



What did the Didiman do at Moem Barracks, Wewak?

By Sgt Greg Smith, 'Didiman' 1969/70



A Didiman is a New Guinea Pidgin term for someone who works in agriculture - either growing crops, raising livestock, doing research or teaching about crop or livestock production.

Teaching agriculture was initiated at Moem Barracks in the late 1960s based on the belief that some soldiers who struggled with the conventional learning in reading, writing and arithmetic might gain more from practical courses in agriculture. It was anticipated that soldiers would take the learning and experiences from the agriculture courses back to their home villages when on leave and when they finished in the Army.



Cultivating corn (maize) in the Agriculture Course garden at Moem Barracks.



Sgt Robert Scott (Didiman at Moem Barracks, 1970/71) visiting an agricultural school in the Eastern Sepik district.

The agricultural courses at Moem Barracks were developed and conducted by a succession of Nasho Agricultural Science university graduates appointed as Sergeants to the Royal Australian Army Educational Corps at 2 PIR. They included Peter Schroder (1968-69), myself (1969-70), Robert Scott (1970-71), Rory McEwen (1971-72?) and Martin Forbes (1972-74).



Pineapples (foreground) and bananas (background) were two popular fruit crops that were grown in the Agriculture garden.



Rearing chickens to become egg producing fowls was a major component of courses.

The agricultural courses comprised classroom learning; practical crop and livestock production experiences on land within the barracks precinct; and visits around the Eastern Sepik district to agricultural research and education facilities. Visits were arranged through local Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries personnel and district schools teaching agriculture.

As Sgt Robert Scott wrote in the August 1971 RAAEC Newsletter*: *The courses included understanding soils and issues such as erosion, drainage and enrichment of soils. Other topics covered climatology, anatomy, physiology, reproduction and germination of plants, and animal husbandry for pigs, cattle and fowls.*

The establishment and development of Agriculture course gardens and poultry houses at Moem Barracks certainly had a few problems, such as a variety of insect and other pests and diseases. In the first year there were problems with snakes (often large pythons) that managed to get into both the chicken rearing enclosure and the laying hen enclosure. Ensuring the enclosures were kept snake-proof became a critical task!



Day-old chickens were initially grown under improvised heating provided by portable lanterns.

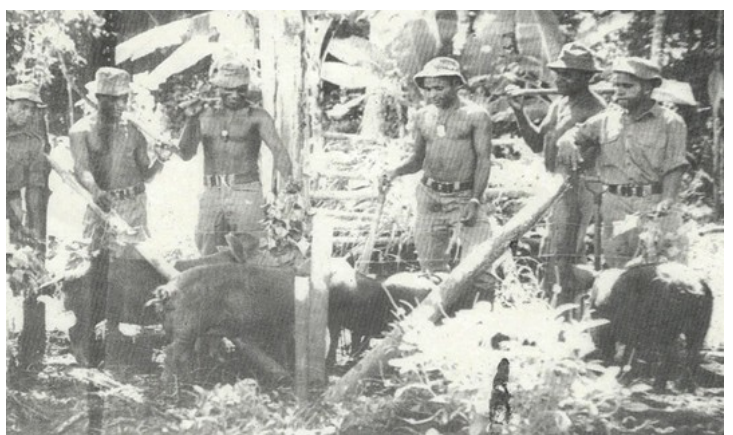


The chickens (pullets) were then grown through to point-of-lay in a large, snake-proof enclosure.

The rearing of chickens, that were flown in as day-olds from Brisbane, to egg-producing hens, was an important and popular component of the Agriculture courses. A wide range of fruit and vegetable species were grown, such as pineapples, bananas, sugar cane, peanuts, tomatoes, kau-kau (sweet potato) etc.



Eggs from the laying fowls were sold to families living in the barracks to cover the cost of feed.



1971 course participants feeding kau-kau (sweet potato) to pigs being raised as part of the Agriculture course.

During 1970/71 practical theory and practice in pig production became part of the agriculture course curriculum. As Sgt Scott reported: *Five pigs were purchased as piglets (one male and four female) and housed in a small area with a moveable shelter. Subsequently, a housing facility with concrete floor was constructed with the pigs being fed on locally available feedstuffs. The pig program had three aims: 1. Pig husbandry experience. 2. Cheap meat for barbeques in the barracks. 3. To breed good quality pigs for possible distribution to villages of Army soldiers.*

Reflections on the Didiman experience

I was extremely fortunate to have had the Didiman role. Prior to commencing National Service I had no knowledge of the Education Instructor positions for conscripts in PNG, let alone the opportunity for me to teach tropical agriculture to soldiers in the developing PNG Army! It was a privilege to have that role. The highlights were many and included the keen interest in the chicken rearing project; the enthusiasm by course participants for nurturing fruit and vegetable plants from seeds to produce; and the learnings from the various trips to research and education facilities around the district.

My entire career since National Service has embraced extension (communication), research and management in agriculture. I am convinced that effective communication in any industry is absolutely crucial and that my experience as a Didiman in PNG 'sowed the seed' for recognising that good communication in agriculture is so very important.

It was certainly pleasing to observe the progress and enthusiasm of the course participants. It was very satisfying that soldiers who had difficulty with conventional education were able to gain considerably from the practically-based Agriculture courses. It was also satisfying to know that the courses were refined and further developed over subsequent years.

* To view the item by Sgt Robert Scott about the Agriculture courses at 2 PIR in 1970/71 look under *Original Articles from the 1966-1973 era* on this website, www.nashospng.com