

DATE: 16/08/2007

Thank you, Malaysia

NST- 19/8/2007

THERE are only 12 days left in the countdown to Aug 31.

I ardently hope to be part of the Merdeka Day parade marching past the padang, secretariat building, "Spotted Dog" and Merdeka Square. This might just come true.

The organisers have invited some of us, retired soldiers, to be part of the parade and I have agreed. I only hope that I remain in good health to meet that August day.

It is hard to believe, but I draw a blank every time I try to remember where I was and what I did on Aug 31, 1957.

And yet, I can recall some days before that, as an 11-year-old, chattering with some friends about the coming Merdeka day.

"The *orang putih* (referring to the British High Commissioner and his other officers) will now have to *balik negeri* (go back home) and will be out of work when they get home," one of my friends said.

I did not add to that comment, feeling a bit gleeful about it and naively believing that all that he said could be true.

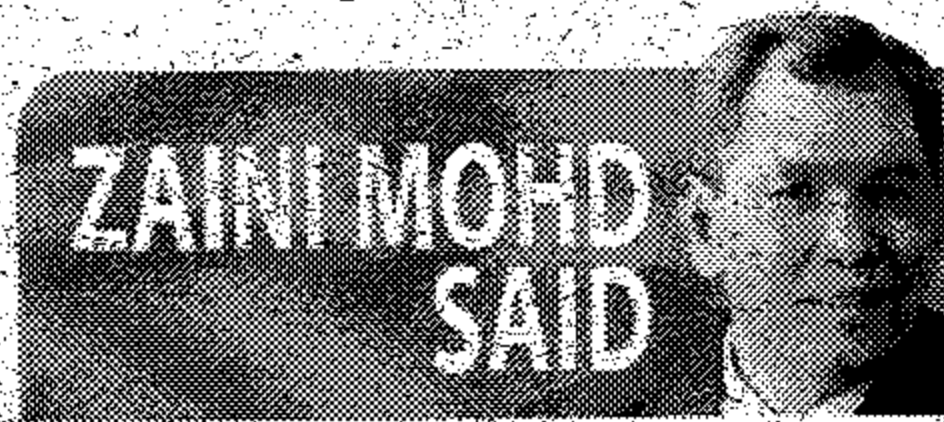
Another boy, who was a lot older, made a more sober and worrying statement: "I am not sure about it all. How do we know we can stand on our own?"

When asked what he meant by that, he replied: "We cannot even make anything, not even bicycles. How are we to survive when all we can make are matches and match-boxes?"

Ignorant boy-talk, undoubtedly, but with a ring of truth.

His talk was also reflective of the thoughts of many other people in those days.

I also remember being told that the Union Jack would be lowered at the padang on the



night of Aug 30.

There was some talk by some of us who had thought about going there but were not allowed by our parents.

"It is going to be late at night and there will be throngs of people. What if you were to get lost?"

I can now understand their concern.

How on earth could 11-year-olds safely walk back after midnight from the Selangor padang to the Police Depot during those days?

Regrettably, I was also not there to witness Tunku Abdul Rahman shouting "Merdeka" together with the crowd at the Merdeka Stadium the very next morning.

I can distinctly recall my own feelings and hopes then.

These were simple and honest enough as I had just turned 11 at that time.

I was very happy and proud that we would be ruling our own country and not be subservient to an *orang putih* master any more.

I remember wishing that that we would all live peacefully and happily together with all of the races in the country who had become the country's citizens. But my most fervent wish was for "Merdeka" to make us richer and that life would be easier as the country's wealth would surely be given more to our own people.

"Surely, our own kind would not forget and not let our own people down," I remember thinking.

So I could not help but feel gratified when, last Thursday, I sat with a friend in a restaurant on the ground floor of the Maxis Tower, attempting to reflect on how far we have gone the last 50 years.

I should, as even where I sat was, in my schooldays, part of the KL racecourse — way out of the town centre.

The foreigners I saw there were either executives of multi-national companies, Arab tourists looking very much at ease and confident in the hustle and bustle of modern Western-style shopping, or foreign workers pretending very hard, but not too successfully, to look and behave like locals.

The real locals were distinctively stylish and spent freely, clearly educated high-wage earners from the two Petronas towers and surrounding high-end offices.

I, and presumably many others like me, have to be happy about the present.

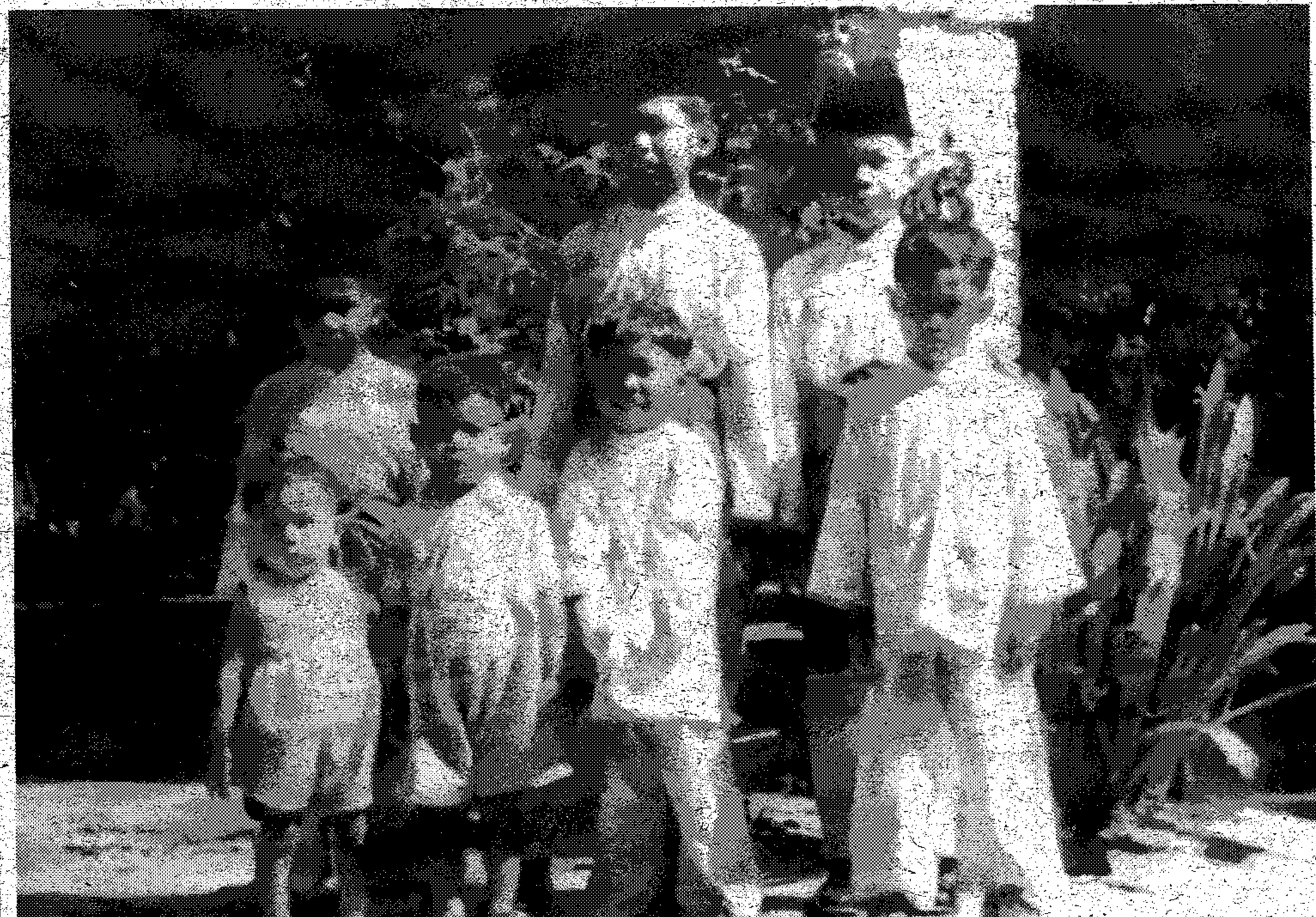
I am because we contributed our little bit as soldiers to make it possible.

It matters little if others are unaware of my joy, or that there are those who are perennially unhappy and dissatisfied, despite the peace and prosperity they have been enjoying.

My desire is to keep the flag flying and sing the *Negaraku* with a lot of feeling for the country.

I want to march past the spot where the federation's flag was first raised 50 years ago and not worry at all about losing my way. Merdeka!

■ Lt-Gen (R) Datuk Seri Zaini Mohd Said is a former army field commander. He can be contacted at panglima_sauk70hotmail.com



Zaini Mohd Said (centre, back row) pictured with his friends when young. He doesn't want to miss the Merdeka celebrations at the padang this time round.