

I REMEMBER WHEN: My father received a medal for gallantry
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HE'S MY HERO: On Father's Day today, Rafique Sher Mohamed remembers the trials his courageous father, Sher Mohamed Allah Baksh, went through

IN 2009, Astro's History Channel invited viewers to submit photos of historical significance to its Photo for the Future contest.

Among the selected winners was a photo of my father taken in 1947 where he was being congratulated by Sir Edward Gent, the Governor of the Malayan Union, for his act of true grit and awarded the Colonial Police Medal for Gallantry.

The winning photos with their stories appeared in the Photo for the Future clips.

My father's photo was further selected with more pictures highlighting his career achievements.

An old photograph, brought to life on the History Channel across Southeast Asia, briefly touched on the impact this medal had on my father's career as a police officer.

My father would have been proud once again, after more than six decades, to have received this publicity on his old colonial medal and would have surely recalled all the media blitz that surrounded the incident way back then.

Sadly, my father, Sher Mohamed Allah Baksh, did not see the clips. He passed away on Jan 13, 1996, at the age of 81.

His act of valour brought him to the attention of the top brass and his reputation was firmly established as a result of this incident.

Dad was a probationary Asiatic inspector at this time. It was a position dad had to slog for for 13 long years.

To appreciate this incident of 1947, it would be meaningful to delve into dad's life at the time when he joined the Federated Malay States (FMS) police force 13 years earlier.

Back in 1934, after completing Senior Cambridge, dad enlisted with the police force with hopes to be taken in with the rank of inspector. To his dismay, he was hired as a recruit due to changes in entry requirements. Dad was 20 years old. There was a scarcity of jobs at that time and the police force had offered the opportunity to join its service as an inspector.

Dad had applied not because he was highly desirous of a career in the police force, but simply because there was no other choice. When he was offered the recruit's position, he reluctantly and unhappily decided to accept it under the circumstances.

Life was utterly miserable for Dad during his training. To add to his misery, Dad, who most certainly considered himself a local by all definitions and by virtue of his local primary and secondary education, was treated by the commandant of the training depot as an uneducated foreign recruit and was ordered to wear a cap that resembled a

Turkish cap but with a protrusion on top akin to a cone that was reserved for recruits from North India.

While his British superiors might have found his demotivated and demoralised feelings funny, this was simply too much for my father. He would have called it quits if not for the encouragement of his close friends.

He made his mark as an outstanding track and field athlete and marksman. He was an athletic champion for five consecutive years, from 1936 to 1940, when athletic achievement was one of the criteria in providing a competitive edge in career advancement.

He was aiming for the inspector's position and he eventually had it in his sight sometime in 1941 and was earmarked for a promotion.

But fate intervened as the winds of World War 2 were gaining momentum then. My father's hopes of becoming an inspector were dashed when, on Dec 8, 1941, the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Malaya.

For 3 1/2 years, life was a daily struggle under the Japanese occupation. It did not take long for his Japanese masters to recognise Dad's strengths and capabilities.

They admired his personality, leadership qualities and his deep sense of values -- his honesty and integrity.

This was clearly evident from his action when a Japanese officer of a lower rank assaulted and humiliated him in the presence of his men.

Sher took up the incident with the commandant of the camp and wanted to relinquish his rank since it carried no authority.

Greatly admiring Dad's stand, the commandant called in the officer who had attacked him and directed my father to hit him back in similar fashion. After this was done, to restore Dad's respect, honour and authority, the commandant ordered him to give the Japanese officer a beating with a scabbard in the field to be witnessed by Dad's men. It was recalled that the Japanese officer ran all over the field with Sher on his heels!

When the war ended, the British forces returned to take over the country in late 1945. With the return of the British, Dad, who was targeted for a promotion as an inspector before the War, was selected for training as a probationary inspector.

Upon completion of his training, he was transferred to Kampar, a tin mining town, not far from where the famous incident in his life was to take place shortly thereafter.

While posted here, a deep bond of respect developed between Dad and his British superior and this friendship lasted till the end of their lives.

Dad never divulged much information about his very first medal. It was only after his death that I learnt about the story behind his Colonial Police Medal for Gallantry.

In short, a spectacular and dramatic gun battle had taken place. A major kidnapping had been thwarted and members of a dangerous gang had been smashed.

Dad moved on after this incident, carrying out his duties with exceptional ability, courage and capacity for leadership.

He remained highly popular because he inspired trust and continued to be a source of inspiration to his men, peers and, most notably, his superiors.

His integrity, unwavering and unflinching loyalty and devotion to duty took precedence over everything.

He moved up the ranks steadily and he continued to serve the country with great distinction.

He retired in 1969 with his reputation intact and held the rank of Assistant Commissioner of Police.

In 1999, 30 years after his retirement and 31/2 years after his death, the Royal Malaysia Police dedicated an exclusive panel in the Police Museum to him in recognition of his outstanding services.

It was impossible to ignore Dad's star-spangled career.

I endeavoured to write a book on his life and to capture his achievements and succeeded in 2007 in producing a pictorial biography of his life, contributions and sacrifices.

The coffee table book was aptly titled Kismet and it was launched in 2008 by former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

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