

The pilot and the bodyguard

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Two men who have served the Prime Minister in different capacities share their experiences with **AUDREY EDWARDS** and **JANE RITIKOS**.

CELEBRATING a birthday is one happy occasion and VVIP pilot Royal Military Air Force (RMAF) No. 2 squadron commanding officer Brig-Jen Datuk Hanif Darimi will never forget the time when a certain passenger joined in the celebrations some 35,000 feet in the air.

"We were flying the Prime Minister on my birthday and the cabin crew brought a cake. After letting someone take over, I went to cut the cake and the crew sang me

the birthday song.

"Datuk Seri heard and when he found out what it was about, he and his wife joined in the singing. Some of the Cabinet ministers also sang along. I was taken aback," he reminisces, adding that he keeps a photograph of the occasion which took place in the 1980s.

With 31 years of service under his belt, he has flown Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and most of the country's leaders around the world for the past 17 years but has been the premier's exclusive pilot for the past seven years.

As commanding officer of the squadron, Brig-Jen Hanif, 52, is in charge of four aircraft – the Boeing Business Jet BBJ 700, Global Express, Falcon 900 and Fokker 28.

Those who are flown in these aircraft include the King and the Queen, Deputy Prime Minister, Cabinet ministers and foreign digni-



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taries.
The Prime Minister normally travels in the Global Express, acquired by the Government in 2001.

A 15-seater plane, it is fitted with the necessary flight equipment. One feature is a touch screen television, which lets the cabin crew control items like the plane's temperature, window shades and audio-visual equipment.

Among the many words this serious military man uses to describe Dr Mahathir are "alert, kind, punctual and simple".

And from all these years of flying him across sea and land, it is evident that he has a fondness for Dr Mahathir although he warns that nothing gets past the Prime Minister's sharp mind even at thousands of feet in the air.

"He is very nice and not fussy. He is very, very sharp. And he knows his subject matter no matter what it is.

"So you have to be cautious whenever you are talking to him. He is well-prepared and there is no subject that he does not know of," said.

Among the topics that he discussed with Dr Mahathir was, of course, aviation.

"He definitely keeps in touch with the developments in aviation. We talk about that a lot and he gives his input," he added.

Brig-Jen Hanif says that travelling from country to country had not stopped Dr Mahathir from working onboard his "office in the sky".

"He would work very hard. He would carry files around just like he was in his office," he added.

He says that Dr Mahathir would usually have a good sleep on the flight back and would head right back to the office once he arrived in Malaysia.

"The amount of energy and stamina that he has is amazing," he commented.

Dr Mahathir's punctuality is another trait that Brig-Jen Hanif is thankful for, as timing is imperative on official visits.

"It is critical we arrive on time because there is usually a parade and we do not want to embarrass anyone by arriving late or early," he said, adding that he and his crew would be on standby throughout all official visits.

Brig-Jen Hanif and his crew have flown a record-breaking 12 hours and 50 minutes from London to Kuala Lumpur, taking unusual routes such as flying to Buenos Aires, crossing the Atlantic Ocean to Johannesburg over the Indian Ocean and returning to Malaysia.

"It is not an easy job when you are flying all around the world. And I really thank the rest of my squadron. But it is not a boring job and I'm honoured to be given the task," he said.

An unforgettable experience was when Dr Mahathir made the announcement that he was stepping down during the Umno general assembly in June last year.

"The squadron was having a BBQ



Main pic: Roslan (with moustache, on left) in a bodyguard's nightmare as his charge, the Prime Minister, presses the flesh in a Chinatown celebration in Kuala Lumpur. Insets: In the early years of his service with Dr Mahathir, his job included carrying a clunky Atur phone and running alongside the PM.

Protecting the PM

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picnic dinner when he dropped the bombshell that he wanted to resign. We were called up and given the task of flying him out of the country to an unknown destination.

"The aircraft was to fly to somewhere in the Mediterranean so we rushed back and started planning and getting clearance from the various countries. It was quite unprecedented."

On Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Brig-Jen Hanif said that she would pass notes to him in the cockpit through the cabin crew on long flights.

Among the points she would include in her notes were that they were going on a record-breaking flight and asked Brig-Jen Hanif to include all the countries they had passed, distance flown and time taken.

"It is a heavy responsibility flying VIPs and everything must be perfect with no hiccups. But the air force has trained us for that," he said.

His job includes making sure that all four aircraft are in tip-top condition and that everything goes according to schedule.

Brig-Jen Hanif joined the air force after attending the Kuala Kangsar Malay College. Among his postings are has aide-de-camps (ADC) to the Negri Sembilan Yam Tuan and flying in the VIP squadron.

The Prime Minister needs an aircraft at his disposal for reasons of

security and convenience.

"You never know what will happen (in the country) and then he needs to come back urgently. If he did not have an aircraft, then time would be wasted on transit (with commercial airlines)," explains Brig-Jen Hanif.

He adds that he and the crew would miss Dr Mahathir and his wife.

"They are a nice couple and Dr Siti Hasmah is a kind lady who is motherly. The whole nation is definitely going to miss them."

Sjn-Mej Roslan Othman is a famous face but few know his name. That's because he has been standing behind the Prime Minister for 22 years and been constantly photographed by the media.

As Dr Mahathir's bodyguard, he has been more up close and personal than most. For example, he was there when Dr Mahathir was told he had had a heart attack and reacted in disbelief.

"He didn't believe it. Only when they showed him the ECG (electrocardiogram) did he believe it," he recalls.

He vividly remembers the incident, which happened in 1989.

"It was Seri Perdana in Kuala Lumpur and I had just finished my dinner when Datin Seri (Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali) called me and said that Datuk Seri was feeling unwell.

"I went upstairs and then called

the KL Hospital chief. He came and detected the heart attack. So, we called for transport and took him to the hospital immediately," he recalls.

Roslan, 45, is one of Dr Mahathir's six bodyguards. He was a trainer at the Pusat Latihan Polis when he was called up in August 1981 to be the premier's bodyguard.

Dr M subsequently had a by-pass operation at HKL.

"After serving him for about nine years at that time, we treated him like our father. It was shocking for us and we were very worried," says Roslan.

During the time when Dr Mahathir was in hospital, the bodyguards worked on shifts and made sure that only family members were allowed to visit him.

Dr Siti Hasmah, says Roslan, took care of her husband throughout the stay, which lasted more than a month.

On the premier as a boss, Roslan says Dr Mahathir never accepts "no" for an answer.

"If he asks you to do something, you do it. And if you slip up, he will ask you to do it until you get it right. He doesn't accept that there is no solution. You must always find a solution," he stresses.

His devotion to his employer is obvious as he says without hesitation that he wants to continue serving Dr M although he will be taking

optional retirement after Dr M steps down.

Four of the bodyguards will be taking optional retirement too.

"I haven't decided what I'll do yet. But I know that I want to continue working for him. If he calls and needs help, I will be there. We haven't been separated from him for 22 years and he is family. It will be difficult," he added.

The father of three also said that his tenure as bodyguard had been satisfying.

"I'm honoured to have served Dr Mahathir these 22 years. He is a leader who is easy to approach and discuss things with. He and his family have never made us feel that we merely working for them," he says with a smile, adding that the Prime Minister "never raises his voice at people and cares for the welfare of his staff."

Roslan says Dr Mahathir would take his own car for a drive into the city on Sundays while the bodyguards followed behind.

But when it comes to protecting Dr Mahathir, it must surely have been nerve-wracking because he does not believe in wearing a bullet-proof vest.

"He believes that his life is in God's hands," explains Roslan. Dr Mahathir also believes in allowing ordinary people access to him. He is also famous for shaking hands with everyone, especially during his Hari Raya open house.

It is no wonder that his bodyguards, like others who have served him all these years, respect and love him - a boss who never failed to thank them whenever they sent him to his doorstep at the end of the day.