

The Tunku — as I knew him

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In many ways Tunku was responsible for initiating the gradual transformation of the navy from a coastal (brown water force) to an ocean-going navy (blue water navy).

By Rear Admiral (Rtd)
DATUK K. THANABALASINGAM

I FIRST met Tunku soon after my return to Malaya from the United Kingdom.

On my return, I was appointed the first Naval Cadet Training Officer at the then Federation Military College at Port Dickson (currently the Royal Military College in Sungai Besi) from Jan 1, 1959. Malaya, soon after attaining independence on Aug 31 1957, had successfully negotiated with the British Government and had the British Royal Malayan Navy transferred to the Malayan Government on July 1 1958. From then on it became the Malayan owned and administered Royal Malayan Navy, and the designation

"Royal" was a reference to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. When the navy was transferred to Malaya we inherited all the assets (the ships, the bases and jetties and personnel).

Tunku was always a father figure to me and I always respected and admired him, even though I disagreed with him on one of those rare occasions.

Tunku had the foresight and common sense to realise that once we were independent we would not be in a position to defend ourselves against external attack. Consequently he was responsible for getting the British Government to agree to sign a Defence Agreement with us. The agreement was called the Anglo-Malayan Defence and Mutual Assistance Treaty signed on Oct 13, 1957.



Special guest: Then Commodore Thanabalasingam receiving Tunku at the Royal Malaysian Navy Woodlands Naval Base, Singapore in 1970.

From what I eventually came to understand, Britain was obliged under the terms of the Agreement to come to Malaya's defence in the event of hostilities.

Confrontation, or *Konfrontasi* as Soekarno called it, started around March 1964. Tunku was very upset by this development but due to his earlier foresight in forging a Defence Agreement between Malaya and Britain, the latter came to our assistance. In doing so, they also persuaded Australia and New Zealand, as part of the Commonwealth, to participate in Malaysia's defence.

In conversations on a few occasions where I happened to be present, Tunku said that we had spent too much financially due to Confrontation and that the money could have been better utilised for development and other urgent national projects.

When the trials and tribulations of Confrontation settled down, especially after the signing of the agreement between Malaysia and Indonesia, Tunku and his colleagues decided to Malaysianise the top posts in the navy and air force. They initially offered these posts to two senior Malaysian army generals, who declined for two main reasons. Firstly they felt that they were not professionally qualified and secondly because they did not want to jeopardise their own careers in the army.

Tunku and his colleagues then decided that they would select two officers, one from the navy and one from the air force, and appoint them chiefs of the respective services. They were fully aware of our age but decided, nevertheless, to appoint us and take the risk. This exercise created history not only because Malaysians for the first time were appointed to these two top posts but also because of our age. I was 31 years old and a bachelor and my air force counterpart was 33.

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Malaysiaku Gemilang

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The events of May 13 completely devastated Tunku because he was a very sensitive person. He was so upset that when normalcy was restored he stepped down as Prime Minister and his Deputy Tun Abdul Razak took over.

Even after Tunku had stepped down as Prime Minister, I continued to keep in touch with him until his final days.

My personal view of Tunku is that he was a great man who loved life and lived it to the full. He was a kind, generous and gentle person who had the welfare of the people and the nation at heart.

He was a simple man despite his royal blood and mixed extremely well with all races. He was also very proper as far as protocol was concerned. To me he was the right man to have led our young nation in the early years of our independence.

□ Datuk K. Thanabalasingam joined the British Royal Malayan Navy in May 1955 and was sent to the Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, England, from which he graduated in early 1958. He returned to Malaya at the end of 1958 to join the newly established Malayan Navy. At the end of 1976, he retired from the naval service as Rear Admiral at the age of 40. He ventured subsequently into private business.