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ESCAPE FROM BORNEO: A REPORT

H.P.K. Jacks

(with and introduction by John D. Yates)

INTRODUCTION

An Epic Journey

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I joined the Colonial Engineering Service in 1954, my first posting being to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak as an Assistant Controller in the Posts & Telegraphs Department. It was quite a cultural shock after leaving a post in a development laboratory of a large telecommunications company in the United Kingdom. The telecommunication infra-structure in Sarawak at that time was more or less as the Japanese had left it when hostilities ended. In fact, my first job was to re-habilitate the transmitter in Kuching used for communicating with Straits Steamship vessels plying to and fro between Singapore and Kuching. It was an interesting task rooting around for bits and pieces left behind by the Japanese.

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Sarawak was administered in much the same way as it had been in the times of the Rajahs and here it may help in understanding Philip Jacks's report if, very briefly, the colonial hierarchy is described. The country was at that time divided into Divisions, the equivalent of counties in the UK and about the same size. A "Resident" was in charge and responsible for everything in his bailiwick; he resided in the major town of the division and had under him "District Officers" stationed at various locations throughout his

division. There were no roads in Sarawak and all communication was by river or by light aircraft between the major towns. This was the situation until the early 1950s when professionals were being recruited, for example, doctors, engineers, lawyers, foresters, etc. The professional organisations also adopted the same hierarchal arrangements and the story starts in the 1960s when I was Controller of Telecommunications in the 4th and 5th Divisions of Sarawak stationed in Miri. Philip Jacks, at that time, was the Resident 5th Division stationed in Limbang. Part of my duties were to visit all P & T stations in my area at least once a year and it was during these and other visits that I became very friendly with Philip Jacks and his wife Philippa both of whom have now, sadly, passed away. They very kindly provided me with accommodation in their bungalow and one night we started talking about the Japanese invasion and Philip offered me, in confidence, a copy of the report that he had written for the official archives that were not to be given the light of the day for another 30 years. I gave him my promise that I would never disclose the details in his report during this period.

Fast forward now to 2003 when Tony Wood, ex-Forest Officer Sarawak, was staying with my wife and me down in Devon. After dinner one evening, we were chatting about the old days and I remembered the long forgotten report given to me by Philip Jacks over 40 years ago. I searched for it and found a very yellowing document at the bottom of my safe. My promise unbroken, I feel others can now share the details of Philip's epic journey. I have converted his report into digital form and Tony together with another ex-forester friend from Sarawak, Eberhard Bruenig, have very kindly prepared the maps to make the reading easier and bring it to life. They both have had much greater experience of the country than I did. For example, the furthest point I reached up the river Rejang was Belaga when I lived in Sibuh. Tony and Eberhard have done much more jungle bashing, where distance is measured in time. A Dyak, if asked how far it was to such and such a place would always respond in days, nights or fractions thereof!

Philip Jacks was the District Officer at Kanowit at the time he is writing about in his report and he was ordered to assist in the

evacuation of the European women and children from the 3rd Division of Sarawak fleeing from the Japanese. Due to the appalling weather conditions the majority of the women and children arrived at Belaga and were prevented from continuing due to the rising floor waters. A few managed to make it to Long Nawang but could go no further. They were eventually captured and spent the rest of the war in the civilian prison camp in Kuching. At the time in question, the river at Belaga rose approximately 80 feet in one night. I have seen the mark on the Kubu (administrative fort) indicating the record level at that time. Philip, as you will read, was past Belaga at the time organising coolies to assist the women and children who were supposed to follow. Fate is a curious thing when one realises that the distance he covered was over 400 miles as the crow flies to Samarinda through tropical rain forest in the landas (rainy season). One wonders how things might have turned out if Philip Jacks had taken his preferred route up the Katibas and Bangkit rivers from Song.

REPORT

(Note: The comments in parenthesis in italics are those of John Yates & Tony Wood.)

The following is my report of events which led up to the evacuation of the bulk of the Third Division Europeans and a summary of my trip with them across Borneo. I am writing from memory and cannot guarantee that there will be no mistakes.

On the 17th December I was called down to Sibü by the Hon'ble the Resident to discuss the scheme for purchasing rubber from the public which was to come into force on December 23rd.

I arrived in Sibü at the same time as the m.v. "Nam Hei" which had set off from Sibü with rice for Mukah and had been bombed at the mouth of the Igan. This vessel had turned about and returned post haste although there were no casualties or damage.

I remember that during my conversation with the Resident he said that there was no question of our leaving our posts and that he would just hand over keys to the Japanese with as much dignity as he could muster.