

## The pioneers and their Pioneers

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**It was those days when the boys in the jungle depended on aircraft for supplies as they battled the communist guerillas. ADRIAN DAVID meets up with some of the Pioneer pilots and the men who kept the aircraft, the workhorse of the air force's supply programme, in the air.**



FLYING them was a challenge and they could go where other aeroplanes could not.

There could not be a better endorsement of the Pioneer supply planes that the fledgling Royal Malayan Air Force operated from 1958.

This thumbs-up of the sturdy aircraft, purchased from Scottish Aviation of Prestwick in Britain, was given by retired Air Vice-Marshal (now major-general) Datuk Sulaiman Sujak, the country's first air force chief.

"Flying the Pioneers was challenging," said Sulaiman, 73, at the "Air Force Pioneers Night" in Petaling Jaya last month.

"As the environment was very tight, we had to be very precise — right speed and altitude."

The "Pioneers Night" was held for about 60 of those involved in the aircraft operations from 1958 till the Pioneers were decommissioned in 1969.

Among those who turned up were the ground services crew, policemen and army air despatchers. Of course, the pilots who put their lives on the line in jungle operations during the communist insurgency and Confrontation with Indonesia, were also present.

The air force operated 16 Twin Pioneers and eight Single Pioneers from the Sungai Besi airbase in Kuala Lumpur.

The propellor-driven Pioneers — the heavier Twin version had a range of 640km and the Single version 960km — were used for transport and liaison purposes.

This was the era before the arrival of helicopters, and the Pioneers' outstanding short take-off and landing capabilities made them the backbone of the air force's efforts to supply and send reinforcement to the men fighting on the ground.

The Pioneers serviced the remote interiors like Fort Tapong (now submerged under the Temengor dam), Fort Kemar, Fort Betis, Gua Musang, Kroh and Grik.

The aircraft were also used for air drops to various forts such as Chabai, Legap, Batau, Dixon, Telanok, Brooke, Yum, Belatim, Wais, Hau and Ber.

While the Single Pioneer managed a crew of two pilots and up to 225kg of supplies, the Twin Pioneer could carry up to 16 troops or 900kg of supplies.

The Twin Pioneers were decommissioned in November 1969 (the Single Pioneers were laid off a few years earlier) to make way for modern aircraft like the Dart Herald and de Havilland Caribou.

Kol (Ret'd) Maximillian Theseira, 69, said the Pioneers were basic aeroplanes with just standard navigation aid that was sufficient to "get you around".

"That meant we had to be on the ball to fly it," said Theseira, who retired as principal staff officer of the Air Staff Division.

"The Pioneers are basic aeroplanes unlike the modern ones, which are equipped with a host of gadgets like the fly-by-wire (flying with the aid of computers and auto-pilot system) and glass cockpit environment."

The first Twin Pioneer delivered was the "Lang Rajawali", which began operations in 1958 soon after it arrived from Britain.

Former air force chief, Lt-Jen (Ret'd) Datuk Seri Yunus Tasi, 66, recalled how he was part of a joint RAF-RMAF team that flew the first four of 10 Twin-Pioneers from Britain to Malaya in 1960.

"I had just obtained my wings in Britain and was given the job of taking delivery of the aircraft," said Yunus.

"All in, it took us 28 days, 22 refuelling stops and we covered thousands of kilometres. It was one heck of an experience for a young pilot like me."

Yunus likened the Pioneer to a "workhorse that did its job well".



Brig-Jen (Ret'd) Soon Lian Cheng, 65, said Pioneer pilots had to learn from scratch, the tough way.

"There were no flight simulators or sophisticated navigational aids," said Soon, who obtained his wings from the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1962. "It was all manual and physical flying."

Airstrips, Soon said, were short and tight like runways on aircraft carriers.

"Flying the Pioneers was very challenging given their limitations.

"We had to negotiate mountain ranges, hills, deep valleys and track rivers before finding that tiny strip tucked in a sea of green to land.

"We literally flew from the seat of our pants and depended on our 'Mark II eyeballs' as navigation aids were not advanced then.

"Needless to say, we had our share of incidents and accidents."

Lt-Kol (Ret'd) Datuk Abdul Hamid Ibrahim, 67, who served with the Royal Malay Regiment, said the Pioneers were a "vital link between air and ground forces".

"While it would take days to send supplies by ground, the Pioneers could do it in a matter of hours," said Hamid, who is now World Veterans Federation (WVF) president.

Lt-Kol (Ret'd) Richard Stevenson, 68, said the Pioneers were the backbone for sending reinforcement and supplies to remote jungles and mountain forts.

Stevenson, who retired as Staff Officer 1 (Logistics) with the Army Field Command headquarters, said the pilots often battled rough terrain and weather to make precise air drops.

"Unlike larger aircraft, Pioneer pilots had to come rather low for accurate air drops, thus increasing the risk of being downed by enemy fire. Being smaller, the Pioneers had to make more frequent sorties as their payload was between 225kg and 1,080kg. The Valettas and Hastings could carry up to 1,800kg."

Stevenson said after Britain disbanded its army in Butterworth, the Malaysians began operations from the Jalan Ampang camp in Kuala Lumpur and flew operations from Sungai Besi.

Mej (Ret'd) Maniam Nandasan, 66, who joined Malaysia Airlines after retiring from the Air Force and then joined Air Asia last year, said the Pioneers were a good grounding for his career.

"The basics learnt in flying the Pioneers put me in good stead and I moved on to flying VIP jet engine aeroplanes like the HS 125 and Fokker 28 with the air force.

"I joined MAS and progressed to become captain of a Boeing 747."

Former television newscaster Robert Lam, who served four years with the air force, said the Pioneers were a test of one's training and discipline.

"There was a sense of independence, flying especially the Single Pioneers," said Lam, 60, now a human resource consultant.

Former air force chief Lt-Jen (Ret'd) Tan Sri Mohamed Ngah Said, 69, said the gathering rekindled fond memories.

"We are planning a grander gathering in conjunction with the air force's 50th anniversary next year."