

First Air Force chief's memoirs launched

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KUALA LUMPUR: Just 30 seconds into the interview, the late Commonwealth air forces commander in Malaya air vice-marshal Frederick Rudolph Scherger decided to accept Tan Sri Sulaiman Sujak, who was 18 at the time, as a Royal Air Force (RAF) cadet. Scherger said: "Young man, I understand you aspire to be selected for (training at RAF) Cranwell. Please proceed and all the best to you." Sulaiman, who turned 76 on March 25, said he responded with a salute and "Thank you, sir."



Defence Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (right) congratulating Tan Sri Sulaiman Sujak on the launch of his memoirs. — Bernama picture

Speaking at the launch of his memoirs by Defence Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi at Wisma Pertahanan in Jalan Padang Tembak, recently, Sulaiman said he had gone to great lengths to prepare himself for the interview. He said he was taken aback when it ended so abruptly.

Sulaiman's wife Puan Sri Siti Zahrah Hashim, whom he had married on Jan 7, 1961, was present at the event.

Sulaiman said Scherger, who was from Germany, was later knighted and went on to serve as the Royal Australian Air Force chief with the rank of air marshal. Subsequently, he was appointed as Australia's first chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee with the rank of air chief marshal in 1965.

Scherger died in Melbourne at the age of 79 on Jan 16, 1984.

Sulaiman said he had flown in a Harvard aeroplane from the RAF Tengah station in Singapore to the RAF Malaya headquarters in Sungai Besi on Nov 18, 1954.

"I was with the Singapore-based Malayan Auxiliary Air Force at the time. At Sungai Besi, I met squadron leader J. F. Langer, who was the commanding air officer to obtain a recommendation to become an RAF cadet.

Although he was honoured to be selected, Sulaiman said Scherger had placed a heavy burden on him: "Scherger's trust in me meant I could not let him down. I had to work very hard during cadet training."

He learnt only much later that he was being groomed by the then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra to helm the air force with the Malaysianisation of the RAF.

He rose through the ranks quickly to eventually become the first Royal Malaysian Air Force chief as a two-star general in 1967.

The RMAF was established on June 2, 1958.

After graduating from RAF Cranwell, pilot officer (equivalent to second-lieutenant) Sulaiman was posted to Scotland and then to Cyprus with the Commonwealth forces.

During the Confrontation (1962-66) with Indonesia, flight Lieutenant Sulaiman was reposted with a detachment to Kuantan.

Later, while attending a course at the Royal College of Defence Studies in London in 1973, Sulaiman said he took the opportunity to take his family to the nearby air force museum to show them aircraft he had flown such as the Hawker Hunter and Canberra bombers.

"I was taken aback when one of my sons asked: "Daddy, how come all the aeroplanes you used to fly are in the museum?"

On his memoirs, Sulaiman said it was important as it recorded his early years and experience since the inception of the RMAF.

"I can say, that the author Major (Rtd) Ramli Abdul Rahim) had carried out research and interviews to the extent that he came to know me better than myself," he said.

In his 20-year career, Sulaiman has flown 22 types of aircraft.

He has clocked 350 flying hours with the Malayan Auxiliary Air Force, 2,000 hours with the RAF and 1,000 hours with the RMAF.