

Off by seven minutes...

THE history books say that Malaya became an independent nation at midnight on Aug 31, 1957. This may not be entirely accurate.

It was seven minutes past midnight when the Union flag was lowered and the Malayan flag hoisted.

But what was seven minutes to a population which had been hungry for a taste of independence?

After what must have seemed to them to be aeons of struggle and negotiations, the founding fathers of the nation won Independence. And the people wanted to celebrate.

Well before 9pm on Aug 31, they had begun gathering at the Selangor Club *padang* (now Dataran Merdeka) for this momentous event.

As anticipation swelled, the crowd became restless and that caused the seven-minute delay.

The Father of Independence, TUHJUI Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj, was mobbed by Malaysians waiting in the area as his car drove up. That, according to *The Straits Times*, "threw the scheduled *padang* programme out of gear".

I came across this information as I perused what I was told is the only remaining copy of the Aug 31, 1957 edition of *The Straits Times*.

The Straits Times, which rolled off the presses in 1845, is now known as the *New Straits Times*. Of course, you know that.

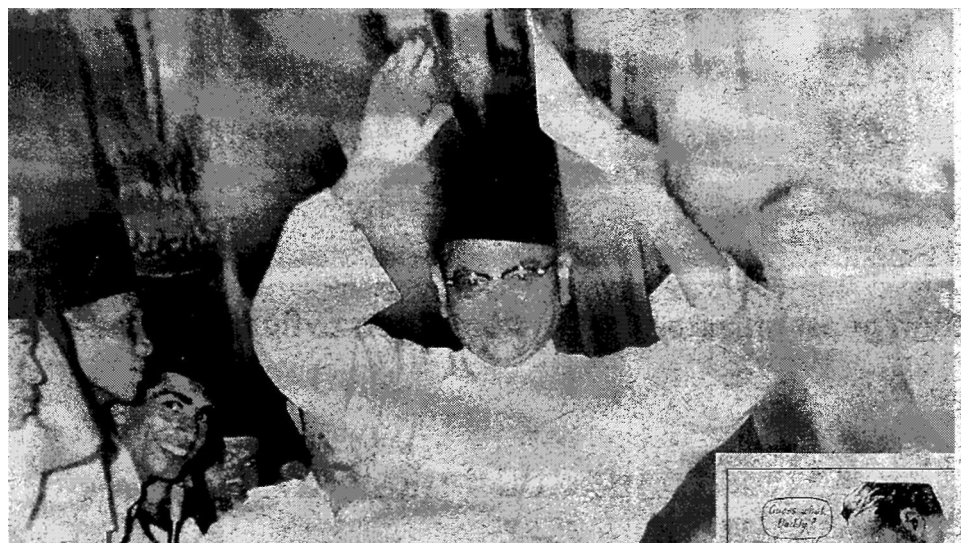
On the field itself, excited Alliance party members who



MERDEKA!

THE TENGKU'S
MOMENT
OF TRIUMPH..

*At the stroke of midnight, a
great roar tells the world:
We are now a nation!*



The Aug 31, 1957 edition of *The Straits Times*.

could not contain their joy surrounded the Tunku, causing the loss of a few more minutes.

I did not know until I read that page-one article that the recorded playing of the national anthem—*Negara Ku*—

was stopped for a few minutes and then re-started.

The Union flag had been lowered and the Malayan flag hoisted, signalling the person responsible for playing the record to do so.

That was when someone spotted that the national flag had not been properly hoisted and so the playing of the record was halted" and the flag fully raised before the commencement of the song, to

wild cheering.

Such things are to be expected. After all, we must remember that, those involved in organising the Malaysians who had gathered there were intoxicated with independence.

At such a defining moment, who can fully control his ebullience, his fervour, his exuberance.

I would have been surprised if everything had gone, as the cliché has it, like clockwork. For this event was no cliché.

The report says that a "tremendous roar" greeted the Tunku, "resplendent in a pale grey Malay costume, as his car drew up opposite the Federal Secretariat in Jalan Raja." The moment he arrived, the lights in the area were simultaneously switched off for two minutes.

Then, "as he prepared to walk down a human aisle of supporters to the dais on the *padang*, the secretariat dock boomed the first notes of midnight. The lights went on again."

The report continues: "A mighty roar burst from the crowd, mingling with the relentless chimes, as the Tunku (that's how the newspapers then spelt his name) stepped" towards the dais flanked by Dato Abdul Razak bin Hussein, The Deputy President of Umno and the Federation's future Deputy Prime Minister, and Mr V.T Sambanthan, President of the MIC."

The Tunku then inspected 300 Alliance Youth members who formed a guard of hon-

our. Returning to the dais, the Tunku was approached by a delegation of 24 Alliance Youth members who bore a \$4,000 gold chain and locket on a silver tray.

Umno Youth leader Sardon Jubir placed the chain around the Tunku's neck before calling out thrice: "*Bapa Kemerdekaan Tanah Ayer*" (Father of Independence). The crowd joined him in giving this honour to the Kedah prince.

The Tunku then addressed the joyous crowd of Malaysians of all races who were eager to catch every word uttered on this first day of nationhood by their beloved leader.

Following this, there was a march-past witnessed by the Tunku, Razak, Datuk Tan Cheng Lock, Sambanthan and Senu Abdul Rahman. And what was the tune to which they marched? *Rasa Sayang*.

The Tunku left at 1am, following which the crowd dispersed. But the festivities were not over. The proclamation of Independence and the passing over of the reins of Government by the British was to take place later in the day.

More than 20,000 people gathered at the Merdeka Stadium on the morning of Aug 31, 1957, to echo the Tunku as he shouted "Merdeka" seven times. Again the number 7. Ilium. There's something about the number 7...

"No matter who you are, live in harmony in this glorious land our ours" — Tunku Abdul Rahman

Feelings of our founding fathers

AS they stood on the Selangor Club field and later at the newly opened Merdeka Stadium, what were their thoughts, aspirations, hopes?

The nation's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj and his Alliance colleagues had just engineered the departure of the British after 171 years on the country's soil.

Looking at their speeches and thoughts then, one fact stands out: They were most concerned about unity

In an interview with *The Sunday Times* published on Sept 1, 1957, the Tunku said: "It must be appreci-

ated that we have problems, many problems, which will have to be faced. These are briefly, racial unity, expansion of education, improvement of health, installation of water-supplies, expansion of the economy of the country and social development.

"We have a lot of spade work to do, particularly in impressing upon the multiracial peoples that this country is their home."

It is telling that he placed "racial unity" at the top of the list of problems facing the nation..

I have had the opportunity of

long after he retired from politics and I liked what I saw. Once, in March 1985, I was among members of the Penang Indian Cultural and Arts Society who threw him a birthday party at his house;

He was so pleased by the gesture, saying thanks over and over again.

As we chatted, he kept repeating that the only option for Malaysians was to work together.

"We must think Malaysian. We must learn to live with one another. This is our country. Whatever happens, there must be tolerance and we must always respect each other. I am most happy when I see ev-

eryone happy. You must all play a role. Young people must play a role. This is a good country. We must remain united and help each other, that is the only way," I recall him saying.

Tun Tan Siew Sin, the then Minister of Commerce and Industry, wrote in *The Sunday Times* that communalism was one of the greatest problems faced by the new nation.

He went on to say: "It is obvious that each one of us must bend his efforts towards achieving a state of affairs in which every Malayan will regard himself as a Malayan first, though there is no reason why he

should not retain his separate individual culture at the same time."

Tun V.T. Sambanthan, the Minister of Health, wrote: "The problem of Malaya, then, is not so much the problem of the treatment of any particular community as one of the general problem of inter-racial harmony, understanding and co-operation.

Sambanthan added: "The plural society of Malaya strikes a balance which is its strength — though it permits of the fear complex between communities which, could be exploited by self-seeking communalists.