

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin National Guard builds relationship with Papua New Guinea through senior enlisted leader information exchange

Posted on Monday, Apr 3, 2023

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PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea — Six Wisconsin Army National Guard noncommissioned officers (NCOs) visited Papua New Guinea March 20-27 to conduct a Senior NCO Information Exchange with counterparts from the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) as part of the State Partnership Program.

The partnership between the Wisconsin National Guard and Papua New Guinea began in 2020, and several key leader engagements and site visits have occurred since to further build that relationship.

The NCOs that participated in the Senior NCO Information Exchange have expertise in health services and medical readiness, sustainment, engineering, infantry and public affairs. The purpose of the visit is to strengthen the relationships between the two countries' NCOs and gather information about the operations, training and equipment utilized by the PNGDF in order to help shape future training exchanges.

The Wisconsin National Guard's health services and medical readiness NCO representative, Sgt. 1st Class Clint Vervoren — the noncommissioned officer in charge of the Wisconsin Army National Guard's Health System Services — spent the week exchanging medical information with PNGDF medics and medical readiness NCOs, and visiting their regimental aid posts and military hospital.

“Sharing our medics’ capabilities and protocols, both for treating civilian and military personnel, helps us establish possible future training programs that will enhance the Papua New Guinea Defence Force,” Vervoren said.

Similarly, Wisconsin National Guard’s sustainment NCO representative, 1st Sgt. Aaron Ritchie — the senior supply sergeant for the 64th Troop Command — visited with the PNGDF’s Force Support Battalion (FSB) and its subordinate companies consisting of maintenance, supply, transportation, signal and military police.

PNGDF Warrant Officer Edgar Kuliniasi, with the FSB Maintenance Workshop, said working with the Wisconsin National Guard has been a matter of progression for their forces.

“It’s important we come together and learn from each other,” Kuliniasi said.

Kliniasi added that this visit helps prepare both countries with the ability to understand one another for future operations. Ritchie agreed.

“Our forces operate similarly in terms of their internal supply chain — not only within garrison, but their resupply routes to the forward operating bases in different parts of the country,” Ritchie observed. “The Defence Force’s frequent missions allows them to execute their resupply expertise almost daily.”

The two Wisconsin Army National Guard engineer NCOs travelled to Lae, Papua New Guinea to meet with the PNGDF Engineer Battalion senior leaders.

Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph Gudleske, the senior enlisted leader for the 173rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, said the PNGDF engineers are very proud of their engineer apprenticeship program and the work they do.

“The engineers work on a lot of the civilian roads and projects in Papua New Guinea,” Gudleske said. “They’re constantly working on projects within the community.”

Comparable to the Wisconsin National Guard, one of the PNGDF’s primary missions is natural disaster response.

Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin’s adjutant general, visited Papua New Guinea in December 2022 for the official signing of the partnership agreement. One of the topics discussed on that trip was natural disaster response.

“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.”

The PNGDF operates differently in this aspect, as their Defence Force — to include engineers — play a significant role in natural disaster relief.

“This could be a good chance for us to work with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force as far as floods, fire breaks and fixing bridges,” Gudleske said. “We don’t really get that opportunity in the Guard because the civil sector does a lot of that.”

Future training opportunities are the backbone of maintaining a long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationship with the Wisconsin National Guard and Papua New Guinea. Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers are scheduled to return this summer for the exercise Tamiok Strike.

1st Sgt. Dustin Zabinski from Troop C, 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry — the infantry NCO representative during the Senior NCO Information Exchange — is returning to Papua New Guinea for Tamiok Strike with one of his platoons.

Zabinski said working with NCOs during this exchange has helped him identify the training that will best benefit both partners during the exercise.

“I’m looking forward to our Soldiers getting the opportunity to improve on survival skills as well as advance our partner’s training in infantry tasks,” Zabinski said. “It will be exciting to embed with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and get to be a part of their military culture during the exercise.”

The PNGDF NCOs who hosted Senior NCO Information Exchange provided their Wisconsin National Guard counterparts with a farewell consisting of a teatime and traditional Papua New Guinea gifts.

Although the visit was only one week, Ritchie contends that strong relationships and ties have been made with their PNGDF counterparts.

“Outside of our military operations, the way they welcomed us into their ranks far exceed any expectations that I had,” Ritchie said. “We all feel very humbled to be a part of this partnership.”