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Flag facts

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Chances are you probably have a small Jalur Gemilang stuck to the roof of your car for this month. Or even better, there's a standard sized one, the red and white stripes flapping in the breeze outside your home.

You are in good company, and not just in Malaysia.

Since the dawn of civilisation, man have used coloured pieces of cloth stuck at the end of a pole for a number of reasons - as national, state or personal symbols, a rallying point for soldiers or as signal implements - hence the expression flagging off.

Over time, some flags have become veritable icons in their own right, with cultural, historical or even emotive significance - no English football yob would be complete without the red and white St George's cross flag. Nor would a pirate ship shiver any timbers without the Jolly Roger - white skulls and cross bones on a black field.

This fascination with flags gave birth to the science, and some say, art of vexillology (the study of flags, from the Latin word vexillum, a flag carried by Roman legionaries).

The states that make up present day Malaysia were flying all kinds of different flags before the birth of that which we know today as Jalur Gemilang.

Early last century, Kelantan for example had a flag bearing the design of a tiger, fleshed out from cursive Jawi letters in blue on a white field. The flag was adopted during the reign of Sultan Muhammad IV and was used between 1912 and 1923.

Before World War II, the closest Malaya came to having a national flag was the one used by the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang.

Introduced in 1905, this flag had horizontal stripes of white, red, yellow and black, with a running tiger emblem in a white oval background at the centre.

The Straits Settlement, which comprised Penang, Malacca and Singapore, as well as Labuan and the Cocos-Keeling Islands, used something similar to the Australian flag today - the British blue ensign with a Union Jack on the upper right side and a badge of red diamond with three crowns.

Later, when the Federation of Malaya came into being, a new federal flag, the forerunner of the Jalur Gemilang, was introduced.

The Federal Legislative Assembly held a flag design contest. Of the 373 entries, three made it to the final selection. The first design was in red, white and blue, with a badge of crossed Keris pointing upwards, circled with 11 five-point stars.

The second was almost like the first, except that the stars were arranged in two circles around the crossed Keris.

The third had 11 blue and white stripes with a yellow crescent moon and star at the hoist, designed by Mohd Hamzah, a government architect from Johor.

The Malay Mail conducted a survey and found that about 40 per cent of respondents favoured the third design, while another 33 per cent liked the design but with some modifications.

The Council of Rulers and later the Federal Legislative Council approved the third design, but with several amendments. The final flag had 11 horizontal stripes, alternating red and white with the uppermost stripe being red, having a blue quarter with a crescent and an 11-point star in

yellow.

King George VI gave his assent to the flag on May 19, 1950, and it was raised in a ceremony a little over a week later in the compound of the Sultan of Selangor's palace, attended by the Malay Rulers and British officials. The same flag was raised in place of the Union Jack on August 31, 1957, turning it overnight into an icon of independence. But the story did not end there.

The present Jalur Gemilang dated from September 16, 1963, when the design was modified to accommodate an additional three stripes and three points to the star, to symbolise the entry of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore into Malaysia. Though Singapore left Malaysia in 1965, the extra stripe and star point was retained and in 1974 taken to represent Wilayah Persekutuan.

Then, the flag was known as just Bendera Malaysia. In 1997, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad renamed it Jalur Gemilang (Stripes of Glory) to mark Malaysia's 40th Merdeka day.

So if you have raised the flag, good and well. If you haven't, run out and get one - at least those small plastic flags with multi-coloured candy beads, available from the roti man or newspaper stand.