

Early explorers fatal destiny in the jungle of Sabah

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Abstract: Narration of the tragic destiny of Ferencz György Witt, Frank Hatton and other explorers while travelling through the Sabah jungle.

INTRODUCTION

Borneo's northwest corner has been the last tract of the island to be explored; early explorers venturing into this unknown territory faced all sorts of dangers: fevers, accidents, wild animals, hostile tribes and the risk of getting lost rendered any journey particularly hazardous. Several explorers lost their life while travelling in the jungle and their memory is now largely forgotten. A modest marble monument at the edge of Sandakan's parade ground has the following lines engraved (Powell, 1921):

"In Memory of Francis Xavier Witt Killed near the Sibuco River May, 1882, of Frank Hatton accidentally shot at Segamah March, 1883, of Dr. D. Manson Fraser and Jemadhar Asa Singh the two latter mortally wounded at Kopang May, 1883 and of Alfred Jones, Adjutant, Shere Singh, Regimental Sergeant-Major of the British North Borneo Constabulary killed at Ranau 1897-98 and of George Graham Warder District Officer, Tindang Batu, Murdered at Marak Parak 28th July 1903, This Monument Is Erected as a Mark of Respect by their Brother Officers".

Some of these tragic, long-forgotten stories are narrated here again.

THE MURDER OF FERENCZ GYÖRGY WITTI

Ferencz György, also called "Francis Xavier" Witt (Figure 1) was an ex-navy officer in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and an explorer at heart. On the advice of Baron Gustav von Overbeck, a German adventurer and diplomat, Witt visited Sabah while on a journey through Southeast Asia. He was so thrilled about the prospects of being the first to explore much of this territory that, on his return to Europe, Witt went to London to seek employment with the British North Borneo Company. In the process, fearing that his nationality may be in the way of securing a job, Witt returned to Borneo on his own account, "working his passage" and eventually landing as the mate of a coasting vessel (Hatton, 1886).

Having demonstrated the value of his services through various survey reports in Sabah, Witt gained formal employment with the British North Borneo Company in 1877 and was appointed to carry expeditions of general



Figure 1: Ferencz György Witt (1850-1882), portrait by Pollák Zsigmond.

exploration, whereby tracts of the country could be mapped and their natural resources identified.

In the course of 4-5 years, Witt penetrated into many districts of Sabah never before visited by a European, following major rivers upstream towards their source and venturing through the jungle. He carried out three major expeditions, before meeting with a tragic death while returning from a fourth journey (Posewitz, 1892).

The following is an excerpt from a letter by fellow explorer Frank Hatton to his mother, written in Kudat on October 28th, 1882 (Hatton, 1886).

"Poor Witt! He was travelling in a Murut country, and having slept in a native's house, left the place next morning with his 11 men. They had a small native-made boat, in which they were going down stream. They came to a shallow place, where everyone had to get out into the water and drag the boat. The rifles and weapons were put in the prahu. Witt waded ashore to make some

notes. In the middle of all this, they were attacked by some hundreds of savages, who fell upon Wittt and his unfortunate men with spears, sumpitans, swords, etc. Wittt, it is said, had a spear thrust right through his body; and even after receiving this awful wound; he turned and fired his revolver six times. Four cartridges were damp and did not explode, with the other two he killed two men. Of the rest of his followers, three escaped to tell the sad tale, the other were killed or died in the ambush.”

Some gruesome acts followed the killings. From the reports at the time, it was never established which tribe committed these crimes, but it was known that at the time, various tribes were at war with each other. W.H. Treacher, Governor of British North Borneo at the time commented that “so far as we have been able to ascertain, the sole reason for the attack was the fact that Wittt had come to the district from a tribe with whom these people were at war; and he was, therefore, according to native custom, deemed to be also an enemy.” (Treacher, 1891).

R.C. Mayne (1888) surprisingly mentioned “...his body and such effects as have been recovered came down the Sibuco, or some river flowing to the east coast in the territory held by the Dutch”. However, no firm evidence is documented that this should have been the case.

These events were widely reported internationally, and the tragic story can even be read in a long article published in the New York Times edition of October 30, 1882, under the heading “Mr. Wittt’s Sad Fortunes in the Land of the Head-Hunters”.

THE FATAL SHOOTING ACCIDENT OF FRANK HATTON

Frank Hatton (Figure 2) was a brilliant, well-educated natural scientist, graduated from the Royal School of Mines in London where he obtained a degree in chemistry and mineralogy. In 1881, aged 20, he accepted a position of mineral explorer and metallurgical chemist with the British North Borneo Company. He was to explore unchartered regions of Sabah in the hope that minerals and metals would be found (Pryer, 1893).

In the course of his expeditions between 1881 and his early death in 1883, Hatton discovered samples of coal, native copper and other minerals. On the Sekuati River, he investigated the occurrence of live petroleum extruding from shales with coal seams, and had a 38 ft deep pit excavated to observe the precise horizons along which the oil was seeping.

In travelling through the interior of Sabah, dangers were always looming. Hatton’s diary of February 9th, 1883 tells of a near fatal happening: having walked with his crew to a river bank where several Muruts were building a house, Hatton noticed that one by one, these men slipped away into the jungle, taking their weapons with them. Soon, nearly 50-armed Muruts came down from a nearby hill, menacing with spears and with their blowpipes. This tense situation was diffused at the last moment when one of Hatton’s local crew members could

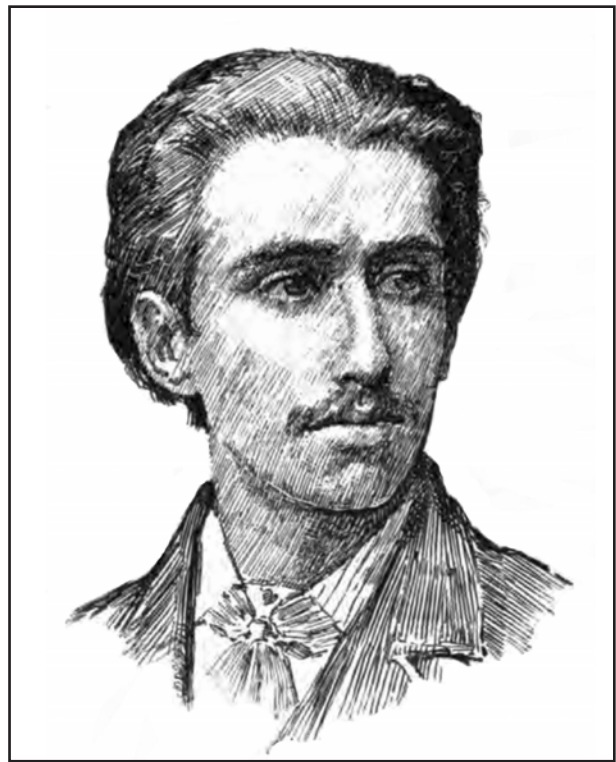


Figure 2: Frank Hatton (1861-1883), portrait in Hatton, 1886.

talk to the head of the Muruts and explain the peaceful motives of Hatton’s presence. The Muruts had interpreted Hatton and his crews’ intentions as hostile, which resulted in a near fatal outcome.

Shortly thereafter, on March 1st, Hutton was exploring the upper reaches of the Segama River for gold when he came unexpectedly upon an elephant. He shot and wounded the animal, but the elephant fled inside the jungle. Hutton and a few of his men immediately followed its tracks but were unable to locate the elephant. As it became late in the day and obscurity was creeping in, the party decided to return to the boats. It was on the way back that Hutton met with his fatal destiny.

The accident that happened is narrated in a letter written on March 7 by W.B. Pryer, the Resident:

“On the way back (where the elephant had been), he was walking with his rifle (the Winchester) at the shoulder, and stooping down to pass underneath a vine (a creeper), put out his hand, holding the stock of the rifle with it, to lift the vine. The stock was thus from him, the muzzle towards him, the rifle probably being on full cock: at the instant he was in this position, partially stooping, his arm extended from him, the muzzle of the gun must have slid down his shoulder, leaving it pointing at the top of his shoulder, and at this instant it went off, presumably from the trigger having been pulled by some twigs of the creeper. The ball entered the collarbone and came out at the back somewhat lower down. His men were round him in a moment, and seized him before he fell (...). One, if not two of the main arteries were severed, and death ensued very rapidly (...). The body was then placed in a

gobang and brought down with all dispatch to Elopura.” (in Hatton, 1886).

The memory of Frank Hatton comes to us through his father Joseph Hatton, who published a biography enriched with Frank's letters and sketches (Hatton, 1886). In concluding the preface to this book, Walter H. Medhurst writes (1885): *“Peace to the young explorer’s ashes! As the broad banana leaves and the feathery palms of Sandakan wave over his untimely grave, they whisper anew the old truth, that high aims, a firm purpose, and honest work, ennoble the man, even when fate denies him the fruition of his reward.”*

JUNGLE FATE AND DOOM

In his 1993 paper *“Unheimliche Erlebnisse eines Geologen im Urwald von Borneo”* (Uncanny experiences of a geologist in the jungle of Borneo) Eduard Wenk recalls some particular events with happened in the years 1936-1939, when he was engaged in fieldwork in Sabah on behalf of the Royal Dutch Shell Group.

At the time, Wenk had been given the task to map the Dent Peninsula, an uninhabited territory, consisting of rough, primary rain forest, a refuge for the wild life. Only brave Dayak and Dusun hunters would venture at times into this forbidden land. Rumors had it that from every group entering this jungle, one man would not return!

To support Wenk's mapping, parties of topographers started their work with the establishment of astronomical stations along the coast. These fix-points were due to be connected later by traverses through the rainforest. Along the north-coast, in the mangrove swamps of the Kuala Maruap, a Philippino topographer started work with a couple of people. He quickly became sick and with the bad omen around, he was promptly sent by boat to the Sandakan hospital, where he died of a lung inflammation.

Meanwhile, another group under the direction of Anga, an experienced Malay chieftain, had started with the cutting of a forest track halfway through the peninsula, from the fix point in Maruap, straight in a southerly direction. As it reached about 20km inland, Anga became sick with fever and died in the forest and had to be buried then and there, as the transportation of a cadaver in hot-damp tropical climate back to the coast was impossible. Again, one man did not return from the Dent Peninsula! Who would do any further work in this unfriendly region?

At the time, Wenk was unaware of these tragic happenings, and had assembled a party of local people to start his work. Eventually, while receiving his last briefing in Sandakan, Wenk heard about the disasters that had been befalling on the topographical crews. His first task was to establish a base camp, and in view of the recent dreadful events, a location along the coast, next to the mouth of a river, did not come into consideration. Instead, Wenk selected the nearby coral island Tambisan as his base.

Soon came alarming news: a group of topographers under the command of a Chinese surveyor that for some

time had mapped the Togopi River in the south of the Dent Peninsula were in distress. A man in the group, Mandur Sabtu, had disappeared without a trace while working on a straight traverse that followed a strongly meandering stream. Instead of returning to his camp following the unending meanders of the river, he had decided to take a shortcut over a hill. The following day, search parties failed to find him and it was decided to call for help. After 2 days of hard travel, a party arrived in Tambisan to seek Wenk's assistance.

While Wenk was assembling all his men to join in the search and rescue efforts, news came that a fisherman had caught sight of a strangely behaving man by the shore; the fisherman thought it must have been a spirit, and afraid, fled away from the coast. When Wenk's party arrived at the place mentioned by the fisherman, they encountered poor Mandur Sabtu completely exhausted. He was promptly brought to a doctor in Sandakan and slowly recovered.

Later, Mandur Sabtu told his story: that evening he was definitely on the right path over the hill back to the camp. But suddenly he heard calls far away: *“Sabtu, Sabtukomo, OooSabtu...”* from a completely different direction to the one he was following. Then from a completely new direction, he heard again *“Sabtu, Sabtukomo Sabtu, Ooo”*. Night was falling, he was tired and without food. Was it his comrades calling or was it an evil spirit, which intended to mislead him? He was now at an unknown, wrong place. On the following day he was wise enough to follow a stream and eventually reached the coast. Once there, he appeared as a ghost to the fisherman!

With the adventure that had happened to Mandur Sabtu, work on the Dent Peninsula was again at risk. His companions assured that they had not called Sabtu on that late afternoon, so all were convinced that an evil spirit did.

Shortly after these bad omens, Wenk decided to investigate the geology of the Togopi River and followed the stream upward with his crew. After some 3 weeks of hard work and no mishaps, the whole party returned to salvation! The spell of the Dent Peninsula was broken!! The first white man in this forest had averted disaster. None of the many Shell groups that worked soon after that on the Dent experienced uncanny situations anymore.

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