



SHARIZAL (left) with Robert in the helicopter's cockpit.

ON MY FIRST EVER HELICOPTER RIDE



A view of the vast greenery along the flight path.

Part one of a three-part series



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Just like other grounded frequent flyers, it has been more than a year since I was on an aircraft or travelled outside Kuching. It honestly feels like a lifetime ago and the blame can be easily put on the current Covid-19 pandemic that has posed various challenges in all aspects of life including travelling.

So, imagine the excitement and nervousness I felt when I was presented with an exclusive invitation and opportunity to experience how the state Fire and Rescue Department (Bomba) conducted its aerial reconnaissance on August 20.

I was indeed humbled by the invitation from Bomba director Khirudin Drahma that I requested to be recalled for work on my day off in order to go for my first ever helicopter ride scheduled at 2.30pm that day.

With butterflies in my stomach, I arrived at the Bomba Headquarters at Jalan Setia Raja almost an hour earlier and waited excitedly for the

AgustaWestland AW139 9M-BOD helicopter to land at the headquarters' helipad.

The medium utility helicopter is often used in Bomba's firefighting, disaster relief, search and rescue (SAR), aerial surveillance as well as aerial command and control. With the ongoing National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme (NCIP), it is also deployed to assist in the delivery of vaccines, particularly to Sarawak's vast interior.

The helicopter was piloted by Senior Fire Supt II Robert James with Deputy Senior Fire Supt II Sharizal Sahari as co-pilot. The air quartermaster (AQM) was Assistant Fire Supt Muhammad Ubadah Shuib.

While some people are familiar with pilots and what they do, I believe there are many others, including yours truly, who have never heard of the AQM.

Robert, also the commander

of Sarawak Regional Air Base Bomba Malaysia in Miri, explained that the AQM is very important to the Bomba aircrew. He revealed that during the initial setup of the unit, the AQM was trained by the air force.

"Generally, the AQM's job is to assist the pilots in flight safety, and to ensure that tasks are successfully carried out. During the take-off and landing, the AQM will check and make sure that the surrounding of the aircraft is clear of obstacles as pilots are limited to forward views only.

"The AQM also checks the condition of the landing surface so that the aircraft can fully land to prevent the wheels from slipping, skidding or sinking beyond limit. Besides this, the AQM will operate the hoist for winching operations and also operate the cargo hook equipment for Bambi bucket and underslung operations," he explained.

Robert added that AQM is essentially an extra pair of eyes for the pilots as he would also assist in flight navigation and check the surrounding air traffic during flights.

Before our helicopter took off, the co-pilot gave a safety briefing and explained the flight route would be from the Bomba Headquarters to Santubong,



A selfie with the gorgeous view of the greenery.

Lundu, Stinggang, Bau, Kuching City and back to the base. The flight was given green light to operate at a flying altitude of 1,500 feet and below by the air traffic control (ATC).

About 30 minutes into the flight, I lost track of the direction and location where we were flying. I began to feel slightly

“We flew low and the picturesque view of the vast greenery that Sarawak was blessed with took my breath away.”

nauseous because the pilot made a few steep turns and because of the vibrations in my ears. We flew low and the picturesque view of the

vast greenery that Sarawak was blessed with took my breath away. I couldn't help but look all around and took many pictures along the way.

If I was allowed to move around in the helicopter, I would have moved from one seat to another!

Sarawak is indeed well on its way to becoming one of the most developed states in the country. In spite of its various development projects, it still has a large green area, especially within Kuching City centre.

Having said that, I do hope that Sarawak's lush greenery will not be replaced by concrete jungles in the future. It honestly felt surreal to see an aerial view of different shades of green covering the land of my beloved city.

At the same time, my admiration for Bomba grew and I was curious to know more about its helicopter operations and missions. Various questions popped into my head like how the crew carried out their respective roles, how they spotted victims in SAR and many more.

After the one hour and 25 minutes' journey, I did not hesitate to seize the opportunity to speak to both the pilot and co-pilot and bombarded them with queries, especially on their experiences in the delivery of Covid-19 vaccines to areas like Long Teru, Long Jegan and Long Kevok. These I will share in an upcoming write-up.

(FROM left): Sharizal, Khirudin, Sarawak Federal Secretary Datuk Amir Omar and Robert.





NO OBSTACLE TOO GREAT FOR BOMBA AIR UNIT

Part two of a three-part series



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Do you know that the State Fire and Rescue Department (Bomba) air unit at the Sarawak Regional Air Base Bomba Malaysia in Miri is playing an important role in battling the Covid-19 pandemic in Sarawak?

It is busy helping Sarawak to achieve its target of vaccinating 80 percent of its population against the virus by this month by delivering the vaccines to remote settlements in the state's vast interior.

Senior Fire Supt II and commander of Sarawak Regional Air Base Bomba Malaysia, Robert James disclosed that the air unit is working closely with the Sarawak Disaster Management Committee (SDMC) and Ministry of Health (MoH) to deliver the Covid-19 vaccines to the rural communities in Sarawak, especially in Miri, Limbang and Kapit.

He said from June 3 until Aug 20, the air unit had successfully covered 33 locations, namely 26 for the delivery of vaccines and seven for food assistance. Among the locations covered were Bario, Mulu, Ba' Kelalan, Long Bedian, Long Liaw, Long Sukang and Long Kevok.

"Despite the challenges of reaching the respective locations while ensuring that the Covid-19 vaccines remain in pristine condition, there is no obstacle too great or challenge too difficult for the air unit.

"The air unit has clocked in 123.3 hours of flying or 57 sorties as of August 20. Come rain or shine, the air unit has safely delivered a total of 23,352 doses of the Covid-19 vaccines thus far," he added.

Robert explained that the aircrew consisted of a pilot, a co-pilot, an air quartermaster (AQM) and two officers from Pasukan Khas Udara Bomba (Paskub).

"For the vaccine delivery operations, there are usually two or three MoH staff on board to hand over the vaccine supplies to the vaccination centre (PPV)'s nurses or medical assistants on standby at the respective locations," he said.

"After being informed by SDMC, we will have to go through the documentation process to get approval from the headquarters before we can carry out the task the next day.



THE delivery of vaccines to the interior of Sarawak.



THE helicopter winching technique.

"We will plan the flight route and calculate the duration of the flight because we have to calculate our fuel consumption. The fuel is one of the main concerns because it will affect the weight of the cargo and number of passengers the helicopter can accommodate.

"We also have to check the weather forecast. It is important to look at the wind moisture and temperature as these can affect the flight in some way such as causing visibility issues, turbulence and overall performance. If the weather does not permit, we will not proceed but continue the flight the next day," he explained.

He added that the air unit would get in touch with a contact person at the respective locations to ask about the conditions at the landing areas.

Robert said the air unit must be extra cautious in carrying out the vaccine delivery operations.

"Apart from ensuring the safety of all on board the aircraft, the safety of the precious cargo is also very crucial.

"There are a number of safety and precautionary measures that the aircrew and passengers must observe. For instance, they must embark and disembark from the aircraft accordingly and in a proper manner.

"In addition to that, we also pay close attention to the landing surfaces and areas. The landing surfaces must be solid and in good condition. If they are uneven or muddy, it will be unstable and dangerous for us to land," he added.

Robert recalled that the air crew had to do helicopter winching

in five rural areas, namely Long Jegan, Long Teru, Ulu Teru, Long Teran and Long Loyang which were badly affected by floods in July.

He explained that winching was the process of lowering down or picking up a person using the sling attached to the winch of the helicopter.

"It requires the pilot to maintain a very good and steady hover to ensure the crew can get down safely. The air crew is very fortunate to have an aircraft that can do winching," he said.

Meanwhile, Deputy Senior Fire Supt II Sharizal Sahari, who is based in the Bomba Malaysia Northern Region Air Base in Bertam, Pulau Penang, admitted that piloting aircraft in Sarawak was more challenging than in Malaya.

Despite the challenges, he is proud to be involved in

the vaccine delivery exercise in Sarawak.

He said most of the areas in Malaya were accessible by road.

"We only have to navigate the Titiwangsa mountains which are familiar to us. But in Sarawak, there are different types of terrains and the weather changes fast here.

"Delivering the vaccines to Long Kevok was rather difficult because of these. Nonetheless, I have made prior preparation and all risks were calculated to ensure that the aircrew, passengers, helicopter and precious cargo arrive safely on locations and all of us could return home safely," he explained.

Apart from doing heroic acts in the event of emergencies to save the lives of those in danger, Bomba and its air unit are also busy saving lives during the Covid-19 pandemic.



FRONTLINERS involved in the delivery of vaccines to the interior.

Last of a three-part series



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The establishment of the Sarawak Regional Air Base Bomba Malaysia in Miri in July 2013 represented a milestone in the history of the State Fire and Rescue Department (Bomba).

"It was set up to provide air support for operations in Sabah, Sarawak, and Labuan," explained State Bomba director Khirudin Drahan.

He added that the establishment of the airbase in Sarawak helped to instil confidence in the common people, stakeholders, investors, tourists and adventurers.

"A good air support is always vital for Bomba. From the coastal areas to the rivers and forests, the air unit contributes to how fast the department can respond to emergencies. It also minimises the impact of any incidents.

"When you look at the topography locally and regionally, the air support for response to incidents at the remote and inaccessible areas is crucial. We are fortunate that we were able to convince the government to set up the air unit in Sarawak.

"The air unit enhances our capability especially for search and rescue (SAR) operations, medical-medevac, aerial surveillance, logistics, manpower and so on," explained Khirudin.

He said a boat tragedy in Belaga in May 2013 convinced Bomba Malaysia to set up an airbase in Borneo.

"The tragedy was said to be one of the worst in the country. The boat had crashed onto rocks in the Rajang River.

"At that time, the State Bomba could only conduct search and rescue (SAR) efforts on the ground and these went on for a few days.

"That tragedy showed how important it was to have air support, especially for SAR missions. Thus, the Sarawak Regional Air Base Bomba Malaysia was established to provide air support for operations in Sabah



THE Bomba aircrew with the Mi-171.

MILESTONE IN HISTORY OF STATE BOMBA



KHIRUDIN

and Sarawak region by utilising two Mi-171 helicopters centralised in Miri," recalled Khirudin.

"At the moment, the airbase is using the AgustaWestland AW139 helicopter to cover for the Mi-171 which is currently undergoing major overhauling," he added.

During the current Covid-19 pandemic, the air unit is actively involved in delivering the Covid-19 vaccines as well as food assistance to remote villages in the Sarawak's vast interior.

"Our air unit in Miri has shown

great commitment in ensuring that the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme (NCIP) under the Mobile Outreach Vaccination Programme runs smoothly to achieve the 80 percent herd immunity target for the country.

"It is also our task and responsibility to make sure that every Sarawakian gets his/her Covid-19 vaccine doses. We do so by assisting and mobilizing the medical teams to places that are inaccessible by road or river transportation," Khirudin said.

He pointed out that it was very expensive to operate helicopters.

"Thus, the deployment of the air unit to assist and mobilise the delivery of Covid-19 vaccines often fully utilizes the six hours of flying that aircraft is capable of," he said.

Khirudin also revealed that the air unit for the Fire and Rescue Department (Bomba) Malaysia was officially formed in 1998.

"A large-scale air quality disaster dubbed the 1997 Southeast Asian haze, which occurred during

the second half of 1997, had strengthened support for the air unit to be formed urgently.

"Before that, Bomba Malaysia had to rely on the Royal Malaysian Air Force (TUDM) and Royal Malaysian Navy.

"When the haze of 1997 badly affected the whole nation, it was noted that the department lacked the logistics, particularly for aerial monitoring and aerial water bombing," said Khirudin.

He recalled there was an exhibition where a few countries displayed their helicopters and Bambi buckets for forest fires. After that, the prime minister then, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad suggested the formation of the air unit for Bomba.

Back then, Khirudin had just been promoted to Supt in charge of Sibul Zone and had just returned from Japan. After pursuing Masters in Emergency Response and Planning at Universiti Pertahanan Malaysia (UPM), he was promoted to Senior Supt and appointed as commandant of the training academy.

"As the commandant, I was asked to scout around for potential pilots within our department. In 2003, we started the programme with special approval from the Public Service Department (JPA) and Ministry of Finance (MOF) for the budget to train pilots in Brisbane, Australia.

"By 2008, we started to train new pilots locally with a series of

competency training to level up our flight commanders. With this, the seconded TUDM and Royal Malaysian Navy pilots returned to their units," he said.

Khirudin disclosed that the air unit started with four helicopters, namely, the Russian Mi-17 Kazans and Mi-171s. As the aircraft were Russian made, the pilots were sent to Kazan, Russia for Type Rating on the Mi-17 Kazans and Mi-171s.

Currently, almost 90 percent of the department's pilots are Bomba personnel and they were required to clock incompetent flying hours to become flight commanders.

The air unit currently has 28 pilots; 27 are Bomba pilots while one is on contract. Two of the pilots are permanently stationed in Miri.

Khirudin said Bomba Malaysia started operating the AgustaWestland AW109 in 2008 and later the AW139.

The air unit is currently anticipating the arrival of a new AW189.

The department has an airbase in Subang, Selangor

(main operation base), in Bertam in Pulau Pinang (for the north west coast) and Miri, Sarawak (for Borneo).

"With my posting to Sarawak, I am blessed to see how much the air units for Bomba have developed and grown," added Khirudin.



THE Agusta Westland helicopter.



THE Bomba air unit during an operation.