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Four Plaques Commemorating Semut Operations in Borneo

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ABSTRACT

A plaque commemorating the Allied Z Special operatives in Borneo and their local counterparts during the Japanese Occupation of Sarawak 1941-1945, is now on display at the Borneo Cultures Museum. A replica of this plaque was placed in Bario in 2013. Two other wooden plaques were made as memorials of operations of the Z Special Unit working behind Japanese lines training local guerrillas during the Japanese Occupation. This paper traces the background and history of each of these four plaques, which were erected at a time when there was no circulation of written print in the interior of Sarawak.

Keywords: Object history, Japanese Occupation, Semut Operations, Tom Harrisson, Kelabit highlands



FOUR PLAQUES COMMEMORATING SEMUT OPERATIONS IN BORNEO

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A plaque commemorating the Allied Z Special operatives in Borneo and their local counterparts during the Japanese Occupation of Sarawak 1941-1945, is now on display at the Borneo Cultures Museum. A replica of this plaque was placed in Bario in 2013. Two other wooden plaques were made as memorials of operations of the Z Special Unit working behind Japanese lines training local guerrillas during the Japanese Occupation. This paper traces the background and history of each of these four plaques, which were erected at a time when there was no circulation of written print in the interior of Sarawak.

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INTRODUCTION

This plaque commemorating the Z Special operatives in Borneo and their local counterparts during the Japanese Occupation of Sarawak 1941-1945, is now on display at the Borneo Cultures Museum (Figure 1). It is one of four plaques erected to commemorate events during this era. The purpose of this paper is to highlight and document the story of each of these plaques, through interviews with descendants of people involved at the time and with reference to the relevant literature available.



Figure 1: The plaque at the Borneo Cultures Museum. If was originally placed at Punga Pawan in the Kelabit Highlands. It was given to the Sarawak Museum in 1962 and was displayed for a time at Fort Margherita. (Source: Author)

The aim of the covert Allied Z special operations in Borneo was to go behind Japanese lines and to organize, train and arm local guerrilla networks to support the Australian coastal invasion of Labuan and Brunei, planned for June 1945. On 25 March 1945, the first group of eight men under Major Tom Harrisson took off from their base in the Philippines, heading for Sarawak's remote highlands, under an operation named Semut1. They parachuted in close to the longhouse at Bario, not knowing whether they would obtain support or opposition to their mission. Soon, Kelabit villagers approached them carrying a white flag and the men were welcomed into the longhouse. After several meetings with local leaders, support was pledged for the operation.