

Malaysian Pioneers in the Spratly Islands

The Untold Stories

Captain Mat Taib Yasin RMN (Ret)
Captain Azhar Abdul Rahman RMN (Ret)
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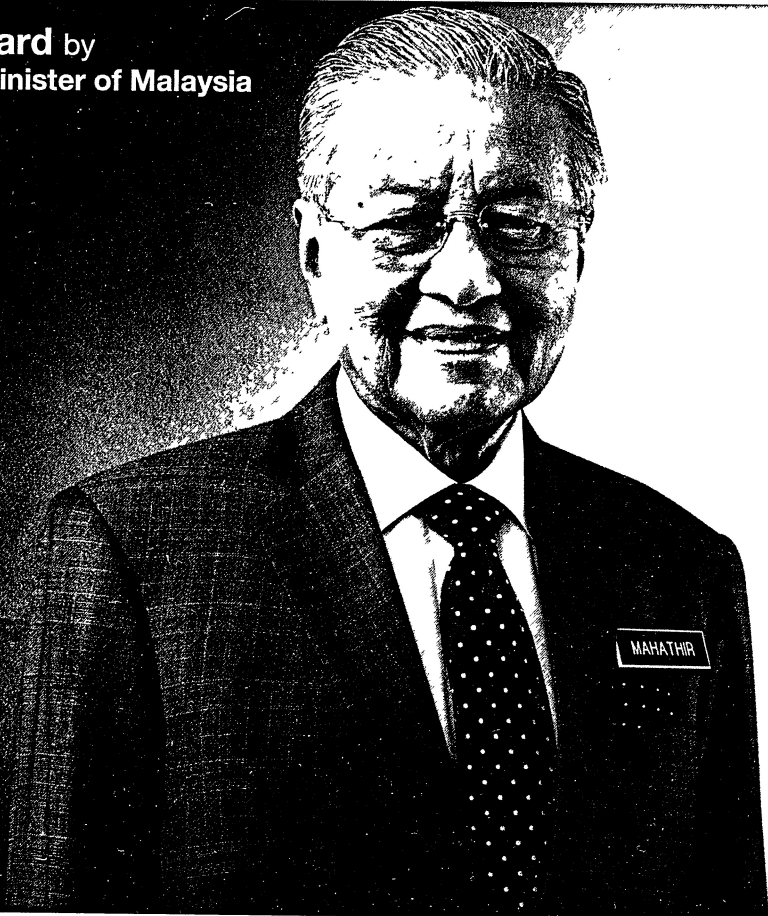
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Foreward by
Prime Minister of Malaysia



I've always believed that Malaysian should do much more in documenting significant moments which occurred in our quest to realise our nationhood and our sovereignty.

Apart from doing it for the sake of posterity, they also serve as contemporary terms of reference in our on-going efforts to build this nation.

In that context, I wish to congratulate the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) and those involved in documenting these moments in history - at a time when Malaysia was seeking a stake in the South China Sea. Coincidentally, these efforts started when I was serving office as the 4th Prime Minister.

There has not been any comprehensively written narrative of these efforts making the completion of this publication important and commendable. This

book, the “Malaysian Pioneers in the Spratly Islands: The Untold Stories”, portrays the dedication, commitments and sacrifices made in securing Malaysia’s maritime stakes in the South China Sea.

As it is widely known, there are numerous claimants to the area and it was, from the very beginning not an easy task or without consequence.

Despite that, Malaysia was swift to move to occupy and station its troops on Terumbu Layang-Layang (Swallow Reef) in May 1983, the first Malaysia’s act of occupying and stationing troops to the reefs were premised on the framework of the third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 3), of which Malaysia is a party.

Due regards have to be accorded to the soldiers, sailors and airmen involved in achieving the goal of establishing those offshore stations. In particular, the PASKAL, for their courage and selflessness in being the first group of Malaysians settlers in the nation’s maritime frontier. This book is tribute to them.

This book is not only a narrative on what is an important part of Malaysia’s history but it also provides a rare glimpse into previously “classified” activities which occurred hundreds of nautical miles offshore far away from public eyes. It should make us proud of our fellow Malaysians and being Malaysian’s alongside.

It has been more than three decades since Malaysia’s early efforts to place a stake in the South China Sea and the sacrifices made by these Malaysians were not in vain. As provided by the international maritime laws, Malaysia had achieved its intended purpose of securing the maritime frontier and that we had gained tremendous economic and geo-strategic benefits.

Thank you.



YAB Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammad

Idea, Interest And Initiative

First and foremost, I wish to put on record our sincere appreciation to Vice Admiral Tan Sri Ahmad Ramli Hj Mohd Nor (Ret) (TSAR) for conferring on us the confidence and trust to indulge in this book writing project. In earnest, the idea of documenting the RMN involvement in the South China Sea (Operationally referred as Gugusan Semarang Peninjau (GSP)) was mooted by TSAR some years ago during an informal discussion at a wedding reception. Being the Director of Naval Plans in the early 80's and later as the Chief of Navy, TSAR has had direct and personal engagement with Right Honourable Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammad, hereafter as Tun Mahathir, then as the 4th Prime Minister, the main driver behind Malaysia's forays into the South China Sea and subsequent occupation and developments of GSP. Therefore, his special attachment to GSP issues is very well understood.

On my part, developments in the South China Sea are intriguing mainly for two reasons. My direct involvement particularly with the developments of Station MIKE and Station UNIFORM whilst holding the post of the Director of Naval Plans in the mid 90's and secondly my deep involvement with South China Sea issues in national and international conferences, as well as regular lecture slots at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), University of Malaya's Centre for Southeast Studies and military institutions, particularly during my tenure at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA) between 2000 and 2007. Nevertheless, perhaps due to a less than conducive environment then, the idea of writing was temporarily put on a back-burner. It was only revitalized in mid-2018 when the situation was deemed to be more conducive. After a series of preliminary discussions, including with the RMN, the core subject matter was identified and a writing team was appointed. Concurrent with this book the RMN undertook to produce a pictorial coffee table version on an almost identical subject, entitled "**Guardian of the Frontier**"

Team Book

While sharing the same subject matter, this book differs from the “**Guardian of the Frontier**” in terms of presentation and perhaps target readers. Besides having a higher word count, this book attempts to take a more holistic approach by incorporating new information suitable for academic as well as leisure readers, particularly, the historical information and adventure stories. It is worthwhile to note that this is neither an edited book which comprises a collection of articles or chapters, nor it is a collection of published articles by a single author or a collection of essays. Instead, it is a book jointly authored and edited by a team of three retired Royal Malaysian Navy officers, led by myself and ably assisted by Captain Azhar Abdul Rahman RMN Ret (Art) and Captain Johari Ramzan Ahmad RMN Ret (Joe). The writing team crystallized sometime in July 2018 and was then assigned with respective work scopes based on their inherent strengths and capabilities.

As the Team Leader I have entrusted upon myself the A-Z of the overall administration, from organizing research interviews, coordinating drafts and meetings with the RMN and publisher. I also assigned myself to pen the background setting (particularly Chapters 2 and 3).

With his “gift of the gab”, in both oral and written English and his overall professional and subject matter general knowledge, Art was the obvious choice as the Chief Editor. Amongst others he was entrusted with the conjuring tasks of editing, evaluating and when needed, even reforming the draft manuscripts of the two writers of differing background, experiences and writing styles. This is to ensure the book is not only interesting but also worth reading. To ensure coherency of facts and the flow, all draft manuscripts including latest amendments were shared for cross checking and comments. The editor was of course accorded the final say especially on the language, writing styles and flair. The preference for a fellow naval officer as an editor rather than an English language

expert was by design. The contents of the book are focused on naval operational, professional and technical matters where in a lot of peculiar terminologies and jargons are used. Past experiences found that in the course of pursuing the use of perfect language, many a time professional writings have lost their actual meaning after being “innocently” edited by language expert who lacked holistic understanding of the subject matter. With his PASKAL background backed by his forthright pragmatic written and spoken English Joe was an obvious choice to fill up the role of subject matter expert writer. He was amongst others assigned to research and write the chapters on “Untold Stories” which mostly revolved around the early occupation of Terumbu Layang-Layang and some passing stories about the other reefs, occupied at a later date. Indeed, being amongst the pioneer PASKAL occupation force on Terumbu Layang-Layang, Joe himself is in possession of lots of stories yet to be disclosed. These stories together with those narrated by other pioneers, formed the “meat” of this book. Joe’s previous engagement as consultant to the United Nations also spelt out a lot about his hidden substance and potential.

Scouting for an Ideal Writing Team

Good writers are not easy to come by as writing is not only about having the ability to articulate and the possession of good language and writing skills. Equally important is having a strong passion, patience and the tenacity to endure the mentally grueling process of research and writing, besides having an “in-built” empathy for the potential readers. It is even more demanding to produce a joint writing. On top of the writer’s qualities mentioned, team writers must also possess other personal common denominators including team player attributes like sincerity, be un-prejudiced and transparent in their ability to offer and accept comments.

I was very pleased when both Art and Joe consented to my invitation to join the writing team. With very little incentive to offer, certainly not the market rate of professional writers, I presumed they obliged more because of comradeship, passion in writing, as well as eternal pride and

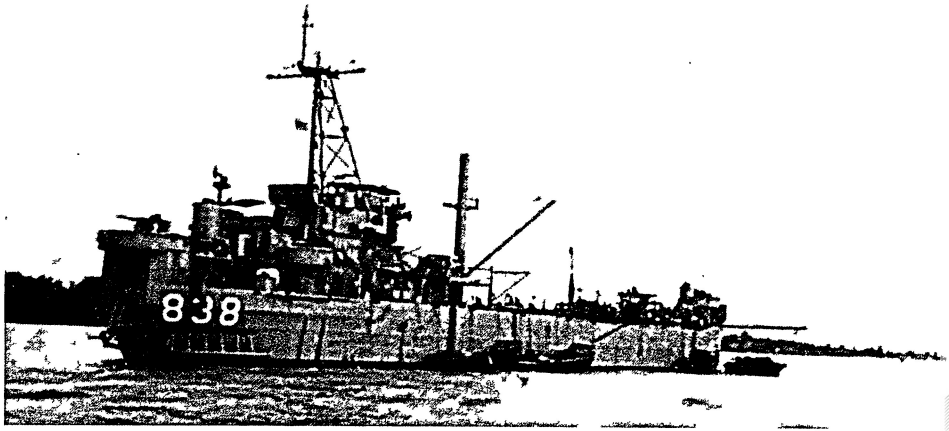
honour to be associated with the Royal Malaysian Navy where once we were served with pride.

Constraints

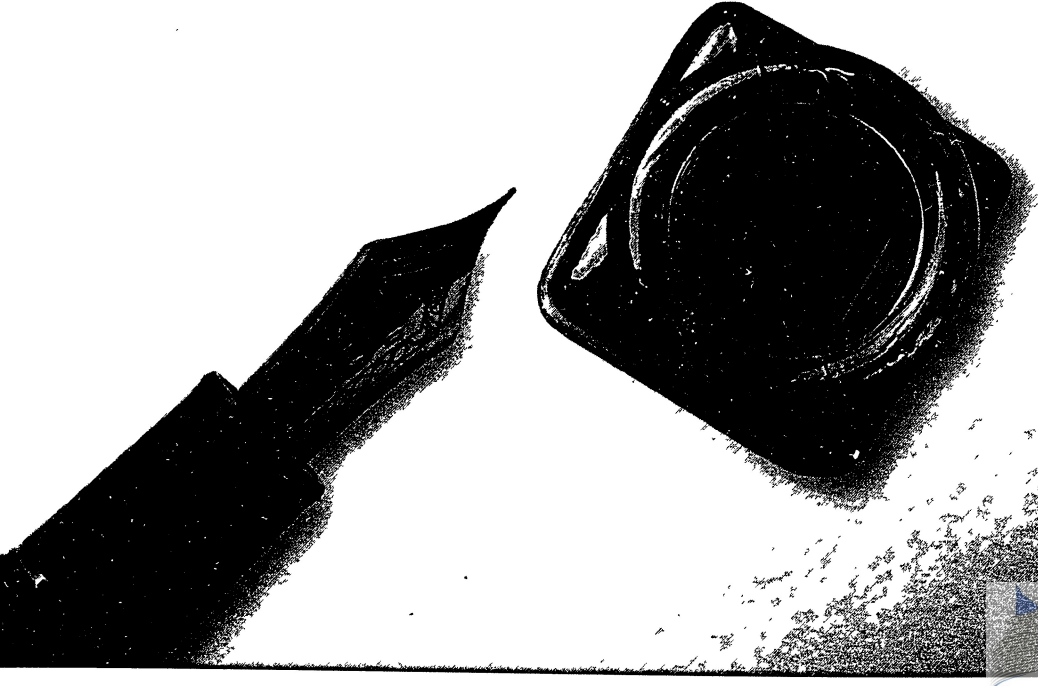
The biggest challenge faced in writing non-fiction like this book is the dearth of reference material, be they written or unwritten. As the title depicts, the core ingredient of the book is the untold stories where the information required has to be authentic and gathered from reliable sources. Any serious researcher could testify that obtaining this kind of “first-hand guarded” information is never easy. To access primary sources of information such as personal interviews and archived documents, if any, could by itself be very challenging. With the passage of time, the challenges become greater as some of those involved in the pioneer occupation team may not be around anymore. Even if they are still alive, the ageing process might have taken its toll resulting in the erosion of details on what they actually went through.

Besides, the culture of good record keeping has also not caught up with us as a nation. One fine example is the futile attempt to trace the “Ship’s Log” of KD SRI LANGKAWI operating around Amboyna Cay in mid 1970’s. This could be of tremendous help should one day we want to reinvoke our legal claim over the cay.

Image of USS HENRY COUNTY recommissioned as KD SRI LANGKAWI



Thank
you



Special Note of Appreciation

Finally, our utmost appreciation is reserved for the distinguished academic and professional subject matter experts who had kindly consented to our interview requests, namely; Vice Admiral Tan Sri Ahmad Ramli Mohd Nor (Ret), Admiral Tan Sri Kamarulzaman Ahmad Badaruddin (Ret), Admiral Datuk Mohd Reza Mohd Sany, Prof Dato' Dr B.A Hamzah, Rear Admiral Dato' Tuan Hashim bin Tuan Mohamed Ret), Rear Admiral Dato' Dr. Mohd Rasip Hasan (Ret), Dato' Rahim Hussein, First Admiral Dr Hj Sutarji Kasmin (Ret), Rear Admiral Shamsuddin Hj Ludin and his Sea Power Center (SPC) staff led by Captain Fadzil Abd Rahman. Our special thanks go to Prof Dato' Dr Hamzah and Rear Admiral Dato' Tuan Hashim (Ret) for going the extra mile to host our interview team to sumptuous lunches, at the Royal Selangor Golf Club and Sailor's Rest, Janda Baik respectively. Your first-hand accounts of the subject matter have indeed been very instrumental in helping us to fill up the pages of this book. It was unfortunate that our interview appointment with the Right Honorable Prime Minister, supposedly the "conclusive interview" had to be deferred due to PM's very tight schedule. We would also like to acknowledge and recognize the contributions of the following :

YB Senator FAdm Hj Imran bin Hamid (Ret)

RAdm Dato' Mohd Som bin Ibrahim (Ret)

Major Gen (Air) Dato' Haji Yahya bin Hj Bidin RMAF (Ret)

Major Gen (Air) Dato' Hj Jamal bin Abu Bakar RMAF (Ret)

FAdm Dato' Tan Eng Seng (Ret)

Captain Siew Koi Seng RMN (Ret)

Lt Col Choy Siew Pun RER (Ret)

Cdr K Sivarajah RMN (Ret)

Major Harjit Singh RER (Ret)

Lt Cdr Guoy Tong Kiat RMN (Ret)

Lt Cdr Pilus Yunus RMN (Ret)

WO1 PKL Abd Rahim Mat Din (Ret)

WO1 PKL Jallaludin bin Nek (Ret)

CPO PKL Ariffadzilah bin Omar (Ret)

Captain Mat Taib bin Yasin RMN (Ret)





Chapter 1

Introduction



An Untold Tale of Resolve, Sacrifices and heroism

Why would Malaysia, a peace-loving nation deploy its naval forces in the 80's to secure a contested area in the South China Sea (SCS), an action that may be construed as belligerent by littoral states that have interests in the same area. What were the reasons and considerations that influenced Malaysia's daring move that may result in dire military and/or diplomatic ramifications.

Malaysia's bold stance towards claiming and physically occupying the GSP would not have been taken, even initiated, if not for his vision and determination. Hardly warming his seat as the premier, Mahathir "summoned the resolve" to order the RMN in August 1981 to occupy Terumbu Layang-Layang (Swallow Reef), upon which the first offshore station was built followed by four more stations on other islands of the GSP built at his behest.

How they endured and survived the elements; blazing sun, gale force winds and treacherous seas? Besides the said physical challenges, they were also haunted by psychological nightmare of being confined on a remote and tiny island away from civilization and love ones, exacerbated by poor living conditions and unpredictable logistical supports.

The deed had not only reinforced Malaysia's territorial sovereignty and control of the area, but also access to the rich oil and gas fields within its claimed Continental Shelf waters. Most of the deep water wells off the coasts of Sabah and Sarawak which contribute substantial percentage to Malaysia's GNP are incidentally located within this body of water. Malaysia had made the right decision to occupy GSP.

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