



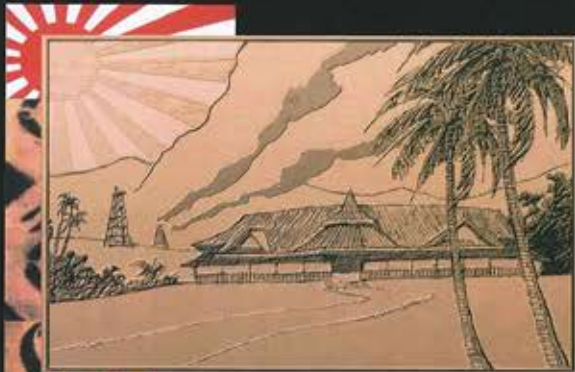
## PAUL LESLIE SMITH

Paul Leslie Smith is a British expatriate engineer who has long harboured an interest in Southeast Asia and Miri's World War II history. He reveals the forgotten aspects of the Japanese Occupation of Sarawak in *Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story*.

FEATURE

# In Search of Rainforest Tears

*Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story* is a blockbuster of a historical novel, laced with love and hate, joy and suffering, fact and fiction. PAUL LESLIE SMITH leads us through the unique circumstances and thoughts that end with *Rainforest Tears* securing a place on everyone's bookshelves



AS I LOOK BACK at what initially sparked me to write *Rainforest Tears*, I consider that there are two components required to drive a person to take on an exercise as huge as the writing of *Rainforest Tears* (556 pages worth of historical fiction, I'll have you know).

The first, and perhaps more obvious element, is an inherent interest in the subject matter. Having always harboured an interest in Southeast Asian history, from the era of the Spice Islands and formation of the Straits Settlements through to the present day, I jumped at the chance of a posting as an engineer to Miri, one of Shell Oil's most desirable international locations, in 1990. Having worked around the world as an oilfield design and commissioning engineer throughout the 1980s, I had always hungered for a move to Sarawak, one of the few remaining places in the modern world that still holds a mystique about itself.

The second factor is without doubt the more elusive component of a writer's ignition circuit. It is an amalgam of chance, opportunity, timing, and to many people, fate. It is the kick start that drives your engine and piques your imagination.

For me this happened two years after arriving in Miri, whilst waiting at the quaint little company airstrip at Lutong for a delayed flight to Labuan Island. I sat and listened, fascinated, as an elderly staff member reminisced how the runway had been constructed by the White Rajahs and required total reconstruction following the bomb damage suffered at the end of World War II. Things that make you go, "Hhmmmm ..."

Further discussions with older locals revealed an outline of the defence measures as WWII loomed. Operation Denial, the brainchild of the British Government, involved plugging the oil

wells at both Miri and Seria in neighbouring Brunei, and the dismantling of most of the refinery at Lutong. The equipment was to be shipped to Singapore to keep it out of enemy hands. Here was another round of quizzical "Hhmmmm's".

As I travelled with my work in succeeding years, I spent many delightful hours travelling dusty second-hand bookshops looking for more on this fascinating subject. As I sat in lonely, remote hotel rooms around the world, I began to punch a few words into my laptop. Initially just side-memories, I slowly realised that a thrilling, barely-known story had been played out in Miri during the Japanese Occupation.

My ideas on what to do with this tale changed dramatically when I unearthed a book in Sydney, containing extracts from an official post-war investigation into the massacre of Europeans in Sarawak by a Japanese platoon at Long Lawan in February 1942. I shivered in the misty depths of the shop as I read of the shocking atrocities committed as women and children were murdered horrifically. Having just read Nod Barber's excellent *Tasmanian*, I was struck by a thunderbolt. Locked in a middle-distance stare across Sydney Harbour, over a cup of cold coffee, I thought, "I can do better than this." It was then that I began more seriously to set out the framework of a novel.

As I focused on my research I began to realise how important Miri and its oil wells were to Japan once America had cut off its oil supplies. Her fuel lifeline cut, Japan needed to strike out south in search of oil if she were to realise her dream of Asian dominance. As the closest commercial oilfields to Japan at that time, it is little wonder that the fate of Miri and Sarawak Oilfields Limited, Shell's pre-war name, were inextricably linked to Japan's expansionist thrust. Driven by these findings I laid a few loose engineering drawings over a box of hard-gotten research books and headed off to Australia on business for six months. Sixteen years of living in Malaysia's balmy climate ensured much was written as I endured Melbourne's winter.

The harrowing reality of what was visited upon the people of Sarawak Oilfields cannot be better exemplified than by the fate of the then General Manager, Bob Parry who, trying to escape the Japanese was caught with the party of Europeans slaughtered by the Japanese at Long Lawan. Reading a grisly recount of the massacre, I knew then that I had a story and realised that I had to enmesh these horrors into *Rainforest Tears*. This I did by creating an ambience of tropical tranquility in the early phase of the book as a love story between Vong, the beautiful local timber heiress, and Portia, the British expatriate, unfolds. Ramping tensions as the Japanese arrive, their world is ripped apart as Vong is taken as the comfort woman of a Japanese officer and Portia is forced to leave her and flee to the interior. Outmanoeuvred by the Japanese, Portia is forced to surrender to torture and the harsh, demeaning life of a prisoner of war.

Whilst centred in Miri and Sarawak, I wanted *Rainforest Tears* to bear cognisance that this conflict was indeed worldwide and show how the characters in this out-of-the-way town became involved in a bigger picture. Replicating history again, my book describes how and why Australian commandos parachuted into Bario, Sarawak's interior, in March 1945 to foment an uprising from within.

Despite *Rainforest Tears* being a work of fiction, I have employed many actual characters and events from history, and provided notes at various points to allow an interested reader to further investigate this little known facet of WWII.

Writing *Rainforest Tears* has been an immense experience. Becoming published was the cream on the dream! But now when I take a step back, hold with pride the book in my hands and consider deeply what it means to me and the effect it has had on me, I realise, at 47, my life has taken on a whole new direction. The clown who runs Petaling Harb every Saturday, the joker who lambasts one and all with puerile humour has taken a long look in the mirror. To sit on the couch in the dead of night, tears streaming as you snuff out a favourite character that took years to create, or to feel a sense of pride in prisoners of war who refused to die because they would not let down their mates—these things change and humble you in this mollycoddled age where the main index of life has become the Dow Jones or the Financial Times Stock Exchange.

Do I want to write another? You're damn right I do! I have a head like a topshop and I want to share it with you. Though my mind now runs the Singapore of the East India Company, deals being struck in Melaka, a town redolent with the tang of spices, with illicit men from the world over; and beaten cargoes of illegal slaves from Zanzibar. Through my mind gallops the sequel to *Rainforest Tears*, of a red open top Jaguar sports car hurtling along laterite plantation roads in the golden early dawn, clouds of red dust sucked into vortices behind as the race is on to deny the communists Malaya. Yes, I want to write another—another 10! Who wouldn't!

Without doubt, my main employment is still that of an engineer. All I need now is around half a million of you to rush out and buy *Rainforest Tears*, then we will party! So tell me, what are you doing still sitting here? ☹

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