

EILEEN CHANIN, *Limbang Rebellion. Seven Days in December 1962*. Singapore: Ridge Books, 2013 (reprinted by Pen & Sword Military, 2014). XXII, 249 pages, \$28.00. ISBN 978-9971-69-775-4 (pbk)

This book is family history, military history, colonial history and political history in one. The rebellion of the title took place in Borneo during the decolonisation era. The author, Eileen Chanin from the University of New South Wales, is a prize-winning historian. Her new book, many years in the making, is based on extensive research in Sarawak (Malaysia), Singapore, Australia and the United Kingdom (pp. 205–36). She also trawled the archives of the Imperial War Museum, the Royal Marines and the Mill Hill Missionaries. Telling use is made of her own family's papers: her parents-in-law were Richard and Dorothy Morris, an Australian in the British Colonial Service and his wife, who were taken hostage by rebels in Sarawak in 1962. They were released unharmed following military action by a vastly outnumbered detachment of Royal Marines. Five comandos were killed and six wounded during the engagement.

Captain Richard Holywell Morris OBE SMB (1915–2000), an only child of Anglo-Welsh heritage, with but a “patchy education” (p. 28), arrived in Borneo in 1945 with the Australian Imperial Force. After the war he was appointed to the Sarawak Civil Service, in which he served until his retirement in 1964. By November 1962, when he took up his appointment as Resident (administrator) of the Limbang District, he had worked in all five administrative divisions of the crown colony, in addition to a long spell (1954–8) in neighbouring Brunei. The author remembers him as “a naturally gracious man with a cheerful and caring disposition”. Dorothy Morris (died 2002), daughter of a bank manager, was reared in country towns in New South Wales (p. 28). Blessed with a “sunny personality”, she organized social events for the benefit of the Red Cross, for which she was a life-long volunteer, a matter of some importance during the ordeal she was to undergo in December 1962. The Morrisises were both fluent in Malay and Iban; Richard was also competent in Cantonese and written Arabic, while Dorothy was a “ready listener and inveterate letter-writer”.

The main body of the book (Chapters 2–8) delivers a blow-by-blow account of the uprising, with each chapter devoted to one day, starting on Friday, 7 December and ending on Thursday, 13 December 1962. The Morrisises were taken prisoner at the outset (p. 51); the book portrays their “highs and lows” before their “knights in shining armour” duly arrived five long days later. Similarly, the emotions of the marines, their fear and tension before going into battle (many for the first time), are excellently captured by Chanin. The assault force suffered from many handicaps: a lack of information about the movements of the enemy, no adequate maps, poor equipment, and deficiencies in transport. Owing to their excellent training, the marines were able to overcome all of these problems.

Sheikh Ahmad Azahari (1928–2002), the leader of the Brunei revolt, does not get a “good press” here. The most interesting insurgent is perhaps Salleh bin Sambas, known as Salleh Jangut, the bearded one, who was 30 years old in

1962. A former member of the Sarawak Field Force, he was a master of the Bren gun. Leading the assault on Limbang, he saw himself as a freedom fighter, like Rosli bin Dobhi (assassin of Governor Stewart in 1949). After the Royal Marines recaptured Limbang, Salleh, though wounded in the arm and chest, escaped on a bicycle. He lay low for a lengthy period and was eventually captured near Serdang by Gurkhas acting on information from a food carrier. He was subsequently sentenced to 15 years in gaol. Released after only a decade, Salleh later became a *penghulu* and a village hero in Limbang (pp. 31–2, 163, 173–4, 196, 203, 223).

The rebellion certainly revealed to the colonial regime its own unpopularity. “It now seems fairly certain”, Morris himself stated shortly after the trouble had subsided, “that virtually all Malays and Kedayans in Limbang district had a foreknowledge of the intended rebellion. This knowledge in some cases appears to have been quite detailed. Despite this, no information was passed either to the Police or to myself” (p. 175). For Dorothy, things could never be the same again: “Our dear friendly Sarawak” had suddenly become hostile; “those long stretches of river where we always waved to fellow voyagers”, she added, “I’m sure I could never travel happily on those again; where any bend could produce some snipers” (p. 149).

Mention must be made here of the Limbang postmaster, Abang Omar bin Abang Samaudin, who ministered to the captives as a Red Cross volunteer, surreptitiously giving them the latest news and keeping up their morale. He was awarded the Queen’s Commendation for Brave Conduct and died in 1992 (pp. 36, 73–4, 110–14, 183, 200, 203).

There are a few factual errors: Duncan Stewart (p. 18) was never awarded a knighthood; the Governor of Sarawak was “High Commissioner” rather than “Governor” (p. 15) of Brunei in 1948–59; to describe Morris as “Minister of Economic Development” (p. 16) is rather grandiose, given that the sultanate did not have a cabinet in 1958; finally, the Brunei honour “SMB” awarded to Morris appears to have been gazetted originally in 1966, not 1970 (p. 201, see Brunei Government Gazette, 5 November 1966: 260). But these are quibbles.

Overall, *Limbang Rebellion. Seven Days in December 1962* sets the benchmark for any future study of the Brunei Revolt and its spillover effects elsewhere in Borneo. Eileen Chanin is a very careful historian; and she has produced an exemplary narrative. The strength of the monograph is its first-hand testimony, produced here for the first time; its glaring deficiency is the lack of original documentation reflecting the rebel perspective. Given that the outcome is known in advance, some narrative tension is lost; even so, the interest of the reader is retained from first to last.

Anthony V.M. Horton