

Heading to the seas to help protect lives

MPA official's search for AirAsia jet reminds him of 1997 disaster

By ADRIAN LIM

WHEN he was out in the Java Sea last month searching for what remained of the AirAsia plane that crashed, Mr Jamie Chen was reminded of another air disaster 18 years ago.

Mr Chen, 49, went to the Musi River in Palembang, South Sumatra, as part of a team to find the SilkAir plane that crashed en route to Singapore from Jakarta on Dec 19, 1997.

His latest search mission brought back memories of the anguished families he saw years ago.

"Then, there were next-of-kin onboard the navy vessels we were on... and you could see their grief. You could identify with the pain," said Mr Chen, who is deputy chief hydrographer with the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA).

"Coming to the AirAsia case... I could imagine the grief the family members were going through. We were trying to recover things as quickly as possible, to help give answers to the whole situation," he added.

Mr Chen said he felt intense elation and relief when the multinational search team, which he was a member of, found the two black boxes of the AirAsia plane on Jan 12 and Jan 13.

The boxes – a flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorder – will offer clues to what happened in the crash of AirAsia Flight QZ8501 on Dec 28, in which 162 people died.

But the search operation was hampered early on, leading to a "bit of frustration", said Mr Chen.

The 12-man Singapore team, which included his MPA colleagues and air accident investigation experts, left Singapore on New Year's Eve and reached Pang-



While such search and recovery operations are a departure from his regular work, MPA deputy chief hydrographer Jamie Chen says he sees a common purpose in both. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

kalan Bun in central Kalimantan a day later.

On Jan 2, they departed for the search site on two ships from Kumai Port. But poor weather and rough waters forced them to turn back to safer waters several times. They finally reached the site four days later.

When asked if there were fears the search would be fruitless in that vast expanse of sea – which he described as "nothing but water from one horizon to the other" – Mr Chen said he was buoyed by a "quiet confidence". He attributed this to two rainbows he saw on the day the team left Kumai, and which the Christian interpreted as signs of reassurance.

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SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

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– Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore deputy chief hydrographer Jamie Chen, on searching for AirAsia Flight QZ8501, which crashed on Dec 28

from his regular work as a hydrographer, Mr Chen said he sees a common purpose in both.

Both are essentially about protecting lives.

Through hydrography, the sea beds and water levels around Singapore are surveyed and charted in maps so ships can navigate the waters safely, he said.

On the other hand, finding the black boxes in airline disasters are critical because they offer insights as to whether there were any inherent faults in the aircraft, which can, in turn, prevent future accidents, said Mr Chen. "It's about safety... The bottom line is to help save lives," he added.

While the physics major was

not fully aware of what being a hydrographer entailed when he joined MPA in 1992 after graduating from the University of Western Australia in Perth, he had a love for natural earth sciences.

He had picked up an interest in this after he started to collect rocks at the age of eight.

Explaining his fascination with rocks, Mr Chen said: "No two pieces of rocks are the same. I was interested in the crystal formations and the colours. I started off by picking them off the road."

In 1993, he did a one-year course in hydrography at the University of Plymouth, in south-west England.

Over the past seven years, Mr Chen's work in MPA has changed from surveying and charting to

the operation and maintenance of lighthouses, beacons and buoys.

His wife – whom he declined to name – and two children, Joel, 19, and Adrielle, 17, may not fully appreciate the hundreds of rocks that occupy three shelves in their home but they have been supportive of his work, he said.

Before Mr Chen left for Indonesia, Joel, whom he said is a transport enthusiast, helped to compile details about AirAsia Flight QZ8501, including the design, dimensions and livery of the plane.

Proudly clutching a print-out of his son's report, he said: "These are clues... which the divers used as they tried to identify parts of the planes... I'm very grateful to him for that."

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