

## Book Reviews

### *The Airmen and the Headhunters*

By Judith M. Heimann. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 2007, 289 pp, £17.99, hardback, ISBN 978-0-15-101434-7.

Judith Heimann is a career diplomat who spent two years in Borneo. This book follows up on her book *The Most Offending Soul Alive*, about Tom Harrisson, the colourful Englishman who, after setting up the innovative Mass Observation project in the UK just before the Second World War (which is still running at the University of Sussex), was parachuted into the interior of Borneo to organise resistance against the Japanese. He later became Curator of the Sarawak Museum. In the course of her research for that book, Heimann gathered a good deal of information about a group of eleven American airmen who had to eject over the interior of Borneo in November 1944. The airmen were sheltered by the natives and local administrators until contact was made with Major Tom Harrisson's command after Harrisson was parachuted into the Kelabit highlands, just across the border in what had been British-administered Sarawak in March 1945.

The book is a well-researched history of a fascinating episode in the history of the Second World War. Heimann draws on interviews with five of the airmen and with administrators, missionaries and local tribespeople who helped to care for the airmen, as well as using archives, private memoirs and diaries.

The airmen were scattered across the interior plateau within the area previously administered by the Dutch (now in East Kalimantan, part of Indonesia) and were picked up and helped by local tribespeople.

Eventually they all came under the care of the District Officer at Long Berang, named Makahanap, who was responsible for the districts of Mentarang and Kerayan. Makahanap was a Christian from Sulawesi. Heimann shows how Makahanap's response to the presence of the airmen reflected his awareness of his own precarious position and his desire to hedge his bets for the future, in case the Europeans won the war. He protected the airmen until they were passed over into the Kelabit Highlands, in what had been British-administered Sarawak. Some of the airmen played key roles in Operation Semut, run by Tom Harrisson, which successfully organised tribespeople from a number of different tribes to harass the Japanese. In June 1945 the airmen were airlifted out of Borneo by the Australian Air Force.

Through this book an interesting picture is painted of one of the last episodes of headhunting in the region, which was witnessed firsthand by some of the airmen. Under Makahanap's leadership, the local Lun Dayeh leaders made the decision to wage war against the Japanese, and they began to waylay and behead any Japanese who ventured upriver. It seems that the Lun Dayeh were nervous about this killing although they attempted to fit it into the context of traditional headhunting, carrying out as much of the usual ritual as they could. It seems likely that the reason for their nervousness would have been the fact that most of the Japanese were killed in or very near Lun Dayeh longhouses, while headhunting should occur far from home.

The book is an exciting and interesting read. It will be of interest to historians of the Second World War in the region as well as to historians and anthropologists working on

Borneo. In presenting a picture of an unusual cultural encounter between very young soldiers from a distant part of the world stranded in an alien environment and the local tribespeople, it may also have some lessons for those working in conflict zones.

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