

In memory of Henry at Normandy

KL-bred RAF pilot Henry Tallala was shot down in France during World War II. To mark the 50th anniversary of his death, the prominent Tallala clan is bound for the village of Airan where he fell. THERESA MANAVLAN reports.

ON a summer's day in 1944, a young Malaysian flying a Typhoon single-seater fighter aircraft was shot down in France. He was in a sortie and at 11.45am on July 25 that year, he and three other pilots had attacked enemy tanks at Fontinay le Marmion, south of Caen in Normandy.

It was World War II, the Normandy Landings had taken place and the Liberation of Europe was underway.

The pilot was Henry Conrad Benjamin Tallala, a Malaysian-born volunteer of the British Royal Air Force. At the time he was killed, Henry was a fighter pilot in No 182 Squadron of the Second Tactical Air Force. In the minutes preceding his death, there was intense anti-aircraft fire but his Typhoon appeared all right and was seen heading north-east. He was never heard of again. The other three aircraft had been hit, and it was presumed that so had his, and that he had been killed in action.

Henry Tallala was just 24 years old.

Fifty years has since passed. As hundreds of thousands of people around the world mark the 50th anniversary of the Normandy Landings, so will the Tallala family of Kuala Lumpur, who by an extraordinary set of circumstances in extraordinary times could not welcome home this hero.

The one who did come home was Henry's younger brother Jimmy, who also signed up with the Royal



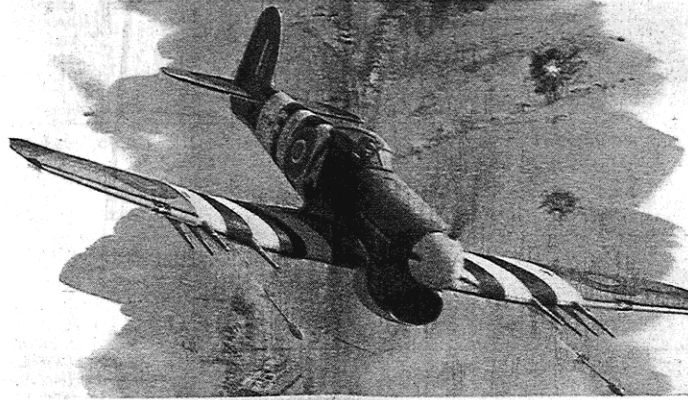
RAF fighter pilot Henry Tallala, shot down in Normandy on July 25, 1944 at age 24

Air Force Volunteer Reserve, and flew Spitfires in the same theatre of war. Jimmy came home as a flight lieutenant, decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar for Val-

our. Jimmy died in 1973. This July 25, Henry's four surviving brothers and their families will converge in the village of Airan in Normandy to mark the 50th anniversary of his death.



High Court Judge Richard (left) and Albert Tallala with photographs and souvenirs. Photo: GOH SENG CHONG



A single-seater Typhoon Mk 1B adorned with invasion stripes, similar to the craft Henry Tallala was flying. Photo: TAKE OFF magazine

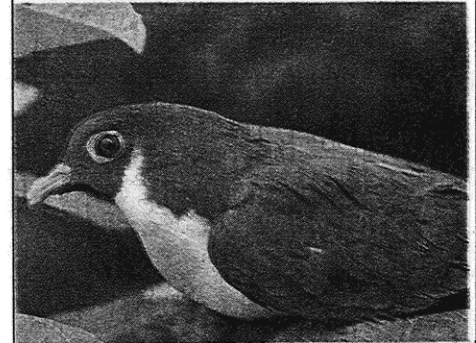
From Kuala Lumpur are Richard Tallala, a judge of the High Court, and Datuk Albert Tallala, a former ambassador and currently head of the Malaysian Institute of Diplomacy and For-

eign Relations. From Canada will be Andrew Tallala, professor emeritus of neurosurgery in Ontario, and from the United States, William Tallala, a retired businessman living

in Arizona. It will be a meaningful reunion, as the brothers go

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INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL OF PEACE

Since the dawn of written history, one bird has stood for the international symbol of peace — the dove. And what an appropriate symbol it is! Soothing in call and graceful in flight, the dove is indeed an attractive ambassador of goodwill and grace. — P33



THE BREE FAMILY: Louis, his wife Marthe and son Serge



HENRY'S HEADSTONE
... French war cemetery

Tallalas to honour D-day heroes

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to pay their respects not just to Henry, but also to the many others who sacrificed their lives. It will also be a reunion of two families, brought together by a painful reality of war — one who lost a son, and the other touched by his spirit.

Richard and Albert have only childhood memories of Henry, much of it composed of hero worship for an older brother. After completing school at Victoria Institution, Henry had been accepted to study medicine at St

Bartholomew's Hospital in London. But his destiny was otherwise determined.

Richard, then 11, distinctly recalls Henry's departure: he signed up in Kuala Lumpur, left on a civilian Dakota DC3 aircraft from the old Sungai Besi airport to Singapore, from where he was shipped to Australia, and then to Canada, where he underwent training. Jimmy, says Richard, went by train earlier, taking a similar route and by late 1941, was already in Britain. A January 1941 *Malay Mail* report says that Jimmy was

the first Malayan non-European to pass the rigid RAF entrance tests and enrol as a cadet in the Government Flying School.

Henry, although older, joined a little later. He was assigned to pilot Typhoon aircraft, which in its day was the first RAF fighter capable of exceeding 400 miles per hour, carrying on its underwing eight 30kg rockets and four 20mm cannons. According to one report, it engaged breathtaking performances in low-altitude ground attacks.

There were no letters from Henry or Jimmy after December of 1941. Communication came to a standstill, and Japanese forces occupied Malaya. With two sons flying in the RAF, the Tallalas were naturally suspected of being collaborators of the British. On Oct 15, 1943, the family was rounded up and held for 16 months in Pudu Prison. Richard remembers being in Cell Eight of Block A. Albert was sent to stay with relatives.

"Some months before the war came to its official end, there were rumours that Jimmy had been decorated," says Richard. "It was Jimmy who returned in late 1945 and told us that Henry had been posted missing. Jimmy was distraught, and had, before coming home, gone on a solo mission to Airan searching for clues. But there were none."

The first official communication from the British came in 1946, says Albert. "The letter said Henry was presumed lost but there was indication of where the plane had been downed."

Their father, Hewage Benjamin Tallala, a prominent businessman, wanted to know more. In 1948, he went to London and called on the War Department. Benjamin discovered that an officer of the Missing Persons Research and Enquiry Service working in Calvados, France, had heard that a British fighter plane had come down on the road from Airan to Pedoux. The officer found part of the fuselage, and tracked it, using serial numbers, to the very aircraft Henry piloted. Henry was buried near the wreckage, and subsequently his body was moved to the war cemetery at Banneville La Campagne.

Benjamin went straight to Airan in Normandy, where with help from local police, he tracked down a certain Louis Bree, a farmer in whose fields Henry's plane had come down. Bree told Benjamin, and war officers before that, that the field was under grass at the time. All civilians had been evacuated from the area, and did not return until Aug 15, 1944, when Airan was liberated.

When Bree returned to his farm, he found the wreckage on his land, and a grave beside it. He assumed that the pilot had been buried by the German SS, for when he returned to his farmhouse, the SS were the only people around.

By the time Benjamin met Bree, Henry's remains had been exhumed and reinterred at the Banneville la Campagne War Cemetery, near Caen. With Bree's agreement, a marble and concrete marker was erected near the site of the original grave.

Benjamin returned to Malaya in an emotional state, and with a piece of the wreckage. He had to come to terms with the huge responsibility the war had placed on his sons. Before the war, both his sons were members of the Kuala Lumpur Flying Club, an interest sparked by Benjamin's spirit of adventure: he had in 1932, travelled by KLM from Malaya to London and back, a journey of 28 days, which, in its time, had created something of a sensation as he was the first Malayan to do so.

Jimmy went on to a career in aviation, first as an air traffic controller in Kallang, Singapore, and later as a pilot and station manager of the then Malayan Airways. He retired in 1963 and went to live in Llangerdeine, Wales, where he died in 1973.

Today, that marker in the Bree family fields is surrounded by fragrant flowering hops. Bree is 86 years old, lame and retired. His wife is 82. They remember Benjamin's visit, and later the visit of Henry's mother. Their sons now farm the land, and have on numerous occasions hosted various members of the Tallala family who visited.

"Although they have never met him, Henry has a special place in their hearts," says Albert. "Their graciousness has kept our memories of Henry very much alive."

Henry and Jimmy Tallala were paid tribute at the D-Day Anniversary celebrations at the French embassy in Kuala Lumpur on June 6. And separately, a message from Léon Bouvier, special advisor to the French Government's 50th D-Day Anniversary Committee read:

"Please extend to the family of Pilot Henry Tallala the expression of condolences of the French Government on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of RAF Warrant Officer Henry Conrad Benjamin Tallala's fall during the Allied Operations on Normandy. The Government of France wishes to express on this occasion the deep appreciation for his heroic sacrifice."