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Ernie braves bullets to do job

KUALA LUMPUR: Veteran pilot Earnest Walter Talalla's spirits were not dampened by the hot weather and downpour, even though he was in a wheelchair.



Earnest Walter Talalla, 93, conducted air drops of salaries for plantation workers during the Emergency.

Ernie, as he is known among aviators, braved the weather to attend the Malaysia Air Festival at Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport yesterday.

"I think the MAF is an excellent platform to help educate our younger generation on civil aviation, which is advancing rapidly in this country.

"I'm very happy that it will be an annual event."

Ernie, 93, is credited with flying 423 sorties during the Emergency to drop salaries for plantation workers in the interiors.

Recalling his days with the Kuala Lumpur Flying Club (now the Royal Selangor Flying Club), Ernie said he and an instructor pilot would drop six to 11kg of leather bags containing 80,000 Malayan dollars (RM45,000 today) to workers."The air drops were the only means for the salaries to reach the workers as land routes were prone to ambush by communists.

"We would take off from the Sungai Besi aerodrome at 9am, circle a plantation, spot the smoke signal before flying low to make the drop.

"Our timing was crucial as the aeroplane had an endurance of only 130 minutes."

He flew over the Kuala Selangor district, lower Perak (Slim River, Tapah), Pahang (Bentong, Raub), Johor (Mersing, Kluang) and Malacca until 1962.

He was one of the country's earliest to obtain a private pilot's licence from the Kuala Lumpur Flying Club on Nov 10, 1949.

He had his brother, Hector, who became a pilot in 1933 and went on to become the first flying club captain in 1956, to thank for.

"Hector was the one who pushed me to take up flying under instructor Anthony Glassborough in a two-seat Tiger Moth.

"I remember people telling me that only those who could stare death, dared to fly."

Ernie clocked eight hours and 20 minutes to qualify to fly solo.

Ernie, who worked as a Telecoms technical assistant, nevertheless, volunteered for the airdrops.

"During one of our missions, word had leaked out to the communists of our flight plan to Slim River.

"We were shot at four times but escaped injury.

"After landing, we were shocked to find bullet holes in the aircraft's wings."