
Soldiers' and Dayak Sense of Self and Other on Borneo during Confrontation between Britain and Indonesia, 1962–66



Matthew Hughes

Abstract

Confrontation on Borneo tests a thesis on counterinsurgency: winning hearts and minds succeeds if object place/people win over the hearts and minds of subject counterinsurgency soldiers. This psychological transformation depends on fixed objects that counterinsurgency cannot easily change: the counterinsurgency destination and the counterinsurgents' place of origin that formed soldiers' unconscious selves. Soldiers encountered on Borneo a transformative, attractive, alien destination that changed their behavior. Soldiers then ratified unconscious behavior by asserting that the cause was their innate decency and official hearts and minds policy. But Borneo had formed the unconscious self that gave form to hearts and minds. This article argues that altered states of being shape counterinsurgency.

Introduction

Confrontation—*Konfrontasi* in Indonesian,¹ *Konfrantasi* in Malay—was a four-year low-intensity insurgency and border conflict centered on Borneo as Indonesian forces expanding Jakarta's influence from Kalimantan into the British colonies or dependent states of Brunei, Sabah, and Sarawak clashed with British-

1. Not used in common parlance but a widely used term when Indonesia confronted another party, as in the Irian Jaya/West New Guinea dispute with Holland (1950–62) as in *konfrontasi Indonesia-Belanda* (Indonesia-Dutch confrontation), and inter-religious conflicts can also be labeled *konfrontasi*.

Matthew Hughes is professor of military history at Brunel University London and the author of *Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State, and the Arab Revolt, 1936–39* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

The Journal of Military History 88 (October 2024): 1028–1061.

Copyright © 2024 by *The Society for Military History*, all rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing from the Editor, *Journal of Military History*, George C. Marshall Library, Virginia Military Institute, P.O. Drawer 1600, Lexington, VA 24450. Authorization to photocopy items for internal and personal use is granted by the copyright holder for libraries and other users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), 121 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923 USA (www.copyright.com), provided the appropriate fee is paid to the CCC.

led forces defending Malaya and the new state of Malaysia, formed in 1963, that incorporated Sarawak and Sabah. Indonesian special forces infiltrated the Malay Peninsula to the west, and British security forces also faced an internal Chinese-led insurrection in Sarawak. The British triumphed, an example of a successful counterinsurgency campaign, and presented subsequently as a victory for a successful hearts and minds operation that won over local peoples in the fight against Indonesia, notably inland Dayak communities living along the border war zone. The author acknowledges the literature on the military campaign on Borneo that details British forces' hearts and minds among the Dayak,² set within Karl Hack's work on counterinsurgency in Malaya, David French's broader works on British post-1945 end-of-empire small wars, and recent studies by authors such as Huw Bennett on the Troubles in Northern Ireland.³ This article reframes Confrontation and challenges how we see counterinsurgency, presenting it as an emotional as much as a combat experience, as readers will now see.

2. Nick van der Bijl, *Confrontation, The War with Indonesia 1962–1966* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen & Sword, 2007); Nick van der Bijl, *The Brunei Revolt, 1962–63* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen & Sword, 2012); Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950–1966* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1996); Peter Dickens, *SAS: The Jungle Frontier: 22 Special Air Service Regiment in the Borneo Campaign, 1963–66* (London: Fontana, 1984); David Easter, *Britain and the Confrontation with Indonesia, 1960–66* (London: Tauris, 2004); Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South-East Asia, 1961–65: Britain, the United States and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Christopher Pugsley, *From Emergency to Confrontation: The New Zealand Armed Forces in Malaya and Borneo 1949–66* (South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, 2003); E. D. Smith, *Counter-Insurgency Operations: 1 – Malaya and Borneo* (Shepperton, U.K.: Ian Allen, 1985).

3. Karl Hack, *The Malayan Emergency: Revolution and Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945–67* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Huw Bennett, *Uncivil War: The British Army and the Troubles, 1966–75* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

The author acknowledges A.V.B. Norman Trust funding for U.K. regimental archival research and a Moody Grant for study in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library. The author thanks all the interviewed veterans, noting the following: Maj. Geoffrey Ashley, Lt.-Col. J. P. Cross, Col. Kim Hoskin, Brig. Bruce Jackman, Mne. David Lee, Brig. Anthony Ling, Gen. Sir Jeremy Mackenzie, Cpl. Dick Muskett, and Brig. John Taylor. Head archivist Dayanku Horiah Bint Awang Gani gave exceptional access to Kuching's State Archive. Dolores Ho supported research in the New Zealand National Army Museum. Indonesia's Legiun Veteran Republik Indonesia facilitated veteran interviews in Jakarta. Dr. Monica Janowski helped with her anthropological expertise on Borneo. The author uses singular spelling as in Kelabit and Dayak for ethnic group collective nouns. Rank in parentheses in author interviews is that during Confrontation, with none noted if soldiers never attained higher rank. All author interviews were in English unless stated otherwise; some were anonymous at interviewees' request and marked as such in footnotes.

Confrontation on Borneo tests a thesis on counterinsurgency: population-centric hearts and minds succeeds if the object people/place win over the hearts and minds of the subject soldiers executing counterinsurgency. This reverses typical counterinsurgency theory that places the emphasis on soldiers winning over the people's hearts and minds. This transformation is psychological, not material, unwitting, and has unintended consequences. It depends on immutable factors of person and place: the counterinsurgency destination and the counterinsurgents' place of origin that formed soldiers' unconscious selves. Counterinsurgency starts with neither insurgency nor associated object peoples, but with the culture of counterinsurgent troops and consideration of how the invaded (used here in the sense of the object war zone) country and people transform soldiers' hearts and minds and effect personal cultural transformation and so the performance of goodness, badness, or indifference. Borneo positively converted soldiers. The British Army's official mantra of hearts and minds to win over Borneo's inland Dayak people in the fight against Indonesia meant little until soldiers unconsciously encountered a transformative object destination. Soldiers then ratified unconscious behavioral change by asserting that personal decency and official instruction had forged hearts and minds when it was the reverse: Borneo and its peoples had formed the unconscious soldier-self that gave form to hearts and minds. Soldiers were neither good nor bad; the place had set their behavior; their behavior set counterinsurgency. This article is concerned with mental state and the moral effect thereof. It argues that a change in being is vital to counterinsurgency. The Borneo case study presented here gives the reader a different multi-perspective view on counterinsurgency, and it triggers a debate with significant contemporary resonance regarding counterinsurgency. Official counterinsurgency policies can work if soldier-civilian cultures in the conflict zone unofficially align. Put simply, British soldiers' positive reaction to the Borneo jungle and the Dayak interior people was a game changer for forging successful hearts and minds, and so achieving a counterinsurgency victory.

There is the related question of whether object Dayak people responded consciously to soldiers, so encouraging the creation of soldiers' perspectives that favored their community by making soldiers "good." In short, did the Dayak wittingly forge hearts and minds? The answer here is mostly negative, but this is an area for more study. Importantly, soldiers read the Dayak as proactively favoring them, but the Dayak view of soldiers was mixed, positive to negative, gain to risk. Dayak experience of Confrontation differed from the soldiers' perspective of their presence benefitting the Dayak; the reality of the Dayak experience differed from the soldiers' imagination of the experience. The Dayak used the soldiers for employment and spiritual gain (as with headhunting), but the change effected on the Dayak by the newness of the soldiers was unintended. Dayak attracted soldiers because of their state of being, but the Dayak never molded their lives to make this happen. Nor did they seem conscious about how their way of life impacted soldiers. The Dayak often observed the soldiers, no more, or were kind to them

without thought to personal gain. The British and Dayak imagined into reality the bonds described here. They were random, grassroots, unplanned, serendipitous. The only witting party was the British military high command, which naively thought that when it told soldiers to execute hearts and minds, it would be successful because the army was bent to its will. When hearts and minds “worked,” the army concluded it had it right.

But hearts and minds on Borneo was an autonomous, undirected part of counterinsurgency. Dayak and soldiers were discrete cultures that blindly met, interacted, and, for the soldiers at least, viewed the other viewing them in ways that made them feel good about themselves. “The people of Borneo certainly won our hearts and minds,” as a special forces officer put it much later.⁴ The heuristic assumption here is that those who feel good about themselves in relation to place will perform positively and actively. The two cultures had many crossovers that pulled them together: alcohol, fighting, weapons, open societies for women, partying, tattooing, music, dancing, fieldcraft, tracking, communal living, and honor through war. Indonesian Muslim troops had to find ways to escape Dayak drinking culture, sometimes by pretending to drink.⁵ The issue is not whether object peoples in their hearts actively favor counterinsurgent soldiers—one wonders if anyone in this situation would be positive—but whether soldiers thought it was so. Some Dayak, such as the Iban, whom the army heavily employed, coded soldiers’ ways of living, their courage and professionalism, as mirroring and value-adding to their own lives, and this positively influenced their unconscious selves in relation to the soldier other. That bellicose Iban society was more classless, egalitarian, and individualist attracted soldiers.⁶ This prompted a symbiotic relationship of subject-object and self-other which found a commonly agreed supra-other to fight: Indonesian insurgents raiding Dayak border *kampongs* (villages) and causing trouble.

Nomenclature: The Dayak

When British, Commonwealth, and Indonesian soldiers deployed to Borneo in December 1962 for Confrontation over Indonesian claims to Brunei, Sabah, and Sarawak, they lived and fought among Dayak (also Dyak) inland, upriver ethnic groups living along the border war zone, and who comprised 51 percent of Sarawak’s, 68 percent of Sabah’s, 17 percent of Brunei’s, and some 30 percent of Kalimantan’s population.⁷ The British launched a sustained hearts and minds

4. E-mail communication, Brig. (Capt.) Anthony Ling 1st Bn Queen’s Royal Surrey Regiment/Special Forces to author, 12/15/23.

5. James Ritchie, *Tun Ahmad Zaidi: Son of Sarawak* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk, 2000), 121–22.

6. Jérôme Rousseau, “Iban Inequality,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 136, no. 1 (1980): 53.

7. Derived from Brunei. *Report on the Census of Population taken on 10 August 1960* by L. W. Jones (Kuching: Government Printing Office, n.d.); [*Sabah/North Borneo*] *Report on the Census of Population taken 10 August 1960* (Kuching: Government Printing Office, 1962); *North Borneo*.

campaign to mobilize the Dayak against Indonesian infiltrators and in favor of the new country of Malaysia. The Indonesians did the same, calling their hearts and minds campaign “territorial warfare.”⁸ This study examines the majority Dayak and has less to say on Borneo’s Muslim Malay, Indonesian, and Chinese communities. Muslim Malay and Indonesians on Borneo were acquiescent or supportive of the military, while Britain and Indonesia pacified the Chinese on their respective sides of the border. Dayak is a catch-all exonym that appears today in the *Keturunan* “descent” box on Malaysian birth certificates. While people now use Dayak with pride, in one interview with the author, the animated interviewee sitting alongside his wife stripped off his shirt to show his warrior tattoos and proclaimed that he was a proud Iban and not an effete Dayak, by which he meant a Bidayuh (or Land Dayak).⁹ Defining “Dayak” remains complicated, as the way people choose to categorize themselves and other varies.

There is currently a Dayak revitalization movement in Kalimantan, one that demarcates people as not Muslim. These are developing categories. A long history of Dayak activism means evolving language, with people using endonyms relating to where they live or come from as defining labels, while also using new Dayak phrases that change as groups interact. Dayak definition is as much about what people are not as what they are: non-Muslim, non-Malay, not coastal dwellers, not Chinese, and natives of Borneo living in the interior or with a lineage back to their *kampung* and longhouse in the primary forest. The government can reclassify Dayak as Malay—*masuk Melayu*, “to become Malay”—if they convert to Islam. Agricultural styles can also define interior ethnic groupings. Dayak is a respectful, appropriate term for interior people encountered by British, Commonwealth, and Indonesian soldiers, but it is imprecise and used more in Kalimantan than in Sarawak and Sabah.

Report on the Census of Population taken on 10 August 1960 by L. W. Jones (Kuching: Government Printing Office, March 1962); *North Borneo: Census of Population taken on 10 August 1960. Additional Tables* by L. W. Jones (Kuching: Government Printing Office, n.d.); *Sarawak. Census of Population taken on 15 June 1960. Additional Tables* by L. W. Jones (Kuching: Government Printing Office, March 1962); *Sarawak. Census of Population, 1960. Preliminary Release* (Sarawak: Government Printer, n.d.); *Sarawak. Report on the Census of Population taken on 15 June 1960* by L. W. Jones (Kuching: Government Printing Office, January 1962); CIA-RDP80-01444R000100020001-6: Handbook for Special Operations Borneo, March 1964, pp. 43–60, CIA Records Search Tool (CREST); *Sensus Penduduk 1961 Republik Indonesia [Population Census 1961 Republic of Indonesia]* (Jakarta: Biro Pusat Statistik, June 1962), pp. 3, 9–10; *Indonesia Sensus Penduduk 1971 Diperintju Menerut Propinsi Dan Kabupaten/Kotamadya [Indonesia 1971 Population Census Population by Province and Regency/Municipality]* (Series B, Number 1) (Jakarta: Biro Pusat Statistik, 31 May 1972); table 1, p. 2; *Sensus Penduduk 1971: Tabel-Tabel Pendahuluan [1971 Population Census: Advance Tables]* (Jakarta: Biro Pusat Statistik, 22 July 1972).

8. The Chinese Insurgency in Western Borneo – A View from Indonesia, 1972, A-018, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration [NARA] II in Migrated Archive Materials, Sarawak State Records Repository (SSRR), Kuching.

9. Author interview, Peter John Jaban (Iban in Kuching), 6/7/22. Many interviews included extensive follow-up correspondence.

We could use the phrase *orang ulu*, “people of the interior” or “upriver people,” but here too there is confusion, as when an educated Bidayuh in Kuching told the author how *orang ulu* applied only to the more distant from the coast Kelabit and Kenyah inland groups, and not to the more proximate Iban and Bidayuh. Dayak is a misnomer applied by outsiders to the Lun Bawang (“people of the place”) and Lundayeh (“people of the upriver”) in the tri-border area; British soldiers called them Murut. Soldiers called all nomadic peoples Punan, properly Penan, often commenting on their “uncanny sense” and their pale skins as they lived in the shadows under the forest canopy.¹⁰ This links to comments made below by soldiers regarding the uncanny, preternatural quality of jungle communities. Thus, the Punan were incredibly quiet: “They could come up behind us.”¹¹ Indonesian records detail Land Dayak, Sea Dayak (Iban), and Ngadju Dayak on the Kalimantan side of the border, and they detail other groups, such as the Tidung, as “relatives” of the Dayak.¹² Bidayuh is the correct term for Land Dayak, while Sea Dayak and Iban are synonymous.

Dayak habitus and jungle habitat were remarkable to British soldiers. This was not the case with Sarawak’s “poker-faced” Chinese, as described in one military file, who opposed Malaysia and the British.¹³ Soldiers disliked the Chinese, up to a point. One rifleman with his mates fired two rounds through the window of the empty office of the predominantly Chinese Sarawak United People’s Party in the town of Bau.¹⁴ A Royal Marine recalled the ubiquity of Chinese hostility, notably after the death in an ambush at a Chinese farm in February 1964 of a comrade, Reginald Chappell, but soldiers were more uninterested in than hateful to the Chinese.¹⁵ Meanwhile, British soldiers established Malays as effete, lazy, and not martial. “The Malays only used to fish,” and they were like South Vietnamese

10. Ralph Harrison and John Heron, *Jungle Conflict: The Durham Light Infantry in Borneo, 1965–66* (Sunderland, U.K.: Business Education/Society of the Friends of the Durham Light Infantry Museum, 2007), 28.

11. Oral History, Sgt. Thomas William John Moffitt (New Zealand Special Air Service and 1st Bn Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment), 2006.655, New Zealand National Army Museum (NZNAM), Waiouru.

12. Sugih Biantoro, “Masyarakat Perbatasan di Sebatik masa Konfrontasi 1963–1966” [“Border Communities in Sebatik in the Confrontation 1963–1966”] (Depok: Universitas Indonesia, 2011), 42, 83, 109, 115, 137; Supoduto Citrawijaya, *Kompi X di Rimba Siglayan: Konfrontasi dengan Malaysia* [*Company X in the Siglayan Jungle: The Confrontation with Malaysia*] (Jakarta: Kompas, 2005), 70; Handbook for Special Operations Borneo, 59–60, CREST.

13. Op Summary January 1966 by Capt. R. C. Eyres dated 24 January 1966, 1/7th Duke of Edinburgh’s Own Gurkha Rifles, Diaries, 1963–66 [box file], Gurkha Museum and Archive, Winchester.

14. Author interview, Cpl. (Rfn.) Dick Muskett 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets, 2/12/22, 2/23/22, 4/24/22, 9/25/23.

15. Author interview, Marine David Lee 42 Commando Royal Marines, 2/17/22, 11/26/22, 3/4/23, 10/21/23, 7/20/24.

soldiers with their “tailored uniforms,” brill-creamed hair, and not “professional”: “They just didn’t seem to get it.”¹⁶ Similarly, a Kelabit policeman from Bario who served in the Border Scouts used the English phrase “bullshit” to describe the “lazy” Malay soldiers in comparison to the committed, brave British and Gurkha troops whom he encountered in Confrontation.¹⁷

Soldiers coding place, place transforming soldiers

The Indonesians framed Kalimantan Dayak (Dajak in older spelling) differently from the British, or put another way: primary forest, place, and people worked differently on Javanese Indonesian soldiers sent to the Kalimantan interior. A Javanese commented that she had learned when young that Dayak were savages, fearsome killers, masters of black magic, and that they were cannibals, while admitting that nowadays many were not isolated and had moved to the city.¹⁸ Dayak has different senses in Indonesian, but it stems from what the Malays call the non-Malays (and not Chinese, one assumes), *manusia* (people, not animals), indigenous, or *hulu sungai*, “upriver,” or “the place where the river starts,” or the river communities living near the source of these river waters, like *orang ulu* above, Malay and Indonesian being cognate languages. The Dayak lived in the *pedalaman*, Indonesian for the “lands and peoples deep inside the forest” or “along the river shore.” The Kalimantan war zone was another world without roads or modern communications. Indonesian soldiers parachuted into forward bases, one special forces commander breaking both his legs jumping into Nangabadan, while three companies parachuted into east Kalimantan “as the only viable alternative” due “to the ‘lack of roads.’”¹⁹ Landing drops were aborted, leaving units stranded and hungry in remote outposts. An Indonesian veteran remembered the “dense jungle never occupied by humans,” thick forest, “soldiers often get lost,” mangrove swamps with “snakes that are difficult to distinguish from branches, the soldiers catch these snakes for food,” and of being cut off as radio communications failed.²⁰ Indonesian newspapers picked up on the otherness of the “dense Kalimantan forest.”²¹ Malayan soldiers saw the Dayak as pejoratively primitive, something like primates; in some

16. Author group interview, Hon. Maj. Sankhabahadur Limbu 7th Gurkha Rifles, Sgt. Ram Bahadur Gurung 6th Gurkha Rifles, Lt. Purna Bahadur Gurung 2nd Gurkha Rifles, W.O.1 Jas Bahadur Gurung 2nd Gurkha Rifles, Sgt. Jamansing Thapa 2nd Gurkha Rifles, and L/Cpl. Khemsing Gurung 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 7/28/21 (in Gurkhali); author interview, Sgt. (Rfn.) Michael Copp 2nd Bn Royal Green Jackets, 8/3/22, 1/13/23.

17. Author interview, Professor Poline Bala, daughter of Police Inspector Bala Palaba, 10/27/22.

18. E-mail communication, Cintya Valena Gorza to author, 7/1/23.

19. Ken Conboy, *Kopassus: Inside Indonesia's Special Forces* (Jakarta: Equinox, 2003), 96.

20. Citrawijaya, *Kompi X*, 24–25.

21. “Pertempuran sengit berkobar di perbatasan Kalimantan Timur *1 kompi tentara ‘Malaysia’ dipukul kutjar-katjir” [“Fierce fighting raged on the border of East Kalimantan *1 company of soldiers ‘Malaysia’ was badly beaten”], *Kompas* [Compass newspaper] (9 February 1966).

accounts, the etymology of Dayak is savage. Malays “looked down on” Borneans, in the words of a Malay-speaking British officer.²² Malays and Indonesians established Borneo as a negative space. The jungle was not neutral; it was hostile.

British soldiers also coded the Dayak as primitive, but positively so, as noble, prelapsarian, and living in an Arcadia, some form of Albion or “Shangri-La,” as a special forces officer put it.²³ “It felt like paradise,” in the words of one British female veteran; “out of this world really” in the memory of an Intelligence Corps soldier; “it never leaves you, every day I think of Borneo”; “men loved it, we all loved it”; “I never wanted to leave Borneo. I loved the jungle” and “it was an utterly different world.”²⁴ British framing of the location’s primitiveness was qualitatively different. Borneo was an impressively alien place for British soldiers, foreign but strangely, paradoxically familiar, and desirable; for Malays and Indonesians, it was an alien, backward part of home and undesirable. In the British view, the Dayak were savage warriors, not savage people: “perfect men, perfect soldiers, perfect subjects,” what in earlier imperial times would have been a “martial race.”²⁵ That Dayak chopped off enemy heads impressed British soldiers: “Maybe if you mix Kipling’s military admiration of the Pathans and then transferred the action to large areas of dense jungle in an equatorial climate, you end up with riflemen having their shoulders tattooed [by the unit’s Iban trackers] with soot from oil lamps,” the soldier in question in his London home lifting his sweater to show the author his two Iban warrior tattoos.²⁶ Dayak were simple, manly recruits, like the Gurkha, who, when kicked in the head by a mule, got a slight headache but left the mule lame.²⁷ Like Sikhs, Kachins, Gurkhas, Pathans, and Scottish Highlanders, Dayak were “naturally martial” mountain people, wielding their *parangs* (“large knife”) as the Gurkhas did their *kukris*, and Highlanders the claymore and dirk.²⁸ British soldiers had an imperial memory of fighting with men such as the Dayak. Dayak were innate warriors in the colonial view. When one asked a British soldier if he could strip

22. Author interview, Lt.-Col. (Maj.) J. P. Cross 7th Gurkha Rifles, 10/13/21, 3/22/23.

23. Author interview, Brig. (Capt.) Anthony Ling 1st Bn Queen’s Royal Surrey Regiment/Special Forces, 5/24/22, 6/10/22, 5/11/23.

24. Author interviews: Sue Wood (officer’s wife), army civilian administrator on Borneo, 7/18/23; Col. (Lt.) Robert Langstaff Intelligence Corps, 5/9/23, 5/15/23; Sgt. (Rfn.) Paul Britstow 3rd Bn Royal Green Jackets, 2/12/22; Capt. (Lt.) David Southwood 1st Bn Royal Hampshire Regiment, 2/26/22; Cpl. (Rfn.) Merv Sprague 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets, 3/15/22; W.O.2 (Rfn.) Colin Payne 2nd Bn Royal Green Jackets, 4/18/22.

25. David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, U.K.: Macmillan, 1994), 25.

26. E-mail communication, Cpl. (Rfn.) Muskett 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets to author, 9/25/23; author interview, Muskett (see above).

27. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, 26, 45.

28. Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 2.

down his machine gun, “he reassembled it faster than I did” and “he’d never handled it before: that man knew his way around a Bren gun.”²⁹

Dayak lived collective lives relying on each other, as did soldiers: “communal, supportive organization,” and if a soldier saw something and said that he liked it, “they’d give it to you.”³⁰ Officers and men saw and liked a primitive socialist lifestyle—“communism with a little ‘c,’” reminisced a female veteran—with dancing, music, and copious quantities of locally produced rice wine, offered freely to them in longhouses: “Iban were a law unto themselves—free spirits.”³¹ Women were not sequestered away. People were free. Longhouse life was barrack life, with a *penghulu* headman (the “one who leads”) in charge, not an army sergeant. The Dayak physiognomy, bravery, strong bodies, hunting skills, fitness, and their graceful, easy movement over rough ground impressed the British: “well-developed shoulders and legs” plus a “tremendous sense of humour.”³² The Dayak were clean in soldiers’ views, bathing regularly; they took pride in their physical appearance. Iban men who spent too much time in the longhouse with the women were “female-men” (*laki indu* or “husband woman”). Soldiers related to this life. Iban men “displayed an exceptional musculature, with generally low body fat.”³³ Dayak open society, free spirit, and powerful bodies had an immensely positive impact on British soldiers, transforming them from temporary visitors to engaged participants in local life.

Dayak were superior soldiers and beings, something left behind in the rush to modernity, and now pleasingly reappearing in the virgin setting of primary forest. Soldiers saw their modernity ruining this idyll: “I felt angry that their ideal existence was being spoiled ... charming people they trusted us.”³⁴ British soldiers gifted Dayak preternatural skills to guide and track in the deep forest, avoiding snakes on patrol that the British could not see: “You haven’t got the eye sight that they have,” but were you to put the tracker “in Park Lane he’d be run over by the first taxi.”³⁵ “High grade jungle men; they knew the answer—thoroughly good people.”³⁶ Dayak had a “natural prowess,” and tracking with the army found the “natural” route across the rugged terrain on jungle patrols, cutting down on time and effort, one correcting an officer in English that his “compass no fucking

29. Author interview, Sgt. (Rfn.) John Fitt 1st and 2nd Bns Royal Green Jackets, 2/16/22.

30. Author interview, Wood (see above); author interview, Gen. (Lt.) Sir Jeremy Mackenzie 1st Bn Queen’s Own Highlanders/Special Forces, 3/14/22, 3/16/22, 5/11/22, 5/25/22.

31. Author interview, Wood (see above); author interview, L/Cpl. (Gdm.) Ian Fisher 1st Bn Scots Guards, 12/11/21.

32. *Royal Hampshire Regiment Journal*, 55, no. 2 (Nov. 1966): 91–92.

33. Vinson and Joanne Sutlive, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies* [four vols] (Kuching: Tun Jugah Foundation, 2001), vol. 1, 235.

34. Author interview, Maj. (Lt.) Paul Wilcocks 1st Bn Durham Light Infantry, 6/8/22.

35. Author interview, Mackenzie (see above).

36. Author interview, Lt.-Col. (Lt.) A. I. C. Gordon 1st Bn Scots Guards, 12/3/21, 5/3/23, 5/24/23.



British Scots Guardsman soldier John Miller on Borneo with his pet sloe loris [courtesy of John Miller]

good.”³⁷ It was a sensual encounter: the “sheer beauty of movement of an Iban police sergeant who was in front of me. He moved quietly and belongingly through swampy jungle, and had a gesture of beckoning with all his fingers together that was a thing of beauty worth capturing.”³⁸ Soldier after soldier in interviews (and in their written media) commented on the innate Dayak ability to track and find, to sense the forest, whether it was a route through the jungle or the Indonesian enemy. Soldiers were “unlikely to get ambushed or surprised with an Iban up front.”³⁹ Soldiers established the Dayak individually and collectively as special, not of this world.

Borneo changed perspectives: wide-angled photographs that typically emphasized the vulnerability of British soldiers and the dangerous immensity of their task now presented to the viewer the sublime immensity of the place. The jungle was a new world of color, light, sounds, and smells, of the verdant green of the jungle canopy stretching to infinity in the many photographs taken by soldiers looking down on this hidden world, visualizing from the modern technology of helicopters speeding overhead. The enormity of the jungle struck one soldier going up from Limbang to a forward base in a helicopter—“beyond comprehension,” “like the distance to the moon”—the “hundreds and hundreds of miles of trees” but “it’s all gone now.”⁴⁰ Beneath the canopy, orangutan “forest person” primates loomed out of the jungle and might lob a coconut down at soldiers (“they were playful in that way”), flamboyant hornbills flew past, a cute little sloe loris lived on Scots Guardsman John Miller’s head, sun (honey) bears shared jungle military bases, drinking soldiers’ beer: “it would race through the canteen,” drunk; men alarmed by little bears in the forest

37. 1st Battalion Leicesters album of photographs and cuttings, 1955–66, DE 7342/20, Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester, and Rutland; author interview, Maj. (Lt.) James Shrimpton 1st Bn Royal Hampshire Regiment, 2/16/22.

38. Skirmish in Sarawak by Capt. Robin Eveleigh dated 20 April 2003 accompanying a letter to Lt. Col. Chamberlin, 170A12W/D/3235, Royal Green Jacket Archive, Hampshire Local Record Office, Winchester.

39. Author interview, Brig. (Lt.) Tim Glass 1st Bn Royal Hampshire Regiment, 2/22/22.

40. Author interview, W.O.2 (Pte.) Mel Gould 1st Bn Royal Leicestershire Regiment, 1/23/22.

jokingly sang “the teddy bear song” (“If you go down to the woods today”).⁴¹ Even the wondrous animals conspired to delight soldiers.

British soldiers called the Dayak different names that reflected the autochthonous tribes that they encountered and lived with for prolonged periods while serving on the border, up to six months on a single infantry battalion tour, or longer for special forces and Intelligence Corps’ men. They shunned racist epithets such as “wogs” or “gollies” for the Dayak, terms that they used for Arabs in Egypt and Aden, “greasy” and “slimy” Cypriots elsewhere, or “bog-wogs” in Northern Ireland.⁴² The only mention of “wog” is in a 1964 *Observer* article pointing out to readers that soldiers had been told not to use the term—“respect forbids the word ‘wog’”—which, of course, suggests that someone in the army thought that it could be a problem.⁴³ The contrast is evident today: veterans over a beer in the pub after an interview segued into racial stereotypes about Arabs encountered during service in Aden after Borneo—including the label “golly,” which they then self-corrected considering current language usage—having earlier consciously eschewed racist epithets and gushed over with considered positivity about the Dayak; the same thing happened at a different reunion, with easy talk of “gollies” in Aden but never a hint of this label for the wonderful Dayak.⁴⁴ Soldiers usually named the Iban trackers serving with them by their proper local names rather than anglicizing them, a small mark of respect. The “greatest compliment” was never calling them “choggies,” recorded the Hampshire Regiment journal, slang for low-ranking, low-quality, like a laborer, more especially a Chinese person, and likely an amalgam of “Chinese” and “wog,” as with “chigroes” from “Chinese” and “negro” in popular literature of the time.⁴⁵ Soldiers used positive language to characterize the Dayak; they did the same for Fijian soldiers serving in British regiments. The army did not educate soldiers to be like this, or rather its half-hearted attempt did not go extremely far. It employed local anthropologist Tom Harrisson to write two sets of pocket-sized

41. Photograph sent to author by Sgt. (Gdm.) John Miller 1st Bn Scots Guards, reproduced in Sandy Low, ed., *Bearskins in Borneo: A Collection of Lighthearted Stories about the Scots Guards in Malaya and Borneo, 1964–67* (Middlesbrough, U.K.: Quoin/Scots Guards Malaya and Borneo Veterans’ Association, 2016), 217; author interviews, Sgt. (Rfn.) John Corr 3rd Bn Royal Green-jackets (2/16/22), Shrimpton, and Lt.-Col. (Capt.) Hastings Neville 1st Bn Royal Hampshire Regiment, 2/26/22.

42. Erik Linstrom, *Age of Emergency: Living with Violence at the End of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 101; Bennett, *Uncivil War*, 25; <https://everything2.com/title/Bog+Wog> (accessed 2/13/24).

43. Andrew Wilson and Stuart Heydinger, “Malaysia: Our Stake in the Jungle,” *The Observer Magazine* (11 October 1964): 14–25, 17.

44. To note: these were not veterans cited elsewhere in this article.

45. *Royal Hampshire Regiment Journal*, 55, no. 2 (November 1966): 92; Ian Fleming, *Dr. No* (London: Book Club, 1958), 10.

handy guides on the peoples of Brunei⁴⁶ and Borneo⁴⁷ as cultural awareness pointers for soldiers. Still, they rarely, if ever, appear in soldiers' papers, and only two veterans recalled seeing them, one of whom sent the author the Borneo pamphlet.⁴⁸ In jungle warfare training in Malaya at Kota Tinggi or at Kota Belud in Sabah, soldiers received only tactical military training before dispatch to Borneo border bases. There was no cultural preparation of the sort that soldiers received for more recent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, an interesting contrast in the value and method of formal/informal cultural acclimatization, not least as Borneo was a complete victory while Iraq and Afghanistan were abject defeats.

British soldiers' memories of Borneo are an emotional history that informed the successful mobilization of the Dayak against the Indonesians. Veterans were, as a rule, unemotional in interviews, or put another way, dry and fact-based, fixed more on physical objects, self rather than other, with little evocative description of place or empathy for object person. Some interviewees delivered exemplary technical details. There was a generational reticence in interviews, including the few female veterans interviewed who replied with considerations of an older world, as did male veterans' wives if they were present at discussions. Men spoke of the physical, not the mental, military objects and fellow soldiers, deployments, battles, and bases. But there was a marked change in voice and tone—sound, speed of delivery, interest, word choice, the use of more adjectives, for instance—when they spoke of Borneo and brought the place to life. Borneo broke the before and after of military service. The change in register appeared in the clipped tones of officers from upper-class backgrounds and pukka regiments, the interviewee softening, slowing down, moving from a slightly irascible tone with the interviewer to a gentler emotional delivery as memory engaged the veteran. The regiment or corps subtly affected the expression of memory, but Borneo as a place transformed all interviewees, and this was also clear in the masses of personal papers and photographs sent to the author. Everyone expressed sentiment in some form, except one officer who left the army soon after Borneo and who, from almost 300 interviews used for this study, expressed no emotional regard for the place, making this point explicit to the author. He is the exception that proves the rule.

Australian and New Zealand veterans' attachment to place is less pronounced and more matter of fact. But in a recent visit by Kiwi veterans to Sarawak, "none had a bad word to say" about the Dayak. The Australians saw the Christian-animist Kadazan of Sabah as "very gentle, very happy, very pleasant" people

46. Tom Harrison, *Background to the Brunei Rebellion*. Published in: *The Straits Times*, Singapore (Bangkok: Siripat, 1963); serialized in *The Straits Times* as "Background to the Brunei Rebellion" (21 and 22 February 1963), "The Great Group of Dayaks in Big Box Houses" (23 February 1963), and "The Jungle World—and its Fierce but Loyal Tribes" (25 February 1963).

47. Tom Harrison, *The Borneans* (Singapore: The Straits Times Press, 1963), originally published as Harrison, "The Peoples of Malaysia: 1) The Borneans" in *The Straits Times*, "This is Malaysia" Special Issue [c. September 1963].

48. From Lt. Michael Charles 1st Bn Royal Leicestershire Regiment.

“with a wonderful way of life,” their “gongs going” at night, also noting that local Muslim villages were less friendly.⁴⁹ The emotional content of the thirty-eight interviews held in Gurkhali was harder to fix through an interpreter. Still, it existed in interviews held face-to-face by the author, one in mixed English-Gurkhali, if less evident in archival oral history recordings. British interviewees reflected, became fascinated, and more fascinating, when talking about Borneo. Indonesian memoirs are dry and full of military facts, with less wonder, while Sarawak Chinese communist insurgents’ recollections fixed the “mountain, water, forest” of the “fickle” jungle as a practical problem of food and poor diet—lack of starch and vegetables, for instance—with little or no mention of Dayak, excepting one description of friendly Iban who sided with the communists.⁵⁰ The point to consider here is how the positive British response to the Borneo jungle was peculiar. Other combatants reacted negatively to the place.

British soldiers placed Borneo in the span of their lives. They became thoughtful. There was less banter, more consideration, and increased sensitivity. The uninterest and disinterest of overseas deployments changed to interest. The subject then returned to a brisker executive summary style when asked about what he did after Confrontation. Veterans’ attachment to the foreignness of Borneo contrasted with the Britishness of their lives. Borneo was an interlude in service life and not just duty; it was something different. This thick description of emotional place peels away the layers covering soldiers’ views on and behavior towards the Dayak. British soldiers’ sense of self in relation to Confrontation was positive, and this emotional inner response to place and person coincidentally mirrored the external official policy to win over the Dayak. This was place as much as it was person, a fusion of the two, “an environment so completely different to anything we had experienced” anywhere else, and pronounced in men who were in the jungle, less so those on Borneo in main bases back on the coast such as Royal Military Police.⁵¹ Were one to apply Occam’s razor at this point—entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity, so do not look for a complicated answer when a simple one will do—then soldiers behaved decently as the Dayak were friendly, soldiers were honorable, casualties were low, and the British were winning, but this does not

49. E-mail communication, Col. (Lt.) Kim Hoskin 7th Gurkha Rifles to author, 9/21/23; Brig. Francis James Cross (Maj., 7th Field Squadron, Royal Engineers, Borneo, 1964–1966), SO3360, Australian War Memorial (AWM), Canberra.

50. Biantoro, “Masyarakat Perbatasan di Sebatik masa Konfrontasi” [transcripts here of “wawancara” oral history interviews are in local dialect with some inaccurate/incomplete spellings]; Citrawijaya, *Kompi X*; Bambang Wiwoho and Banjar Chaeruddin, *Memori Jenderal Yoga* [sic, *Sugomo*] [*Memories of General Yoga Sugomo*] (Jakarta: PT Bina Rena Pariwisata, 1990); Association of Editors [no editor is listed], *往事* [*Stories in the Past*] (Sarawak: Sibü Friendship Association, 2000), 93–120 [a primary collection of Chinese communist insurgent veterans’ memories of Confrontation].

51. Cpl. (Rfn.) Muskett 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets, e-mail communication and notes to author, 9/25/23.

preclude the idea of the emotional turn. It recognizes the point made more broadly in this article about soldiers' peculiar response to Borneo that affected/effected their view of and behavior towards the Dayak. The Dayak responded kindly, or, more precisely, we can say that genuine decency by the subject group will leave object communities predisposed to view with favor and take advantage, and sure not to disadvantage. British soldiers thought that the Dayak were superior people living in a remarkable place. The Malays, by contrast, considered the Dayak as inferior, living in a primitive place, and so behaved harshly to them. As the Malays took little part in the fighting during Confrontation, this was less significant until British soldiers left in 1966, after which Dayak-Malay relations took a new turn, a subject beyond this study's remit.

British soldiers' reactions to and behavior towards Dayak women extends our understanding of the interaction between counterinsurgent soldier and the conflict zone. By incorporating soldiers' positive reactions towards Dayak women, one gains deeper insight into the soldier-Dayak interchange that created a meaningful hearts-and-minds campaign. British soldiers' reading of Dayak women is wonder of object, and of how place and person reflected on subject soldiers and made them consider language and body. There is no evidence of pre-set racialized misogyny or of sexual assaults on Borneo by British troops. The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. There are cases of abuse by Malaysian troops—Malay, Muslim, from the peninsula, not the Malaysian Rangers that at this time was a largely Dayak unit—toward Dayak and Chinese women on Borneo, so such crimes were recorded, and several Dayak in interviews were emphatic about how Malays would “go after” local women, in contrast to the correctness of British soldiers. Malaysian soldiers attacked Kuching residents at the town's marketplace; the press reported alleged rapes of local women (often Chinese) by Malaysian soldiers; a commander on the Indonesian side had to stop his men from assaulting a Murut woman, threatening to shoot one of them “if he ever molested the woman.”⁵² Moreover, Dayak, in interviews, proactively made the point that British soldiers never abused women in any fashion. The author pursued this, sensing a hidden history of abuse/hostility by British servicemen towards non-white women in a jungle setting where soldiers could have escaped punishment for such things, but it was a dead end. Interviews, regimental journals, and personal papers elicited occasional jokey allusions to falling in love with Dayak women (see note on marriage below). Still, any intimate sexual exchanges with women during Confrontation were with sex workers, partly around Miri, Sibuluan, and Kuching, mainly in Singapore.

The author wondered about soldiers' reactions to bare-chested Dayak women as Confrontation occurred before the social and sexual revolution of the later 1960s

52. “Unbecoming Behaviour of Malaysian Soldiers,” *Sarawak Tribune* (28 December 1963), 3; “Boxing Night Incident: Thirteen Soldiers on Trial,” *Sarawak Tribune* (3 April 1964), 3; “Assaults on Civilians Confirmed,” *Borneo Bulletin* (30 November 1963), 1; “Be on the Look Out,” *Sarawak Tribune* (29 November 1963), 1; “No Evidence,” *Sarawak Tribune* (6 December 1963), 1; Ritchie, *Tun Ahmad Zaidi*, 122.

and at a time when sexual matters remained “a shame that started at sixteen and spread to everything” in the words of the poet Philip Larkin.⁵³ But seeing women’s breasts provoked humorous banter then and now, and the reply that after the first few times of seeing this, the men ignored it and got on with soldiering, so a typical military “get the job done” response: “once you’ve seen one pair of tits you’ve seen them all,” with soldiers “goggling” women at first but “you get used to that after a while.”⁵⁴ Or as one officer put it, the men “were told in no uncertain terms they would see plenty of tits” but that local women were “strictly off limits.”⁵⁵ One man recalled that until Borneo, he had only ever once accidentally seen a pair of breasts, his sister’s, but on Borneo, “all the women were topless” and “you’d never seen bare chested women,” but “it was so innocent,” adding that the women were tattooed, too, concluding: “What we learned off them. They never learned off of us.... it was one big adventure.”⁵⁶ Nakedness was innocence, novelty, adventure, and amusement. Here was the Garden of Eden, the primary jungle canopy “like a cathedral” ceiling.⁵⁷ One infantry officer remarked to the author how his men changed their field hand signals, so a soldier on point at the front of a patrol, if he saw a Dayak woman coming down the track, would signal back by cupping his hands over his chest with a firm or sagging motion indicating whether the oncoming woman was young or old.⁵⁸

Readers at this point might care to compare this story with the encounter between U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese women “out on the trails” in what Amanda Boczar has termed an “American brothel”: “they might stick a rifle in a woman’s head and say, ‘Take your clothes off.’ That’s the way it’s done over there. Cause they’re not treated as human beings over there, they’re treated as dirt.”⁵⁹ “You had the power to rape” and Vietnamese women—“gooks,” “slopes,” and “dinks” with *vagina dentata*—were “pieces of meat” in the words of U.S. soldiers, “racism and misogyny” rendering Vietnamese women “the lowest people on the planet”: “kill them all.”⁶⁰ By contrast, an Australian commander on Borneo fined a soldier a shilling in a village court for accidentally touching a girl during a communal dance.⁶¹

53. See Larkin’s poem “Annus Mirabilis.”

54. Author interview, Lt. Mike Daunt 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets, 2/10/22; author interview, Cpl. (Rfn.) Garry Jones 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets, 4/22/22.

55. Author interview, British infantry officer 191.

56. Author interview, British infantry soldier 231.

57. Author interview, Lt.-Col. (Lt.) Richard Spencer 1st Bn Scots Guards, 12/14/21.

58. Author interview, British infantry officer 189.

59. Amanda Boczar, *An American Brothel: Sex and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 145.

60. Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 162; Boczar, *An American Brothel*, 39, 41; William Thomas Allison, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 12–13.

61. Brig. Cross, SO3360, AWM.

Women's attempts in Borneo to put on bras in response to soldiers wanting to take photographs in longhouses were amusing, for modesty or to show modernity, soldiers opposed the practice and associated it with the corrupting influence of Christian missionaries taking away the innocence of the place. Soldiers also wondered at Dayak women's heavy earrings and elongated ear lobes, but curiously so, interestingly, not mockingly absurd. The discussion of British soldiers' regard for Dayak women and the brief contrast presented here between Borneo and Vietnam show that men's reactions to women in war zones differed markedly. The place of conflict affects male behavior, not just in a simple way that if the place is attractive then soldiers will be, too, but in how, at an unconscious level, a destination can actualize the innate best in people. As much as a "male gaze," empowering men and diminishing and sexualizing women, Borneo made soldiers gaze on themselves, fascinated by the place and their place in it—a curious, introspective, puzzled late colonial "traveler gaze" if you like.⁶² Dayak women gazed back on the soldiers. Blond-haired Royal Marine David Lee recalled entering villages devoid of women and children until the headman knew that the patrol was British, at which point children appeared wanting the sweets that they knew British soldiers handed out, and women came up to him and touched his hair to see if it was real, some form of Occidentalism on their part.⁶³

Soldiers replied in military fashion that orders were to respect local women as part of hearts and minds, so they behaved accordingly—officers in interview were especially likely to make this point—but the tactical deployment on Borneo gave soldiers and NCOs considerable leeway to do what they liked as they were often on their own, far from an officer's gaze. Soldiers lived among local people and stayed in their longhouses, often for weeks on end, sometimes with just a corporal in charge, especially with Royal Marine units. The British usually sited military bases near *kampongs*. The author wondered at this propriety, considering violence against women typical in war settings.⁶⁴ The contemporaneous systemic rape of women by U.S. troops in Vietnam, as at My Lai in 1968, alongside brutal exchanges with local sex workers, is a striking contrast, as British soldiers in interviews were wont to point out to the author: not only did they win and beat the enemy, but they also behaved properly, contra the heavy-handed Americans in Vietnam, some admitting that Indonesian forces were nowhere near the order of insurgent Vietnamese troops.⁶⁵ Pushed on why they acted properly, perplexed

62. A recent reproduced image of a bare-chested teenage girl in a veterans' journal is jarring: *The Keris: National Malaya and Borneo Veterans Association* (2018), 13.

63. Author interview, Lee.

64. Discussed more broadly and most recently in Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War does to Women* (London: Collins, 2020).

65. Howard Jones, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2, 4, 6, 79–82, 96, 112, 115, 146, 179, 181, 248–53, 266; Boczar, *An American Brothel*, 140–65; Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 168.

soldiers fell back on the curt reply that these were the orders and that this was their being. The point to make here is that it was Borneo acting on soldiers' latent behaviors as much as it was the other way around, and when this was put to veterans today, they agreed, often quizzically, as if they had never thought of it this way. The unconscious mind decided, and the conscious mind ratified. This is not to say that there would otherwise have been gendered abuse, but soldiers' amused respect for women was a function of the place, as it was culturally personal to the men serving on Borneo. This non-sexual view was localized to jungle and Dayak; once back in big cities such as Singapore—civilization, so to speak—men sought out sex workers, some described by a Chinese schoolgirl in Sibü as “comfort women” but “willing to do this,” and so short and young that the soldiers (who seem to have been Australian) were “pedophiles.”⁶⁶ To note: a handful of the men interviewed married local women, usually Chinese, two of whom were present in author interviews in the U.K., and one man married a Bidayuh, alongside references to comrades marrying Christian Dayak. The point here is that intimate relations were not simply transient or transactional.

Britain's Nepali Gurkha soldiers, who did most of the infantry fighting during Confrontation,⁶⁷ framed the Dayak in different ways, partly as primitive “wild people” who were “less civilized” than Nepalis—*jangali manchhe* in Gurkhali, an “uncouth” or “ill-mannered” man—living in muddy longhouses, and akin to the Indonesians, partly as similar to themselves, seeing Dayak women as looking like their own, “the face and the dress,” but also peculiar, “with really long ears” as they had hanging earrings that stretched the ear lobes: “if that ear touched their breast they'd get a reward.”⁶⁸ As with British soldiers, we have here the fascination/amusement of place. The deeper inland that the Gurkhas went, the more primitive it became, no salt or sugar, but the Gurkhas delighted in drinking rum with and having “fun” with shared “fast” comparable dancing and musical drumming with the Iban: the sound “is similar and so is the beating system” and “exactly similar principle but ours [Nepali drums] are smaller,” the interviewee at this point making happy motions to the author in his English living room as he recalled his jungle service sixty years ago, his serving Gurkha son sitting alongside him, his wife and daughters preparing a Nepali lunch.⁶⁹ Nepali society had liberal views on alcohol but conservative ones on women. Still, as Gurkha Manbahadur Thapa put it, while he did not like the crowded longhouses, “as for the bare breasts” of Dayak women, “after a few days I

66. Chen Jie Xue [Ann Kit Suet Chin-Chan], *海外华人的中国魂 [From China to Borneo and Beyond]* (Auckland: Ann Chin, 2015), 156.

67. Eight Gurkha battalions executed 31 of the total 76 British infantry battalion tours on Borneo, equaling 41 percent of operational infantry action.

68. N.C.O. Hindupal Rai (1/10 Gurkha Rifles) 27538, Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWMSA); Rfn. Purnabahadur Rai (2/10 Gurkha Rifles) 27500, IWMSA (in Gurkhali); author group interview, Sankhabahadur Limbu, Ram Bahadur Gurung et al (see above).

69. Author interview, Maj. (Rfn.) Shri Prasard Gurung 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 6/21/21 (in English and Gurkhali).



British Gurkha riflemen and Iban together outside a longhouse [courtesy of Geoffrey Ashley]

did not notice them.”⁷⁰ One of the British Gurkha officers recalled that the Dayak women’s backpack method of portorage resembled that of Nepalese women.⁷¹ One Gurkha saw the Borneo jungle as “big,” saying this in an elongated way in Gurkhali in the interview. It was more extensive than anything in Nepal, so a regard for place not person.⁷² Veterans’ photographs are a story of happiness and curiosity, with many taken of Dayak and their daily lives. Photographs taken by British Gurkha officers show friendly, intimate mixing of Gurkhas with Dayak in and around longhouses, dancing together, and Gurkhas with large fish that they had caught, sometimes using grenades—one the size of the grinning Nepali Gurkha soldier holding it up—and which they gave to the Dayak.⁷³

New Zealand Māori soldiers, as “people of the same color” to the Dayak in the words of a white (Pākehā) New Zealand soldier, found commonality in shared tattoo designs and root words like the one for food and eat, *kai* in Māori, (*pe*)*makai* in Iban.⁷⁴ Māori Special Air Service (SAS) men deplaned from a helicopter and

70. J. P. Cross and Buddhiman Gurung, eds., *Gurkhas at War in Their Own Words: The Gurkha Experience 1939 to the Present* (London: Greenhill, 2002), 232.

71. Author interview, Brig. (Lt.) Bruce Jackman 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 5/24/21.

72. Tejbahadur Gurung (N.C.O. 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles) 27663, IWMSA (in Gurkhali).

73. Photographic collection, Maj. (Capt.) Geoffrey Ashley 2nd Gurkha Rifles; author interview, Maj. Ashley 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 6/29/21, 10/14/22.

74. Oral history, Moffitt, 2006.655, NZNAM; author interview, Col. (Lt.) Kim Hoskin 7th Gurkha Rifles, 10/13/21, 10/23–28/22; author interview, Sgt. (Gdm.) John Miller 1st Bn Scots Guards, 12/12/21, 8/14/22; correspondence, Col. Hoskin to author, 9/21/23.



British Gurkha riflemen and Dayak fishing together [courtesy of Geoffrey Ashley]

delighted Lundayeh school children by performing their “haka” war dance.⁷⁵ Fijian soldiers served in British units such as the SAS and the Royal Green Jackets (often labeled Greenjackets),⁷⁶ one as a platoon commander, and the Greenjackets had black riflemen like Londoner John Brown—black soldiers at this time often hailed from non-U.K. parts of the empire/commonwealth—and at least one Chinese recruit from Hong Kong, Peter Yeo.⁷⁷ Such things mattered, not least on the British side, as brown-skinned combatants such as the Chinese, Dayak, Gurkhas, Fijians, and Māori risked being shot by accident as the enemy. Gurkha soldiers confused the Indonesians, who, upon seeing them in the jungle, were unsure if they were friends or foes at the critical instant of contact. Meanwhile, “really scared” Dayak ran from the Gurkhas thinking that the Japanese had returned, to be told in some form of Malay, “we are the Gurkhas,” the villagers replied: “how can you be Gurkhas? You look like Japanese.”⁷⁸ Indonesians attacked Gurkhas operating

75. Author interview, Jayl Langub, Lundayeh, schoolboy during Confrontation, 6/11/22, 10/28/22.

76. Properly, the Green Jackets Brigade of three battalions, all of which served on Borneo: 1st Green Jackets (43rd and 52nd, formerly the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry), 2nd Green Jackets (King’s Royal Rifle Corps), and the 3rd Green Jackets (Rifle Brigade) that in 1966 became the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd battalions of the Royal Green Jackets regiment.

77. Dickens, *SAS: The Jungle Frontier*, 156, 223, 231; author interview, Muskett; author interview, L/Cpl. (Rfn.) Jim Sinclair 2nd Bn Royal Green Jackets, 3/8/22.

78. Author interview, Sgt. Jamansing Thapa 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 7/28/21 (in Gurkhali).

ten kilometers inside Kalimantan, shouting the insult from Muslim troops of “pig Gurkhas,” “which we understood,” so probably using the phrase *babi*, pig in Indonesian, Malay, and Iban, which the Gurkha concerned, Jasbahadur Rai, comprehended as he had served ten years in Malaya.⁷⁹ Indonesians would not have known the Gurkhali for pig: *suñgur* for the domestic variety, *banyell/bandel* for wild ones.⁸⁰ One Indonesian Kalimantan volunteer differentiated the “large soldiers from India called Gurkhas, who were very tall” (“part of the Britons”), while another man had not seen a Gurkha but “had only waited for them.”⁸¹ Gurkhas were, as a rule, short, not tall, but war, and their fearsome reputation as they chased down and wiped out Indonesian attackers may have made them seem extraordinarily large to the enemy.

Confrontation in the Dayak view, Dayak in the soldiers’ view

The British framed the Dayak as loyal collaborators and employed and armed them in auxiliary units such as the Border Scouts. The remarkable presence in longhouses of photographs of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, even Queen Victoria and Lord Kitchener, and that headmen asked soldiers for portraits of the queen, confirmed in soldiers’ view Dayak allegiance to the Crown. Soldiers suspected Dayak of treachery after Indonesian attacks on Gurkhas and Border Scouts at Long Jawi in September 1963 and against the Parachute Regiment at Plaman Mapu in April 1965, but this was unusual. British soldiers self-defined as caring and kind with the, as they saw it, friendly Dayak, and the welcome afforded validated the self-assessment: “And despite the fact of our alien-ness, and the fact we were armed, we still received their kind hospitality.”⁸² This was a fiduciary, beneficial relationship for the Dayak, in the British view, that brought protection from Indonesian attacks, employment by the army, and opportunities to be warriors. Soldiers read the Iban in one way only, as fighters, but this partial perspective is not wrong. The Iban “like a fight” and war is “a status activity,” in the words of one Iban, and Confrontation was a chance to protect communities. At the same time, headhunting could increase “spiritual” strength for the Iban, but unlike the Bidayuh, where one head would suffice for the whole community, each Iban needed a head.⁸³

Confrontation meant different things to Indigenous peoples. Soldiers brought rewards, but they upset Dayak life and brought risks: battles, curfews, anti-personnel mines, electronically fired booby traps, *panji* sticks around military bases and

79. Cross and Gurung, *Gurkhas at War*, 261–262; communication, Lt.-Col. Cross to author, 8/23/23.

80. Gurkhali language information from email correspondence, Lt.-Col. Cross to author, 8/23/23.

81. Biantoro, “Masyarakat Perbatasan di Sebatik masa Konfrontasi,” 116, 141.

82. Muskett in Garry Jones, ed., *Recollections from Jungle Soldiers* (Hereford, U.K.: Allied Special Forces Association, 2002), 7.

83. Author interview, Jaban.

alongside village tracks.⁸⁴ There was the noise of voice aircraft flying overhead, night-time illumination flares, propaganda and “safe-conduct” leaflets falling from the sky, seismic listening detectors,⁸⁵ *kampung* relocations, *flame fougasse* petrol-incendiary defenses,⁸⁶ grenade necklaces, and U.S.-supplied ball-bearing-filled Claymore mines with condoms over the electrics to keep out moisture. Explosives decayed in the heat of the jungle, killing Greenjacket riflemen Freddie Hunt and Charlie Saunders, who were removing accumulated defensive ordnance around their Greenjacket company base. Military police had to “pull the soldiers out” who were visiting Dayak sex workers in out-of-bounds “mixed” longhouses on Kuching’s Sekama road.⁸⁷ There were food denial patrols, mostly directed at the Chinese.

Men accidentally shot dead Dayak who did not understand British soldiers shouting “halt” three times in Malay or who were breaking curfew. As a Gurkha put it, they had orders “to kill everything” after 6 p.m.⁸⁸ “Curfew breakers are liable to severe penalties and such offenders who do not halt when ordered to do so, are liable to be shot,” as the local press reported.⁸⁹ Royal Marines killed two innocent Dayak returning home late, wounding another, and causing “pandemonium” in the *kampung*. Women “were the most disturbed, rushing forward to try and cradle and caress the bodies.” There was “mounting anger” among the local men at what had happened, so the marines ordered a withdrawal to allow the *kampung* to deal with the issue without any marines present. The “incident caused us considerable concern” and “damaged our good relations with the local Dyaks.”⁹⁰ Greenjackets shot an innocent “civvie” after shouting halt in Malay three times. A soldier held the victim’s “bits in” with his jungle hat, but the man died: “Don’t know why he didn’t stop—just kept coming.”⁹¹

Early morning rubber tapping stopped, as did night-time hunting, “for to be out at night was to be hunted rather than to hunt.”⁹² Shells rained down.

84. Brian Edwards, ed., *After Limbang: A Royal Marines Anthology of Experiences of the Confrontation with Indonesia, December 1962–September 1966* (Southsea, U.K.: Royal Marines Historical Society Special Publications 36, 2010), 83.

85. Bryan Perret, *The Hampshire Tigers: The Story of the Hampshire Regiment, 1945–1992* (Winchester, U.K.: Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum Trustees, 1997), 193.

86. E-mail communication, Lt.-Col. Patrick Conn 2nd Bn Parachute Regiment to author, 9/1/23.

87. Author interview, Sgt. (Cpl.) Michael Allen Royal Military Police, 8/25/22; *The Royal Military Police Journal* 16, no. 2 (Third Quarter 1965): 69–71.

88. Tejbahadur Gurung (N.C.O. 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles), 27663, IWMSA (in Gurkhali).

89. “10 Day Curfew,” *Sarawak Tribune* (21 March 1963), 1.

90. Keith Wilkins, *Memories of Indonesian Confrontation, Brunei, 11 December 1962–1 April 1963*, RMM 2015/123/2/7/20/9 in Box RMM 2015/123/1–12: *After Limbang: 40 Com-mando Royal Marines Borneo, 1964–1966*, National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth; Edwards, *After Limbang*, 79–80.

91. Author interview, Sinclair. The interviewee was commenting on another soldier who shot the local man.

92. Peter H. H. Howes, *In a Fair Ground* (London: Excalibur, 1994), 349.

British artillery strikes supported cross-border operations deep into Kalimantan. The British 105-mm gun reached out to 10,500 meters and the 5.5-inch gun to 18,000 yards, so sixteen kilometers over the border, *pace* the distance back from the border to the gun pits. Gunners fired on track junctions, delivered night-time harassing “interdiction” fire onto key border points, and fired shells randomly to help triangulate location for lost patrols. British patrols withdrawing from contacts in Kalimantan called in gunfire to hit pursuing Indonesians. One Royal Artillery battery of four to six guns fired 7,507 105-mm and 5.5-inch shells over eight months: “The area within about 10 kilometers of the border was subject to a permanent curfew” at night and “during this time all guns were free to fire, taking care of dwellings.”⁹³ The Indonesians fired heavy mortars as they chased out British forces on secret over-the-border Operation Claret missions; the British mounted machine guns in helicopters for strafing runs; soldiers fired man-portable rocket launchers in firefights; the British Army cut down and blew with explosives jungle clearings along the frontier zone for helipads; Indonesians fired Yugoslav-supplied (M57) R.P.G.-2 rockets and rifle grenades into border *kampongs*; soldiers booby-trapped deserted Indonesian military posts over the border;⁹⁴ the Indonesians laid mines along the border. Dayak may have impressed soldiers, but the Dayak experience of war is more complex than the one imagined by the British. More interviewing of Dayak would be the foundation to telling this story, which would broaden our understanding of Confrontation and make it less Eurocentric.

Confrontation traumatized Dayak. “Of course I was afraid, but I still need to find food,” as one Kalimantan Dayak put it, adding that Indonesian KKO (*Korps Komando Operasi*, Corps Command Operation of the Navy) marines were “scary.”⁹⁵ British soldiers over the border on an ambush abducted an “absolutely terrified” Kalimantan man and took him back to Sarawak, eventually releasing him at the border to walk home after interrogation back at base; orders were to “seize a person and bring him back” if the ambush was not sprung.⁹⁶ Soldiers gave the seized man a helicopter ride back to base once at the border, at which point “his eyes grew wide with fear and he flung his arms around my neck,” recalled the platoon commander.⁹⁷ Soldiers elsewhere grabbed a Kalimantan mother and her two children who threatened to expose their ambush site, and they manhandled the “screaming” woman who was like a “Dyak Glaswegian” (so tough); they treated the group well, giving them

93. MD/3170: 129 (Dragon) Light Battery RA: Typescript Diary of Operational Tour in Borneo 1965–66 (RAHT A/C 2002.05.17), p. 144 and Annex D, Royal Artillery Archive, Larkhill Camp.

94. Author interview, Col. (Lt.) Alan Thompson 1st Bn Royal Leicestershire Regiment, 1/20/22.

95. Biantoro, “Masyarakat Perbatasan di Sebatik masa Konfrontasi,” 120.

96. Richard Hayes, ed., *The Last Campaign of the Rifle Brigade, 1965–66: The Individual Stories of the Authors* (Cheltenham, U.K.: John Bodley Trust, 2009), 70; author interview, Brig. (Lt.) John Taylor 3rd Bn Royal Green Jackets, 3/31/22.

97. Hayes, *The Last Campaign*, 70.

chocolates and sweets, later releasing them, telling the woman and children that they could go, “but she was terrified, and wouldn’t move, she thought that we were going to shoot them!”⁹⁸ The soldiers also seized the woman’s husband in some accounts: “The awful thing was they thought I was going to shoot them, they were howling when they were left on their own with me.”⁹⁹ Indonesian irregular forces terrorized border *kampongs* while SAS patrols ambushed Indonesian lateral communications on Kalimantan’s tracks and (especially) rivers, discombobulating local travel. British troops avoided killing civilians over the border as much as possible. Still, Dayak witnessed the tremendous force and lethality as close-range machine guns and rifle fire demolished targets. The SAS used rocket launchers against boats.¹⁰⁰ The SAS shot those wearing olive green shirts in one boat and “did not fire at the 2 locals in the boat,” who bailed out and swam away among bodies being thrown into the air from the impact of the incoming SLR rounds, men hit as they tried to swim away, grenades thrown into the water in another ambush to kill those in the river.¹⁰¹ The SAS men, as they withdrew, shot an Indonesian soldier twice, leaving him “on the ground gurgling.”¹⁰² The redacted SAS patrol reports are a candid record of the effects of maximal firepower in an ambush in Kalimantan. One otherwise talkative officer in the interview went quiet as he moved at one point to recalling the destruction wrought by his men ambushing Indonesians in a wooden boat.¹⁰³ Boats became “coffins.”¹⁰⁴ British ambush teams repeatedly noted that they did not fire on women or villagers and that it was “completely obvious” who was a civilian, but viewing and determining a boat’s occupants or who was coming down a jungle track was not an exact science.¹⁰⁵ The British could not individually differentiate Dayak from Indonesians, except by uniform, maybe weapons carried, but Dayak had shotguns, and Jakarta employed them with regular *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* soldiers. The British unwittingly killed Dayak in firefights. The location of the battle, as at an Indonesian army camp, mitigated risk, but the Indonesians also situated their army camps near local kampongs, and they, too, employed local people.

Mines blew off the legs of Iban trackers. Greenjackets had a whip-round for a prosthetic leg for their tracker, Jalin, who stepped on a mine and lost his foot and then a leg from gangrene. Riflemen had filled him with morphine and dragged

98. Hayes, *The Last Campaign*, 117–18, 167.

99. Hayes, *The Last Campaign*, 104, 168.

100. Report on Patrol Red Yankee to Area West of Poeri, A Squadron, 22 SAS Regiment, 22 June 1965, P. de la Billière, WO 305/4292, National Archives U.K. (TNA).

101. Engagement Report, Annex A to SAS OPS/90/61, 23 May 1965, 22 SAS Reports Volume II, February–July 1965, and Engagement Report, S Matang, Patrol 46 of D Squadron 22 SAS, Annex A to SAS OPS/90/52, 1 May 1965, WO 305/4292, TNA.

102. Engagement Report, Annex A to SAS OPS/90/61, 23 May 1965, 22 SAS Reports Volume II, February–July 1965, WO 305/4292, TNA.

103. Author interview, British infantry officer 187.

104. Dickens, *SAS: The Jungle Frontier*, 253.

105. Author interview, Taylor.

him back to the border for helicopter evacuation, but not in time to save the leg. “A dull thud,” then shouting, the foot blown off but not completely, “a few toes left,” and it had been Jalin shouting: “We lifted him up and put him on the boss’s back [the officer] and hightailed it” back to base.¹⁰⁶

The Indonesian army pressed Dayak into service as “volunteers.” Sarawak Special Branch police gave soldiers captured Indonesians for pseudo-operations, dressed as the enemy, working for the British, visiting “target” *kampongs* to see whether they were friendly, and so changing local regard for friendship and identity.¹⁰⁷ Confrontation made the border violent and real; it split communities. British Intelligence Corps officers on the border paid Dayak to be spies, and they distributed to Dayak Kodak cameras to take photographs in Kalimantan, while others sketched for the British Indonesian military insignia and drew maps of camps. Intelligence officers questioned and sometimes detained cross-border traders; they used others for covert operations. Border checkpoints demarcated space and restricted movement. The Indonesians accommodated over 6,000 refugees in north Kalimantan, forced out in their view by British operations, and who then became “volunteers” for Jakarta.¹⁰⁸ Borneo as a place of conflict fascinated British soldiers and forced them to consider their part thereof, but soldiers had less sense of how the conflict might have adversely impacted the Dayak. The Dayak “other” molded the British “self,” partly because the British assumed that their presence benefitted the Dayak, inflating self-worth. It was perception as much as it was reality.

The debate needs to move beyond loyal Dayak, delighted at the British presence—and, for sure, many Dayak then and now were, and are, immensely positive about the exceptional behavior and martial prowess of British forces—to reframe Confrontation as opportunity and threat. The British offered good pay for men and women working in local camps on construction jobs and doing laundry (*dhobi* girls in soldiers’ slang), protection from bandit depredation, they gave out gasoline and parachute silk for free, dispensed gratis medical treatment and food, gave helicopter rides and sweets to children, and they employed Iban trackers, while men in the Border Scouts saved thousands of Malay dollars, so making themselves more eligible for marriage. But Iban and Kelabit separately complained to this author about lost promises and missed demobilization payments post-Confrontation, although the culprit was the Malaysian government, not the British Army. The Indonesians also paid Dayak on their side of the divide, with *rapel*—extra wages for Eid.¹⁰⁹ The inflow of cash changed local life, eroding, and improving pre-capitalist living, as British soldiers recognized, preferring the old pre-specie ways of doing things. Not all Iban

106. Author interview, Copp.

107. Author interview, Lt.-Col. (Lt.) Patrick Conn 2nd Bn Parachute Regiment, 12/15/21, 1/27/22, 8/12/22.

108. Nyoman Arsana and G. Ambar Wulan, *Sejarah Operasi Dwikora 1962–1966* [History of the Dwikora Operation 1962–1966] (Jakarta: Markas Besar Tentara Nasional Indonesia Pusat Sejarah, 2014), 47.

109. Biantoro, “Masyarakat Perbatasan di Sebatik masa Konfrontasi,” 139.

were loyal. Some were communists, but it suited the authorities to present them as loyal and to paint the Chinese as disloyal, in the view of one Iban interviewed by the author.¹¹⁰ There is also the broader question of what the Malay, Muslim-dominated, pro-Western, British-sponsored Malaysia that emerged from Confrontation meant to the Christian-animist Dayak and to the largely Buddhist Chinese, the latter detained and persecuted by the Malaysians during and long after Confrontation. Many Dayak felt “no special commitment to fight” and tried to survive the violence and demands of Confrontation by “betting on both sides in the conflict.”¹¹¹ Trackers in Kalimantan working for the Indonesian army colluded with their counterparts working for the British by using “different kinds of signals” such as imitating animal cries or wearing caps backward to let the other party know that they were leading troops: “These unwilling scouts did their utmost to prevent clashes between the different patrols.”¹¹²

Dayak fealty to Britain impressed British soldiers, but it is worth remembering that Dayak also fought for the Indonesians. The Indonesians formed *sukarelawan* home guard units and Dayak militias, initially for use against the British, and after 1965, to massacre and drive out the supposedly communist Kalimantan Chinese. Jakarta deployed *Resimen Para Komando Angkatan Darat* para-commando special forces to support the Dayak—as the British did with the SAS over the border—and to promote “traditional” Dayak war practices like headhunting, later encouraging the Kalimantan Dayak to drink local rice wine from the skulls of dead Kalimantan communists.¹¹³ U.S. diplomats toured Kalimantan and Sarawak after Confrontation, and the “reporting officer” saw photographs of “four grisly guerrilla heads cut off by Iban Dayak irregulars” the previous year in the Kapuas Rivers/Lakes area inside Kalimantan near the border.¹¹⁴ The more subtle reading is that the Dayak were ambivalent and ambiguous on Confrontation, caught between two warring parties, some taking part for personal material or spiritual gain (as with headhunting), some forced into service, others standing aside, what was neatly called *attentisme* in Nazi-occupied France: “wait and see.”¹¹⁵

The problem here is partly the weight of evidence and data collection: the author interviewed fewer Dayak and Indonesian veterans—with nuance lost in translation—but Indonesian veterans repeated tropes narrated by British soldiers. They were emphatic on how Dayak were “very, very friendly with us” and how,

110. Author interview, Jaban.

111. Michael Eilenberg, *At the Edges of States: Dynamics of State Formation in the Indonesian Borderlands* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 121.

112. Eilenberg, *At the Edges of States*, 121.

113. J. S. Davidson and D. Kammens, “Indonesia’s Unknown War and the Lineages of Violence in West Kalimantan,” *Indonesia*, 73 (2002): 68–69.

114. The Chinese Insurgency in Western Borneo – A View from Indonesia, 1972, A-018, US NARA II in Migrated Archive Materials, SSRR.

115. Christopher Lloyd, *Collaboration and Resistance in Occupied France: Representing Treason and Sacrifice* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2001), viii–ix.

despite knowing that some Dayak were working with the British, the ones with the Indonesians were “faithful” and “will join the Indonesian side to the end.”¹¹⁶ Dayak “kindness” was “memorable,” men recalling how the Dayak would leave families behind to fend for themselves so that Dayak men could go into the jungle with Indonesian soldiers, and they did this in both east and west Kalimantan. The Iban were “strong,” the former Indonesian KKO marine emphasizing this in an interview with an arms-apart muscle-man motion. Indonesian veterans also pointed out that Dayak knew the jungle and would guide Javanese soldiers who would otherwise get lost, as they did with the British over the border. The Indonesians assessed the “smarter” Dayak as less “primitive” and “fast” to learn, having some Malay and basic education, compared to the Papuans that they had encountered in their prior Confrontation with Holland over West New Guinea (Irian Jaya, 1950–62). The Dayak played both sides, perhaps for reasons of basic survival, maybe driven by cultural views on friendliness to strangers—their sense of self and other. The Indonesian veterans said that they never paid the Dayak for their help, at most giving out food and basic supplies and later sending clothes for the bare-chested women. They also remembered the local fermented alcohol, which the Indonesian soldiers avoided.

British soldiers rarely reflected on what the Dayak thought of them (nor did the Indonesians) or the Dayak taxonomy for alien-looking, smelly, heavily-armed soldiers with muddy boots, backpack radios, and military webbing, who probed around and entered their longhouses, asking questions in bad Malay, or with an Iban tracker doing the interpreting, often offering basic medical help, or giving out sweets to children. The British soldiers always assumed that their actions, as part of the army’s hearts and minds campaign, resulted in the Dayak coding them positively as benefactors. Interviewing soldiers now and reading reports then, it is impossible to avoid hearing or reading a reference to the mantra of “hearts and minds.” This provides a comforting way of reading the Dayak reading soldiers: they were beneficial, and the welcome afforded in Dayak longhouses proved this fact. They may not have been wrong. A Lundayeh schoolboy recalled how the British “didn’t harm people, gave all sorts of things,” and how “people would come and sell chickens to them. Barter trade going on. So different across the border where people had to feed the Indonesian army.”¹¹⁷ A Kelabit girl wove the beaded center of a native sunhat for a British soldier inscribed in Kelabit and English with “*Selhmat Pakai* from Kelabit Girl 10.1.67,” meaning “safe wearing” (or “safely use,” grammatically it should read *selamat memakai*), so soldiers might have been right; some Dayak regarded them

116. Author interviews with: Brig.-Gen. (Lt.) Ismu Edy Ismakun KKO Marines, 6/27/24; Pilot Col. Air Force Abd. Aziz Muhammad, 6/27/24; Col. Tutie Artica Adjutant General Corps, 6/27/24 (in Indonesian). The last is a female veteran who served on Riau islands. The citations in this paragraph are all from these interviews.

117. Author interview, Langub.

as saviors.¹¹⁸ A Lundayeh schoolboy at the time recalled the Gurkhas as “very friendly,” alongside remembering with affection Gurkha officers such as Bruce Jackman and (the late) Field Marshal Sir John Chapple; Kelabit Border Scouts in interviews did the same, remembering respectfully British special forces officers who had led them, men such as Anthony Ling and Anthony Harnett.¹¹⁹

British soldiers unconsciously internalized the Iban skill at tracking, their generosity, and their work tattooing soldiers, as willingness, so a mark of free acceptance of the soldiers, and proof that hearts and minds worked. Soldiers fascinated by jungle life were unwitting ethnographers on Dayak life, but soldiers were not anthropologists consciously contextualizing themselves within local cultures, observing others observing them while self-observing. Occasionally, soldiers stopped and wondered consciously, and this multi-perspective gives us alien perspectives on local perspectives on the aliens. This usefully extends comments made below regarding the “tourist gaze.” Thus, a lost Belvedere helicopter descended to ask directions of a British Army patrol near “stone age” Mongkus *kampung*, just two longhouses and children scrabbling in the dirt, no road or anything, not in the 1960s anyway.¹²⁰ The Belvedere is a curious-looking, ungainly helicopter, its rear landing wheels shorter than the front ones, elongated like a pencil, and with twin rotors, like an earlier, less aesthetic Chinook. The Belvedere’s helmeted loadmaster, with attached communication wires, stepped from the “futuristic” helicopter to speak to the patrol’s lieutenant. Once done, the patrol officer turned around to find the villagers lined up, looking at the helicopter, the loadmaster in his silk suit, with his “bone-dome” helmet, this thing from the sky, like a spaceman landing.¹²¹ But local languages had words for helicopters. Kelabit used “heli” as a descriptor. The Lundayeh and Lun Bawang called the helicopter *kapal libetuh*—“tadpole plane”—*kapal* for plane and *libetuh* meaning tadpole, so resembling the Belvedere helicopter, also called the “flying longhouse.”¹²² Helicopters appeared on Dayak mats in this period, sometimes woven upside down, one looking like a Belvedere but called a “Sikorsky” by Dayak.¹²³

Mongkus villagers may have observed that this helicopter looked different from the more usual, rotund-shaped Wessex and Whirlwind models. Iban had

118. “Various Borneo artefacts including Kelabit sun-hat with inscription,” Accession number As1988,22.46, British Museum, London.

119. Author interview, Langub; author interview, former Lun Bawang Border Scouts: Daud Braok, Liun Basar, and Marten Liau (in Kelabit), 10/25/22.

120. Author interview, Taylor.

121. Author interview, Taylor.

122. Brian Skinner, ed., *Voices of the Fleet Air Arm during Borneo Confrontation, 1962–66: Eyewitness Accounts from those who were there* (Peterborough, U.K.: Fastprint, 2011), 60.

123. Photographs from Professor Christine Helliwell, 6/14/22; Bernard Sellato, ed., *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest* (Jakarta: Lontar/NUS, 2011), 117, 343; Michael Heppell et al., *Iban Art: Sexual Selection and Severed Heads* (Leiden: Zwartenkot, 2005), 79, 81.

been trackers with the British in the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s, where they first used helicopters, and they brought back stories of *bilun engkabang*, literally “illipe nut airplane.” *Bilun* means airplane in Iban and *engkabang* the illipe nut, as a helicopter landing resembles how the illipe nut fruit fell with its wings spinning like rotor blades. Special forces officer Jeremy Mackenzie recalled that the Sabah Murut called the Sioux helicopter with its big domed glass cockpit “the unfinished thing,” pointing out that they called it this as it looked so different from the more typical metal-encased Wessex and Whirlwind helicopters.¹²⁴ One Kelabit recalled that the Wessex pilots he met were from the Royal Navy, while another man noted soldiers from different regiments: Gurkhas, Leicesters, and Gordon Highlanders.¹²⁵

The Dayak were not passive observers but picked out models of helicopters, who flew them, and which regiments were in their area. They were watching those who were watching them. British-trained Iban trackers told local people that “those who come with the helicopter, they are like our people.”¹²⁶ That British soldiers new to Borneo perceived a rude world observing a finished one is unsurprising. Soldiers giving out medicine thought the Dayak to be simple souls in how they regarded soldiers, not least as they fooled Dayak by giving sweets or aspirin for all ailments, sometimes sticking the pill to a Dayak’s head. Over the border on an ambush, waiting for days by a track for the enemy to come, with Claymore mines primed, the officer commanding observed local villagers daily passing by, careful not to fire on them, wondering, “could they sense we were there?” Did they know “we were there” as they “scuttled by?”¹²⁷ The implication is that villagers speeded up to get by the danger zone, knowing that something was amiss. That Dayak had a “sixth sense” is a leitmotif in soldiers’ memories, “they would twitch and sense,” a unique way of seeing the jungle, for sure, and maybe soldiers, too.¹²⁸ “Amazing hearing” and “natural woodmanship”: “can you hear that?” said an Iban tracker, and after a while, soldiers heard a boat approaching.¹²⁹ Nomadic Punan (Penan) were eerie and otherworldly, strangely ghost-like. The exotic otherness of jungle peoples made them ideal tourist objects, the subject to be covered next, but the more limited interviewing of Dayak by this author suggests that they, too, saw a strange newness which, while never captured on film, they still recalled many years later: Gurkhas, white soldiers, parachute air drops, and new aerial views from helicopters of their forest world.

124. E-mail communication, Gen. Mackenzie to author, 9/12/23.

125. Author interview with Ose Murang, Kelabit schoolboy during Confrontation, 10/24/22; author interview, Langub.

126. Author interview, Jaban. For a critical account of Iban headhunters employed by the British in Malaya, see Dan Poole, *Head Hunters in the Malayan Emergency* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen & Sword, 2023).

127. Author interview, Taylor.

128. Author interview, Glass.

129. Author interview, Capt. (Cpl.) Bert Wolfe 1st Royal Hampshire Regiment, 2/28/22.

The “tourist gaze”

Confrontation as tourism is another way of seeing the creation of an imagined place and real self. That British soldiers in Confrontation captured local people and places with Kodak cameras and 8mm film cameras—Kodak Instamatics from 1963, Super-8 motion cameras from 1965—is suggestive of a “tourist gaze” from what we might call soldier-tourists or soldier-travelers.¹³⁰ This offers us a different sense of Borneo during Confrontation. Everyone—Chinese, Dayak, and Malay—and everything was exotic, and photographs and hand-held film captured, indeed created, location and peoples as a tourist destination. Soldiers who had rarely traveled abroad now went to a decidedly different, far-away place, nothing like home, which veterans remembered and returned to later as bona fide tourists. The Intelligence Corps’ Singapore Dawnwatchers’ Society motto for its veterans is “the dusk, the ale, and the dawn,” with a palm tree and lion motif, so the eastern sun of a new world setting and rising alongside the men’s favorite Singaporean “Tiger” beer (brewed now in the U.K.) still drunk at annual reunions.¹³¹ Soldiers knew what it was to travel by the 1960s. They had seen the postcards and films about the jungle and the Orient. Sexualized Asian women in opera and musicals such as *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and *South Pacific* (1949) fell in love with white men, as they would later in Vietnam in *Miss Saigon* (1989).¹³² The 1964 B.B.C. film *Jungle Green: Borneo* about Royal Marine commandos on Borneo captured the tropical mood of Confrontation, people back in Britain thinking that “there’s a bare-breasted maiden around every tree.” Chinese photographic studios in Kuching sold soldiers photographs of bare-chested young Dayak women doing their make-up, playing musical instruments, and sitting in glistening rivers and waterfalls, also raising the question of how Sarawak’s Chinese categorized the Dayak: as primitive, idealized objects, but also as a means of making money. This generalized reading of ethnicity encompasses the remarkable, exceptional place of conflict, and whether the people there were Iban, Murut, or Dayak, or anything else is less significant than the jungle, light, color, smells, tattoos, orangutan, nasi goreng, dress, women, “awesome” trees, local rice wine alcohol, bazaars, and the “intimate” of the destination.¹³³

Sex workers sold soldiers a “short time” (or “two-buck fuck”) or a “long time” at inexpensive prices, a “long time” whole night costing \$M10–20, so a fraction of

130. See John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze* [1990] (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2011); Jonathan Culler, “Semiotics of Tourism,” *American Journal of Semiotics*, 1, no. 1 (1981):127–40.

131. Intelligence Corps’ Singapore Dawn Watchers’ Society (Far East Intelligence Corps) reunions, Liverpool and York, 6/1/22, 4/11/23, 4/10/24 and <http://www.sdws.org.uk/> (accessed on 7/30/24).

132. Richard Bernstein, *The East, the West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

133. Author interview, Lee; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

a soldier's weekly wage, and this included the woman cooking him a nasi goreng and sharing a bath, leaving the man ready for parade the next day.¹³⁴ "Lovely girls" and "sweet memories," in the words of one soldier to the author, while another recalled Gurkhas in a line outside a brothel standing aside in deference to let in a white soldier.¹³⁵ There were the "lady boys" of Singapore's red-light Bugis Street who were not "friendly local girls" but instead had "meat and two veg," a familiar ribald anecdote in soldiers' tales of the East, alongside the offended soldier euphemistically giving the ladyboy "chastising" for impugning his masculinity.¹³⁶ Kuching's transvestites were "far better looking than the local girls," but there was the shock of "grabbing a handful of the unexpected," or "I don't care," in the words of another soldier.¹³⁷ An ordinary British soldier earned with overseas deployment pay £10–15 per week, which equaled \$M86–129 in Malaysian currency, so sex tourism was affordable: a "short time" cost a minimum of 4s/8d, so 56 old pennies, 240 pennies to the pre-decimal pound.

Men had money to spend, especially after a six-month tour in the jungle with nothing to buy. They bought tailored suits and Rolex watches that when inscribed incurred reduced U.K. customs duty,¹³⁸ they took back Dayak *parangs* and skulls, the former still adorning the walls of veterans' homes.¹³⁹ One man took Bornean poison blowpipes and darts to his local pub in Leicester, while another tested the lethal effects of Murut poison on a cat back home that walked five paces and dropped down dead. A JAK *Evening Standard* newspaper cartoon pictured a British patrol climbing into a Dayak longhouse adorned all about with skulls, a friendly-looking family helping them in (grinning, with tattoos, the women bare-chested), and the patrol leader turning back to his men and saying respectfully, "keep your hat on Ginger, there's no point tempting the head man," while a little Dayak boy looks up at them, aiming a blowpipe.

Borneo was not just a tour of duty. It was a memory of place and a site of jest and wonder: "My experiences in Sarawak have influenced my whole life" or "the highlight of my life."¹⁴⁰ The jungle was "staggeringly beautiful, awe inspiring and just a real experience to be there," seeing hornbills take off with "great long

134. A "short time" cost 2–3 Malayan dollars. £1 Sterling exchanged to \$M8.571, so one Malayan dollar was equivalent to 2s/4d. A "long time" cost at least \$M10, one soldier calling this an "all-nighter" with "all night at it" that cost \$M20.

135. Personal communications to author, email in the first case, verbally in the second.

136. Low, ed., *Bearskins in Borneo*, 109.

137. Hayes, ed., *Last Campaign*, 24, 56.

138. Author interview, Lee; author interview, Cpl. Johnny Cox 2nd Bn Royal Green Jackets, 2/11/22.

139. "Skull presented to General Sir Jeremy MacKenzie GCB OBE DL by Muruts, an indigenous people of Borneo," Queen's Own Highlanders Archive/Museum, Fort George, Inverness.

140. Communication to author, Maj. (Lt.) Anthony Vosper 1st Bn Royal Ulster Rifles, 5/23/22; author interview, Lt. Mark Friedberger 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets, 3/20/24.



British Evening Standard newspaper 'JAK' cartoon of British patrol on Borneo entering a longhouse [courtesy of Dick Muskett]

slow wing flaps,” and “when the sun pierced down between the huge trunks of trees that were like nothing I had seen, and seeing butterflies as big as the palm of your hand, in that beam of sunlight.”¹⁴¹ Local tattoos, inscribed memory, many Iban ones emphasizing muscularity and numbers of heads taken. Men would never forget Borneo. Iban trackers tattooed soldiers with new abstract native designs, including officers with a small clover-leaf pattern hidden on the underside of the wrist to sit below a watch strap, despite which “We got a quite serious bollocking from our Colonel for un-officer-like behavior” and from their wives, too, who were “not happy on return.”¹⁴² *Bungai terung* (eggplant flower) warrior designs on shoulders were popular, as were star designs indicating the compass and fieldcraft: “Mine is a tracker. North, south, east, and west.”¹⁴³ This was highly unusual. Sandhurst-trained officers in the 1960s did not have tattoos. Men had lost their senses. Guardsmen told the author of an officer with

141. Muskett in Jones, *Recollections from Jungle Soldiers*, 7.

142. Author interview, Brig. (Lt.) Andrew Freemantle 1st Bn Royal Hampshire Regiment, 3/14/22; author interview, Glass.

143. Author interview, C.S.M. (L/Cpl.) Albert Storey 3rd Bn Royal Green Jackets, 2/16/22.

a large, big-cat tattoo on his back. Iban, who wanted a memory of helicopter or airplane travel, got a corresponding tattoo on their backs.¹⁴⁴ Greenjackets sent the author photographs of a comrade, “Little Stevo,” on operations, with a Mohican, topless, sporting a shotgun, Iban tattoos on his chest: “on forward bases you could have the daft haircuts what’s under your beret is your own,” and retrofitting another jungle war: “it all got a bit *Apocalypse Now*.”¹⁴⁵ Men in the Greenjackets’ “recec platoon” wore earrings, a peculiar addition that the author queried as such things never happened in normal service life.¹⁴⁶ Borneo was a holiday destination. British soldiers never imagined or experienced their service in Cyprus, Guyana, Aden, Radfan, Dhofar, Northern Ireland, or even Germany and Berlin as they did through the looking glass of tropical Borneo and its imperial staging posts of Hong Kong and Singapore. Borneo was a site of war and of tourism, and the Dayak were part of the magic of the place. Looking at Confrontation through the prism of tourism augments the discussion here on the huge impact that the destination had on the men sent there to fight insurgency. The jungle and people were not just remarkable but lent themselves to a tourist gaze that further boosted the place as ideal rather than war space.

Whose hearts and minds?

That Borneo and the Dayak altered soldiers’ minds and created new selves made possible Britain’s successful counterinsurgency strategy to energize loyalism and engage loyalist Dayak forces. Dayak and Borneo mobilized British soldiers, who were then benignly and usually enthusiastically favorable to the Dayak, or put another way, from the Dayak view: the strangers who arrived were interested, never actively unpleasant, and attractively forthcoming. It is not clear that the Dayak saw the British as benefactors in the ways presented in official reports and soldiers’ memoirs. Certainly, sufficient Dayak joined the British to seal the border and then project power into Kalimantan. The question is whether the British mobilized the Dayak, or the Dayak mobilized themselves; most likely, the two combined. There is a tension here: the Dayak manipulated the British, while the British manipulated the Dayak, each side seeking personal gain, watching the other watching them. Mobilization on the British side depended on an individual soldier’s motivation and the dynamics of the small-sized military units that he operated in—platoons and companies, and for the Indonesians, too—not higher military directives demanding goodness. Men had their own reasons to be decent, or not, as with Malay troops. Dayak as people and Borneo as place unwittingly worked on the inner self of British soldiers who then unintentionally made real through positive behavior the official policy of hearts and minds. This was innate and natural, not because of officers’

144. Author interview, Jaban.

145. Author interview, Cpl. (Rfn.) Garth Copley 1st Bn Royal Green Jackets, 5/14/22; author interview, Muskett.

146. Author interview, Muskett.

orders, so it worked all the better. Official hearts and minds actions might or might not have meant something significant to the Dayak, depending on what was on offer: the regimental band playing music, a medical center, jobs on bases, work as trackers, free helicopter rides, or anything else available at that moment and place. Hearts and minds was imagined and then made real, not through random acts of material gain for the Dayak, but with quotidian humanness by armed, alien men whose place in life had improved their nature and being.

Thousands of thoughtful, positive soldiers deployed among the Dayak supercharged Britain's military campaign and locked into Dayak willingness to work with the newly arriving soldiers. The sum of the parts was a success. The British Army had always sought out loyalists. This was a longstanding colonial practice, previously employed in Malaya's Emergency and Kenya's Mau Mau insurgency, and afterward in Northern Ireland. On Borneo, with Malays acquiescent and Chinese hostile, the British utilized the former, contained the latter, and precisely calculated the *schwerpunkt* ("main emphasis" or "center of gravity") for winning Confrontation: the majority Dayak who lived along the critical border war zone, and whom the British would now arm and pay, employ them in Border Scout militia units, form them into Own Guard home guard forces, get them to track and guide for British units, act as spies, spot for strange guard tracks in the jungle, and be Britain's eyes and ears watching for infiltrating Indonesians along the unmarked, porous frontier. The Dayak did this superbly. The British line of operation went from Singapore to Borneo H.Q. on Labuan Island to the Dayak on the border, whose support once gained led to an extension of the line of operation over the border with secret Operation Claret missions to smash Indonesian Kalimantan forces. The Indonesians were not the primary center of gravity. The British succeeded because, inadvertently, the people/place of operation operationalized the first "hearts and minds" stage of the plan. The people were the center of gravity: the army worked the Dayak, the civil administration contained the Chinese, and London offered Malays political independence with the new country of Malaysia, Malaya having gained independence in 1957. The Indonesians tried to do the same, as did Sarawak's insurgent Clandestine Communist Organization, but neither matched Britain's enlistment of the Dayak. Victory went to the side that mobilized the people, as it invariably does in an insurgency.

British anthropologist Richard Noone had previously commanded *Orang Asli* ("original man") aboriginal peoples in the Malayan Emergency, and he formed the secret E Group in Sabah with the Murut during Confrontation, led in the field by Jeremy Mackenzie, and one of a set of hush-hush Dayak covert forces run by the British, such as the SAS-led "Jungle Squads."¹⁴⁷ Noone and Tom Harrison, another British anthropologist in arms, were earlier, less ethically challenged,

147. Roy Davis Linville Jumper, *Death Waits in the "Dark": The Senoi Praaq, Malaysia's Killer Elite* (London: Greenwood, 2001), 85, 116; John D. Leary, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-60* (Athens: Ohio Centre for International Studies, 1995), 152; Richard Noone, *Rape of the Dream People* (London: Hutchinson, 1972).

military anthropologists “armed with expertise” as social science went to war, what today are called “human terrain teams” supporting soldiers.¹⁴⁸ But military anthropology was and is seeking to understand the wrong thing: the otherness of object people rather than the self-ness of subject soldiers. Noone took his experience to Vietnam to support America’s mobilization of inland Montagnard hill peoples—French for “hill man,” another colonial exonym—as a loyalist force against communist guerillas. Americans and the French before them saw the Montagnard as the British did the Dayak, or they did at first: “they were good warriors and fantastic jungle fighters, natural at it.”¹⁴⁹ Noone worked with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the Cold War fight against communism. Americans recalled that he “was a big help to us,” but this counterinsurgency cross-pollination came to naught as the Americans preferred operational firepower over meaningful hearts and minds, and so they lost, not helped by lowland Vietnamese antipathy to the “savage” (*moi*) Montagnard.¹⁵⁰ But “meaningful” hearts and minds was beyond the military’s control and lay instead in soldiers’ minds as they reacted to a strange place. Or stated differently: Vietnam never transformed the inner lives of American soldiers as Borneo did those of British men of the same generation, and so soldiers responded differently, negatively to the place of insurgency, and in that unwitting reaction to an alien other, we have a key to understanding victory and defeat in counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency starts at home, not with tactical military training or classes on the rules of war and the cultures of object peoples, but with an understanding of oneself.

148. George R. Lucas, *Anthropologists in Arms: The Ethics of Military Anthropology* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2009); Montgomery McFate and Janice H. Laurence, eds., *Social Science Goes to War: The Human Terrain System in Iraq and Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2015); Joy Rohde, *Armed with Expertise: The Militarization of American Social Science Research during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

149. Author interview, David Nuttle, US International Voluntary Services/Peace Corps, in Vietnam with Noone, 9/22/22; Calder Walton, *Empire of Secrets: British Intelligence, the Cold War and the Twilight of Empire* (London: Harper, 2013), 181–83; Frank Walker, *The Tiger Man of Vietnam* (Sydney: Hachette, 2009), 237–38.

150. Author interview, Nuttle; Peter Kunstadter, ed., *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* [two vols.] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), vol. 1, 3–66, 57.

Copyright of Journal of Military History is the property of Society for Military History and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.