

THE COLLAPSE OF BUTTERWORTH FERRT TERMINAL 1988

By **Mohd Azim Mohd Azmi**

On 31st July 1988, when I (then 24 years old) was with Private Hashim Ahmad, an army colleague decided to spend our 'liberty' day around Georgetown before reporting back for duty on the following day. We left Bukit Mertajam by a public service bus destined to Butterworth. Upon reaching Abdul Halim Ferry Terminal in Butterworth, we were awed to see thousands of people thronged the jetty.

Only then we realized that there was the Kuan Yin's procession in Penang and this crowd was part of those who celebrated Saint Anne festival on the previous day in Bukit Mertajam, Penang. It took us nearly 20 minutes of shoving and squeezing through the crowds to get our ferry tickets. The paddock right after the ticket counter was fully packed with people and we had to wait for our turn to get into it. Ferry service was horrible on that fateful day. We had long wait for the next ferry.

As the crowd in the paddock was released, it was our turn to get into the paddock for the next ferry. Phew!! The waiting made us fuming mad and easily irritated. Once in the paddock along with a few hundreds of sweating and grunting crowds, my friend suddenly had to go for nature's call. Fuming mad, I had to follow him out from the paddock back to the complex where toilets were situated. I couldn't help from grumbling and scolding him for his inability to hold his bladder. We climbed out from the paddock to weave out from the crowd towards the complex.

After done doing his business, we bought some canned drinks as we moved back towards the tickets counters. Seeing the ever mounting of crowds moving towards the tickets counters, I told Hashim that it would be better for us to use the other alternative route from the railway station. A few minutes later we were already on the ramp from the railway station towards the tickets counters. As we were walking up the ramp, there was a thunderous noise 'boom' within the jetty complex. What we saw was beyond words. People were falling off the wooden and iron framed walkway towards the ground below!



Hundreds of people were running away and some were coming towards us. Seeing this tsunami of people coming towards us, I quickly grabbed Hashim and both of us hugged tightly onto one of the pillars nearest to us. We did not want to be trampled by this panic crowd.

I estimated that we were only about 60 to 70 meters from the scene of the mishap and what we saw was chaos and heap of bodies. We discovered that the victims were from the paddock that we came out from earlier. God is great!!! We were somehow saved from this mishap!

From where we stood, we could see bodies piling up on the ground, blood was every where and the sound was deafening with cries of help. There was a control room next to the vehicle ramp, and it was crushed by a metal beam from above. Utter panic was the best I could described at that moment in time. Without words we moved forward and what we observed was distinctively a true human nature i.e. some were really helping others and there were many others too were taking advantage of the situation. There were groups of people helping those in dire straits and carrying them to safety, away from the immediate area. I could well see others, helping themselves with personal belongings of the dead or unconscious victims.

On that fateful day besides ambulances, other vehicles including taxis and buses were used to ferry the victims to the nearest hospital which was about 3 kilometers away. From the corner of my eyes I saw Hashim was moving forward towards a crying woman holding tight onto her handbag, on the other end a male person was pulling hard. I knew Hashim will give hell to this guy but before he could reach them, the handbag sling snapped and the guy ran away from the scene. The scene before authorities came was a tumultuous, bodies were lying about and we could smell blood and other bodily fluids from the scene.

I managed to help one bloodied Chinese man. I took him away from the location where he fell and injured his head and broke his leg. We walked towards KTM station and handed him over to some people there.



Note; The guy in white T-shirt was none other than the great Mohd Azim, whose photograph was taken by the local press people.....comment by Ramli Bahari

Once out from the area, I saw a massive grid lock of vehicles. Ambulances, BOMBA and Police cars could not approach the scene, all of them had to walk over to help the victims and caring for the unfortunate ones at the scene. Bodies were still lying without assistance.

The deadly mishap took place around 4.35 pm. It dawned upon me that I owed a lot to Hashim's inability to hold on to his bladder otherwise we could be in the casualty list too. At 5.00 pm, there were still unattended victims. Sound of crying and screaming were still in the air. Later we had coffee at a nearby coffee stall at Bagan Dalam to calm down ourselves from the harrowing experience. We left Bagan Dalam around 9.00 pm towards Bukit Mertajam, none of us spoke much except the taxi driver, who was talking about the mishap, as if he was there!!

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