

It took 5 days to get to NZ

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Posing with a Harvard aeroplane at RNZAF Wigram are (standing, from left) Soon Lian Cheng, Roger Henstock, Bruce Johnston, Ross Ewing, Gordon Thompson, Gary Wrathal, Graham Lloyd and Graham McLeod, with (squatting, from left) Richard Histed, Ian Brausch, Murray Crawford and Buang Ahmad.

THOUGH they lived more than 9,000km apart, distance could not separate seven bosom air force buddies from meeting up for their 47th anniversary reunion in Penang recently, along with their wives.

Brig-Gen (R) Datuk Soon Lian Cheng, who retired from the Royal Malaysian Air Force after 36 years, played host to his Kiwi visitors at the Bayview Beach Resort in Batu Ferringhi from Aug 17 to 19.

His guests were Squadron Leaders (R) Roger Henstock and wife Ngaire, Ivor 'Chub' (and Kerin) Roberts and Bruce (and Heather) Johnston, Flight Lieutenant (R) Graham 'Snow' (and Christine) Lloyd, and Flying Officers Murray (and Judy) Crawford and Phil (and Shirley) Clarke.

The air force buddies were part of a group of 20-odd men who attended the 36th aircrew course at the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) station in Wigram, Christchurch, in 1962-63.



(From left) Judy and Murray Crawford, Christine and Graham Lloyd, and Roger and Ngaire Henstock enjoying a trishaw ride near the heritage row.

Soon, 69, and the late Flight Lt (R) Buang Ahmad were the first two Malaysians at Wigram but attended only 12 out of the 18 months of the course as they were summoned home early owing to a shortage of pilots.

While the Kiwi members went on to graduate with their 'wings' in early 1963, Soon and Buang completed their advanced flying training locally to earn their 'wings' towards the end of that year.

Buang died during an operation when his Twin Pioneer crashed on the peninsular's Main Range in 1967.

But Buang's daughter, Aileen, was present at the reunion, as were Soon's son, Teck Giap, and Teck Giap's fiancée, Marina Sern.

It was the first time Aileen had attended any of the reunions, the last of which was held in Tauranga, New Zealand, in 2008.

Speaking on behalf of his coursemates, Soon said that they were already eagerly looking forward to celebrating their 50th golden reunion in Christchurch in 2013.

"Fifty years is a long time. But we are sure, God willing, to see it happen provided we remain hale and hearty," said Soon, adding they had kept in touch through the years via correspondence.



(From left) Soon Lian Cheng, Maniam Nandasan, Raja Mohar Raja Bahari and Buang Ahmad with RNZAF women personnel in Christchurch. Pilot Officers Maniam and Raja Mohar were the second batch at Wigram.

Reminiscing, Soon said he and Buang were handpicked for Christchurch soon after being commissioned as RMAF Pilot Officers from the Federation Military College after completing cadet training in Port Dickson and, later, Sungai Besi, in December 1961.

"The journey to Christchurch was an arduous one, taking five days and four nights. We first caught a night train from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, then flew from the Royal Air Force Changi base in a RNZAF Hastings aeroplane to Darwin (famed for the Cyclone Tracy devastation in 1974).

"On the third day, we flew across Australia to RAAF Amberley base near Brisbane before flying across the Tasman Sea to the RNZAF Whenuapai base near Auckland on the fourth day.

"The fifth day we flew on a Devon aeroplane down south to Christchurch, taking the scenic views of the Southern Alps, Mt Cook and Mt Tasman. We finally landed at Harewood Airport instead of the nearby RNZAF Wigram station as Formula One racing legend Sir Stirling Craufurd Moss was in action for the Lady Wigram Trophy that day."

On his stint in New Zealand, Soon said he and Buang had to endure the freezing temperatures there, especially during winter.

"I remember the cold winds that swept across the open airfield in the Canterbury Plains to the wooden barracks we stayed in. I used to find my way to the ante room at night after everyone had gone to bed, to sleep by the fireplace.

"Flying under these cold conditions was challenging. The Harvard training aircraft that we flew was noted for its poor heating system. I used to dress to the hilt to fly, with long johns and woollen pullovers from Gian Singh (a clothing store in Kuala Lumpur), and service flannel pyjamas underneath my flying suits."

In jest, Soon said he represented the RNZAF Station in basketball but could not dress in similar (warm clothes) fashion to play!

While Soon served as a career air force officer, the others opted for early retirement from the RNZAF to serve with the RAF, RAAF and commercial airlines.

"In 1963, Buang and I assisted the RMAF to ferry home the Heron aeroplane from Hatfield, Britain, to Kuala Lumpur.

"Later, we flew the Twin Pioneer aircraft during the Emergency and Confrontation."

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