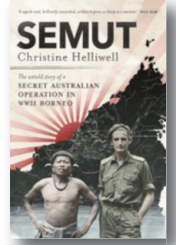


# *Semut: the untold story of a secret Australian operation in WWII Borneo*

by Christine Helliwell

Penguin Random House: North Sydney, NSW; 2021; 562 pp; ISBN 9780143790020 (paperback); RRP \$34.99



If war is innate to human societies, then anthropologist Christine Helliwell is well placed to provide insights that are atypical of most military histories. Her account of this small operation of the Second World War is insightful and fascinating.

Operation Semut was undertaken by Australia's Services Reconnaissance Department in Sarawak in mid-1945 as part of the Allied campaign to recapture North Borneo. Its two main objectives were to gather intelligence and to encourage the indigenous people to launch a guerrilla war against the Japanese.

The operation was commanded by Major 'Toby' Carter and was divided into three main parties: Semut 1, 2 and 3. This book is the first of two volumes and covers Semut 2 and 3, in which 60 Allied soldiers took part. Although some had experience of the conditions and culture in Borneo, for many the cultural 'shock' was significant. Most previous accounts of the Semut operations have paid scant attention to the local Dayak people, with whom Semut troops co-operated. To correct this imbalance, Helliwell has conducted hundreds of interviews to recreate a more holistic and detailed record of events.

Helliwell has studied the Dayak peoples, and has a very good understanding of their culture, lifestyle and attitudes as well as their natural environment. She also

explores the dynamics between the European, Malay and Chinese expatriates in Borneo, as well as the occupying Japanese. Compared to earlier accounts, her account provides a more balanced perspective on the Semut operations – particularly the complex and nuanced relationships between the various groups.

Helliwell's narrative critically examines the numerous contradictions between previous accounts of Operation Semut. She also delves deeply into the local Dayak tradition of headhunting which the colonial rulers had worked to eradicate, but which, conversely, was encouraged as part of the campaign.

*Semut* includes a number of images as well as over a dozen detailed and well-produced maps. This account of Semut and its 78 pages of endnotes and bibliography, well demonstrate Helliwell's extensive research.

Operation Semut was a short but very successful example of advance force operations to understand and shape the battlespace ahead of conventional operations. *Semut* provides an excellent account of the 'classic' special operations mission, and is highly recommended to students of unconventional warfare.

**Marcus Fielding**