

Sarawak to finance missions to recover, preserve war relics
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HERITAGE: Special fund to recover and preserve World War 2 relics

KUCHING: Sarawak's Tourism and Heritage Ministry will allocate funds in its budget next year to finance expeditions to trace, recover and preserve World War 2 relics, like downed warplanes in the jungle.

Its assistant minister, Liwan Lagang, said the money would also be used for researchers, historians and writers who want to research and write about wartime experiences of survivors.

"It's a heritage that would be lost (if nothing is done about it)," Liwan said after opening the Bario Commandos Heritage exhibition at the Sarawak Arts Museum yesterday.

The exhibition coincides with the 67th anniversary on Sunday of the parachuting of British and Australian commandos into Bario, in the Kelabit Highlands in Baram, to start a counter insurgency against the Japanese Imperial forces in Borneo.

It was on March 25, 1945, that the first group of Allied soldiers, led by Major Tom Harrison, returned to Sarawak to harass the Japanese and prevent them from entering the interior in order to cut off the supply of rice, buffaloes and native labourers which the ethnic tribes in Baram had been forced to supply.

Liwan pointed out that the wreckage of two warplanes, one in Limbang and another in Miri, had never been retrieved for preservation and that there were no records of any kind of warplane that was reportedly uncovered in Ulu Rajang.

The Liberator bomber that parachuted Maj Harrison and his "Semut" commandos, crashed near the famous twin peaks of Batu Lawi on the flight back to its base in Morotai, an island located in Indonesia's Maluku Islands. It, too, had yet to be recovered.

Liwan believed there were many war relics just waiting to be uncovered.

He also said many wartime experiences of Europeans and locals alike had never been written down or recorded officially.

Earlier, when speaking at the opening, Sarawak Museum director Ipoi Datan narrated the futile attempt by a Christian missionary couple and the wife of a British administrator to escape capture by the Japanese at the onset of the war in Sarawak in 1942.

They managed to get as far as Kampung Puneng in Trusan, Lawas, but fearing that the Japanese would take reprisal against the villagers if they were found out to be sheltering them, the missionary, his wife and the wife of the British administrator surrendered. The trio were brought and interred at the infamous Japanese prisoner-of-war camp at Batu Lintang here.

Liwan said stories like that could be researched and compiled into a book so that the young people would not only know about their state's history, but also be made aware of the horrors of war and the "heroism of our war heroes".

The so-called "Semut trails" -- trails used by the commandos in their hit-and-run attacks on the Japanese -- should also be promoted, Liwan said, so that people could experience what the commandos and the 2,000 tribal warriors underwent during the war.

The four Semut operations mobilised some tribesmen from Baram to Rajang and in their campaign, killed about 1,500 Japanese soldiers and their auxiliary fighters and took 240 prisoners for the loss of only 60 tribesmen.

The exhibition ends on May 25. It will then move to Miri before finding a permanent place in Bario.

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