

# Smokey Bandits

*Air Fleet*



Malaysia acquired MiG-29N tactical fighters and MiG-29NUB twin seat operational trainers in 1995. This aircraft became the first Russian type in the inventory of the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF). The MiGs are for the air superiority role. Almost simultaneously, in 1997 Malaysia also purchased F/A-18D Hornet tactical fighters from the United States. These were to provide RMAF with an all weather interdiction capability. In 1997 RMAF MiG-29 squadron made its first appearance at LIMA. Since then the MiGs have been the show's main attraction. The current RMAF chief himself is one of the pioneers in the MiG-29N air display team. In the beginning the team was popularly known as Taufan Ganas (Raging Storm). During LIMA'2003 RMAF MiG-29N display team was officially introduced as the Smokey Bandits and this name has been their trademark ever since. The term smokey bandit was originally coined by visiting foreign air force pilots in reference to the black cloud of smoke generated by the MiG-29's Klimov RD-33 Series 3 engines when operating in full military thrust. The Smokey Bandits are in reality a fully operational combat unit and not a dedicated full time display Team. The pilots maintain their combat readiness by participating in routine exercises and trainings as required to maintain their skills and competency level. The display Team is formed as and when they are required and directed by the Chief of Air Force or upon national requirement. The continued success story of the No.17 Squadron's air display team having evolved from Taufan Ganas to the Smokey Bandits is contributed by the hard work, dedication, esprit de corps, and professionalism of its squadron members.

RMAF commander Rodzali Bin Daud said the following about the Team on the eve of LIMA'2013. "As the famous saying goes, "To most people, the sky is the limit. To those who love aviation, the sky is home". Once again, RMAF is proud to showcase its best aviators and their machines soaring across the skies of Langkawi for LIMA'2013. As chief of air force, I take great pride in seeing my men performing their best to showcase RMAF capabilities to Malaysia and the world. We are committed to deliver the promise of our predecessors in keeping the skies of Malaysia safe and secured always. LIMA'2013 is the best opportunity for RMAF to

prove itself through the skill and professionalism of its men and women who have dedicated their lives to their beloved nation. The Smokey Bandit steam is the epitome of true aviation skill and professionalism as they have proven time and time again through the years, both locally and abroad. Once again, we are proud to present you these brave and courageous men from No. 17 Squadron who themselves are the pride and joy of RMAF."



Rodzali Bin Daud himself served in the No. 17 Squadron, and flew with the Smokey Bandits in 1998-2000. Mior Nor "Ghost" Badrishah is the current commander of No. 17 Squadron and Team leader. He flew with Smokey Bandits starting in 1997, flew solo in 2001-2002, and has been the leader since 2011. He addressed the LIMA'2013 visitors with the following words. "We have come a long way since the MiG-29's inception in the RMAF and since 1997; we have been a regular feature in LIMA expositions. With some new faces in the team, we will strive to show our best to people of Malaysia and the world in line with the Chief of Air Force's aspirations in transforming RMAF into the Next Generation Air Force. We are determined to keep the excellent track record of devotion, passion, precision and professionalism in our performance. Alongside the 31 enlisted and 12 officers out of 180 squadron personnel who make up the Smokey Bandits team, we would like to say "Let the engines roar and the smoke fill the skies for the Bandits are here to steal your breath away". Mior joined RMAF in June 1988, graduating from RMAF Cadet School in Kuala Lumpur. Military life was introduced to him as early as the age of 13 when he was selected to join the Royal Military College (RMC) for his secondary education. He is a distinguished graduate from Air University, Alabama ACSC Class of 2010 with Masters of Military Operational Art and Science. His skills and potential in becoming a good fighter pilot was evident as early as when he finished top of his class during basic flying

school with "Best Flyer Award". He went on to win the Top Gun Pilotrophy in RMAF annual Air to Air Gunnery competition. He has logged more than 2700 FH so far with over 700 jet instructional hours. He is married to YMRaja Nor Azlina and they have 12- year old daughter, PM Athirah. We were lucky to interview Mior Nor "Ghost" Badrishah at LIMA'2013.



**Q.** How was the name of the group invented?

The name of the Smokey Bandits first came when we had a joint exercise with the Americans. They asked us "why is that your aircraft makes so much of the black smoke?" We told them that this aircraft got a Russian engine and it does that way at full afterburner. So that said, Ok – and next time they saw us in the air, they started calling us "Smokey", "Bandit", and then mixed the two words into "Smokey bandit". And after a while this became nickname. And, a little over, the name came for aircraft of our squadron. We took name to be [our mark] that of our air display team, the Smokey Bandits. It happened in 1998 –2000, - about that time.

**Q.** Was it a nickname first?

Yes, it was a nickname initially. And then we accepted it. We were in Brunei for the first time in 2011, at Brunei International Defense Exhibition BRIDEX 11. Then, next year, we were at the Singapore Airshow 2012. These were our first time air shows outside our home country.

**Q.** It is quite often heard from the US pilots having joint exercises with you [No. 17 Squadron] that their biggest impression was to see a MiG-29 in a 9-g turn. Is it really difficult for a pilot to make a sustained turn at 9 g?

It is not difficult, this aircraft type is meant to perform 9-g turns. Normally, it is up to the pilot, how the pilot handles his aircraft against the adversary, and our adversaries in the joint exercises with foreign air forces have been the F-15, the F-16, the F-18 and so on. You must be fit, of course to pull 9g. And that means that the weight gets nine times larger against your body.

**Q.** So, for how long you can keep this high?

Normally, it is not about that to win a dogfight. The actual time depends on actual engagement, combat engagement. Normally, it is less than 10 to 15 seconds. It is also known

that the Hornet can make only 7g. The Super Hornet also does not match the MiG-29's in the ability to perform at high. Yes, the Hornet and the Super Hornet can pull only something like 7.5g. But again, it depends what sort of flight you perform. It also depends on the weapons, aircraft systems, and also the skill of the pilot. In plain words, this does not mean that... if you can pull 9g and your opponent could not, then you'll win the fight. No, it is not that easy. Sometimes technology works. The newer Super Hornet has better technology than the classic MiG-29. Much more better of that in the Super Hornet.



**Q.** Here at the air show many thousands of people are watching you when you fly aerobatics. Is it popular in Malaysia to be a pilot? Do many youngsters want to become a fighter pilot? Do you think that your performance at the show brings in more youngsters into this profession?

Yes. First, I believe that it is good to be a pilot. It is a good job. Most of our ambition is to fly the airplane. And to be a fighter pilots means to be above other pilots, which gives you a feeling that you are greater. Secondly, it is my job as leader of the Smokey Bandits is to promote the positive image of the Royal Malaysian Air Force, so we can pull more of the young generation to join the service and do a service to our country.

**Q.** How long does it takes for a young Malaysian boy to become a fighter pilot?

Normal time is about four to six years. To be a good fighter pilot you may probably need another couple of years.

**Q.** How do they start the career of the fighter pilot?

First, they go to the Air Force Academy for four years. That's to have a first degree, to complete the first degree. After having received their first degree, they go to the Fighter Pilot School for another year. So, it makes five years. And then they are off the class, they will be selected to join in the Fighter Lead-In Conversion starting with the MB.339A or... now we have the MB.339CM, from Italy. These are used as Lead-in Fighter Aircraft for fighter pilots. Here, they are meant to spend six month to a year. After that they are posted to a MiG-29 or to the Sukhoi or the Hornets, or to the Hawks aircraft. There you need to spend a year or a year-and-a-half, depending on the syllabus. From the time they join the Flight School, to get your wing, it takes between five and six years to become a fighter pilots.

**Q.** Do many RMAF pilots leave the service prematurely and seek a job of commercial pilot?

After having spent a number of years with the Air Force, the pilots want to go to the commercial world. This is an issue for many air forces, and we also have that issue in Malaysian air force.

**Q.** There is a proposal to upgrade the RMAF MiG-29. Do you think it worth it?

Let me get my superiors talk about it.

**Q.** Is it still life in those aircraft?

You mean the MiGs? Oh, yea! The issue here is what when we first bough the MiGs and until now we have not had any major upgrade program on the aircraft. In terms of technologies this means that you keep lagging behind. You know that now the industry produces fourth generation aircraft, and we are even starting to hear about fifth generation aircraft. This aircraft is about the third generation. So, maybe it is a good time for us to change this aircraft, maybe not. I am not sure. It depends on the Air Force.

**Q.** Please tell us your opinion. What is the main difference of the MiG-29 that sets it apart from other fighters in RMAF inventory?



The technology. If you compare the MiG-29 with the Hornet, our classic Hornet, you may find that the technology matters. The Hornet is far ahead compared to the MiG-29. It has a glass cockpit, while the MiG-29's cockpit is still analogue. The Sukhoi also has a glass cockpit, and that sets the MiG-29 apart from other fighters RMAF has. But I think the MiG-29 is still quite good in the role of an interceptor...Yes, we can do intercept. It depends on the skills of the pilots, and the skills of the ground controllers. So far we have never failed to fulfill our mission. You are an operational pilot. And you are also an air display pilot. How do you combine the two different professions? In many air forces which have display groups they do not combine those. Actually, we never practice aerobatics until we are tasked to do so. For example, for LIMA'2013 we received the respective order from our command. The order had us practice aerobatics starting from January. And we have been practicing in January, February and March. Other than that, we are normal day-to-day a combat pilot and never practice any aerobatics. Instead, we do our normal combat training routines like any other squadron.

**Q.** In other words, this brings more pressure on you?

Yes, exactly! We do two jobs at a time.

**Q.** Could you please tell our readers a little bit about yourself?

I am 43 years old. I have about 2500 flying hours. Of those I logged some 1500 FH hundred our in the MiG-29. The rest comes from the PC-7 and soon. I have been with the air force since 1987. So, I have been there for 25 years now. Rank: I am Lieutenant Colonel –Podpolkovnik... Ya govoryu po russki chut-chut...

