**Samuel Cox (SC): What is the ‘value-add’ of having a Defence Advisor (DA) in our High Commissions?**

**James Kidd (JK):** I consider the High Commission a whole-of-government team or joint agency taskforce. It follows that the DA ensures that Defence is represented within that team and is meaningfully contributing to the broader Australian mission in Papua New Guinea (PNG).   
  
To clarify terminology, an Embassy has a Defence Attaché and an Ambassador and is located in a country which is not part of the Commonwealth; a High Commission has a Defence Advisor and a High Commissioner and is in a country which is part of the Commonwealth.

There are over 100 Australian diplomatic posts around the world. The one here in PNG isone of the biggest; I believe it’s fourth behind Jakarta, Washington and London [depending on the metric used to measure; all are category 5 posts]. There are Defence Advisors and Defence Attaches like me in many diplomatic posts around the world.

**SC: What does your role entail?**

**JK:**I work to many masters. Firstly, I am the senior Defence representative of the [Chief of the Defence Force](https://www.defence.gov.au/cdf/) (CDF) and the [Secretary of Defence](https://www.defence.gov.au/Secretary/) (SecDef) in PNG; I work for both equally. Secondly, I am the Defence Advisor to the [High Commissioner](https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/our-people/homs/Pages/high-commissioner-to-papua-new-guinea). There is a third, slightly more unorthodox master: the Commander of the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF). Given the breadth and depth of the Defence partnership in PNG my relationship with [Major General Gilbert Toropo](https://twitter.com/cdf_pngdf?lang=fr) is a very large part of my job. As a result, the role is complex and diverse.

At the junior levels of command in our military, we often have a strict and well-defined Chain of Command. Generally speaking, a Lieutenant Platoon Commander has two flanking Platoon Commanders, and those three Lieutenants work for a Company Commander, at the rank of Major, who has a Captain as a second-in-charge (2IC). It’s a neat and clearly understood Chain of Command.

Once you promote from Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel, the Chain of Command remains, however you begin to work with many different stakeholders. You become part of a network of decision-makers and leaders. I work for a one-star in [International Policy Division](https://www.defence.gov.au/SPI/Divisions/InternationalPolicy.asp) (IP Div) and my 2-UP is a two-star equivalent Defence civilian: the [First Assistant Secretary of IP Div](https://www.defence.gov.au/SPI/DivisionHeads.asp). However on any given day I could be working closely with senior DFAT officers, leaders from other Departments and Agencies, the leadership of the PNGDF, [Commander 1st Division](https://www.army.gov.au/our-people/our-leaders/commander-1st-division) and his staff, the Service Chiefs, SecDef, CDF, or other parts of our Defence organisation.

At the post we have what’s called the Australian Defence Staff. This constitutes two teams: the Defence Section and the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP).

The Defence Section is the Defence ‘diplomatic staff’. This includes my deputy (a Lieutenant Colonel), several Department of Defence civilians, several Air Force personnel who manage our access to local airports for incoming military aircraft and, finally, 15 locally engaged staff. They assist me with my work at post and my support to the High Commissioner.

The DCP team is led by a Lieutenant Colonel and is what makes this role particularly exciting, complex and rewarding. The DCP in PNG is the largest that Australia has globally and the greatest number of personnel (nearly 40 military and civilian Defence personnel).

DA’s are responsible for managing a partnership and a relationship on a day-by-day basis. That requires character and people and communication skills rather than rigid adherence to process and doctrine. My background has required me to work with small teams with adaptive structures and a flat hierarchy, where cultural literacy and strong people-to-people links is essential.

This is much the same as a DA where you spend a lot of your time moving amongst and in conversation with the host nation. Much of my most productive work is done sitting under a mango tree at Murray Barracks with senior PNGDF officers; listening to them and their views and asking open-ended questions about how they think about the world or particular problems they are facing. This helps inform me where the PNG-Australia partnership might be able to assist or enable.

**SC: How have you found it to-date? How much time do you spend outside Port Moresby?**

**JK:**It has been a fantastic experience and an extremely rewarding personal and professional challenge. PNG is often called ‘The Land of the Unexpected’ and that has proven true for me. I don’t think I’ve had two-days that were the same; it’s an extremely dynamic role because it’s a very dynamic bilateral relationship.

I make it my business to get out of Port Moresby as much as I can. Port Moresby is a capital like any other and can exist in a bubble at times. There are 800 different tribes and languages in PNG, so you have to know more than ‘Port Moresby’ to understand the huge cultural variations across the country. Getting out a lot has been a huge part of the reward for both me and my family.

**SC: What has been your greatest challenge in working and representing Australia abroad?**

**JK:**As this is such a dynamic relationship, it can beeasy to feel like you’re being ‘pulled off a centreline’. One of the biggest challenges is returning to that centreline by confirming my Commander’s Intent and confirming that I am on track. PNG is only one of many, many important relationships so you have to work hard to continue to clarify your Commander’s Intent. Once you have done this you are better prepared to exercise your judgement.

**SC: What are you hoping to achieve in your posting?**

**JK:**Each DA’s role will vary in response to the strategic environment of the time. There’ll be ‘bumps in the road’, but if I am able to keep us moving in the right direction and the partnership is strengthened as a result of my time, then we’re in a good place.

For me personally, I’m looking to learn from my interagency colleagues at post and my fellow officers in the PNGDF. I am interested in their organisational cultures and their approaches to decision-making and problem-solving. It’s a unique opportunity to ‘step-outside’ the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and look at the world through other people’s eyes.

**SC: The**[**Pacific Step-up**](https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/Pages/the-pacific)**is a whole-of-government initiative, but the**[**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**](https://twitter.com/dfat?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Eembeddedtimeline%7Ctwterm%5Eprofile%3AOfficePacificAU&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dfat.gov.au%2Fgeo%2Fpacific%2FPages%2Fthe-pacific)**has the lead. What is the ADF contributing?**

**JK:**The [2017 Foreign Policy White Paper](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf), which initiated the Step-up, begins by establishing the first principles of greater engagement and greater connectedness between Australia and our near region. The ADF was already doing many of those things here in PNG so for us the ‘step-up’ has largely been about emphasis and value.

Our budget has increased, and we’ve expanded our ambition. For example, we’ve re-engaged with the PNGDF Air Transport Wing (their equivalent of an Air Force) after many, many years, and we provided [Guardian Patrol Boats](https://news.navy.gov.au/en/Feb2019/Events/5060/Pacific-security-bolstered-as-first-Guardian-Class-Patrol-Boat-commissioned.htm#.Xr4IIS-r3-Y) under the [Pacific Maritime Security Program](https://www.defence.gov.au/annualreports/17-18/Features/Maritime.asp) (PMSP). However, I believe the biggest contribution Defence has made to the Step-up is reflected in the signals the CDF and SecDef have sent regarding the people we are sending into the Pacific. We’ve started toselect younger people with younger families. Younger families become part of local communities in the Pacific and younger officers should, theoretically, be able to bring their Pacific networks back to Defence. I think, and hope, that this will also lead to new energy and greater competition for these important roles.

**SC: Has the Pacific Step-up ended the practice of “under-resourcing and under-engagement save for short-term moments of ‘crisis-driven interest’” in PNG? (**[**Ian Kemish, The Interpreter**](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/notes-representing-australia-papua-new-guinea)**)**

**JK:**The article in question was excellent, and Ian Kemish is a very sober and measured commentator. He knows PNG very well. I’d highlight that the DCP has been running unbroken for 41 years. I believe the Defence Partnership with PNG was one of the first treaty level agreements between the two countries after diplomatic recognition itself. Defence has been in PNG the entire time and has always sought to avoid surging in-or-out based upon crises.  
  
The other point I’d make is that this Defence partnership is built upon people. If our budget was shrunk down to nothing, but our people were still here, we’d still achieve a huge amount. Resourcing can be distraction; if you measure a relationship by the dollars put into it then you’ve got it wrong. Measure the partnership instead by the connections between people and the depth and breadth of those people-to-people links because that’s where the true value lies. If you’ve got the right people, with the right character, who approach PNG with a ‘partnering mindset’ and they’re looking to listen and learn, then you can achieve anything and move beyond spikes and troughs in resourcing.

**SC: How is Australia helping PNG respond to COVID19?**

**JK:**There’s been a massive response; the full breadth and depth of the DCP has been refocused to support the PNGDF’s response to COVID19. We’ve been actively engaged in supporting the PNGDF with intelligence, operations, logistics and aviation and maritime assets. We’ve refurbished key infrastructure so they can isolate and quarantine as needed and so that their command and control (C2) centres are protected from COVID19. We’ve rebuilt the communications network as an insurance policy in case their mobile network fails. The response has strengthened the partnership as a consequence.

We should always strive for a more sophisticated understanding of PNG. It gets nearly 30,000 cases of tuberculosis every year; the result is about 3,000 people dying per year. Therefore, COVID19 has some ground to ‘make up’ before it becomes worse than what PNG is already experiencing in terms of health. There’s a very high level of morbidity [rates of disease] and lots of people carry malaria, dengue fever, tuberculosis and HIV. There’s also a very high mortality rate; partly as a result of the high morbidity, partly as a result of the brittle healthcare system. However, the country is able to absorb that. There’s a societal resilience that we don’t often recognise or appreciate. COVID19 will likely still hit PNG very hard, but the country has some shock-absorbers that might prepare it well.

**SC: What do you have to say about the current state of the PNGDF?**

**JK:**Their biggest challenge is funding. At the same time, the PNGDF is an incredibly adaptive and resilient military which is able to do a lot with very little. Those of us on the ground are learning a lot from how they operate within those constraints.

The PNGDF is incrediblyresilient; they can take moral and physical knocks and keep going. They are like a big elastic band; they can stretch, absorb and contract without ever breaking.

**SC: Grounded Curiosity’s readers are the junior leaders who will command the future Army. What do you want them to understand about the PNGDF?**

**JK:**This is on my mind a lot. The PNGDF are adapting and evolving just like our own Army; they’re not static. Operationally, they are incredibly active; to a level beyond what we sometimes realise. They have a lot to teach us.

We should approach the PNGDF as a partnership rather than a relationship. A relationship can be a bit binary, whereas I think a partnership refers to equals who are invested in learning from each other. I would encourage our ADF to regard the PNGDF as a true partner whom we listen to and learn from as opposed to always teaching. They’ll always be open to that, but I think we’d be collectively surprised by how much we can learn from the PNGDF.

**SC: Where are the opportunities to grow the relationship between the ADF and the PNGDF?**

**JK:**We’re going through a period where our senior leadership, including the CDF, SecDef and [Chief of Army](https://www.army.gov.au/our-people/our-leaders/chief-army), have incredibly strong, personal connections with the PNGDF. It’s always been a great strength of the ADF that we’re invested in people-to-people links at the senior level. There’s a great opportunity right now to emphasise this at all ranks, especially junior levels. We’re seeing regular Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) and Royal Military College- Duntroon (RMC-D) ‘battlefield tours’ and we’re seeing bonds form between PNGDF and Army officer cadets at RMC-D which help strengthen the connective tissue between the two militaries.

When the ADF, but particularly the Army, come to PNG, the training is important but the connections between the participants are more important. We saw some fantastic training exercises conducted last year when the [3rd Brigade](https://twitter.com/3BrigadeTSV?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor) visited, and it was often the sporting, social and cultural engagement activities that were most effective. There’s lots of opportunities there.

**SC: What advice would you give to students and young Australians looking to pursue a career in international affairs?**

**JK:**Anyone can become a specialist; it’s easy to get very deep into your own field. It takes a lot of hard work to be a generalist. Seek to broaden your experience as much as you can and appreciate how the world looks through other people’s eyes.

To do that, you’ve got to come to grips with culture; both the culture of other nationalities and the organisational cultures of other government departments. Improving your cultural literacy like this increases your ability to communicate and turns you from an observer into a participant.

**SC: Can you recommend some PNG commentators?**

**JK:**If you want to read in depth, Tristan Moss’s book [Guarding the Periphery](https://www.amazon.com.au/Guarding-Periphery-Australian-1951-75-History-ebook/dp/B072ZYWDS5) is a great place to start and gives the history behind our military engagement in PNG. The other two I’d recommend are [Ian Kemish](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/people/experts/bio/ian-kemish), Non-resident Fellow, and [Jonathan Pryke](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/people/experts/bio/jonathan-pryke), Director, at the Lowy Institute Pacific Islands Program. Both spend significant amounts of time in PNG and remain well-connected. Importantly, both always promote local PNG voices and perspectives.