

Among equals

You get the feeling that Ben Blakeney was always going to leave an impression. The Indigenous soldier, actor and police officer could turn his hand, and did, to any vocation that captured his imagination.

As a soldier he served Australia on operations during the Malayan emergency. As an actor he was in every home-grown television production worth mentioning from the sixties and early seventies. But arguably his most important role was as the first Indigenous Commonwealth Police officer and mentor to those who would follow.

He was drawn to service, whether the army or the police, where he was treated as an equal and judged according to merit. In his later life he was a mentor to Indigenous youth. At his funeral in 2003, there were three hats representing his service in the army, the police and the United Nations for his police deployment in Cyprus.

A larrikin of the first order, he heard of the Commonwealth Police when he was working in steel production with BHP in South Australia. It was to be a unique application. As he applied to the police in his late 30s, his illustrious career as a soldier and actor was behind him. And so he came to the Commonwealth Police with impeccable credentials.

"I went to see the Commonwealth Police in Adelaide. They took all my information and asked for character references. I thought to myself, 'well, people who have said that if I needed a helping hand, just mention their name'. There was Gough Whitlam, Sir Asher Joel and Sir Robert Askin, so I put them down."

The application also requested any prior law enforcement experience. Ben is reputed to have listed his many roles in 'cop dramas' such as 'Homicide', 'Matlock Police', 'Dynasty' and 'Division Four' in the application.



Ben Blakeney: early policing days.

A life well lived

Ben was born in March 1937 as 'Lavanda Gordon Blakeney' at Crown Street Women's Hospital in Surrey Hills, Sydney. He attributes the singularly unique name (particularly in that era) to his father.

"I'm not saying that he might have been a bit 'under the weather' at the time, but how the Dickens would you come up with a name like Lavanda Gordon?"

And Lavanda it was until he joined the army at age 18 in 1955. Initially, he signed up for National Service, which was compulsory at the time. He was offered an exemption as he was Aboriginal but decided that he was just as good as anyone else, and chose to join his fellow recruits.

He was originally known as 'Van' from the abbreviated Lavanda. During introductions by a fellow recruit, Van was mispronounced as Ven, which in turn was heard as Ben. "From there on I became Ben, Ben Blakeney, and from that moment on I haven't looked back."

Ben transferred to the regular army after completing his national service and would continue in the army until 1964. From 1959 to 1961, he served with 101 Field Battery and it was during this time that he deployed on military service to the Malayan Emergency.

After the army, he lived in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Acting on a chance comment at a military reunion, Ben engaged an agent to find him television work. He was soon offered a part in one of Australia's most popular police dramas, 'Homicide', which starred Leonard Teale and Les Dayman – both A-listers of the day.

Teale told Ben, "Now, from here on in you're no longer Ben Blakeney, you're Jim Patterson, you're an Aboriginal gardener and you've just found your boss stabbed to death in the bush.

"You've called in the Homicide team, that's me and my partner here. We're not Leonard Teale, we're not Les Dayman, we're detectives from the Homicide Squad and you're one of the suspects."

Ben said "from that moment on, line after line, it was just like a duck takes to water".



Ben Blakeney had acting roles in Australian TV police dramas such as 'Homicide', 'Matlock Police', 'Dynasty' and 'Division Four'.

Ben also holds the distinction of playing Bennelong at the opening of the Opera House on 20 October 1973. It was a proud moment on top of the tallest sail of the Opera House with an audience of 650 million people. For Ben it was more than just another role. "I represented a race, a country and a historical building."

Even so, it was with the death of his mother, Ethel, in 1974, that acting lost its appeal. After three years in the steel industry Ben joined the Commonwealth Police. Two years later he successfully applied for deployment to Cyprus and he was back overseas. "It was the first time I'd been in a war zone, minus wearing a gun," Ben said.

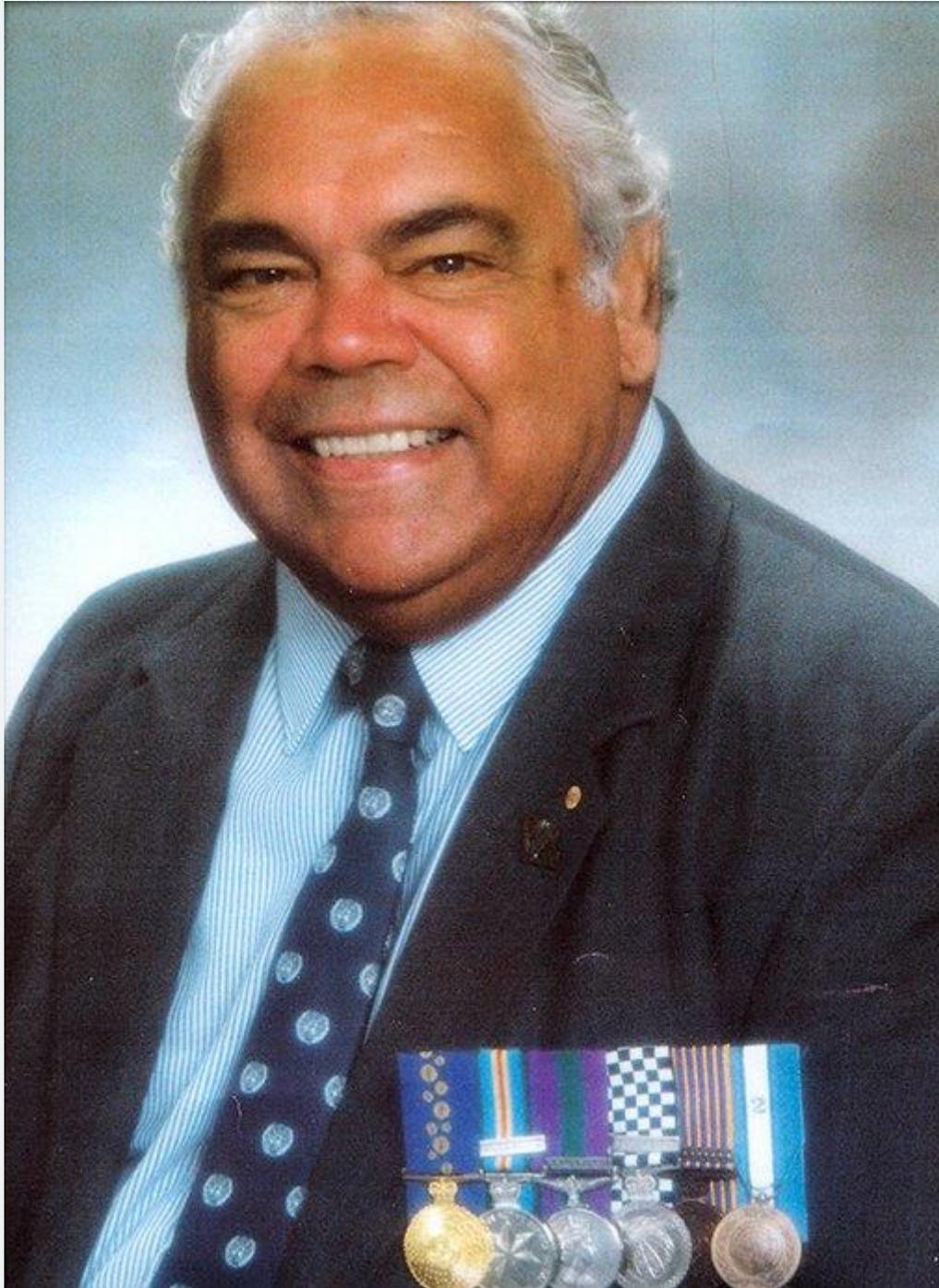


Ben Blakeney was pleased to be wearing the peace keeping 'blue beret' when he was deployed with the Commonwealth Police to Cyprus in the 1970s.

"I was so pleased that I was wearing a blue beret. I was doing the same work as my counterparts. There was no colour bar or anything like that, which I was proud of."

During his posting to Cyprus the Commonwealth Police were transformed into the AFP. Ben was awarded a Police Overseas Medal to add to his military medals. On return to Australia, Ben resumed the role of AFP Protective Service Constable. With the creation of the Australian Protective Service (APS) in 1984, Ben left the AFP and remained with the APS until 1991.

When he retired Ben remained active in encouraging Indigenous employment in the AFP. He later played an active part as a mentor and role model in the Malunggang Indigenous Officers Network (MION) when it was raised in 1995.



Ben Blakeney with his police medals.

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Throughout his life, boomerang throwing became a way for Ben to make new friends and teach people about Aboriginal culture. This includes Governors-General Sir Zelman Cowan, Dr Peter Hollingworth and Sir Ninian Stephen. The latter asked Ben "If it lands in the lake does that mean I have to go get it?"

Ben replied "Usually yes, but I'll make an exception with you."

Ben also taught boomerang throwing to AFP police commissioners, UNESCO representatives, and hundreds of school children. It was for his community service that he was awarded the Order of Australia on the 10 June 1994.

Ben passed away on Sunday 28 December 2003 in Queanbeyan, NSW. So many people attended the funeral that people were standing outside to listen to the service. Ben was remembered for his community service, his ability to quickly form good friendships and for his big "golden smile".

His brother Eddie arranged to have the funeral in Canberra because Ben "loved Canberra and called it his city". The funeral was attended by AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty and ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope. Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke sent a representative. There among the wreaths of native flowers lay the three hats representing his service to the Australian community.