

**A Year in Jamaica: Leveraging Partnerships Through the State
Partnership Program**

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Introduction

“The National Guard through the State Partnership Program is uniquely positioned ... to provide a persistent and sustained presence to our partner nations by means of senior leader visits, exchanges, and cooperative training and exercises in areas ranging from humanitarian assistance to cyber.”

- Admiral Craig Faller, *2021 Posture Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee*.¹

The onset of the global pandemic in 2020 ushered in a period of unprecedented change. International travel nearly halted, supply chains were interrupted, and COVID-19 mitigation measures fundamentally reshaped how we interact with one another. While one can debate what the future will bring as a new normal begins to take shape, one aspect of the pre-COVID-19 era remains the Department of Defense’s (DOD’s) enduring mission to protect the security of the United States.

Throughout the pandemic U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) continued to fulfill its mission to secure the homeland and protect our national interests by building regional capacity, and

working with our allies and partner nations. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in 2019, Admiral Faller put it succinctly when he said, “Strengthening the heart of everything we do.” The State Partnership Program (SPP) is the critical tool in SOUTHCOM’s security cooperation toolbox that links a state’s National Guard with the armed forces or equivalent of a partner nation.²

The partnership between the District of Columbia National Guard (DCNG) and the Jamaica Defense Force (JDF) exemplifies the ability of the SPP to be an innovative, small-footprint tool that supports the security cooperation goals of the geographic combatant command (GCC, which in this case is SOUTHCOM) and the U.S. Chief of Mission for the partner nation. Since 1999, the partnership between DCNG and the JDF has contributed to an enduring relationship between the two countries, and SOUTHCOM’S goals of ensuring U.S. strategic access, sustaining and increasing U.S. presence and influence, and enhancing Jamaica’s defense, security force, and disaster-response capabilities. Even in the face of a global pandemic, the partnership between the two organizations has continued to provide a low-cost tool for SOUTHCOM. Thus, the purpose of this article is to share the conclusion that despite the human, economic, and budget impact of COVID-19, the SPP, administered by the National Guard Bureau and resourced by members of the DCNG, continues to deliver a significant return on investment by broadening the pool of security partners who are willing and able to maintain global security.

The Partnership

Washington, DC, which was established by the U.S. Constitution in 1790 and carved out of land along the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, is an island of historic neighborhoods and federal buildings covering 68 square miles that is home to almost 700,00 people. Jamaica, the third largest island in the Caribbean, with just less than three million people achieved its independence from Great Britain in 1962. In 1999, the two were partnered together through the National Guard Bureau’s State Partnership Program, and in the years since, they have been building on that partnership.

As one of 24 such partnerships with defense and security forces in the SOUTHCOM’S area of responsibility, the DCNG has been an instrumental player in SOUTHCOM’S efforts to build regional security through sustained engagement to deter adversaries, preserve stability, support allies and partners, and cooperate with others to address common security challenges. In a period of time that saw the U.S. military engaged in combat operations around the world, along with challenges presented by a global pandemic, the professional, institutional, and personal relationships maintained by DCNG with their JDF partners have helped the United States to maintain a consistent, enduring presence in Jamaica. The DCNG, with its community-based structure, characterized by low personnel turnover and of a size relatively comparable to its partner’s military, is an ideal DOD asset to provide this enduring security relationship.

As Jamaica, situated in a region often characterized as the United States’ third border, grapples with the effects of the global pandemic, the importance of strengthening the partnership between these two countries takes on added strategic value. In a world where once solid relationships have been strained and broken by the stress of pandemic, the importance of this enduring partnership stands out. In an environment where adversaries seek to exploit weakness, the DCNG has continued its role as a force multiplier for SOUTHCOM, supporting its efforts to build trust between the United States and Jamaica and increase its capacity to counter threats and respond rapidly and effectively to crises.

Partnership in a Time of COVID-19 and the Way Ahead

From a partner nation engagement perspective, 2021 was about navigating the shift to virtual events in response to the COVID-19 crisis. During the year, Jamaica experienced two notable surges of COVID-19 cases, stretching the ability of the local health care system to respond. Faced with COVID-19 mitigation measures like strict country entry requirements, no-movement days, curfews, and limits on the number of people in gatherings, the DCNG took advantage of the ability to shift to virtual events. This presented its own challenges and opportunities. Some engagements that did not lend themselves to virtual events had to be either cancelled or postponed. However, where possible, DCNG shifted to virtual platforms, demonstrating that through ingenuity and creativity, both parties could still meaningfully engage in important ways.

Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEEs) that normally would have taken place in-person, instead took place virtually. For example, building on a prior event in 2020, the DCNG's G1 sat down with the JDF's senior personnel officer for an in-depth focused discussion on career management and human resources using the Microsoft Teams platform. More than a dozen personnel were able to listen in on the conversation, without disrupting the discussion, benefiting from the knowledge sharing. Similarly, the JDF's director of its newly created Veterans Affairs office met virtually with the DCNG's Veterans Affairs representative who has nearly twenty years of experience helping U.S. veterans. In their time together online, an instant bond was formed and plans for an in-person meeting are in progress.

For a variety of reasons, virtual SMEEs were invaluable in facilitating the relationship between the DCNG and the JDF in a challenging environment. In some cases, the DCNG found that virtual events allowed them to be more accessible to the partner countries, reaching a larger audience. Instead of a handful of personnel navigating international flights with the associated costs and coordination, participation could be tailored to the event by simply sharing a link. As the DCNG assesses and looks ahead to future events, it has become clearer that virtual events are here to stay for the foreseeable future. When life returns to normal, it will be unproductive to look at scheduling as a simple question of in-person versus virtual events. Increasingly, the DCNG will work on a model that allows us to engage throughout the year with a mix of virtual, hybrid, and in-person events.

While the personal touch of in-person meetings allow for a degree of connection between DCNG and JDF counterparts that can never be completely be replicated by a virtual platform, our virtual events showed that they could foster a degree of human connection and spontaneity that you would normally associate with persons being physically in the same location. In a world that is only becoming more digitally connected, virtual events have shown the ability to provide solutions to meet the demands of organizations with high operational tempos. It can be a win-win for both organizations, providing increased flexibility, affordability, and sustainability over the long-term.

After a period of adapting engagements during the first year of the pandemic, the DCNG supported several in-person events in 2021, including a Joint Combatant Command Cyber Assistance Team, a Logistics Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) SMEE, and a Geospatial Intelligence SMEE. With fully vaccinated personnel and COVID safety protocols, the events demonstrated how to adapt to a changing operating environment and reaffirmed the value of in-person engagements.

In the case of the HA/DR SMEE, it took place in August 2021, a time when Jamaica was still not welcoming cruise ships to its shores and strict mitigation measure were still in place. Four personnel from the DCNG joined the U.S. Army South G4, and the 167th Theater Sustainment

Command, for a weeklong SMEE with the JDF's Disaster Assistance Relief Team (DART) on HA/DR sustainment operations and preparedness. Due to its location in the Northwest Caribbean near a geologic fault line, the threat of natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes is all too real. The fact that this SMEE was taking place in the middle of hurricane season only weeks after a magnitude 7.2 earthquake caused widespread damage in Haiti, only served to heighten awareness for everyone on the vulnerability of Jamaica to natural disasters and the importance of preparedness.

During these in-person meetings and briefings, U.S. and JDF personnel shared expertise on the safe and expeditious movement of equipment, cargo, and personnel with accurate in-transit visibility. The central learning point for the exchange was how one gets the right stuff to the right place at the right time. The DCNG personnel drew on their unique blend of experience gained from active duty missions and as traditional guardsmen to share information effectively on how to optimize airlift planning/utilization; load preparation and certification; air load planning; unit load planning operations; cargo load planning and palletization; and Joint Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, and Integration (JRSOI) techniques. Critical to the success of these sessions, was the decades of real-world expertise of senior NCOs who participated. In their interactions with their JDF counterparts, they displayed the benefits of the National Guard and the critical role of the NCO Corps.

More than just an isolated event, the SMEE laid the groundwork for future engagements in the area of disaster/emergency response. In the coming year, the DCNG will collaborate with the U.S. Army South G4 on additional military-to-military engagements. Together, they will continue the important work with the partner nation regarding the supervision, preparation, and certification of unit movement and unit load plans for ships, planes, trains, and vehicles. The JDF has one of the premier DARTs in the region and has already come to the aid of neighbors in the region during recent natural disasters. The benefit of this SMEE and others still to take place will be on the enhancement of the DART's deployable capabilities and their interoperability with US sealift and airlift load-planning procedures. In addition to strengthening their own capabilities, this will mitigate whether and how much U.S. forces need to respond when natural or man-made disasters occur.

Conclusion

From this case study, one can see the value of a permanent and systematic cooperation and coordination that the SPP provides. The partnership with Jamaica provides a compelling example of the benefits SPP engagements bring to strengthening security in an important area such as the Caribbean basin. Jamaica is a willing partner that is making real investments in its national defense and has demonstrated a commitment to contributing to security in the region. Given the demands on security and defense assets, the partnership is a win-win for both the United States and Jamaica.

The security cooperation engagements, both in-person and virtual, demonstrate how the DCNG, acting through the SPP, in concert with SOUTHCOM and U.S. Army South, advance bilateral and regional interests. These events will go a long way toward enhancing the capabilities of the JDF and thereby enhancing regional and U.S. security. For its part, the DCNG, as it has been since 1802, is "Always Ready, Always There." Always ready to help our Jamaican partners. Always there to help SOUTHCOM keep our neighborhood safe.

About the Author: CPT Matthew Larkin is a traditional member of the DC National Guard. He is completing a two-year tour as a Bilateral Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy Kingston.

¹ Faller, Craig S. “Posture Statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller Commander, United States Southern Command.” Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States Africa Command and United States Southern Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2021 and the Future Years Defense Program, Senate Armed Services Committee, 30 Jan. 2020, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Faller_01-30-20.pdf.

² Vergun, David. “Partnerships in Hemisphere Important, SOUTHCOM Commander Says.” U.S. Southern Command News, Defense.gov, 7 Feb. 2019, <https://www.southcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/Article/1751708/partnerships-in-hemisphere-important-southcom-commander-says/>.