



Immigration and Border Security Minister Hon. Petrus Thomas, MP, West Sepik Governor Hon. Tony Wouwou, MP and Chief Migration Officer Mr Solomon Kantha with invited dignitaries pictured with 63 West Papuans in West Sepik province who received PNG citizenship 2018.

Journey to the East

William Billy Braber recalls the journey he took 50 years ago to escape Indonesia's rule over West Papua and was relieved to be accepted by PNG Government as a Citizen in 2018. Mr Braber shares his story with **Quinton Alomp**.

They depart at dawn. It was cold on the hills but William Billy Braber and three of his friends walked out of their homes with nothing - no money, no bags, no extra clothes and of-course no mobile phone.

They begin their Journey to the East set on one motive – not to accept Indonesian Citizenship.

They watched as the Indonesian Government took control over West Papua from the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) after the Dutch government failed to secure enough support at the UN General Assembly for the self-determination of West Papua (formerly known as West New Guinea).

They could not let their call for independence go unheard. After all their journey to the east was to find answers.

William Braber, now about 72 years old, left his parents on his beautiful island of Biak and journeyed to Papua New Guinea. William and his three friends could imagine the punishment if they were caught by Indonesian Authorities.



William Billy Braber (second from left) and his wife Flora (left).

Sitting on his wooden chair in his home in Vanimo, he recalls the journey in detail as if it happened just yesterday.

“We walked for two weeks,” Mr Braber recalled. “I came with nothing, except the T-Shirt and the trousers I wore.”

“We were very mindful of Indonesian authorities. They have spies and informants. We have to walk with local villagers when they advise the road is clear,” he said as his voice started to shake as he recalled the sleepless nights fighting with mosquitoes and sometimes had to sleep under makeshift roofs and no proper meals.

“*I waited for 50 years and finally I can now call myself a PNG citizen*”

They trekked over 500 Kilometres along the coast and at times have to move inland to hide from authorities.

Mr Braber recalled the moment they crossed over into PNG side of the border and went into Wutung village.

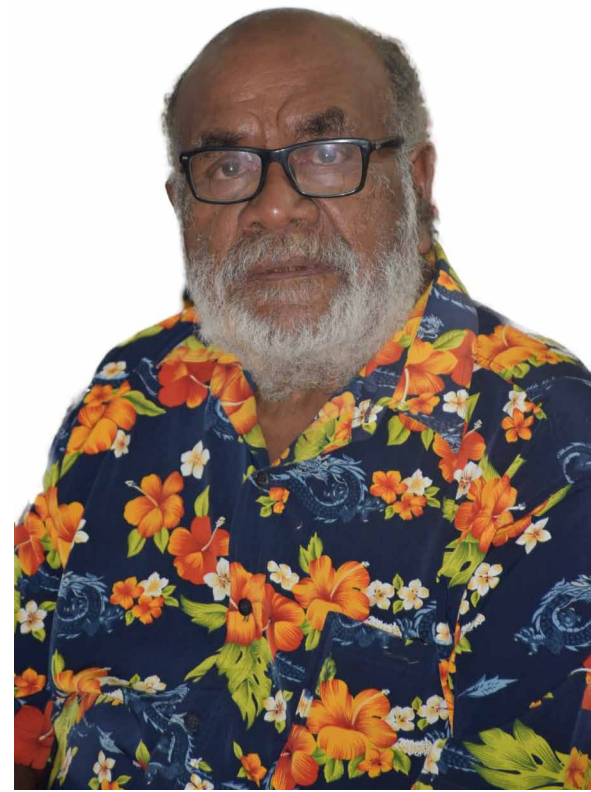
“We were relieved that at last we entered PNG.” But before they could find a place to rest in Wutung, the Australian *Kiap* (named Tony Try) confronted them.

“The *Kiap* told us to go back,” William said.

They knew any objection to the *Kiap’s* decision would result in them being handed over to Indonesian authorities. They fear punishment is severe.

“So we obeyed the *Kiap* and crossed the border again and instead of going back we went inland and crossed over again to the PNG side,” he laughed. “Then we walked down to the coast but were caught by police at the “Sun-flies” beach and taken to the refugee camp at Yako village.” Mr Braber recalled.

Mr Braber was 22 years old in 1969 and finished his National High School when he crossed into PNG.



Mr William Billy Braber



“I was supposed to go to the university but I cannot make it because of the political pressure. We witnessed the inauguration of our Parliament, our Flag and National Anthem and were on the path for self-determination. I cannot accept Indonesia’s Citizenship” he said.

Mr Braber and his wife Flora were among 63 West Papuans living in Vanimo, West Sepik Province who were recently awarded PNG Citizenship in November 2018. His two daughters received their PNG citizenship in Port Moresby in 2017.

“I waited for 50 years and finally I can now call myself a PNG citizen,” Mr Braber said with his right thumb pointing up.

Mr Braber receives his naturalised citizenship certificate from Immigration and Border Security Minister Hon. Petrus Thomas, MP.



Photographs

Above: The new PNG Citizens in West Sepik province.

Below: A West Papuan boy sings PNG's National Anthem during the citizenship ceremony in Vanimo.

Below Right: A traditional West Papua singing group that performed in Lae, Morobe province during the citizenship ceremony in 2018.



The PNG Immigration and Citizenship Authority (ICA) issued 113 citizenship to West Papuans in 2018 and will continue to recognise them in the new year.

“I am proud to be a Papua New Guinean. I came with nothing but I’m glad I have children and have many things now,” said Mr Braber.

Mr Braber is married with nine children. His elder son joined the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary as a member of the Mobile Squad 16 who were sent to Bougainville and was killed in the line of duty during the Bougainville civil war.

His story is no different to many West Papuans who arrived in PNG five decades ago. Similar accounts were shared in Western Province, Lae, Madang and Wewak during the citizenship ceremonies held in 2018 by these new PNG Citizens.

His three friends who crossed the border with him 51 years ago remain strong advocates of West Papua independence. One of them moved to Sweden but passed away recently while the other lives in Australia and his third friend resides in Port Moresby.

