

About British North Borneo Dyak Police, 1882-1918

Introduction

Among the units of the British Empire which took part in the commemoration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee on 22 June 1897 was a paramilitary police unit from Borneo - the British North Borneo Dyak Police. Units from all over the Empire participated in the marking and were the occasion for many different illustrations, drawings as well as photographs.

British Borneo Dyak Police/North Borneo Armed Constabulary



British Borneo Dyak Police, 1897.

Fra NYPL Digital Library.

Sources describing the police force do not appear to be particularly extensive, but everything indicates that the police force was established in 1882 and that it then consisted of approx. 50 men. The policemen were primarily Sikhs, who were provided by Sir Hugh [Low 1](#)), who then ruled Perak, a state on the Malacca Peninsula, from 1895 part of the Federation of [Malaya States 2](#)).

The force is described in 1883 as "being scattered about the east and west coasts, and entirely undisciplined, and equipped with arms of various kinds, and six different uniforms. (Source 4)

Since then, things were tightened up considerably and the then Chief of Police (*Commandant*), AM Harrington recruited 100 new men to the police force in Singapore, Perak and Penang. Some of the new police officers were Sikhs, with a past in the Indian army, but there were also people from as far away as Somalia.

Since then, the Company preferred to recruit local people, *Dyaks*, both to save money but also not to expose themselves to criticism by letting foreigners rule over the area's own population, and it must be after this that the police force gets the name *British North Borneo Dyak Police* that was used until 1897.



Uniform button from North Borneo Armed Constabulary.
Set for sale on the Internet.

In 1897 the force's name was changed to *the North Borneo Armed Constabulary*; this name is retained as far as is known until independence in 1963.

Towards the end of North Borneo's time under English rule, the policemen came from several different population groups, e.g. Sikhs, Malays, Chinese, Indians and people from Brunei. Some of the force's officers were English.

An addendum in *the Field Service Pocket Book (1914)* (Source 3) states that the term of service was then 5 years and that the force was divided into a paramilitary division and a district police division. The crew were Sikhs, Mohammedans and Malays.

Armament

In 1914 the force was equipped with 7-pounder mountain guns, Maxim machine guns and Martini-Enfield rifles and carbines (caliber 0.303) [3](#).

These rifles and carbines had replaced older model Snider-Enfield [4](#) (caliber .577) rifles seen [on](#) British North Borneo Dyak Police 1897 London parade reenactments.

Uniforms

Around 1900, the uniform of the police force was khaki (coat, trousers and wraps), with a brown leather waist belt. The boots are described in Source 2 as black. At the parade in London, however, it appears that the police troopers wore black shoes, with a sort of khaki canvas gaiter.



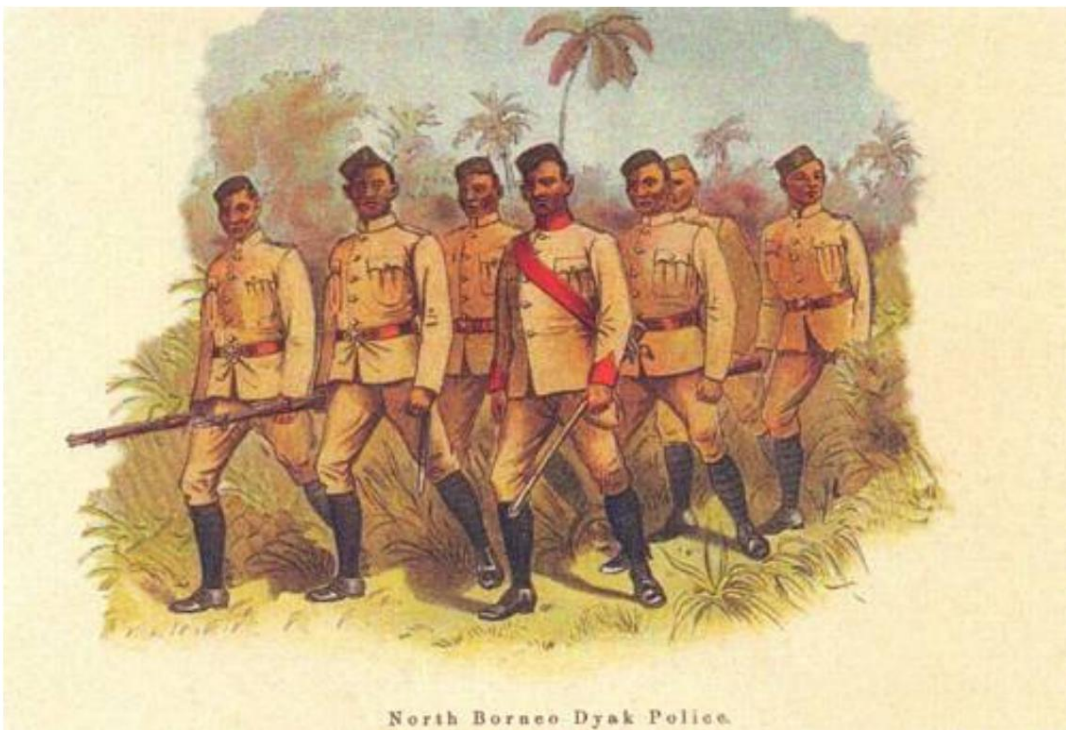
Troops of the British Empire - Dyaks.

From a postcard published by Max Ettlinger & Co. Ltd., approx. 1906.

The headgear consisted of a red, round cap, on which was either carried, in brass, the lion of the British North Borneo Company's coat of arms, or the policeman's number. Based on the available illustrations, it appears that the lion was used by sergeants, while figures were reserved for private police soldiers.

The English officers of the police force wore a troop helmet or field hat (slanted hat).

The illustration gives, with a closer look, examples of the mentioned hat brands as well as shoes and leggings.



British Borneo Dyak Police, drawn by Richard Simkin, ca. 1900.

This version of the illustration is a postcard issued by Dorset Soldiers in 2007.

The sergeant (left, shouldering saber) does not appear to have the red collar seen in the article's first illustration, or the Richard Simkin drawing.

Also notable about the Richard Simkin drawing are the round caps, which are black, like the sergeant

also wears red notices on the uniform coat.

In addition, black or dark blue wrappers are worn. An explanation for these uniform differences is currently unknown

About Borneo

Borneo, the world's third largest island, was in principle divided between the Netherlands and England from 1824, but also included the two small self-governing areas of Sarawak and Brunei:

Borneo was divided into four land areas - in 1911 ...

British North Borneo, which was administered by the British North Borneo Company
Sarawak, a Malay sultanate that was under English protection

Brunei, a Malay sultanate that was also under British protection

Dutch Borneo, which included the remainder of the island of Borneo

... and in 2007

Part of Malaysia

Brunei

Indonesia

The three English-controlled land areas were self-governing domestically, while foreign political relations were handled by England.

The Dyaks

The Dyak people are Borneo's original indigenous population, and consist of more than 200 different ethnic groups, each with their own laws, customs, etc. The original religion is called animism [5](#), but later Christianity and Mohammedanism came along.

A part of the original population were head hunters (in the original sense of the word), and quite feared on that occasion, not least for their effective use of blowpipes, with the help of which they could hit a target of approx. 30 m distance.

Many were also particularly jungle-savvy, not least the Iban tribe, and were used as scouts in various military contexts, e.g. during the First and Second World Wars and in 1950s Malaysia.

British North Borneo Company



*Governor's Ensign and Naval Jack 1882-1948
(British North Borneo, Malaysia).*

Fra Flags of the World.

On 5 January 1882, the British North Borneo Company, which had the status of a royally privileged company (*chartered company*), was given the right to rule over the northern part of Borneo, and administered the area until 1946, when North Borneo became an English colony.

Medals and heraldry

A study of the medals awarded by the British North Borneo Company [6](#)) gives an impression of some of the major actions in which the police force took part, and the medals are reproduced on two cigarette cards - Nos. 42 and 43 - from John Player & Sons ' series *Decorations & Medals*, published 1927, from which the text also originates.



*British North Borneo
medals, 1899 and 1916
Fra NYPL Digital Library.*

"There are three varieties of these medals, the obverse and reverse being all the same. The former is illustrated; the reverse bears the British Lion standing in front of the "Sabah Jack". The first has a clasp for "Punitive Expedition" and an orange ribbon. The second has a clasp for "Punitive Expeditions" and the ribbon shown; while the third has a clasp for "RUNDUM" and an orange ribbon.

The first two were issued in 1899 in silver and bronze, but the bronze medals were exchanged to silver in 1906. The Rundum medal was issued in 1916 to all ranks in silver."



British North Borneo.

Tambūnan medal, 1900.

Fra NYPL Digital Library.

"The Tambūnan medal was issued in 1900, in bronze to N.C.O.'s. and men, and in silver to officers. In 1906 the bronze medals were exchanged for silver ones. The obverse, as shown, bears the shield from the Coat-of-Arms of the British North Borneo Company, while the other medals (see Card No. 42) had the full coat.

The reverse has the crest of the Company with the motto "PREGO ET PERAGO" (I advance and accomplish). One clap was stuck for "TAMBUNAN". The ribbon is yellow with a central emerald green stripe."

The "Sabah Jack" referred to is the lion of the British North Borneo Company's coat of arms, according to the reproduction of Cigarette Card No. 5 of WD & HO Wills' *Flags of the Empire, 2nd Series*, issued in 1929.



*The "Sabah Jack" of
British North Borneo.*

Fra NYPL Digital Archive.

On the back of the card is the following description

"British North Borneo is about 31,106 square miles in extent. It is under the jurisdiction of the British North Borneo Company, and is held under grants from the Sultans of Brunei and Sulu (Royal Charter, 1881). The bulk of the trade is with Britain and the colonies, via Singapore and Hong Kong, the chief products being timber, sago, rice, coconuts, bums, coffee, fruits, spices and tobacco. The flag shown is the "Sabah Jack" flown at the fore by H.E. the Governor of British North Borneo when afloat in territorial waters, and also flown at every station.

The picture shows and anti-aircraft gun, in action on the deck of a battleship.

Punitive expeditions

The punitive expeditions of 1899 and 1900, mentioned in connection with the medals, were part of a series of disturbances, provoked by disputes over land rights between the native chief Datu Muhammad Salleh, called Matt Salleh, and the British North Borneo Company. Source [4 7](#)) gives a description of the background and also mentions some fierce fighting at the chieftain's fortified retreat at Tambŷnan, which had the character of an actual fort.

The unrest at Rundum, whose suppression in 1915 also resulted in a medal, involved the Murat tribe, under the leadership of Ontoros Antanom (1885-1915) [8](#)), but further [details](#) of these battles are not available.

The efforts of the head hunters

On 15 February 1915, the Indian battalion 5th Light Infantry mutinied in Singapore. There were rumors that the battalion was to be deployed against the Turks, which did not go down well with the battalion's Muslim soldiers. See more in [About Indian units in East Africa, 1915-1918, The Malay States Guides 1896-1919 and 1915 Singapore Mutiny \(Wikipedia\)](#).



H.H. the Sultan of Johore as Colonel of the Johore Forces at King's Birthday Parade in Singapore.

Fra Askar Deputy Loyal (Wikipedia).

While the rebellion was quickly put down, well over 200 men managed to escape, including across the Johore Strait that separates Singapore from the mainland.

Some of the fugitives were captured by the Sultan of Johore's army [9](#). —

And now for the connection with Borneo...

A number of Dyak head hunters from Borneo were deployed to track down the last refugees, some of whom carried out sniper operations against the British, Singaporean, French, Russian and Japanese forces that had put down the rebellion.



Dayak hovedjægere.

Fra Headhunters (Malay World Edged Weapons).

It is not reported whether the head hunters were successful in tracking down the snipers, but as they were particularly skilled at working in the jungle, they must have been successful in their venture.

A few years later, possibly in 1918, Perak was also helped by 50 head hunters from Borneo to track down the robber chieftain Chang Lun.

Equipped with blowpipes, long slender swords (*parangs*), the half-naked headhunters scoured the jungle areas of the Kinta Valley and tracked down Chang Lun.

Closing

It can be added that again in 1948 jungle-savvy people from Borneo in Malaysia were again needed, this time to track down communist partisans. Source 6 describes how a team of 49 Dyaks arrives at a secret English camp before being deployed on an operation.

Several teams were recruited since then, which in 1953 were attached to the paramilitary unit, the Sarawak Rangers [10](#)), established in 1872.

The Sarawak Rangers were also deployed against the Japanese invasion of Borneo from December 1941, which you can read more about in *The Invasion of British Borneo in 1942* (Dutch East Indies 1941-1942 Website) - a very exciting account of a few people's attempt to solve an impossible task.

Sources

1. *Military Uniforms of Britain and the Empire* af R. Money Barnes, Seeley Service & Co. Ltd., London, u.y. (circa 1965).
2. *A Celebration of Empire: A Centenary Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, 1837-1897* af Peter Walton, Spellmount Publishers, Staplehurst/Kent 1997, ISBN 1-86227-021-X.
The book reproduces i.a. a very nice contemporary color planche drawn by Frank Dadd, with representatives from 89 different military and paramilitary units from the Empire.
3. *Field Service Pocket Book (1914)*, published by the General Staff, War Office, London 1914, Reprint af David & Charles Reprints, London 1971, ISBN 0-7153-5225-3.
4. The History of Matt Salleh (Sabah Historical Figures).
5. *Small Wars and Skirmishes 1902-1918: Early Twentieth-century Colonial Campaigns in Africa, Asia and the Americas* af Edwin Herbert, Foundry Books Publications, Nottingham 2003, ISBN 1-90154-305-6.
6. Bad men in the Jungle (TIME, 23. august 1948).

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) What Hugh Low (Wikipedia).
- 2) Se The Malay States Guides 1896-1919.
- 3) The Martini-Enfield rifle was an improved version of the Martini-Henry rifle, originally introduced in the English army from 1874. See Martini-Enfield (Wikipedia).
- 4) The Snider-Enfield rifle was introduced into the English army from 1866. See Snider-Enfield (Wikipedia).
- 5) Animism: The notion that spirits are attached to certain animals or things and can leave these for a shorter or longer time (Gyldendal's Fremmedordbog).
- 6) Se også The British North Borneo Company's Medal 1899-1900 (Guide to British Medals).
- 7) See also Mat Salleh Rebellion (Wikipedia).

8) Fra Kota Kinabalu History (Kota Kinabalu).

9) Se The Volunteer Forces of the Federated and Unfederated States of Malaya, ant the Straits Settlements, 1940-1940 af Audrey Holmes McCormick (The Malayan Volunteers Group), der beskriver denne hærstyrkes senere status.

10) See Sarawak Rangers (Wikipedia) and Royal Ranger Regiment (Wikipedia).