

Chapter 1: My Flying Journey



Introduction

My dream of soaring among the clouds began in 1965, fresh out of school, with my sights set on joining Malaysia Airlines—then known as Malayan Airways Limited. I was young, hopeful, and eager to take flight. But fate had other plans. Despite my enthusiasm, I stumbled at the very first hurdle. The competition was fierce, and a few outstanding candidates outshone me during the interview.

The disappointment was sharp. Yet, as one door closed, another opened. The Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) was expanding rapidly, filling the void left by departing British RAF personnel. The country was transitioning to Malaysian-

led aviation, and the skies were calling. When I saw the recruitment notice, I seized the opportunity.

The selection process was no walk in the park—it tested both skill and grit. I vividly remember the pilot aptitude assessments: mechanical comprehension, spatial awareness, orientation, and hand-eye coordination. One test, in particular, stands out—the mechanical psychomotor challenge.

It took place in a modest classroom near the Sergeant Mess at the old RMAF Base in Kuala Lumpur. Conducted by Sergeant Coates, the test was deceptively simple yet brutally precise. Flying demands sharp coordination, and this test was designed to measure just that. The device featured a rotating disc and a pointer. My task was to keep the pointer in constant contact with a moving target. My left hand controlled a crank that moved the contact vertically, while my right hand adjusted it horizontally. The goal was to maintain contact for as long as possible within a set time.

I passed. That test, taken nearly six decades ago, marked a turning point. It was the beginning of my journey to becoming a pilot—through the military route, where flying training came not with a price tag, but with discipline and duty.

Today's airline selection process is even more rigorous. Candidates face advanced psychometric evaluations, requiring strong command of English, Mathematics, Physics, and sharp reasoning skills. Modern tools like PILAPT (Pilot Aptitude and Screening Test) are widely used. These computer-based systems assess spatial awareness, multitasking, and decision-making—critical traits for any aspiring pilot. (More on this in Chapter 15: Becoming an Airline Pilot.)

Back in my day, after the aptitude tests, came the physical obstacle course—a true test of stamina and agility. Thankfully, my active school days and long-distance running prowess paid off. I tackled each challenge with determination: scaling six-foot walls, balancing on narrow beams, crawling through concrete pipes, swinging across ropes, navigating wired

bridges, monkey bars, and crawling under barbed wire. It was tough, but I completed it with a solid time, boosting my overall score.

Then came the final interview—a defining moment with Air Commodore Steedman, the head of the Air Force then. Seated in a room full of hopefuls, I knew this was my chance to shine. I spoke with conviction, drawing on everything I had learned and prepared for. When the results were announced, hearing my name was pure elation.

But before I could take to the skies, one final challenge remained: military training at the Royal Military College. It was the crucible that would shape me into an officer and a pilot. Only after passing through its rigorous discipline could I truly spread my wings and embrace the boundless sky.

The Royal Military College



The Royal Military College, Malaysia

From RMC to the Skies

My journey into the Air Force began on May 6th, 1966, when I reported to the Royal Military College (RMC). A group of us had gathered at a designated spot in Kuala Lumpur, awaiting

transport via military truck to Sungei Besi—a quiet town about 10 miles away. That day marked the start of a chapter that would shape my life in ways I never imagined.

RMC had recently relocated from its original site at the 5th Mile Coast Road in Port Dickson to its current hilltop campus in Sungei Besi in 1961. The college overlooked a former mining pool, now transformed into the Mines Resort, and sat near what would later become the Bukit Jalil Stadium, host of the 1998 Commonwealth Games. Today, the grounds are shared with the National Defense University of Malaysia.

The architectural blueprint of RMC was inspired by prestigious institutions like West Point in the United States and the Royal Military College of Canada. Structurally, it was divided into two wings: the Boys Wing and the Cadet Wing.

The Boys Wing offered secondary education and basic military training for future army officers. In 1971, the term “Boy” was replaced with “Putera,” reflecting a more dignified title. The Cadet Wing, often referred to as “Little Sandhurst” after the British Army’s elite training academy, focused on developing leadership and essential soldiering skills among Officer Cadets.

Upon graduation, navy and air force cadets were typically sent to Dartmouth and Cranwell in the UK or other Commonwealth flying schools for specialized training. However, once the local flying school in Alor Star was established, most commissioned officers were trained there instead.

In 1997, RMC underwent a major restructuring. The Cadet Wing was relocated to Ulu Tiram in Johor, while the Boys Wing came under the administration of the Armed Forces Military Academy (ATMA). Today, ATMA serves as the main institution for grooming future officers, occupying the former Cadet Wing premises. Meanwhile, the relocated Cadet Wing—now known as the Officers Cadet School—operates from semi-permanent barracks, a far cry from its earlier reputation as “Little Sandhurst.”

A defining moment came on December 9th, 1966—the day I was commissioned as a Pilot Officer. That same day, the Federation Military College (FMC) was officially granted the “Royal” title by the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, becoming the Royal Military College of Malaysia. Our Passing Out Parade ended with the traditional rendition of “Auld Lang Syne,” a farewell anthem that resonates with military officers around the world.

First Day at RMC

I still remember our first day at RMC vividly. We arrived full of excitement, expecting a formal welcome and registration. Instead, we were met with a barrage of shouts from senior cadets and forced into performing tasks we hadn’t anticipated—push-ups, ear squats, climbing poles, and other random commands. It was a rude awakening.

The overt message was clear: “New cadets are worthless.” But beneath the surface, the real lesson was that all aspiring officers—regardless of background—would be treated equally. This was military shock treatment, especially jarring for those from privileged or pampered upbringings.

This initiation ritual, known as ragging, was an unofficial tradition at military colleges. Orchestrated by senior cadets, it was quietly tolerated and even supported by many senior officers. One retired armed forces chief once remarked, “In the military, ragging is seen as a way of instilling discipline, character-building, and esprit de corps.”

Personally, I believe moderate ragging has its place. But when it crosses into humiliation, abuse, or danger—it becomes unacceptable. Ragging was common at RMC, though its severity varied depending on the officer-in-charge. Thankfully, during my time, it was relatively mild compared to some other institutions.

One memorable episode involved being woken in the middle of the night for dress parades. Seniors would bark out orders, demanding we change into various uniforms within

impossibly short timeframes. We'd scramble from our rooms to the square, switching from PT kits to combat gear, then to service attire, formal dress, mess kit, and finally ceremonial parade uniform—all in rapid succession.

The chaos was almost comical. Junior cadets dashed up and down the stairs, trying to meet the deadlines. Any delay or mistake meant punishment—usually more push-ups or other physical tasks. It was exhausting, but also oddly bonding.

Officially, ragging is prohibited due to its potential for harm. Most military organizations now enforce strict policies to prevent abuse. Yet, despite these rules, ragging continued behind closed doors—until serious incidents forced change.

In 2007, an air force cadet at RMAF Alor Setar was subjected to repeated physical and mental abuse. The situation escalated to the point where the cadet's parents filed a police report. The seniors involved were charged and fined in court.

Even more tragic was the 1982 incident at RMAF Kuching, where a young officer died as a result of ragging. At bases like Kuching and Labuan, where tax-free alcohol was easily accessible, induction rituals often involved heavy drinking.

The grand finale of these initiations was the infamous “Kuching/Labuan Special”—a lethal cocktail made from whiskey, brandy, vodka, gin, rum, port, soy sauce, tomato sauce, beer, stout, and orange cordial. Some managed to drink it; most vomited before finishing, and a few passed out after bravely gulping it down.

Then there was the bizarre “Mr. Cobra” contest, a kind of male bravado ritual. Juniors were summoned to a room with a vintage movie projector to watch adult films, dressed only in service-issued towels. At the end of the screening, one cadet was crowned “Mr. Cobra” with a symbolic ribbon, ceremoniously passed down from the previous winner.

Despite the absurdity, many who went through ragging look back with a strange fondness. They recall the camaraderie, the resilience it built, and the shared laughter—except, of course, in cases where lives were lost.

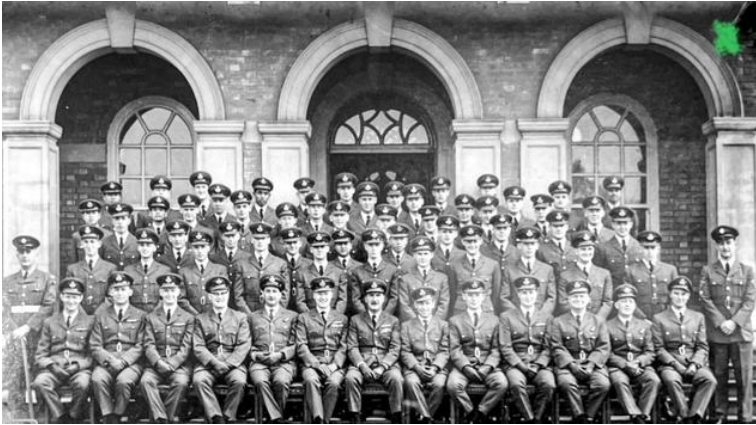
Looking back, my time at RMC was a blend of discipline, tradition, and transformation. It laid the foundation for my career in the Air Force and instilled values that stayed with me long after I left the parade square. While some practices have rightly faded, the spirit of service and brotherhood endures.

My First Journey to the United Kingdom

The launchpad of my aviation journey began at the old railway station near the Majestic Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. From there, I boarded a train bound for Singapore, where I would catch a British Eagle Britannia flight to London Heathrow. The route took me through Colombo, Bahrain, and Rome—a long, winding path to a new chapter.

My parents, siblings, and girlfriend came to see me off. I still remember the look in my parents' eyes—an emotional mix of pride and worry. They had initially opposed my decision to join the service, but I suspect the monthly allotment from my salary helped soften their stance. Watching me leave for a distant land must have stirred deep emotions.

We arrived in London on a cold, wet winter morning. There was no welcoming party, no fanfare—just a quiet arrival in a foreign land. Our only instruction was to report to the Malaysian High Commission's service attaché the next day for a briefing. After a few days in London, we boarded a train from Paddington Station to Kemble, where military transport took us to RAF South Cerney.



*Aircrew Officers Training School, RAF South Cerney 1967
(Standing third from the left in the second row from the back)*

Aircrew Officers Training School

Six of us had been selected from the Royal Military College (RMC) and commissioned as Pilot Officers in the Royal Malaysian Air Force. Our destination: the Aircrew Officer Training School (AOTS) at RAF South Cerney. Despite our officer status, the RAF required all non-British trainees to attend AOTS before progressing to flying school. The assumption was that our English proficiency might not be up to standard.

Our class was a diverse mix of trainees from Africa and the Middle East. The instructors were pleasantly surprised by our command of Queen's English—far superior, they noted, to many of our international peers.

South Cerney was surrounded by the picturesque Cotswold, and the nearby town of Cirencester became our weekend escape. Rich in Roman history and charm, it offered cozy pubs, a bustling Market Place, and a welcome break from military routine.



With the Chipmunk (“Chippie”), 1967.

RAF Church Fenton and the Chipmunk

After completing our basic officer training, we were transferred to RAF Church Fenton in North Yorkshire, about 10 miles east of Leeds. This was our elementary flying school, where we learned the fundamentals of flight, navigation, and aircraft operation.

Our training aircraft was the Chipmunk—affectionately known as the “Chippie.” Introduced in 1950, it replaced the Tiger Moth and featured modern upgrades like flaps, brakes, a radio, and an enclosed cockpit. Even Prince Philip had flown one, making his first solo flight in a Chipmunk in 1952.

My early flights were rough. I suffered from air sickness, and on more than one occasion, I had to vomit into my flying gloves—there were no air sickness bags on board. It was a humbling experience that slowed my progress. I wasn’t alone; some trainees were given medication, while others underwent “spinning therapy”—a desensitization process involving controlled spinning to help the body adapt.

Gradually, I overcame the nausea and began to enjoy flying. Sadly, one of our groups didn’t make it through this stage, but

he went on to become a successful air traffic controller—a vital role in aviation.

After logging around 30 hours on the Chipmunk, we moved on to RAF Acklington, located north of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, about 280 miles from London, for our basic flying training.



My flight instructor, Robin Renton, and I on the Jet Provost, 1968

RAF Acklington and the Jet Provost

At Acklington, we transitioned to the Jet Provost—a sleek jet trainer equipped with Martin-Baker ejection seats. Flying at higher altitudes in an unpressurized cockpit meant we had to undergo two critical safety exercises before taking to the skies.

The first was the ejection seat drill. In a static simulator, we practiced the steps of an emergency ejection—pulling the handle, assuming the correct posture, and mentally preparing for the real thing. These drills built muscle memory and ensured we could react instinctively under pressure.

The practical component involved a rocket-powered ejection seat mounted on a ground rig. This allowed us to experience the acceleration and forces of an actual ejection—without the danger of being airborne.

The second exercise was the hypobaric chamber test, designed to simulate high-altitude conditions and teach us about hypoxia—the lack of oxygen at altitude. Inside the chamber, we wore aviation masks and were monitored by medical staff. The pressure was gradually reduced to mimic a climb to 25,000 feet.

During the test, we were asked to perform simple tasks like writing and solving puzzles. At one point, we removed our oxygen masks to experience hypoxia firsthand. I remember being asked to write my name and a short sentence. I felt euphoric and confident, convinced I was doing well.

When the oxygen was restored, the doctor showed me my paper—it was covered in illegible scribbles. I was stunned. That moment taught me how deceptive and dangerous hypoxia can be. You feel fine, even brilliant, while your cognitive functions quietly deteriorate.

We were then briefed on the symptoms: blue fingernails, dizziness, euphoria, confusion, shortness of breath, and impaired judgment. The goal was to help us recognize the early signs and respond quickly—skills that could one day save our lives.

Commencing My Basic Flying Training

No. 6 Flying Training School at RAF Acklington, nestled about 28 miles north of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, was a vital hub for RAF pilot training during the 1960s. It was here, in June 1967, that I began my formal journey into the skies—learning to fly the Jet Provost.

Our 11-month course started with the fundamentals: basic flying techniques, navigation, and aircraft handling. As we gained confidence and skill, we moved on to more advanced manoeuvres—looping through aerobatics, mastering

instrument flying, practicing formation flights, and rehearsing emergency procedures that could one day save our lives.

I was fortunate to be under the guidance of Flight Lieutenant Robin Renton, a calm and patient instructor whose steady mentorship helped me graduate successfully. Years later, when I was flying with Malaysia Airlines, I had the pleasure of inviting him aboard my Boeing 777 during a stopover in Manchester. By then, both of us had transitioned from military cockpits to the world of commercial aviation—a full-circle moment I'll always cherish.



Meeting with my instructor, Robin Renton, on board the Boeing 777 at Manchester Airport.

Life at the training school came with its own set of challenges—transportation being one of them. Four of us pooled our resources and bought a second-hand Morris Minor for just £50. It wasn't glamorous, but it gave us freedom. One memorable incident involved a minor collision with our meteorology instructor. He was understandably upset, but thankfully, the damage was minimal.

Another time, while driving to Newcastle, we were pulled over by a police officer due to a wobbly wheel. We explained that we were foreign pilot trainees, and he let us off with a stern

warning to get the car repaired immediately. That old Morris Minor may have been temperamental, but it was our lifeline. On freezing winter nights, it ferried us to Broomhill, a nearby village, where we'd warm up with chicken or fish and chips—the simple pleasures that kept us going. It even took us as far as Edinburgh, about 95 miles north, where we explored the city's historic charm during our training breaks.



Graduates of No. 6 FTS, RAF Acklington – 1968 (I'm seated front right)

In May 1968, after logging approximately 200 flying hours, the five of us were awarded our RAF wings—a proud symbol of our transformation from trainees to qualified aviators. We wore them with honour, knowing the journey had tested our endurance, discipline, and determination.

Upon returning to Malaysia, we were posted to various squadrons based on our performance. The top graduates typically joined jet or helicopter units. I was assigned to a transport squadron—not the most glamorous path, but in hindsight, a fortunate one. It paved the way for a smooth transition into commercial aviation, setting the stage for the next chapter of my later flying career.

In May 1968, when they pinned the RAF wings to my chest at Acklington, I thought of the aptitude test in that classroom near the Sergeant Mess—the rotating disc, the pointer, the examiner who never smiled. Three years of training separated those two moments. They felt like a lifetime.