

# National Guard: Papua New Guinea Defense Force leaders greeted with warmth during winter visit to Wisconsin

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MADISON, Wis. — Despite the many disruptions and plans canceled because of COVID-19, in-person exchanges between the Wisconsin National Guard and the Papua New Guinea Defense Force remain on-track as the partnership between the two entities continues to grow.

Three military leaders from the Papua New Guinea Defense Force arrived in Wisconsin Feb. 3, marking a historic first visit to the Badger State. During the trip they traveled to different facilities, met key leaders, and experienced some of Wisconsin's highlights including a tour of the state capitol, a cheese tasting, and overhead views of Wisconsin's snow-covered, sprawling farms.

Maj. Roselyn Wia, staff officer two to the director of health services for the Papua New Guinea Defense Force, said that upon stepping off her plane she immediately noticed the snow and a few leftover Christmas lights.

"The snow covered pine trees reminded me of a postcard," stated Wia.

The visitors met with leaders from different units including the 115th Fighter Wing, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's Combined Support Maintenance Shop, the 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation, the 426th Regional Training Institute, the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, and Wisconsin's Joint Force Headquarters. During these visits they discussed different facets of the National Guard's mission including training, the counterdrug program, leadership development, equipment

maintenance, health services, as well as their shared military histories – specifically during World War II.

Lt. Col. Derrek Schultheiss, the State Partnership Program Director, has been building a relationship with the Papua New Guinea Defense Force over the last two years since the partnership began.

“I found that there are more parallels than differences between our militaries,” stated Schultheiss.

Maj. Sarufa Eka, who is in charge of operations for the military’s engineering battalion commented that there is one glaring difference.

“It is much colder here,” he joked.

Some of the common ground their organizations share is adapting their militaries and their infrastructure to a modern world and mission sets.

Lt. Col. Boniface Aruma, acting director of force preparation, explained that the infrastructure of his military is stems from the 1970s when Papua New Guinea only had three million people.

“Now that we have closer to eight or nine million people, our infrastructure must grow too,” stated Boniface.

Col. Jeffrey Alston, the commander of the 32nd “Red Arrow” Infantry Brigade Battalion Combat Team, reflected on the culture of the National Guard in the 1970s.

“You used to see a howitzer sitting on someone’s farmland because someone in the company knew someone who would allow us to use their land to train,” stated Alston.

Boniface responded that this resonated, resembling the way that they often rely on their service members’ social connections to find resources and space for training.

“I am laughing, because it is so similar, human beings are the same everywhere I suppose,” stated Boniface.

Another challenge both military forces share is the challenge of addressing the universal needs of all troops.

Wia toured the Wisconsin Army National Guard's Soldier Readiness Program, an annual process that checks in on each Soldier's financial, spiritual, physical, legal, administrative and mental well-being and assesses their readiness.

"It is clear that the [Wisconsin National Guard] attends to their Soldiers with a fine-toothed comb," stated Wia. "I was especially impressed by how they attend to mental health."

The Soldier Readiness Program ensures that each Soldier is prepared to deploy quickly which has become increasingly important for the National Guard's domestic missions that have included many no-notice civil unrest and COVID-19 response missions over the last two years in addition to federal overseas deployments.

"Much like the National Guard, we also respond to elections, civil unrest and border control," Boniface stated, referring to the border his country shares with Indonesia.

Besides the many modern parallels between the two militaries, there is also a shared history between the two.

Alston, a self-described history buff, stated that it is interesting to trace Wisconsin Soldiers to Papua New Guinea in World War II.

"It deepens our ties, and I'm grateful for this opportunity to work with them," stated Alston.

Aruma stated that he was unaware of their shared history until they entered into the State Partnership Program.

"I started learning more about the Wisconsin National Guard and realized the magnitude of history we share," stated Aruma.

The Wisconsin National Guard has a long history with Papua New Guinea, and its service there during World War II holds a special place in the organization's history and lineage. During World War II, the 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Division, which consisted of all 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. The Buna Campaign was particularly brutal, and three Wisconsin Army National Guard Soldiers earned the Medal of Honor posthumously for their actions there. The Red Arrow engaged in other major campaigns in Papua New Guinea including in Saidor and Aitape. 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.

The 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. The partners have also collaborated via several virtual exchanges on different topics over the past two years.

Command Sgt. Maj. Terri Vollrath, the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the Wisconsin Army National Guard's state surgeon cell, said she's learned a lot about how the Papua New Guinea Defense Force handles medical training via those virtual interactions.

"The experience of working with PNGDF medical teams energized me tremendously and made me feel privileged to be part of the Wisconsin National Guard, where we take our standard of training and amount supplies for granted," she said.

Vollrath said she hopes to continue to partner with their medical teams in the coming years and share written medical training information and curriculum that they can employ on a regular basis with military forces in Papua New Guinea.

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