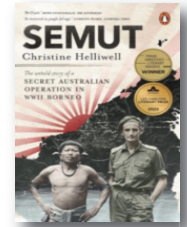


# *Semut, secret Australian operation in WWII Borneo*

by Christine Helliwell

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In 1945, the war in the South West Pacific was nearing culmination. The invasion of Borneo by Australian forces under Operation OBOE planned for July was imminent. A component of the campaign, Operation SEMUT was planned by the Australian Army's Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD) and conducted by Z Special Unit in preparation for the invasion. Initially known as Special Operations Australia, SRD was formed from the Allied Intelligence Bureau in 1943 to undertake clandestine operations and was heavily influenced by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE).

The author, Christine Helliwell, is a New Zealand-born anthropologist, author, academic and Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University. Her research on Borneo's indigenous Dayak peoples, has taken forty years and she has written widely on Dayak social and cultural life. Her research for *Semut* included interviews with hundreds of Dayak people in Sarawak and most of the remaining veterans from Operation SEMUT. *Semut* won the Prime Minister's Literary Awards Australian History Prize 2022, the Les Carlyon Literary Prize 2022, and was first runner-up for the Templer Medal Book Prize (UK) 2022.

Operation SEMUT was launched when four SRD operatives were parachuted into Sarawak in March 1945 into an inhospitable jungle with the threat of being captured by the Japanese. They were tasked to recruit the native and feared head-hunting Dayaks.

The objective of Operation SEMUT was to enlist the support of the local inhabitants to wage a guerrilla war against the Japanese forces in their local regions and recruiting a guerrilla force of some 500 strong. They would harass the enemy, and when the Australian forces landed on Borneo, prevent retreating Japanese forces from reaching the hinterland. While defeat of the Japanese was paramount, the operation was seen by the British as an opportunity to reinstate imperial control of Borneo after the war.

Following deployment of the initial group of operatives, Operation SEMUT was divided into four separate forces, SEMUT I to IV. *Semut* focuses on Semut II and III operations along two of Borneo's rivers - the Baram and Rejang - and provides a detailed account of the brutal guerrilla campaign against the Japanese. The author provides vivid accounts of the hardships, hazards and challenges of operating in the dense jungle of Sarawak.

While mostly Australian, operatives were drawn from across the Services as well as from other Allied forces. SRD was Australia's first foray into special operations

and in its infancy, decisions were often made on the fly which resulted in challenges for the men in the field and caused friction between the Semut forces.

*Semut* recounts the challenges and hardships endured in the Borneo jungle by the operatives and of the willingness of the Dayaks and other groups to fight against the Japanese, who by this time, had outworn their welcome with ill treatment of the local populations and appropriation of their food supplies. Operation SEMUT would not have succeeded without Dayak support.

Banned from head hunting by the British administration before the war, under Operation SEMUT the Dayaks were encouraged to return to the practise, provided only Japanese heads were taken. This made the recruitment of Dayak warriors easier and served to terrify Japanese soldiers, eroding their morale. The loyalty, bushcraft and fighting ability of the Dayaks ensured the success of Operation SEMUT and Professor Helliwell's considerable research has enabled to successfully highlight the personalities of the Dayak communities, taking the reader into longhouses set within the sanctuary of the jungle of 1945 Borneo.

Following the successful landing of Australian forces in July 1945 on the north-west coast of Borneo, Operation SEMUT forces attacked Japanese forces in Sarawak, taking control of the jungle interior, while the 9<sup>th</sup> Division took control of the coastal areas. To limit casualties, the 9<sup>th</sup> Division remained on the coast and resulted in Operation SEMUT III being responsible for stopping Japanese forces from retreating into the centre of the island by calling in airstrikes and attacking isolated groups of enemy soldiers. They were also responsible for the safety of the Dayak and Chinese communities against Japanese reprisals. The operatives were subsequently charged with accepting the surrender of local Japanese forces and assisting with the restoration of civil administration.

*Semut* has an excellent set of end-notes, bibliography and index. It is well written and provides a fascinating insight to a little-known operation by a group of people in a generally overlooked part of World War II. The result is a unique insight of an encounter between two very different cultures amidst the savagery of the Pacific War. It differs from other accounts of Operation SEMUT with its detailed acknowledgement of the dependence of the Dayak contribution to the success of the operation.

**Bob Treloar**