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50 years on and the love affair continues

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KUANTAN: The first Merdeka celebration here was by no means grand, but it holds many happy memories for former Royal Air Force staff John Allen.

The Brit, 20 years old at the time, remembers how happy people were, with strangers congratulating each other on the streets.

"I managed to capture some of the interesting moments with my camera," said the 70-year-old Allen who came here with his wife Betty, 69, yesterday.

Among them was a picture of a boat parade along Sungai Kuantan with all the vessels beautifully decorated.

Allen also brought with him a copy of a book that was published by Straits Times Publications in conjunction with independence day.

Allen has kept the book, entitled *The Merdeka Book — Malaya's Road to Nationhood*,

very carefully and he says he plans to auction it for charity.

Allen said he was sent to Kuantan in early 1957 to help set up the communication facility at the RAF base in Jalan Gambang.

"It was a small base surrounded by thick jungle then. We dared not leave our camp at night as there were many elephants and tigers," he said.

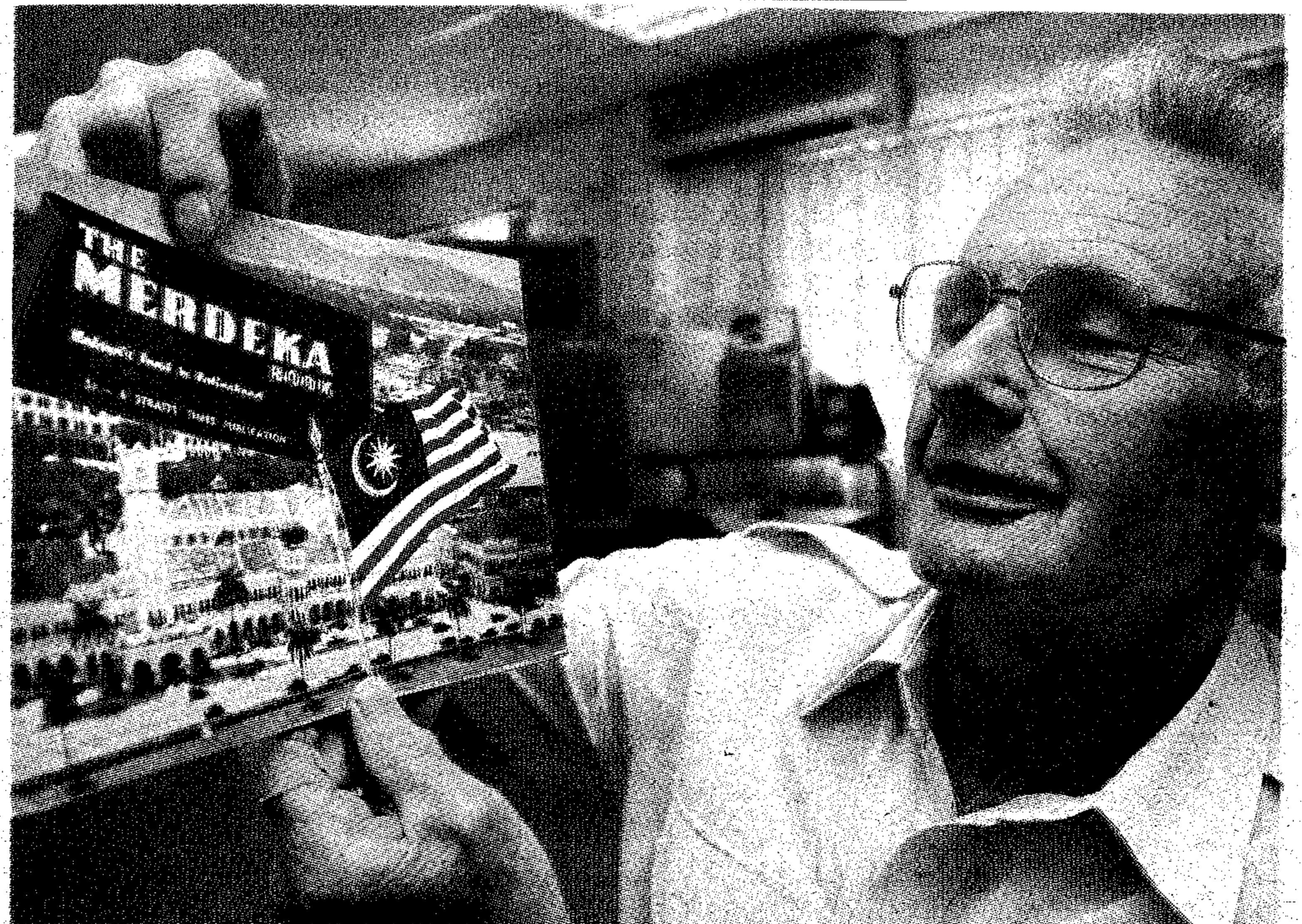
Although he was in Kuantan for only nine months, Allen said he had many interesting experiences especially during the preparations for Merdeka.

"We even celebrated the joyous occasion with the locals, although at first, we were scared that they might become hostile towards us."

He and Betty left Malaya in January 1958 with many happy memories.

They came back for a visit for the first time in 1987.

"We were surprised to see all the development, and we



Former Royal Air Force staff John Allen with a copy of *The Merdeka Book — Malaya's Road to Nationhood*, fell in love with the country when he first came here in 1957.

fell in love with the country and have been back many times since," said Allen, who has three children and seven grandchildren in London.

"The country has progressed so much. But the beaches are still beautiful, especially Teluk Chempedak," said Allen who visited the famous beach every weekend in 1957.

Both he and his wife said they were touched by the friendliness of the people.

The couple were also grateful for the help they had received while trying to locate a Chinese friend of Allen's from the old days.

The couple later met state Tourism Committee chairman Datuk Maznah Mazlan and passed her some of Allen's

photos.

Maznah, who hosted a lunch for them, said the state government is compiling information on British ex-servicemen and their experiences while serving in the state.

It has also launched a special holiday package for them called "Pahang — The British Trail".