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PLAYING TO THE CAMERA, a strangely relaxed Mas Selamat is seen here in the custody of the Indonesian police in 2003. Reporters from Batam Post said he did not appear nervous or afraid when he was arrested. In fact, he smiled as photographers rushed forward to snap his picture.

ST FILE PHOTO

Kampung boy, bus mechanic, bomb maker, wanted terrorist

Singapore's most notorious man on the run is also no stranger to prison escape attempts

► Nur Dianah Suhaimi

THE man who is now the target of Singapore's most massive manhunt had an ordinary childhood.

Growing up in Kaki Bukit, Mas Selamat Kastari led a typical carefree kampung life, playing football and marbles and flying kites with his neighbours.

He attended the English-language Kaki Bukit Primary School and didn't show interest in radical religious beliefs, said childhood friends who spoke to The Sunday Times.

Today, the 47-year-old former leader of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) terror network, who once plotted to hijack a plane and crash it into Changi Airport, is hogging headlines.

He escaped from the Whitley Road Detention Centre at 4.05pm last Wednesday where he had been detained since 2006 under the Internal Security Act.

This was not the first time he broke out of jail.

In 2003, he tried to escape from a jail in Bintan in Indonesia where he was serving an 18-month sentence. He jumped from a high floor and broke his left leg, and now has a permanent limp.

He has been described by terror experts as the most ruthless of the JI Singapore members and someone who knows how to make bombs.

Those who have met the 1.58m-tall man describe him as soft-spoken, with a calm demeanour. But he is also very stubborn – someone who "cannot accept others' opinions", as one put it.

He is also known to be cunning. For an entire year, between 2001 and 2002, he moved his family from place to place in Indonesia and successfully evaded arrest.

Born on Jan 23, 1961 in Kendal, a province in Central Java, his family migrated to Singapore when he was a young boy.

His father worked as a gardener while his mother, a Batam native, was a housewife.

The youngest of eight or nine siblings – no one knows for sure – he grew up in a kampung in Kaki Bukit and was known as "Selamat" among neighbours.

A childhood friend told The Sunday Times: "He was a very normal kid. He played a lot like us, he was not weird and he did not spout radical nonsense."

It is not known if he went to secondary school, but childhood

How he got his limp

In 2003, he tried to escape from a jail in Bintan in Indonesia where he was serving an 18-month sentence. He jumped from a high floor and broke his left leg, and now has a permanent limp.

Fugitive's family

Wherever he went, he took his family along with him. They travelled mostly by public transport and would take along bags of clothes, pots, pans and even crockery.

To avoid detection, he shaved his beard, changed his name many times and wore a cap pulled low over his eyes. He also got his wife a fake Indonesian passport with a false name. The authorities said she knew about his activities and provided moral support.

playmates said it was unlikely he studied in a madrasah.

He moved to a flat in the Bedok Reservoir area in the early 1980s and married a few years later.

He and his wife have five children – four boys and a girl – now aged seven to 18.

He was believed to have worked as a bus mechanic before joining the JI.

His involvement with JI began in 1990 after he heard Indonesian cleric Abu Jibril preach in Johor. He joined Darul Islam (DI), a movement considered to be the parent of JI.

In 1992, he joined the Singapore JI cell and visited Afghanistan twice in the next five years. In 1999, he was handpicked by JI chief Hambali – now in United States custody in Guantanamo Bay – to lead the Singapore cell.

In 2001, Mas Selamat fled the country when the Singapore Government began cracking down on JI members.

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, he deliberately

damaged his computer hard disk to destroy any incriminating evidence before he left the country.

He went to Malaysia and moved on to southern Thailand. There, he hatched the plot to hijack a plane and crash it into Changi Airport. He later fled to Medan in Indonesia.

He moved regularly in the country to avoid detection, spending time also in Denpasar, Surabaya and Padang.

He knew the Riau islands like the back of his hand and was familiar with all the unofficial entry points.

Wherever he went, he took his family along with him. They travelled mostly by public transport – on ferries and buses – and would take along bags of clothes, pots, pans and even crockery.

To avoid detection, he shaved his beard, changed his name many times and wore a cap pulled low over his eyes. He also got his wife a fake Indonesian passport with a false name.

The authorities said she knew about his activities and provided moral support.

In February 2003, the Indonesian police nabbed him with his family on a bus in Tanjung Pinang, Bintan. They had received a red notice from Interpol about him in relation to the plane-hijack plot. He had with him a book on the virtue of suicide.

He confessed to the Indonesian police that he had plans to overthrow the Singapore Government. Reporters from Batam Post said he did not appear nervous or afraid when he was arrested. In fact, he smiled as photographers rushed forward to snap his picture.

While he was being interrogated, his wife and children sat as if in prayer. The children did not cry or look nervous, and were observed as being cheerful at the police headquarters.

Mas Selamat was jailed for 18 months in Bintan for carrying a fake identity card and passport. It was during this prison stay that he tried to escape.

The Indonesian authorities handed him over to Singapore in 2006, but not before a controversy broke about him being released from prison earlier and being on the loose for five months in Indonesia.

Mr Fahmi Bahmid, his former lawyer in Indonesia, told The

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