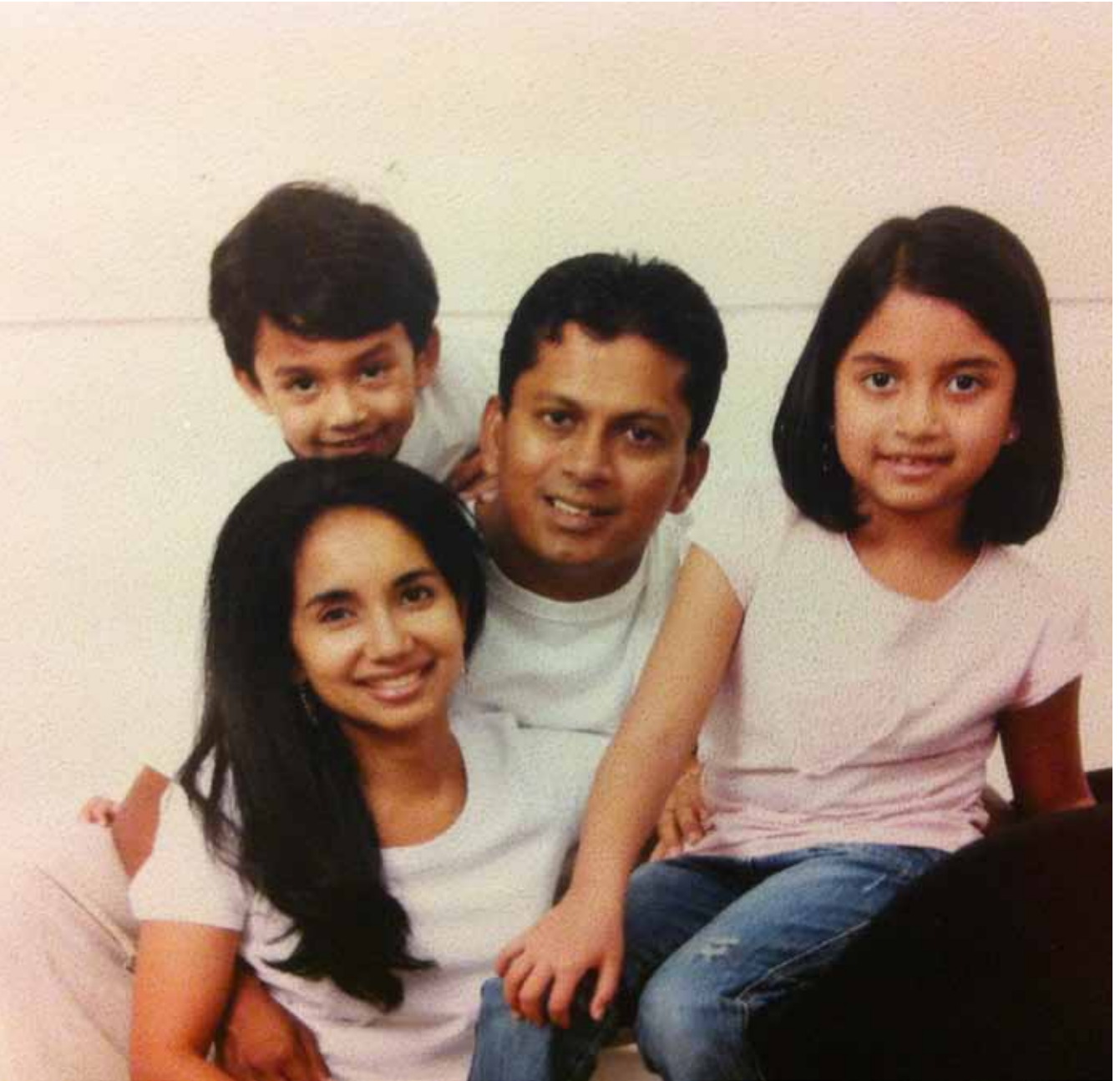


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The road less travelled

Halliburton Area Vice President **RAO ABDULLAH**'s entry into the oil and gas industry may have been a quirk of fate, but his rise up the ranks of one of the world's largest oilfield services company has been a journey of persistence and sheer determination. BY SREEREMA BANOO.

Rao Abdullah's seventeen-year journey in the oil and gas industry has been nothing short of remarkable. It's a journey that has an unconventional, if not amusing, beginning, followed by many years of hard work, sustained by a never-say-die attitude.

"I fought to get to where I am today," says Rao who, as Area Vice President, oversees Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines for oilfield services giant, Halliburton. One of only a handful of vice presidents in Halliburton without a technical background, Rao recently added another feather to his cap.

The 49-year-old was named the 2012 Halliburton Executive of the Year for the Eastern Hemisphere. It is the second highest accolade awarded by the company and the award encompasses its businesses in all regions around the world except for North and Latin America.

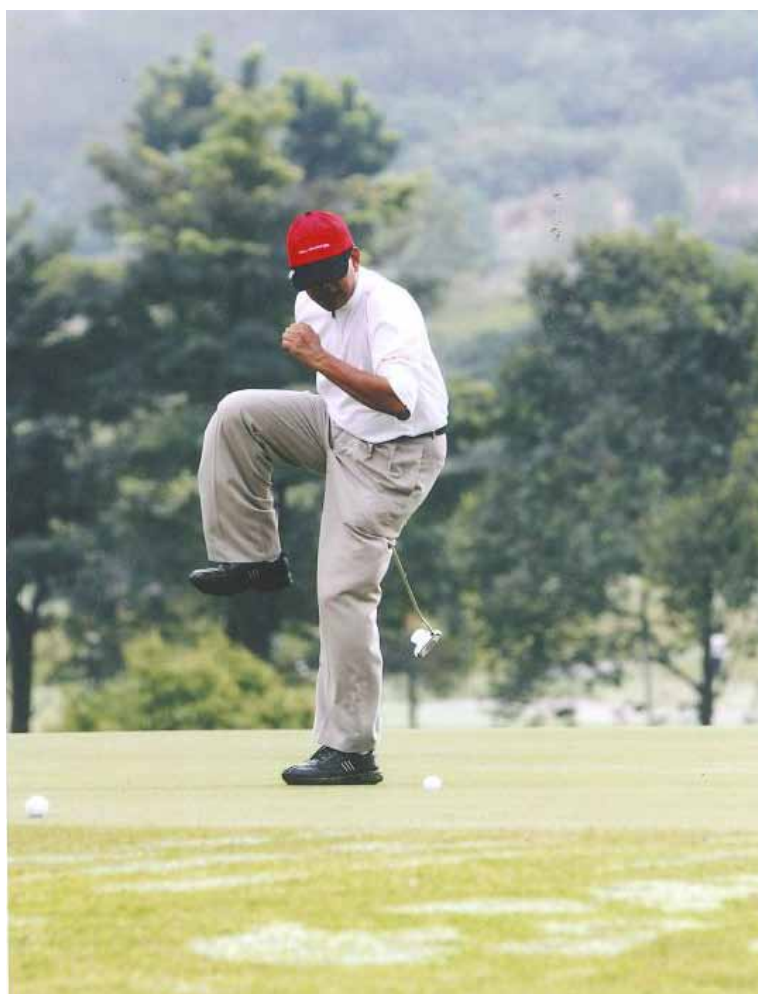
It is a meaningful recognition, particularly given his rather unconventional start in the industry. Rao began his career in the oil and gas industry, and in Halliburton, in 1995. He had just returned from the United Kingdom where he completed his professional qualification from the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, and had spent six years in public practice.

His first job upon his return to Malaysia was as an accountant for a pharmaceutical company in Penang, and while he was comfortable enough, he decided to move to Kuala Lumpur, where his wife (then girlfriend) was based.

"I thought it was the silliest thing, me working in Penang while she was in KL," he says. When he received a call from a headhunter about a job opening in KL, he did not hesitate and went for the interview without an inkling of the company's background or industry.

"When they first called me up, I thought (the company) was called Haliborange until I went for the interview and they were talking about oil and gas, and equipment," he quips. But that didn't deter him. "At that point in time, I kind of realised that audit wasn't for me, and I wanted something different, so that's how I landed in Halliburton... purely by accident."

Making the move to oil and gas back then was also a courageous one. "Today, it's a sunrise industry and the best paid industry, and everyone wants to be in it," he says. But back then, that wasn't the case. "When I walked up to my boss in the pharmaceutical company and told him I was going to oil and gas, his reaction was: 'What's wrong with you? Pharmaceuticals is the sunrise industry, oil and gas is a sunset industry...are you ok? Is something wrong with you?'"



Rao admits that making that transition from public practice to the corporate arena wasn't easy, and he knew that by moving he would in effect be giving up his licence to practice accountancy. But he took the plunge nonetheless. "I wasn't enjoying it anymore...I felt that there was something missing. I believe in building something, developing and growing it and Halliburton gave me that option," he says, pointing out that at the time there weren't many Malaysians in the company. "There were less than a hundred employees, maybe about 50 or 60, today there are 1,200 employees."

TAKING THE BULL BY ITS HORNS

Rao began his tenure at Halliburton as Finance Manager for Malaysia, and he gave himself three years to make something of it. "I told myself it was either this or I have to chart my career somewhere else."

Very early on, he saw how different the oil and gas industry was from the audit industry, in particular the emphasis on health, safety and environment, and service quality. "Those things were new to me. We never talked about safety in audit."

A few years into the job, Rao began to feel restless. "My passion was in growing the business and not being the finance manager and crunching numbers...it just wasn't me. The oomph wasn't there."

After a pep talk from the CEO – who told him that if he wanted a change he had to take the bull by the horns – Rao decided to chart his own career. He began to familiarise and equip himself with

the demands and skills required of a different role within the organisation. He attended service quality meetings, met with clients and gained a Masters in Business Administration, which helped him gain further insight into the field of human resources and other aspects of general management. He even picked up golf – a game he thought very little of – because it was one way to meet clients and network.

"I just started positioning myself and getting myself the skills set needed for the job so that when the opportunity came along I would be ready for it...I wasn't waiting for things to fall on my lap and I didn't expect to be spoon fed," he says emphatically.

From Finance Manager, Rao became Shared Services Manager for South East Asia, and was later appointed Business Development Manager and Country Manager for Central Asia. Before his current appointment, Rao served as the Area Manager for Central Asia, overseeing Malaysia and Brunei.

He says the experiences from varied roles over the years have been invaluable as they have given him a better appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of the business. "I don't spend a lot of time





with numbers or real estate issues because I know exactly how things work...and I'm able to make decisions better."

He concedes that the path up the Halliburton ladder hasn't been easy, especially given his lack of a technical or engineering background. "It was challenging...I didn't know the lingo and there wasn't any proper training. So you have to ask questions and learn on the job." He says that he spent more time in each location and went on rig visits to enhance his understanding of the business.

The going was tough, but he persevered. "It took years to get where I am, there were no shortcuts. I've even been in a position where the promotion was given without a salary increase because I had to earn it (the promotion) and prove that I was better than the next guy," he says.

And his experiences serve as a lesson to others. "The grass will always be greener on the other side, you will have difficult times, you will have ups and downs and maybe think of quitting but that's not the solution. If you decide that where you are is where you should be, then you just have to fight for it. I fought to get to where I am... you just cannot give up," he says.

EARLY LIFE LESSONS

Much of Rao's perseverance and work ethics are attributed to his humble beginnings. Born in a plantation in Negri Sembilan to parents who were both rubber tappers, Rao was the fourth of five children. He doesn't sugarcoat the difficulties he faced growing up. "We didn't have enough to eat," he says as he tells of how he helped to look after farm animals.

In secondary school, Rao was offered the opportunity to attend a residential school in Seremban, and he grabbed the chance. He was fortunate that his late father believed in the merits of education although he didn't have a formal education himself. "My father saw it as a way out of poverty and he was very hard on us."

From Seremban, he moved to KL where he pursued his undergraduate studies in University of Malaya, graduating in 1987 with a degree in accountancy. The timing could not have been

worse – the country was in recession and jobs were paying a pittance. So he decided to pack his bags and head to the UK – the plan was to go as a tourist and eventually secure a job.

Soon after arriving, Rao secured an articleship at the accountancy firm of Sylvester, Groves & Co and embarked on his professional qualification. Those early days in the UK were tough ones, but a twist of fate changed all that – a dispute with a flatmate led to him being offered a place to stay in his boss' home. And what Rao thought would be a temporary arrangement turned out to be a six-year stay.

"After about two or three months I thought of moving out, and my boss Timothy Sylvester told me that it was up to me. He said that he was more than happy for me to stay there, I didn't have to pay rent and there was a maid to clean the house...from nothing to that." It was the turning point in his life, and for that moment on, he says he's been spoilt.

It was while he was in the UK that he met his future wife Zuli who was studying for her postgraduate degree at the time, and this then led to a major decision – to stay on in the UK or return to Malaysia with her. He chose the latter, and that, he says, has made all the difference.

"The best things I did in my life was meet my wife and join Halliburton," he says. Other events were the result of providence, he believes, "but these were two things where I had a choice...and they were the best decisions I made."

THE FUTURE

As Area Vice President, Rao looks after Halliburton's businesses in Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, across all product lines. Growth has been phenomenal over the years and he says the region is an important one to the company.

Going forward, he hopes to develop a strong national workforce within the company by instituting aggressive training on soft skills. "Very often people are not lacking in technical skills but fall short in terms of managing people, dealing with customers and coping with pressures," he explains.

He also hopes that Halliburton will be able to play a more significant role in contributing to the country, in particular the area of capacity building and corporate social responsibility. With regards to the former, the company recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with PETRONAS to explore collaboration opportunities in the areas of research and development, staff attachment, student sponsorship, internship as well as supervision of post-graduate students and technical trainees.

The two companies will also collaborate in conducting lectures and seminars via Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS to enhance the understanding of the industry.

As for his personal goals, he says that while he would not mind adding more countries to his portfolio, he's already had his fair share of challenges and sleepless nights so he is happy with where he is. "I am content. I am blessed. And I never forget to thank God for that."

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