

# Wisconsin National Guard: Red Arrow Soldier prepares for 2023 exercise in Papua New Guinea

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by Vaughn R. Larson

The last time Wisconsin National Guard troops conducted significant military operations in Papua New Guinea — the eastern half of a large island just north of Australia — was during the Battle of Aitape against Japanese forces in the summer of 1944.

Nearly 78 years later, members of the Wisconsin Army National Guard's 32nd "Red Arrow" Infantry Brigade Combat Team were back in Papua New Guinea for the second annual Tamiok Strike, a bilateral training exercise to improve interoperability between U.S. forces and the Papua New Guinea Defense Force (PNGDF).

The exercise — which included active and reserve components of the U.S. Army in addition to Australian and British military forces and the 1st and 2nd Royal Pacific Island Regiments of the PNGDF — took place in Port Moresby, Wewak and Lae.

"This mission was meant to add and assist with the existing bond and training relationship between the Australian Defense Force and Papua New Guinea Defense Force," said Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Aker of Company D, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry based in Marinette, Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin National Guard and Papua New Guinea are connected by more than history — they are involved in the State Partnership Program, which builds a

cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship between the partners' military, security and disaster response organizations.

"Our goal was to learn from them and provide some additional insight into their training so that the PNGDF and U.S. Army had many options moving forward in our Indo-Pacific Partnership," Aker said. "The Australian Defense Force was crucial in providing U.S. forces with an introduction and background into their training techniques and the PNGDF's abilities and capabilities."

Parts of the island were governed as European colonies, though Australia largely had administrative authority over what is now called Papua New Guinea following World War I. In 1975 Papua New Guinea became independent of Australia, but remained a British commonwealth and maintained close relations with Australia. The western half of the island was a Dutch colony, but is now governed by Indonesia.

Aker's role during the 16-day exercise was as an observer, to assess the Papua New Guinea Defense Force's facilities and capabilities for future training.

"I learned about the history of military conflict within Papua New Guinea, and how to integrate the Wisconsin Army National Guard's capabilities into effective training for the PNGDF," Aker said. "Tamiok Strike 23 will focus on increasing the PNGDF's combat capabilities and create a foothold of partnership to allow for future training operations."

While U.S. Army forces shared information on security operations and medical training, the PNGDF shared their knowledge on jungle operations.

Something else stood out for Aker from this year's visit to Papua New Guinea.

"The compassion and the hospitality of the Papua New Guinea people," he said.