

# I almost died in Memali

Tunku Muszaffar Shah, who was the Baling OCPD during the 1985 Memali Incident, tells **SANTHA OORJITHAM** what led up to the tragedy

**T**WENTY-FIVE years after the Memali Incident that claimed 18 lives, Tunku Muszaffar Shah, 68, still has unanswered questions.

Firstly, the former officer in charge of police district (OCPD) Baling wondered why were there two attempts to arrest ustaz Ibrahim "Libya" Mahmood at his home in Kampung Memali.

After the first attempt failed on Sept 1, 1984, a second attempt was made only over a year later, on Nov 19, 1985 — after his supporters had accumulated more weapons and organised

man with rubber bullets.

He had a revolver but he didn't use it, and his corporal and constable on the lower deck had M-16 rifles each.

A police photographer and Special Branch videographer were also on board.

As the FRU troops marched toward the house, stones were catapulted at the command vehicle from shrubs along the roadside.

When men armed with swords appeared, the FRU hurled gas grenades which should have scattered everyone.

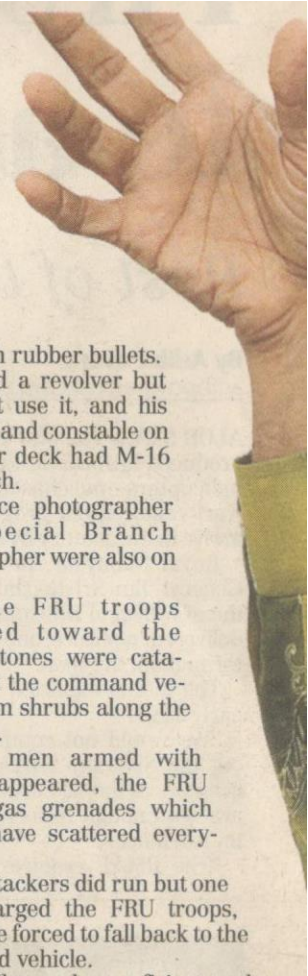
The attackers did run but one man charged the FRU troops, who were forced to fall back to the command vehicle.



Tunku Muszaffar Shah in 1995, a couple of years before his retirement

A RTM1 screen grab showing a woman brandishing a weapon

Armed women confronting the FRU troops



The weapons used by villagers in the incident

Ibrahim 'Libya' Mahmood was injured and later died in hospital

guard duties.

And since the villagers were armed, Tunku Muszaffar also questioned why the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) and the Public Order Riot Unit were told to go into the village without firearms.

Although he retired (as Assistant Commissioner of Police) in 1997, the tragedy in Memali was very much alive in his mind these days because his memoir, *Sworn to protect: A policeman remembers Memali*, will be published in the next few months.

The first attempt to arrest Ibrahim in 1984 was a Special Branch operation which he provided backup.

"I was not informed on what was mentioned in the 1986 parliamentary White Paper after the Memali Incident, that Ibrahim's followers had planned concerted attacks on police stations to topple the government," he said.

"That must have been on a need-to-know basis."

During a Special Branch briefing on the first attempted arrest, he said "We were told that the deputy prime minister, Datuk [now Tun] Musa Hitam, said if there was any resistance, the arresting party was to withdraw."

Originally, the plan was to arrest Ibrahim simultaneously with another "target" in Sungai Petani on the next day (Sept 2), when both were taking their children to school.

But the district Special Branch officer in Sungai Petani jumped the gun and arrested his target that night.

His counterpart in Baling, too, decided to go ahead and try to arrest Ibrahim at his house near his madrasah that night. The place was also the headquarters of the Kampung Memali Pas branch.

"He was a religious leader and the kampung people held him very dear," said Tunku Muszaffar.

They sounded the alarm with the *tuk-tuk* (a hollowed-out tree trunk used to call people for prayers or an assembly) and about 20 to 30 of them, armed with sharpened bamboo and

other weapons, confronted the police team.

Following instructions, the police team withdrew. After the botched arrest, according to Tunku Muszaffar, "Ibrahim's followers became more anti-establishment".

A group of guards was set up in March 1985, headed by Pas district committee member Yusof Husin.

"The mood changed in Oct 1985, when both Pas and Umno were organising political rallies."

The breaking point was on the night of Oct 20, during a Pas *ceramah* in Kampung Memali.

"The marked patrol car I was in was surrounded by 200 to 300 people armed with sharpened bamboo, parang, machetes, daggers and wooden sticks," said Tunku Muszaffar.

"They demanded for the return of a couple of knives that had been confiscated in a roadblock earlier."

If Yusof had not intervened, Tunku Muszaffar thought he would have been killed by the mob.

Yusof shouted: "This is Pak Tunku, OCPD. Do not do anything to him. He can be trusted."

To prevent an incident, the knives were returned to their owners.

In November, security around Ibrahim's house was tightened further. Five attempts to persuade him to surrender failed.

His followers had collected swords, parang, sharpened bamboo and made their own catapults, arrows, Molotov cocktails and fish bombs. They also managed to obtain shotguns from the People's Voluntary Corps (Rela).

But the FRU troops involved in Ops *Angkara*, the second attempt to arrest Ibrahim, were told that they did not need firearms.

Tunku Muszaffar was in the turret of the FRU command vehicle, which slowly approached the front gate of Ibrahim's house in the morning of Nov 19. The vehicle was not bulletproof and he was accompanied by a marks-

The villagers began firing on the FRU troops and, if the corporal had not shot the man with the sword who was trying to board the vehicle, "we would have been slaughtered".

An appeal and a warning over the loud hailer for Ibrahim and his men to surrender went unheeded.

Director of Internal Security and Public Order Datuk Yahaya Yop, who was the operation commander, gave them five minutes to consider.

But as he and Tunku Muszaffar were walking away from the gate, shots suddenly rang out, "including the sound of automatic gunfire".

People ran out of the compound and were arrested by the police teams. Tunku Muszaffar saw Yusof was among those detained.

As it was, four policemen were among the 18 people killed. Ibrahim was taken to Sik Hospital where he died of his injuries.

Tunku Muszaffar asked for an immediate transfer for the sake of his children's education, but was told that he was needed in Baling for the 1986 general election. After that, he was moved to Penang.

It was not until Sept 2000 that he was asked to attend a discussion with senior police officers about the lessons learned in Memali. He said among the examples was a lack of coordination among the police.

The five-minute grace period given to those inside Ibrahim's house "probably did not reach all the officers and men as hardly a minute or two had passed when the sound of gunfire was heard".

Perhaps the most personal lesson that Tunku Muszaffar learned was that every police officer should be non-partisan.

"Everyone under his watch should be treated equally, no matter which party they belonged to.

"I was non-partisan. This attitude of mine probably saved my life," he said.