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# MEMORABLE MEALS

## No. 14 by Dr Tom Harrisson, D.S.O., O.B.E.

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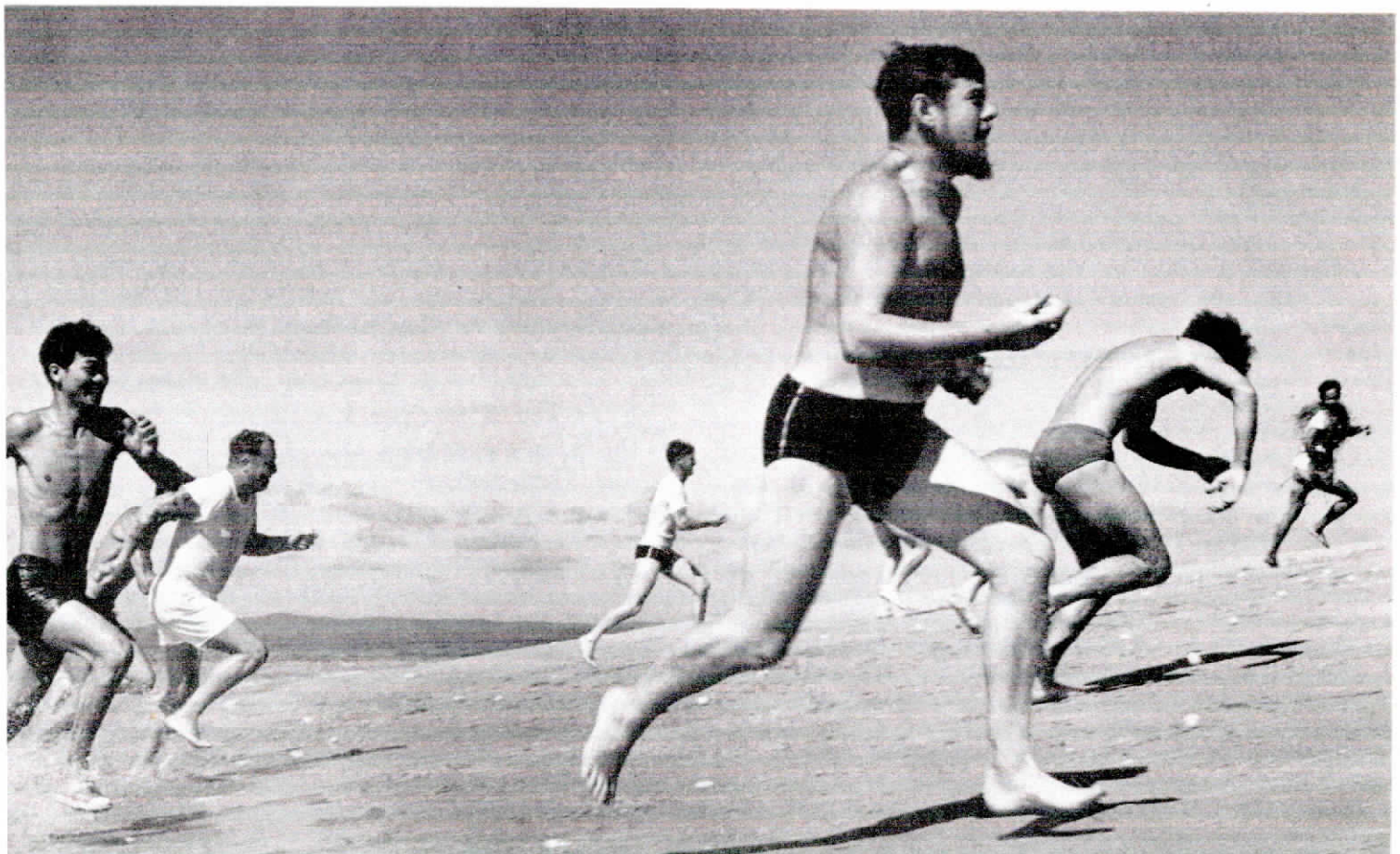
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(Above) Arriving for the *Semah* feast in the Turtle Islands (off Borneo). (Below) The Malay, Gurkha and Royal Navy assault party are charging up the beach armed with rotten eggs for the traditional egg battle

ONCE a year, in May, the Turtles Board holds the *Semah* feast on Sarawak's Turtle Islands, off the south-west corner of Borneo, out on the southernmost fringes of the warm South China Sea. This is probably the biggest regular ceremony in East Malaysia today. The prime object of the operation is to carry out Mohammedan observances and prayers, plus Dayak rites and interracial fun, culminating in a circular tour of the islands to promote the new season for Green Turtles, which start laying seriously in June (over 500,000 eggs may be laid on a single beach of suitable white sand).

The highlight is the battle of rotten Green Turtle eggs. In this, an invading party (representing the new turtles) land from many small craft and—in a fierce fight—pelts and is pelted by rotten turtles' eggs, to drive back a shore party (the old and faded). This ammunition is the only foodstuff that does not contribute to the vital, secondary role of *Semah*: good eating. The





Attacking the great feast in shifts: (above) part of the fourth sitting; the author is standing. (Below) The chief of the *Semah*; the altar is for a spirit offering to bring in the Green Turtles

main meal comes at noon, after the egg battle is over and everyone has bathed. This year, May 1964, was my fourteenth *Semah*; the best yet and in more ways than one the meal I shall remember longest. For today the islands lie under the shadow of Indonesian confrontation. Thus, on this occasion, as well as local Sarawakians, we had along the Royal Navy, Malayan policemen, Hong Kong Chinese stewards and some extremely egg-agile Gurkhas from Nepal.

We had to sit down in shifts, on mats under the palm thatch at the edge of the coral sand and blue sea, everyone eating with the right hand as local custom requires. Rather over 260 guests ate a conglomerate, served all at once:

First, a mass of rice, boiled but not soft (about thirty shillings' worth); with salt fish (ten lb.).

Second, buffalo meat cooked with superb Sarawak pineapples, almonds, raisins, *chillis* and light curry.

Third, one he-goat; with garlic, sago-paste, tamarind and small Chinese onions.

Fourth, mixed dishes of pumpkin, large onions, yellow beans, a few Australian potatoes and chopped chicken; spiced with *dal* and *rempah tumis* (mixed roots and leaves, with sweet bark and petals of a soft flower), plus a touch of ginger and *belachan* (prawn paste).



Fifth and finally, turtle eggs (both boiled and raw) galore.

Cost per head, around 2s. 2d. What was not boiled was fried, in a mixture of *ghee* and local coconut oil, in huge cauldrons and pans on a great wood fire. The chief cook was the Museum bookbinder, Abang Kushairi. We sailed back into the Bornean sunset, singing in seven languages, twenty-five miles to Kuching, sated.