

Paying the debt of our gratitude
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Most of the men who fell in Sarawak during the Confrontation were Australian, British and New Zealand troops.

A CEREMONY pregnant with meaning and undoubtedly tinged with sadness for many of those involved takes place in Kuching this weekend, on the eve of our 50th Merdeka.

The state's civilian leadership, the military and police top brass and diplomats from Australia and Britain will gather for a ceremonial wreath-laying in memory of local and Commonwealth men numbering about 500 who fell in the immediate aftermath of the birth of Malaysia.

The ceremony is rare, perhaps only the first such occasion ever organised, made all the more poignant by Kuching now lacking even a proper war memorial since the imposing cenotaph in the city's then Central Padang was demolished and never resurrected, as the ceremonial patch of green metamorphosed into Padang Merdeka.

Since the Confrontation was never strictly speaking a war and did not have clear dates signifying its start and end, no dates held special significance for its commemoration. Perhaps this was why no such commemoration seems to have ever taken place before.

That the commemoration even takes place at all now owes a good deal to the efforts of a slight but persistent fellow in the person of retired secretary of the Legislative Assembly, Lim Kian Hock, working through the Sarawak Tourism Federation.

It is a very worthy commemoration, lest our younger generation forget that Malaysia did not start out as a land of milk and honey from Day One.

At the outset, Malaysia began life as a rather weak and vulnerable nation. In the immediate post-colonial era, Third World luminaries such as Indonesia's President Sukarno loomed large as they strutted the global stage. His designs on the whole of Borneo were easily camouflaged by his seductive "neo-colonial" battle-cry that resonated among newly emerging nations all the way to Africa.

The claim to Sabah initiated by Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal has lingered unresolved until today.

Confrontation was particularly problematic because of the nearly 1500km of dense jungle between Sarawak and Sabah and Kalimantan. Moreover, many native inhabitants of Sarawak counted Indonesians across the border as kith and kin. It was just as well that Sukarno probably never intended Confrontation to be a serious military campaign, or it could well have been far more deadly and bloody.

Perhaps this particular commemoration really represented a coming of age for the nation. It shows we are no longer shy to admit that we had help to defend our young nation then.

The bulk of the men who fell were Australian, British and New Zealand troops. We owe them not so much the oft-hyped abstraction called "freedom" as our distinctive way of life and, as Datuk Paddy Bowie would say, the "highly original political arrangement" we have since evolved in our beloved country.

It is perhaps the same debt that we collectively owe the Americans for the Indo-China campaign. The dreaded "Domino effect" stopped at the Thai border and the Vietnam War gave us precious time to strengthen our political and economic cohesion to take on the festering communist insurgency in our own backyard.

The current Iraq War has tragically undone much of the admiration and goodwill that the West had built up, not so much because we have grown and changed but because the West led by America has since refused to change and recognise that the end of the Cold War, not the attacks of Sept 11, 2001, fundamentally altered world politics.

Malaysia, born of Western goodwill and some sacrifice, has not developed as the West's mirror image — and just as well. Emerging nations that claim to keep faith with Western-promoted notions and ideals have by and large fallen way short. None can really claim to have truly emerged based on following the Western-laid path.

We are different, and as we celebrate our 50th Merdeka, we are proud of this fact and have nothing to be apologetic about. It is up to the West now to cultivate our goodwill and accept us on our own terms, rather than forever expecting blind devotion to the ideals they hold dear for themselves and would even ram down someone's throat by force.

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