



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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GCC's Keep Your Guard Up classes going strong

It's the only program of its kind in the nation, and it is going strong. Nearly all of the 164 Guam veterans who returned from deployment in Afghanistan in January and started with the Keep Your Guard Up program at Guam Community College in February are still attending classes every day – and in some programs – all day long.

Today, Lt. Col. Robert Crisostomo, Sergeant Major Mark Ishmael, Chaplain Richard Kelley, and potential employer Marlene Slomka, owner of Asia Tiger Construction and retired GUARNG soldier, visited the KYGU classrooms to check on the soldiers' progress in their fourth week of class.

Ishmael told the soldiers that he recently attended a military conference on the mainland where he says a program that mirrors Guam's KYGU program is in its infancy stages.

"The rest of the nation is just starting this and we're already executing it," Ishmael told the soldiers, noting, "All eyes are on you."

Specialist Richard Acosta, 32, is in the electrical program. "They make it easy for us to understand – it's very hands-on. We're so used to being hands-on with everything we learn in the Army," he said. Acosta joined the Guard in 2009. Before that, he was working as a cook.

"Hopefully I can get set up with an apprenticeship program after this," Acosta said.

Business owner Marlene Slomka noted that these soldiers will have a head start when they apply for jobs upon the program's completion. "It's just a matter of applying what they have learned in the classroom," she said.

Lt. Col. Crisostomo, who heads the KYGU program, says it is working because Governor Eddie Calvo, Adjutant General Benny Paulino, and Guam's businesses are behind it. "While they're going to school, we're going to start the placement process" to help get these soldiers gainfully employed when they graduate with certifications in May, Crisostomo explained.

KYGU was implemented after Guam National Guard Adjutant General Benny Paulino informed Guam's leaders last year that of the 588 men and women of the I-294th Infantry Regiment deployed to Afghanistan, a full 260 of them would be returning home in January either unemployed or under-employed.

While the soldiers were still in country, GCC surveyed them and formulated a 90-day industry certification program in eight areas: automotive general service technician; A+ computer networking; electrical; emergency medical technician; heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), supervision and management, heavy equipment/truck driving, and welding.

Victor Rodgers, GCC asst. director of Continuing Education & Workforce Development, said of the program, "Our success will be when we can say, 'He's working here. She's working there. And doing well.'"

Suggested caption:

Master Sergeant Mark Ishmael explains to Guam Army National Guard veterans in GCC's Keep Your Guard Up program that at a conference he attended recently on the mainland, a program that mirrors KYGU is only in its infancy. "On Guam, we are executing it. All eyes are on you," he told the soldiers. Keep Your Guard Up is a 90-day certification program designed to provide returning veterans with the skills they need to enter the workforce and secure sustainable jobs.

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For more information, contact Jayne Flores, GCC Asst. Director of Communications & Promotions, at 735-5638 (office), 483-6409 (cell), or via email at jayne.flores@guamcc.edu.