

One of the first to sing *NegaraKu*

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KUALA LUMPUR: Ragnathan Sundram, 70, has always felt proud when singing the national anthem.

After all, he was among the first to sing the *Negaraku* in the early hours of Aug 31, 1957 at what is now known as Dataran Merdeka.

He was then a 21-year-old clerk with Malayan Railways and had just got married.

Ragnathan recalled the historic moment: He trudged home at 3am, slept for a short while before rising up again to take part in the Merdeka Day celebrations.

The former RTM TV and radio newscaster was part of the British Red Cross Society Malayan Branch (now known as the Malaysian Red Crescent Society) contingent which marched into Merdeka Stadium.

Ragnathan said he still remembered vividly his contingent passing in front of the country's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and other dignitaries seated at the grand stand.

"We had been rehearsing our steps for hours, especially the part when we had to turn and salute as we approached the grandstand.

"I think members of the contingent put on their best step. I suppose no one committed any errors," he said.

When Tunku shouted "Merdeka" several times to proclaim the



nation's independence, Ragnathan said many in the stadium shed tears.

"I did not cry as I think I was too young to understand fully the political reality then, that we have become an independent nation which decided on its own destiny.

"I clapped and shouted with delight because I was just excited to be part of the celebrations," he said.

Today, five children and 18 grandchildren later, Ragnathan still celebrates Merdeka with the same excitement as in 1957.

In his garden, a large Jalur Gemilang is hoisted at the beginning of every August.

He continues reading for the umpteenth time *The Merdeka Book Malaysia's Road to Nationhood*, a Straits Times Publication he bought for 1 Straits Dollar in 1957.

The book was published to pre-

pare the people then for the new country ahead. There were notes on the nation's history, British leaders, the railways and advertisements on independence.

Ragnathan said the country's independence spurred him to better himself.

He continued his studies, passing his Senior Cambridge (equivalent to Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) and Higher School Certificate (Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia) examinations.

He was promoted as an officer with the Railway and later joined the Labour and Employment Ministry. He retired as an administration officer with the Information Ministry.

Ragnathan said he became a part-time Malay news reader in RTM from 1971 to 1977.

"I became fluent in the language by reading, writing and conversing with my Malay friends," he said.

During that time, his colleagues in RTM included Jamsari Mohamad, Yahaya Longchik, Adnan Ali, S. Samy Vellu (now Works Minister), Robert Lam, Bosco D'Cruz and George Abraham.

After retirement, he became a member of the Malaysian Film Censorship Board for several years.

Now Ragnathan spends his time tackling local issues affecting his neighbourhood.

But the memories of Merdeka and the following years are not lost. He keeps a diary.