



A young Carney seen busy at work, restoring parts of the national monument that was destroyed in a blast in the 1970s.

Bonded by the bronze

Heroic restorers who worked together in 1975 to repair the bombed and damaged Tugu Negara reunite after 46 years.

By M. IRSYAD
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

THE iconic Tugu Negara in Kuala Lumpur remembers and recognises the sacrifices of British, Malaysian, Commonwealth and other international military personnel in World War I and II, as well as the Malayan Emergency. The historical monument was badly damaged when it was bombed by communists on Aug 26, 1975.

Later, the Malaysian government commissioned Australian art lecturer and sculptor Christopher Carney, who was working at Institut Teknologi Mara (now UiTM) back then, to help restore the monument.

A group of young art graduates – Abdul Mansoor Ibrahim, Abdul Mufti Jantan and Zolkeply Maulana – who were his former students in the sculpture class were handpicked by Carney to assist in the restoration works.

Carney, who offered his services, was awarded the job by the government on the strength of his skills and experience.

The restoration was completed in April 1977, and Tugu Negara was subsequently opened to the public on May 11 that same year.

The cost of the restoration, according to a report in *The Star* (May 1977) was estimated at RM1mil, with nearly RM1.3mil received from the general public through a restoration fund.

The four men, who rebuilt the damaged parts of Tugu Negara, then went their separate ways, without realising that they had forever left their mark in history.

On Tuesday this week, they met again after 46 years, to revisit the site and reminisce the challenging times working on the historical monument.

The reunion was mooted two years ago but the pandemic delayed their plans.

Things finally came into place in the last few months. The men said the meet-up in KL had to be coordinated well as Mufti resides in Los Angeles, California in the

United States, while Carney lives in Port Huon, Tasmania in Australia.

Special association

"The rebuilding of Tugu Negara was important as it is part of the nation's history," said Carney, 74, at a media event in the Royal Lake Club before a site visit to Tugu Negara.

"It is for this reason that my association with Tugu Negara is special and it is the most important work I've been involved with," he added.

As someone with experience in sculpting and foundry, Carney possessed the necessary skills to restore what was originally built in 1966 by the renowned Austrian-born American sculptor Felix de Weldon (who also constructed the Iwo Jima Memorial in the US in 1954).

The amount of damage to Tugu Negara caused by the bombings however required extra help, to which Carney selected three of his students.

"They were bright, resourceful and had the ability to problem-solve," said Carney.

Despite having no experience in welding with bronze ingots, the three graduates were ready for national duty.

When they inspected the aftermath of the bombing at Tugu Negara in 1975, they realised the damage was extensive.

Not only were there cracks, holes and breaks in the bronze, there were huge broken chunks of the monument that needed to be welded and pieced back together. If there were missing parts, they needed to cast new pieces.

"Of the seven figures (in the sculpture) only the one holding the flag was intact. The rest were strewn all over the ground, some missing a face, an ankle, soldiers without a leg and various broken body parts," recalled Carney.

As artists, they believed they had the talent and dedication to



Four sculptors (from left) – Abdul Mansoor, Carney, Mufti and Zolkeply – who worked on the restoration of Tugu Negara after it was bombed by the communists in August 1975 reunited this week in Malaysia after 46 years. – KAMARUL ARIFFIN/The Star



An image of a fallen soldier sculpture from the Tugu Negara monument. – Photos: Handout



Zolkeply (middle) and a group of welders from JKR seen standing at the top of the Tugu Negara during the restoration.

get the job done. Through the months of repair work, the team, guided by Carney, persevered through unfamiliar situations. This coupled with the faith they had in Carney made them believe they could do anything.

"With Mr Carney ... no problem!" they said in unison, cheering on their former teacher earlier this week.

In terms of the teacher-student dynamic, Carney and his boys (old boys now) were as tight as ever during the long-awaited reunion, which also saw them visiting UiTM in Shah Alam, Selangor to give a talk about this long forgotten restoration project.

Pride and honour

Working on such an important project was an unforgettable experience for all of them.

"In some instances, we had to use our own moulds to restore the parts which were broken. For example, to repair the stomach area, you needed to cast new pieces to fill the broken part and then weld the parts together," said Mufti.

He also recalled a memorable experience while working on the project. "I had to climb up the highest figure with Zolkeply and Ah Sung, a welder from the Public Works Department, to weld the hat on the soldier," said Mufti, 73.

They also took the opportunity to imprint their names on it.

"That was the moment I realised we had completed the job with pride and honour. And I finally understood what it meant to graduate from ITM with what I had been taught and given the opportunity to do something others could not," he added.

With the Tugu Negara monument standing tall at 15m, the only way to view these imprints now would be via a drone.

For Abdul Mansoor, 71, he still marvels at how they had worked on the bronze monument without proper equipment, protective gear and safety measures to prevent any untoward incidents.

"We had taken a big risk, but it was worth it," he said.

Zolkeply, 69, said that he did it for his father, a policeman attached to the General Operations Force to handle the communist insurgency. To his joy, his father made a surprise visit at the site to see his son's handiwork.

"I really enjoyed every minute of the work and it did not matter whether we were paid or not," said Zolkeply, who remembers that the team got paid RM600 a month for their work. "I felt honoured to be given the chance to repair the damaged parts of the figures on the monument," he added.

The Tugu Negara space is currently under renovation till December and will be open to the public in January 2024.