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Professor

AN AMERICAN IN MALAYA

ATHENS, Ohio, April 30 (Bernama) -- The name Norman Parmer may not ring a bell with many Malaysians. But historian Datuk Professor Zainal Abidin Abdul Wahid remembers him as an American who stood up for Malaysia against Indonesia during those "confrontation" years.

Parmer, then a young professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, was attending an Asian Studies meeting in New York back in the 60's. Parmer and Cliff Wharton, former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, came out in full defence of Malaya when criticisms were hurled at Malaya by an upstart Indonesian academician at the conference, Prof Zainal Abidin said.

Now a visiting (and retired) history professor at Ohio University here, Parmer is in his 70's and wears a hearing aid. He is still married to his wife Bess, whom he met in Kuala Lumpur, 48 years ago. Parmer, who survived three "emergency" experiences, has an incredibly photographic memory of his days as a graduate student of Cornell University doing his doctoral dissertation on colonial labour policies in Malaya.

"Bess and I were driving from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore back in 1955. At Air Hitam we were told 'tak boleh jalan' by the police. We headed towards a police station to get shelter. There were a lot of sand bags and machine guns at the police station -- like they were expecting a heavy-duty assault. But Bess, being a woman, was not allowed in the police station. So, we went to a transient labour hotel -- boarding upstairs and restaurant downstairs -- and for six ringgit, we were given a small cubicle to sleep in. We heard gunfire that night and the next morning we learnt from the Straits Times that the Queen's Counsel was shot."

In 1961, he returned to Malaya as America's first Peace Corp director in Malaya, heading a group of 40 volunteers.

Sometime in August of that year, at about 3 o'clock in the evening, Parmer says he received a call from the Prime Minister's office inviting him and a group of volunteers to the Prime Minister's residence.

As Parmer recalls it, "after tea, the Tengku (Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman) and I sat on the verandah and he said, you've done a lot for Malaya. What can we do for you? I told him that we need Malay language instructors [for Northern Illinois University in DeKalb to teach volunteers Malay. He asked, how many? I said, four. He said, done deal!"

The next day, the Malay Mail came out with a big headline: "Malaya Gives Technical Assistance to US" -- says Parmer, grinning.

One of the four Malay Language teachers sent was Prof Zainal Abidin, who met Parmer again at Ohio University when Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak opened the Sixth Tun Abdul Razak Conference here recently.

Parmer regrets for not keeping in touch with the Tengku though. "But I was a bit disappointed with Tengku because he was blindly anti-communist. It's OK to be anti-communist, but I think he did make blind statements against them towards the end of his leadership."

As for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Parmer said: "He's smart, he's clever and he's a survivor. He's given Malaysians a lot of confidence and pride to stand up against Britain and the US."

"His criticisms against the US make me wince, but part of them may be true," he says.

Parmer is currently working on a book on health and diseases in

Malaysia, a historical perspective. -- BERNAMA
SH JK