

Koa Moana Marines Host Puma Training for Palau Maritime Law Enforcement



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U.S. Marines with Task Force Koa Moana 23 concluded the Task Force Koa Moana RQ-20B Puma Training Course with a graduation ceremony at the Palau Joint Operations Center, Bureau of Maritime Security and Fish & Wildlife Protection, Koror, Palau, Sept. 14, 2023.

The three-week Marine-led course taught 11 Palauan Maritime Law Enforcement Officers how to use the RQ-20B Puma drone, which is an unmanned aircraft system used for surveillance and intelligence gathering.

“Originally, we were going to just teach them how to fly the Puma,” said Staff Sgt. Alex Lane, a native of Rockford, Illinois and the course supervisor. “But, we turned it into a train-the-trainer; we train the Palauans and then they teach their fellow Palauans how to accurately operate the drone during their operations at sea and also here in their homeland of Palau.”

According to Lane, the students learned how to deal with maintenance issues as well as how to fly, launch and land the Puma.

“They were five-day instructional weeks, where we would be doing one to two days of classroom work,” said Lane. “The third day would be us flying it at the pier on land, and then the following two days would be us flying it off the boat. We would take it about a mile out and they are able to practice while the boats are moving, so they can get used to how they would normally use it in a maritime domain.”

The Palauan Maritime Law Enforcement Officers have had RQ-20B Pumas for approximately two years, but within the first year, they lost a majority of their operators to other job capacities and have not had anyone trained to fly them recently.

“We came out here and they had operators who had no knowledge and no experience,” said Lane. “Within just five days, they were full-fledged operators. The next week they were teaching us as the instructors to see where their knowledge was at. Then the next week, they were teaching their fellow Palauans. For individuals who had no knowledge of how to fly a drone,

they picked it up so fast. I was extremely impressed with them.”

The goal of the course is to enable the officers to use the Puma system on every single operation that they will embark on.

“They will be using it for search and rescue operations and as a deterrent for suspicious vessels,” said Lane. “They can fly it near them and it will be like ‘hey, this is Palau, you can’t come into our water.’ It is also the same for illegal, unregulated or unreported fishing. It will be a better reconnaissance and surveillance asset for them. They will be able to see these wrong doings and be able to get a clear picture of it and more information to relay to the nation of Palau. It makes everyone’s job easier.”

According to the Marine instructors, the students picked up on the skills quickly and were able to proficiently conduct operations.

“I think it went extremely well; we learned so much about these new technologies that we didn’t have and I think it will be very useful for us to use and utilize during our trips and for surveillance,” said Monique Hideo, a Police Officer 2 at the Palau Division of Maritime Security. “The Marines have so much knowledge about drones. It was a great experience to learn under people who really know their stuff. The Marines were amazing at making us feel confident. I would say if they weren’t there to teach us, we would be less likely to be confident behind the controller.”

During the training, the students would be designated as a mission operator or as a vehicle operator and would have practical application exercises.

“I would say the best part was actually having the drones in

the air,” said Hideo. “You could just imagine all the good things it could do when an emergency actually happens, because all of these features would be so helpful.”