The
IBAN TRACKERS
and
SARAWAK RANGERS
1948-1963
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1948-1963

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I believe this book is the second book ever written about the history of Iban Trackers and Sarawak Rangers and their involvement in the first phase of the Malayan Emergency from 1948 till their disbandment in 1963. There is no doubt that there will be many more books will be written about them as more and more of their stories will come to light.

I had contemplated on writing this book since 2008 but the lack of materials and the inability to track down the surviving members of the Iban Trackers and Sarawak Rangers in Sarawak were impossibly difficult. What more with me in Semenanjung Malaysia, journeying back to Sarawak will need a lot of financial back up and time that I did not have. With the majority of these elite soldiers living in the interior of Sarawak, the task of gathering the all-important information were even more impossible.

However, over the years, I have gathered enough details through my researches in the archives of Yayasan Sarawak and through the internets and some documents available within the Country. Friends overseas have also given me valuable information and photos that helped to throw some light on this little-known and amazing unit called Iban Trackers which later became Sarawak Rangers.

In particular I would like to thank George Swetman of 1st Manchester Regiment who was the Platoon Sergeant of one of the two Experimental platoons of the Ibans in late 1952. Also Miss Jan Hurlestone, the Grand Daughter of Lt Col Christopher James Baird the first Commanding Officer of Sarawak Rangers (Malayan Unit) who resides in Australia. She had sent me numerous and valuable photos and documents. There was also Mr. Shawn Auma of New Zealand who had
sent me some photos. I also had the permission of Mr. Robert Bonner of The 1st Manchester Regiment to use a couple of photos in his book The Jungle Bashers.

I would very much like to see many books written on the feats and bravery of these Iban warriors who had volunteered to come to Malaya, a far-away land, just to fight and may be to “bejalai” (in Iban literally to see new places) and see new lands. I have no doubt if they were offered these two opportunities that the Ibans would find it hard to refuse! Perhaps it was these traits in them that had encouraged Britain to take in Sarawak Rangers to become a part of the British Army on 1 April 1960. But alas! The formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963 had dashed their hope of being equally as famous as the Gurkhas and as fighters feared by the enemy. Sarawak Rangers (Far East Land Forces) was disbanded on 15 September 1963, a day before the formation of Malaysia. Today I mused over this and wondered at the missed opportunity. I really hope Sarawak will, one day, revive this world-renown Unit. A legacy that must not disappear into the fold of history.

A special thank you to my dear friend, Professor Emeritus Haji Mohammed Abdul Majid who had agreed to proof-read my draft. My special thanks too, to YB Datuk Talib Zulpilip who had taken the pain to help me source out the much-needed fund to publish the book. And my deepest appreciation to Yab Datuk Patinggi (Dr) Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari bin Tun Datuk Abang Haji Openg and Yb Datuk Amar Douglas Uggah Embas for giving me the financial assistance. Without it I will not be able to publish this important part of Sarawak’s history.

My appreciation also goes to UNIMAS Publisher bUniversity Malaysia Sarawak for willing to publish and print the book at their own expense.

To all my friends, thank you for giving me the encouragement to keep going and produce the book, especially Lt Gen Datuk Stephen Mundaw who incidently, had also consented to write the Foreword to the book.
To my wife, my apology for spending hours at the computer and seemingly to have ignored her.

To all the readers, this book is by no means exhaustive as the number of Iban Trackers and Sarawak Rangers I had met and interviewed were not many.

Lt Col Hj Robert Rizal Abdullah PGB

Author
FOREWORD

The book, The Iban Trackers and Sarawak Rangers 1948 – 1963, I believe, is the second book ever written about this elite unit. Sarawak Rangers was, and still is the pride of Sarawak and a symbol of battle worthiness and courage of the Ibans. Regretfully, after 12 years of fighting, it was disbanded a day before the formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963.

The book tells about the involvement of the para military Iban Trackers, which was later reformed into a full-pledged military unit called Sarawak Rangers (Malayan Unit) initially, in the first phase of the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960. The Iban Trackers was reformed into a full-pledged military unit on 1 January 1953 with a British war veteran who had won a couple of Mentioned-In-Dispatches to his credit, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher James Baird O.B.E as the first Commanding Officer.

In their roles as Trackers, these soldiers were attached to the Commonwealth Units, usually in pairs and more often than not they wore the uniforms of the Units they were attached to. However, during their early involvement, they often wore shorts, less shirts and bare-footed; the same way they dressed at home. In one incident the Ibans were mistaken for an Orang Asli by the Communist Terrorists (CTs). They were well - like by the troops as they were often very cheerful and seen to be at home in the jungle. Their cheerfulness were often contagious and could lift the moral of the troops, especially the young soldiers who had never been to the thick, damp and humid South East Asian jungles.

They impressed the British Army so much that on 1 April 1960, Sarawak Rangers (Malayan Unit) was taken in as a part of the British
Army and renamed Sarawak Rangers (Far East Land Forces). From then on, just like the Gurkhas, they could be sent to any war theatres around the world. Sarawak Rangers then was poised for bigger and better things. Unfortunately, the formation of Malaysia which saw both the States of Sarawak and Sabah amalgamated with Malaya to form the Confederation of Malaysia had overshadowed the disbandment of the Unit and Sarawak Rangers just disappeared into the folds of history. Today, many are thinking that this elite Unit should be revived as it was a conspicuous brand name for Sarawak. It is a symbol of bravery befitting Iban warriors and Sarawak.

It was astonishing that in the twelve years of fighting, Sarawak Rangers suffered only 20 Killed in action and 25 wounded. The awards they had been bestowed with spoke of their dedication, bravery and commitment to their duties.

One George Cross
One George Medal
One Military Medal
One British Empire Medal
Nineteen Mentioned-In-Dispatches
Twenty-one Commander-In-Chief’s Certificates

The book also mentioned about Operation Mai Pulai, an effort that was initiated by Lt Col Robert Rizal Abdullah PGB in bringing back all the 21 remains of Iban Trackers and Sarawak Rangers buried in many parts of Malaya and Singapore, including a Border Scout. It also touched on the relocation of a roadside grave of LCpl Ungkok ak Jugam, a member of Sarawak Rangers, in Alor Setar, Kedah.

Lt Gen Datuk Stephen Mundaw
Panglima
Medan Timur Tentera Darat
CHAPTER 1

Sarawak Rangers The Beginning The Brooke Era

The arrival of Sir James Brooke in Sarawak on 15 August 1839 started the rule of the Brookes family in Sarawak that lasted until 1946 when it was ceded to the Crown Colony of Britain. For his assistance in putting down a rebellion in Kuching, he was proclaimed the Rajah of Sarawak in 1841 by the Sultan of Brunei. Thereon, the Sultan of Brunei had steadily granted the expansion of Sarawak’s territory. By 1853, Rajah James Brooke had made Sarawak independent from the Brunei Sultanate. By the end of his reign in 1868, he had firmly established his rule in Sarawak.

Sarawak at that time was in turmoil with inter-tribal wars, head hunting and revolts by tribal leaders who were very much against the presence of the white Rajah in Sarawak who had imposed all kind of taxes on them.

In 1868, his nephew Charles Brooke who had been the Rajah Muda, succeeded Rajah James Brooke as the second white Rajah of Sarawak. His reign lasted until 1917.

Rajah Muda Charles Brooke came to Sarawak on 21 July 1852. In October 1854, he was put in charge of the Batang Lupar area, which was Rentap’s stronghold.
Rentap did not like the idea of foreign people coming to take over their land and imposing all kind of taxes. He called them pirates and they must be chased out of the country. Charles Brooke, on the other hand also called Rentap as rebels and pirates and must be quelled and defeated.

The first battle was fought on August 19, 1844 in Skrang. About a thousand boats were used. Rentap won and 29 Englishmen were killed and 56 wounded. In the second battle on July 29, 1849, in Skrang and Saribas, James Brooke used his ships The Royalist, Ranee, Nemesis and 80 other warships. The five-hours naval battle was the longest ever fought in Sarawak. Five hundred Rentap followers were killed. Defeated, he retreated to the foot of Mount Sadok where he built a fort at Tabat, with River Lang as the frontage.

At the end of 1849, James Brooke sent Arthur Crook Shank to build a fort in Lingga to strengthen his stronghold in Skrang and Saribas. Rentap did not like the idea. It prevented him from contacting Ali and Linggir who were in command of the coastal area of Sarawak. He attacked and defeated Brooke’s fort in Lingga. Brooke tried to negotiate a peace talk with Rentap but the later refused. In April 1853, he ambushed one of Brooke’s ship and sank it. In the ambush, the Lingga Resident, Alan Lee was killed.

In retaliation, Charles Brooke, in Sungai Lang expedition attacked Rentap’s long house. Rentap was wounded. Defeated, he and his followers retreated to the top of the inaccessible 3000ft Mount Sadok and built another fortification there.

After the Sungai Lang Expedition, through trials and errors, Charles Brooke realised there was the need to have a trained standing army. It was after his first unsuccessful Expedition against Rentap that he realised “only Dayaks can kill Dayaks”. He came up with the idea to have a force of Dayaks that can travel light and fast. The idea of Sarawak Rangers was mooted. It was not until
This book is about the short history of the para military Unit called The Iban Trackers which was later reformed into a full-pledged military unit and renamed Sarawak Rangers. The book covers a period from 1948, just 7 weeks after the Malayan Emergency was declared to 15 September 1963 when it was disbanded, a day before the formation of Malaysia. This Unit was very popular with the Commonwealth troops not only because they were the best trackers in the world but also due to their happy, easy-going and relax attitude in the jungle – a trait that helped to calm down the nerves of many young soldiers who were not used to the damp and hostile jungle environment. The Book ends up by recounting Lt Col Robert Rizal Abdullah’s efforts in relocating a roadside grave of LCpl Ungkok ak Jugam in Alor Star and finally bringing back all the remains of the 21 Iban Trackers and Sarawak Rangers killed and buried in Malaya and Singapore back to their homeland in Sarawak through Operation Mai Pulai.

Lt Col Hj Robert Rizal Abdullah PGB is a descendent of an Iban warrior. He was born in 1948 in a Longhouse called Lachau Ili in the district of Pantu, Sri Aman, Sarawak. He left his Longhouse at an early age to follow his eldest brother who was a Police Constabulary in Kapit. There he continued his primary schooling. He continued his primary education in Lutong and Bintulu when his brother was transferred there. He completed his secondary education in Tanjong Lobang School in Miri from 1962 to 1966. He joined the Army and had his training in the Royal Military College, Sungai Besi, Kuala Lumpur from 1967 to 1969.

He was commissioned into the Rangers Corp and joined 3rd Rangers. From then on he never looked back. He gave his best to the Unit and played many major roles in operations against the Communist Terrorists both in Semenanjung Malaysia as well as Sabah and Sarawak in the 70s and 80s when threats were at its peak. He was awarded a gallantry medal Panglima Gagah Berani (PGB) for his attack on a CT camp in Sarawak in 1973.