

THE whole (of Kuala Lumpur) town did not sleep for about two weeks. This is how veteran journalist Felix Abisheganaden of *The New Straits Times* remembers the days leading to Merdeka, Aug 31, 1957.

On Merdeka eve, there was the pre-independence celebration at the Selangor Club, where Tunku Abdul Rahman and the other leaders of the nation watched as the Union Jack was lowered at the stroke of midnight and the Malayan flag was raised.

"We were to time the British anthem, *God Save The Queen*, to end when the (Federal Secretariat) clock was striking midnight and to play the *Negaraku*, remembers Datuk Ahmad Merican, who was in charge of the music that night.

"It was impossible!"

The impossible was possible, and all went well. *God Save The Queen* ended as planned with the clanging of the clock tower bell, signifying the end of an era.

Tunku Abdul Rahman's voice then rang out loud as he shouted "Merdeka", as *Negaraku* filled the air, signifying a new era, a new Malaya.

"It was especially moving, everyone was in tears."

Ahmad continued with his "backroom" role at the official proclamation in Merdeka Stadium the next day. In the celebrated black and white photograph, the Tunku is standing on a podium with other dignitaries, leading the passionate cry of "Merdeka!"

"I was underneath that podium, recording the whole proceedings."

Abisheganaden, who was brought in from the newspaper's head office in Singapore to beef up the team in Kuala Lumpur, remembers:

"There was so much enthusiasm, everyone was putting up flags, painting their buildings, and hanging bunting everywhere.

"The highlight on the eve of Merdeka was at the Selangor Club field. The crowd started streaming in from 5pm.

"Thousands thronged the field, including many expatriates."

After the address by the Duke of Gloucester and the Sultan of Kedah, the countdown began.

"All eyes were on the clock at the

# The timing, the deadline and shouts of Merdeka

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The night before, and the morning of the big occasion. WAN HULAIMI and ARFAH ABDULLAH talk to a then worried broadcasting man who had to time the playing of two national anthems to the very second, a journalist who was rushing to meet his deadline, and an expatriate civil service officer who led the shout of 'Merdeka' after Tunku had proclaimed independence



Malaysiaku Gemilang



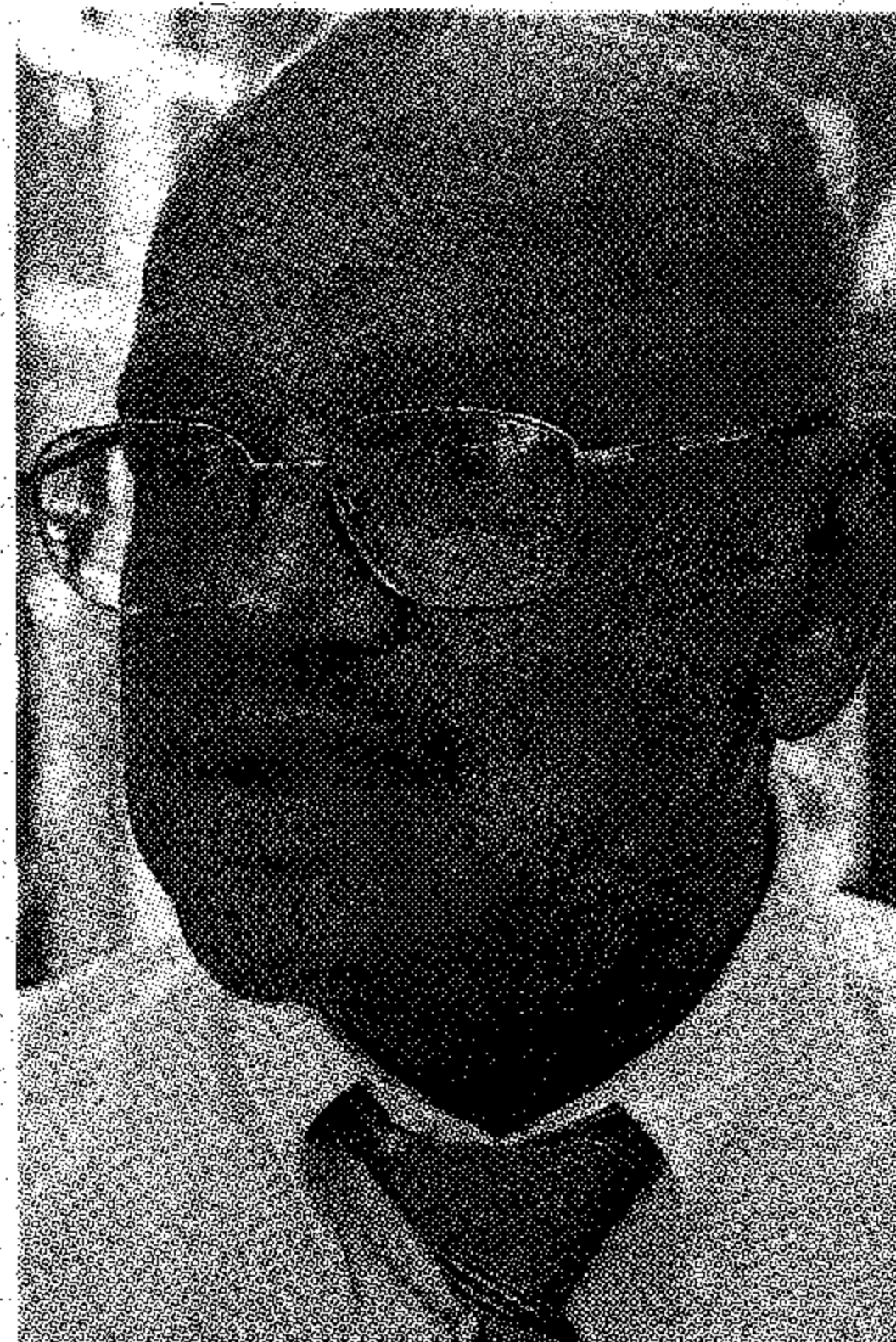
Datuk Ahmad Merican

Federal Secretariat building. As it struck midnight, the crowd roared with joy. I will never forget the moment."

The journalists then had to take turns to rush to *The Straits Times* office in nearby Market Square to file their copy and rush back to the field.

"The final story was written at about 3am."

Abisheganaden remembers that as the euphoric celebrations started to die down, the crowd then left the field to walk down the streets of Kuala Lumpur.



Felix Abisheganaden

The VIP visitors from abroad left for the Federal Hotel, which had been built at Tunku's request to accommodate them.

By 5am, the crowds were making their way on foot, by bicycle, and other modes of transport to the Merdeka Stadium for the formal "handing-over ceremony" at 9am.

"There was a drizzle as we arrived at the stadium."

It was perhaps an apt prelude to the many who wept with joy as Tunku read the proclamation, which described Malaya as being



Frederick Lees

"forever a sovereign democratic and independent state".

For Frederick Lees, the man who continued to lead the shout of "Merdeka", he had played several key roles while serving the Malayan Civil Service in the 1950s.

Lees, a member of the staff who served the Director of Operations, had worked tirelessly to win the hearts and minds of the Malayan people during the Emergency.

For that big day, he served as secretary of the Merdeka Day Celebrations committee.

In his home in Rye, England, Lees keeps a near-pristine copy, cyclostyled and bound, of the Merdeka Day plan, detailing every movement of every guest, including Tunku's arrival, the declaration of independence and departure from the Merdeka Stadium, all laid out with military precision.

"On the morning of Merdeka Day, a bus drove into the ditch just near the stadium," says Lees, "which pushed everything in the programme back by an hour."

He remembers the moments before Tunku stepped out to address the crowd who turned up to hear the official proclamation of independence.

"Just before entering the field, Tunku popped his head into the (broadcasting room) box and asked Albar (Datuk Syed Jaafar Albar) to shout "Merdeka" into the microphone at the end of the ceremony.

Tunku was full of last minute changes like that. At the end, Albar shouted "Merdeka!" and the crowd responded.

"After a couple of roars later, Albar lost his voice, and he turned to me (and signalled that I should) continue.

"And there I was, an Englishman, at the microphone, shouting 'Merdeka!' and the crowd responded." —MPS