


# NOT YOUR USUAL SOLDIER

How did a teenager from a remote Papua New Guinean village end up a hero, fighting alongside Australians in WWII?

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**THEY** look like any bunch of WWII trainee army recruits. Shirts off, dog tags round their necks, watching intently as their instructor explains the .303 Bren light machine gun.

But these are not ordinary recruits, and nor is their instructor.

Although they wear the khaki web belt familiar to generations of Australian soldiers, they are barefoot, dark-skinned and their curly mop-tops set them apart as recruits of the Papuan Infantry Battalion. They also wear khaki cloth laplaps, the traditional wrap-around garment favoured in PNG.

Unusually, their instructor wears a watch – in Melanesian Pidgin a *hanwas* – hardly common even then with Australians, let alone what was referred to as a ‘native soldier’. Ben Moide, however, was not your usual soldier.

He was one of an estimated 3800 Papua New Guineans who fought as infantrymen with either the Papuan (PIB) or New Guinea (NGIB) Infantry Battalions during WWII. Many were just teenagers when they enlisted, and in the absence of formal birth certificates it was often difficult to

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determine their exact ages.

Army medical officers developed a simple yardstick: if the boys, as male natives were referred to in both Pidgin and English, had pubic hair, they were in.

PN67 Ben Moide, as he was later known, enlisted on July 1, 1940 under the name Ben, with Moide registered as his NOK. His place of birth was recorded as Daru Island and he would serve for just over six years until July 12, 1946.

He participated in some of the great battles of the war in PNG and

is credited with being among the first group to make contact with the Japanese at Awala near Popondetta, where his expertise with the Bren gun initiated that skirmish. By the time the Japanese landed in PNG in early 1942, Moide was one of the most experienced local soldiers and by the end of the war, as a lance sergeant, was actually leading a platoon.

By his own reckoning Steven Benjamin Moide was born in 1925 at Pari village, 5km east of Port Moresby, to policeman Moide Enagi and Neveva Gabai. Their marriage was by PNG



**LEFT:** Corporal Ben Moide and recruits Kaso, Baimuru and others at Bisiatabu, PNG, in 1943 (AWM: 053357)

standards 'mixed', he from Saguane village on Kiwai Island near Daru, and she a Pari girl. The relationship would have been frowned upon by her parents and extended clan, for the Motuans were suspicious of people outside their language and clan group.

They had been exposed to the missionaries of the Protestant London Missionary Society from 1874, when people like Percy Chatterton lived among them, recorded their language and introduced them to Christianity.

Further west along the Papuan coast French Catholic missionaries had established a mission on Yule Island, and the Mekeo and others practised a different religion. The missionaries encouraged the adoption of 'Christian' names at baptism, so it was not uncommon for children of Ben Moide's generation to have Westernised first names.

Ben was the third of the family's nine children. Growing up in a police barracks and surrounding villages meant the children received a rudimentary education in reading and writing, which allowed them later to assume more responsible roles in PNG than their cohorts who grew up in primitive village environments.

Ben's father taught his children the oral traditions of his people, bush survival skills, how to make weapons to hunt and how to capture pigs and *magani* (wallabies) for food. Because his mother was a devout Catholic, Ben also spent time at a Catholic school at Badili in Port Moresby.

Just behind them over Two-Mile Hill was Murray Barracks, the main Australian military base in Port Moresby. After the outbreak of WWII, troops of the Victorian 39th Infantry Battalion were sent to man the Port Moresby garrison, since as militia they could not serve outside Australian territory.

Young Papuans were thrilled at the sight of the armed white soldiers in their khaki tropical kit travelling between Konedobu, Paga Hill, Murray Barracks and other vital points they guarded. The young boys would sneak

up the emplacements to watch the *taubadas* (big men) with their .303 rifles, artillery pieces and searchlights ostensibly protecting Port Moresby's massive port and airfields.

In May 1940 the Australian commander Major General Basil Morris was directed to recruit local soldiers and the nucleus of the PIB was formed. The nucleus of the first PIB draft was drawn from 63 policemen from the constabulary, as they were already familiar with the .303 rifle and a disciplined environment. The officers were selected from the Australian Imperial Force; men like Lieutenants Alan Hooper and John 'The Frog' Godwin.

The PIB recruits were tough, experienced men, all of whom had participated in long police patrols

through the Papuan interior when resistance to authority was often settled with the rifle. Many had killed and were initiated into the customs of their tribal groups.

When recruiting was opened up Ben Moide, aged 16, looking 15, but claiming to be 19, enlisted straight from school classes without his parents' consent as number 67.

His mission school English helped differentiate him from the other recruits, but the boy soldier suddenly found himself mixing with experienced, tough soldiers and the mix of other Papuans who had signed up.

He later admitted he had been drawn by many things: by the sight of the armed soldiers with their weapons and uniforms, by the encouragement of his other mates who were also

**BELOW:** John Borrit Godwin (fourth from left) at Wonginara Mission, PNG (AWM: 090552).

**BOTTOM:** PNGDF Party fire a Rifle Salute at Sgt. Ben Moide funeral in Port Moresby on January 17, 2014. (Photo by Greg Ivey / NASHO PNG)

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**“BY THE TIME THE JAPANESE LANDED IN PNG IN EARLY 1942, MOIDE WAS ONE OF THE MOST EXPERIENCED LOCAL SOLDIERS AND BY THE END OF THE WAR AS A LANCE SERGEANT WAS ACTUALLY LEADING A PLATOON.”**

thinking of enlisting, but also by the admiring looks and giggles of the young Hanuabadan lasses who had also gathered to cast an eye over the young soldiers.

His parents desperately tried to get the army to release their son, revealing his real age, but to no avail. Despite her love and concerns for her son, Ben’s mother’s strong Christian beliefs were offended by the idea her son might actually be required to kill someone. Accepting she could not get him discharged, she made him promise her he would not kill another human being. Ben, however, enjoyed army life, the discipline drill and weapon handling, and he would become proficient in the .303 Lee Enfield, Bren gun and later, as an NCO, the Owen machine carbine.

By the time the Japanese landed in PNG, he was a well-trained, if not experienced soldier. PIB soldiers were among those deployed to the Buna-Gona region of eastern Papua in July 1942 to attempt to repel the Japanese.

The official Australian account says the first contact between the PIB and Japanese troops was at Awala near Popondetta on July 23, 1942. There may have been some prior minor harassing, but a deliberate ambush was prepared and as the Japanese advanced, the Australian commander waited until they were well into the killing ground before giving a silent signal for the Bren gunners to open fire.

Ben Moide was happy to claim credit for firing that first burst; a legend that grew over the years, cementing his place as one of PNG’s WWII heroes. Yet Ben Moide always claimed that as he fired that burst he apologised for breaking his vow to his mother, “Sinagu, sori bada hera!” (I’m very sorry mother).



It may have been his first action, but it was definitely not his last, and more of the Japanese invaders would fall to Ben Moide’s weapons before war’s end.

Ben Moide fought in the Buna-Gona campaign and withdrew back across the Kokoda Trail with the 39th Battalion, fighting at Kokoda and Deniki. He was in the landing at Scarlet Beach, Finschafen, in September 1943, remaining in the army until July 12, 1946 – just over six years’ service.

The experienced veterans of the PIB, NGIB and the Constabulary built on the relationships they had established during the war to form the nucleus of the cooperation between the Australian administration and the local population, which would lead to PNG’s Independence on September 16, 1975.

Ben did not stay in the army, instead securing a job as one of two drivers to the post-war administrator Colonel JK Murray, and later for the deputy administrator Dr John Gunther, to whom he was a trusted confidant, despite the attitudes that prevailed among PNG’s European population in those times.

Ben had returned to Hanuabada, married and raised a family of seven children, although like his father he had to overcome the objections of the conservative Hanuabadans about allowing an outsider to marry one of their own.

He sat comfortably across two worlds as much as he was able; active

in the RSL and in sports including cricket, bowls and rugby league at which he excelled. Ben Moide was an influential figure in the rise of rugby league in PNG, both as player and administrator, and all four of his sons represented PNG, with one playing professionally in New Zealand.

Post-Independence Ben Moide was senior sales representative for the local SP Brewery and PNG National President of the RSL from 1982-1983. The soldiers’ canteen at Murray Barracks was named The Sergeant Ben Moide Club in his honour.

Ben Moide was a regular visitor to Australia and a familiar figure in Brisbane’s ANZAC Day march alongside his 39th Battalion mates. They in turn ensured he received whatever medical treatment he needed, given PNG veterans have never enjoyed the same access to DVA benefits as their Australian compatriots.

Cataract surgery restored the old soldier’s vision in his final years; a gift beyond value from men who understood the sacrifice of their PNG native mates.

Ben Moide died on December 30, 2013. The day before he was interred at Taurama Barracks military cemetery following a state funeral, Ben’s old PIB platoon commander Lt Alan Hooper also died.

Two old soldiers united unusually in war, united again in death. ←

**ABOVE:**

Ben Moide CDE, pictured on the Gold Coast in 2012, ahead of the start of the official annual 11km walk from Carrara to the Kokoda Shrine at Cascade Gardens in Broadbeach. (Photo by Luke Marsden / Newspix)