin will never be forgotten, so it is fitting that it will be enhanced by our bond with the Wisconsin National Guard through this partnership."

"For Papua New Guinea, the chance to be part of this great program and to contribute to regional and international peace and stability is important," Goina added.

The visit also included several key leader engagements at Port Moresby's Murray Barracks between Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs senior leaders and their PNGDF counterparts.

Lt. Col. Penny Ripperger, director of the Service Member Support Division, met with Lt. Col. Brendan Creer, an Australian Defence Force advisor to the PNGDF, to collaborate on gender integration strategies and comprehensive health and wellness

initiatives within the PNGDF.

“Many of the gender integration and comprehensive health and wellness challenges are similar between the two organizations,” Ripperger said. “We are excited to learn and grow alongside our new PNG partner as we both continue to grow in these areas.”

The partnership includes more than a military component, however.

“Natural disasters can devastate a community, its people, and vital infrastructure at any time,” Knapp explained. “In Wisconsin, civilians handle most emergencies with the military assisting as needed. Therefore, I asked Mr. Greg Engle, the administrator of Wisconsin Emergency Management, to come on this trip so he can learn more about potential collaboration opportunities for both PNG and Wisconsin.”

Engle discussed natural disaster challenges with his Col. Craig Solomon, his Papua New Guinea counterpart.

“PNG wants to use exercises to build operational capabilities over time, which is a good strategy,” Engle said. “I shared with him parts of Wisconsin’s emergency response plan and the framework we use when dealing with emergency responses in Wisconsin. This is a great area where we can learn from each other.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Curtis Patrouille, state senior enlisted advisor, and Command Sgt. Maj. Aaron Johnson, 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team command sergeant major, met with the PNGDF senior enlisted advisor, Chief Warrant Officer Donald Yalum, about enlisted and non-commissioned officer roles in upcoming exchanges.

“This partnership is a great way for Wisconsin Guard personnel to learn new ideas and experiences from our newest partner — and to share our own expertise,” Patrouille said.

The delegation also joined Goina and several hundred PNGDF soldiers in his monthly morale march around Port Moresby. The event connects different PNGDF units and promotes community outreach.

“Physical conditioning is very important,” Goina said to the group after the march. “We have to be physically fit, mentally fit and spiritually fit to perform our mission of supporting the people of Papua New Guinea.”

Brig. Gen. Matthew Strub, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Army, noted how Goina's philosophy matched his own for the Soldiers of the Wisconsin Army National Guard.

"My three guiding principles to our Soldiers is that we all must be physically, mentally and morally fit," Strub said. "That is the only way we will succeed long-term to meet our missions and to serve the people of Wisconsin."

The delegation traveled by helicopter to the Isurava Memorial in the rugged Owen Stanley mountain range. The memorial marks an August 1942 battle between the Australian and Papua New Guinea forces against the Japanese. The group was welcomed by local villagers with flowers and singing.

The group next traveled to Boregaina, Maj. Gen. Goina's home village, where they received a traditional welcome, a tour of the village school, health clinic and church, and attended a traditional mumu.

"A mumu is a traditional ceremonial meal where yams, plantains and a pig are cooked in a pit covered with banana leaves," said Maj. Sara Czepczynski, Wisconsin National Guard state partnership program coordinator. "It is the highest honor to be invited into a village for this type of celebration."

On its return to Port Moresby, the group stopped in the seaside village of Gabagaba, an important site in Red Arrow history.

"Gabagaba village is legendary in the history of the Red Arrow because it marks the start of the trail the 2nd Battalion, 126th Infantry's took over the Owen Stanley Range," said Col. Jeffrey Alston, commander of the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

The delegation also attended the opening ceremony of the new United States embassy in Port Moresby that supports U.S. diplomatic efforts in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Alston and Johnson presented the embassy with an original National Guard heritage painting that commemorated the 32nd Division's efforts at the Battle of Buna.

"To be here 80 years to the month of the Battle of Buna is a tremendous honor," Johnson said, "and to have this painting tell the Red Arrow story to all those who work at or visit this embassy is phenomenal."

The painting will hang outside the embassy's Red Arrow conference room.

The group concluded the trip with a brief ceremony and wreath laying at the Bomana Memorial Cemetery. The cemetery honors those Australians and Papuan New Guineans killed during World War II along the Kokoda Trail, which was a grueling campaign that prevented the Japanese from capturing Port Moresby.

Knapp honored the sacrifice of both nations during the campaign, and also recognized Papua New Guinea's recent agreement with the United States to locate and identify missing American World War II service members.

"I profoundly appreciate Papua New Guinea's work with our Defense Accounting Agency to find and identify our missing service members here," Knapp said. "Currently, there are 54 Wisconsin service members missing in Papua New Guinea — 12 of whom were members of the 32nd Division."

The success of this visit exceeded all expectations.

"I talked to all level of PNGDF enlisted soldiers on the importance of developing cohesive teams," Patrouille said. "After this trip, I consider the soldiers of PNGDF to be part of my team."

"We did more than sign an agreement," Knapp said. "We created new connections and friendships that will make this a strong and powerful partnership which will benefit both of our organizations for years to come."

Goina summed up the success of the weeklong visit.

"You came here as friends and partners, and you now leave here as family."