The Petagas War Memorial and the Creation of a Heroic Past in Sabah

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The Petagas War Memorial in Sabah is also a cemetery. When John Maxwell Hall published his book entitled *Kinabalu Guerrillas* in 1949, he captioned the sketch of the memorial on page 141 as 'The Cemetery at Petagas'. Those buried at Petagas were individuals belonging to a local guerrilla force commonly known as the Kinabalu Guerrillas, who took part in the uprising against the Japanese Army in Jesselton on 9 October 1943. They were executed with their supporters on the morning of 21 January 1944. Also buried at the memorial were the guerrillas' colleagues, who died at Labuan after being sent there by the Japanese to serve prison sentences. This paper will recount the events that led to their execution as well as trace the erection and preservation of the memorial and its role in remembering the Kinabalu guerrillas. The Kota Kinabalu or Jesselton Uprising forged a sense of heroic past for post-war Sabahans in facing common adversaries and challenges.

### The Kinabalu Guerrillas

Young Chinese men in Jesselton started the Overseas Chinese Salvation Association, which was behind the group of Kinabalu Guerrillas in June 1942. Their leader Albert Kwok, a Chinese of the Teochiu dialect group, was born in Kuching and studied in China before migrating to Jesselton. The guerrillas' main objective was to overthrow the Japanese and to get rid of collaborators. They enlisted the help of all quarters. This included former members of the North Borneo Volunteer Force, including Li Tet Phui and Jules Stephens, who were lieutenant and sergeant respectively; businessmen and community leaders such as Lim Keng Fatt, a business partner in Ban Guan Company, one of the larger business establishments in town, and Chong Khiam, former chairman of the China Relief Fund. The guerrillas also managed to enlist the participation of non-Chinese groups, including members of the Armed Constabulary, including Charles Peter, the Chief Police Office of Jesselton. Apart from that, the guerrillas also worked hand-in-hand with the Suluk islanders from the offshore islands. During their build-up, Albert Kwok made two trips to southern Philippines to procure arms and supplies from the remnants of the Filipino–United States Forces still operating there.  

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1 The first edition of *Kinabalu Guerrillas* was published in 1949 by Sarawak Press Ltd. in Kuching. The second print, which is commonly referred to, was published in 1962 by the Borneo Literature Bureau, also based in Kuching. In this second print, the picture of the Petagas Cemetery is found on page 175.

2 Kwok went to the Philippines twice: first in April 1943 when he stayed for a month and then in June. Kwok received training during the second trip and was appointed intelligence officer for the guerrillas in British North Borneo. In terms of procurement of arms and supplies, Kwok's mission failed on both occasions. The Filipino guerrillas, who were also in dire need of supplies,