1

A Rite of Passage

In March 1967, the Singapore Parliament passed the National Service (Amendment) Bill, which made national service compulsory for all male citizens and permanent residents when they turned 18. In addition, all civil servants, irrespective of age, recruited after January 1967 had to do basic military training before returning to their civilian jobs. Unlike in 1954, when Chinese middle school students rioted following the enactment of the 1952 National Service Ordinance—Singapore was then under British rule—the 1967 National Service Act was generally accepted by the population as Singapore was by then an independent country. In fact, many citizens, including some political office holders, volunteered for part-time training and service with the newly formed People's Defence Force (PDF).

Two batches of civil servants were called up for three months of basic military training (BMT) in the 1st and 2nd Singapore Infantry Regiments (SIR). After completing the training, these civil servants were returned to their civil service jobs and put on part-time service with the People's Defence Force, as the Ministry of Defence (Mindef) had yet to decide where to deploy them.

As I had joined the Singapore Administrative Service in April 1967, I was also liable for national service. In September, I received the enlistment notice and hoped to complete the three-month BMT course, after which I would resume my civil service career like the first two batches of civil servants before me. I joined about one hundred-odd civil servants at the Central Manpower Base in the erstwhile Kallang Airport to be conscripted. Compared with the average national servicemen, the civil servants were older. They were in their mid-twenties and thirties, mostly single, but some married with children. As enlistment and medical procedures were new, there were mistakes. Some enlistees were found not fit for combat, including a novice Buddhist monk who had to have a special vegetarian diet, which rendered him unsuitable for military training. He was discharged from service mid-way through the BMT course.

We were dispatched to the Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute (SAFTI) in Pasir Laba Camp. Although a new institute, SAFTI had already acquired a reputation for tough training and rigorous learning, as symbolised by its "scimitar and torch" insignia. We were organised into two companies comprising Chinese, Indian, Malay, and Eurasian recruits.

Our first day in SAFTI was unforgettable. We were given "four-by-two" haircuts, issued uniforms and metal tags with our name and blood group indicated (which we irreverently referred to as "dog tags"), and allocated beds and cupboards. Accommodation was very spartan: in one-storey wooden huts, with ten- to twelve-men sections to a room. Morning call was at 6 am, and lights-out was between 9 and 10 pm.

Our instructors were very fit. On the first day, they introduced us to the training regime by getting us, just before dinner, to run up Peng Kang Hill, which was located just beyond SAFTI's fences and overlooking the training complex. Both companies of recruits, mostly unfit because of our sedentary lifestyle, had to run from the company lines, exit SAFTI's gate, cross Pasir Laba road, and then run up the steep slopes of Peng Kang Hill until we were just short of the

peak before running down again. By the time we were midway up the hill, some of us were vomiting from the agony. After descending the hill, we stumbled to regroup for the run back to our company lines. "Shock and awe" was our introduction to SAFTI's basic military training.

In the initial weeks, it took some time for most of us to adjust to the routine of life in the barracks. The Chinese food served included overly tough fried chicken, tasteless fish from frozen stock brought in by Russian trawlers, sauteed vegetables and pineapples. Compared with the Muslim food, the Chinese food was bland and inedible. This led many non-Muslims to eat their meals without permission from the Muslim section (going early to ensure a head start in the queue), causing food shortages for the Muslim soldiers as a result. Our officers soon put a stop to this, and the non-Muslims were back to tasteless food. Green bean soup or fried *bee hoon* (rice vermicelli noodles) were the usual evening snacks before lights-out.

The instructors, mostly new officers from the first officer cadet batch and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) from the same batch who did not make it to officer rank, could be abusive. They subjected us daily to abusive language spiced with vulgarity whenever we made mistakes. Rules against such abusive behaviour, which might have been tolerated or overlooked in an all-regular army, had not yet been formulated for a citizens' army.

After one month of being confined to camp, we were released on furlough on a Saturday afternoon, with instructions to return the following evening. I spent that weekend polishing my boots and washing, starching, and ironing my drill cotton uniforms. By the time we completed the BMT course, we had been thoroughly "army inoculated".

After three months of rigorous basic military training, we became competent soldiers and learned to be responsible members of a section. We were all looking forward to our return to civvy street. But, for some of us, our joy was short-lived. After the passing-out parade, about 50 of us were made to assemble in the SAFTI auditorium to

await the arrival of the Director of SAFTI, Colonel Kirpa Ram Vij. The room hushed when he arrived. With an air of nonchalance, he informed us that we had been selected for further training and would have to stay in the Army for two full years. We were surprised as earlier batches of recruits were released after the BMT course to continue their national service obligations on a part-time basis.

It turned out that we were on a through train to eventual officer cadet training if we passed basic military training (which we had just done) and section leader's training. Amendments made to the National Service Act provided for selected civil servants to do up to two years of military service. Kirpa Ram told us matter-of-factly that those who objected could appeal if they wished but the appeals would be rejected because the Army needed us. It reminded me of the World War I US Army recruitment poster of Uncle Sam—a longstanding symbol of American patriotism—saying, "I want you for [the] US Army". This was high-handed and arbitrary, but it was the harsh reality of national service then. Some of my fellow national servicemen were in their thirties, and some were married with children. I could feel their dismay when we learnt that many of our civil service colleagues who were not enlisted had been transferred to part-time service with the police force because of severe manpower shortages in many government departments arising from the enlistment of civil servants for national service.

We returned to SAFTI after a week-long break to be trained as platoon section leaders. This three-month course taught the leadership duties of a section commander and his role within a platoon. This would be followed by another course of eight months if we were selected for officer cadet training. It was no consolation that we would continue to draw our civil service salaries, which were more than the $60 paid monthly to the other national servicemen.

The training philosophy advocated by SAFTI's Israeli advisers was based on the need for leaders to empathise with the men they lead. Therefore, they had to undergo the same training regime as their men before they qualified as section leaders or platoon leaders.

Upon completing section leader's training in February 1968, we were promoted to corporals, a rank signified by the two chevrons we wore on our sleeves. About half of us were selected for the eight-month officer cadet (OCT) course beginning in March. Those not selected remained as corporals and were posted to military units as instructors or section leaders to serve out their national service obligation.

Together with more than 100 others who were regulars or secondees from the police force, we made up two companies of cadets for the 3rd officer cadet course. We were the pioneer batch of national servicemen selected for officer training in the SAF. The eight-month course from April to November 1968 tested our mental and physical endurance to the limits. There were frequent written and field tests as well as live firing exercises. It included section, platoon and company-level training, occasionally in the presence of Israeli advisers who were veterans of the Six-Day War of June 1967 to impart their experience.

As officer cadets, we were subjected to very long hours of training, with very few hours of sleep each night. Rightly or wrongly, group punishments would be meted out for any mistake or instance of poor performance by an individual or a group. Our instructors explained that this was to inculcate in us the habit of working and cooperating as a group.

Our company commander, Major Albert Tan, was trained at Federation Military College (FMC), Kuala Lumpur. He was a strict but fair disciplinarian. He led by example and moderated some of the harshness dished out by the less experienced instructors. He worked as hard as we did, often sleeping overnight in his office during our late-night training. Some national service officer cadets felt like giving up towards the end of the course because of the intense pressure, but they persevered with encouragement and support from the rest of us. On the other hand, the cadets who were regulars were highly motivated as they were set on taking up a military career.

The last few months of officer cadet training were daunting. We had to learn to use improvised floatation devices fashioned out of our

uniform trousers. We learnt river-crossing operations on the Jurong River and executed "coastal hooks" in aluminium assault boats, culminating in a tactical exercise ending at Pulau Tekong. There were two memorable large-scale exercises, codenamed "Shakedown I and II", which took place over several days and involved both cadet companies. We did various manoeuvres using a mix of aluminium assault boats, wooden boats and converted landing craft. Colonel Ronald Wee, the new Director of SAFTI, personally directed the exercises. The final test for the officer cadets was Exercise Red Beret, where we had to navigate and move on foot across Singapore from east to west within 24 hours. It was a test of endurance, navigation skills, and the ability to overcome "ambushes" laid by instructors on the way to the destination. To end the course on a high note, both officer cadet companies participated in a live-firing exercise supported by an attached 81 mm mortar platoon.

Officer-cadet training imbued us with the values of teamwork, professional integrity, leadership by example, and endurance under continuous physical and mental stress.

On 17 November 1968, 193 of us were commissioned as officers out of the original 200-plus cadets in the 3rd officer cadet course. The commissioning parade was held at the SAFTI parade square. We were dressed smartly for it, but a heavy thunderstorm broke and drenched our well-starched and ironed ceremonial uniforms. The commissioning ceremony was a simple affair, held that evening in SAFTI's main training shed. Mr Lim Kim San, the Minister for Defence, presented us with our ceremonial swords and commissioning certificates.

Unlike the first and second officer cadet batches, which comprised only regulars, the third batch was a mix of regulars, police officers, and national servicemen from the Civil Service. Those who failed the officer course were granted the rank of sergeant and posted to training or operational units as instructors.

Around that time, Mindef announced that national servicemen who had been commissioned as officers had to undergo three years

of national service instead of two. This meant that my return to civilian life would be delayed by a year. This new ruling discouraged many better-educated national servicemen in subsequent batches from performing well to avoid officer cadet training and having to do an extra year. The rules were amended in November 1970 such that those with Higher School Certificates (A-level equivalent qualifications) and above would only serve two and a half years. This effectively removed the incentive to underperform.

After commissioning, the third-batch officers were posted to newly formed infantry, armour, combat engineers, artillery, and signals units. I was posted as an infantry platoon commander to 6 SIR, a freshly formed battalion commanded by Major Jagrup Singh. The camp in Taman Jurong was converted from a former dormitory for foreign workers employed in nearby factories. The battalion had five rifle companies, all made up of national service recruits. 5 SIR was our neighbour, located several blocks away. It had been formed a year earlier and was being prepared for participation in Exercise Bersatu Padu. Held in Terengganu, in eastern peninsular Malaysia, it was the first major Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) exercise.

The 5 and 6 SIRs were sited near a large open area, which was our training ground for basic field training. Proximity to training areas was a boon because, with the SAF having insufficient trucks, soldiers often had to march to the training areas, which left them with less time for rest. It was a SAF-wide problem until more trucks became available.

Like most others, my platoon was made up entirely of national servicemen. My platoon sergeant was Ee Hong Teck, a schoolteacher who had been with me in officer cadet training, but he did not make the grade. Hong Teck was patient and caring. As the platoon sergeant, he handled platoon administration and helped supervise the four sections of the platoon. That all the platoons in the battalion were made up entirely of national servicemen was a testimony to the viability of the national service army concept. In fact, national service would become a "rite of passage" for all Singaporean male citizens.

In later years, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had this to say about national service: "National Service has had a profound impact on Singapore society. It has become a rite of passage for our young men and a part of our way of life that has helped to unify our people."*

In May 1969, communal riots flared up in West Malaysia, causing racial tensions to rise in Singapore. There was concern that refugees from the southern part of the peninsula would seek refuge in Singapore. Hence, all six infantry battalions of the SAF were deployed to support the police in internal security patrols. As 6 SIR was not yet operational, we were assigned guard duties at camps earmarked to house refugees who made it from Malaysia. Officers and NCOs were each issued a magazine of five rounds of live ammunition, while the men were not given any. Knowing that our deployment was for a real contingency made us realise how vital national service was. Fortunately, there were no refugees from Malaysia, and we returned to our routine training when the situation became normal again.

Six months into my stint as a platoon commander in 6 SIR, I was posted to Mindef's Department of Military Intelligence (DMI) to hold a regular officer's appointment. The department was housed in the former Police Headquarters building at Pearl's Hill. I exchanged places with Lieutenant Ha Weng Kong, a promising regular from the first batch, who took over my platoon as he had yet to serve in an infantry battalion.

The new posting gave me a taste of military intelligence staff work and analysis. I dealt with the assessment and analysis of capabilities in the regional militaries. Interactions with the Research Department of Mindef's Security and Intelligence Division (SID), housed in the same complex, gave me a glimpse into how research analysts worked. My supervisor in DMI was Captain Adrian Villanueva, a mobilised Naval Volunteer Reserve officer who had seen operational service during the Indonesian Confrontation. He was a good boss. After six

* Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965–2000* (Marshall Cavendish International, 2015), p. 44.

months, I was transferred to the Research Department of SID as it needed more staff for its growing workload.

In August 1969, Singapore celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding by Stamford Raffles. VIP guests from the other four countries of the FPDA were invited to our National Day Parade, which was part of the anniversary celebrations. Princess Alexandra represented the United Kingdom, while Malcolm Fraser, Tun Abdul Razak, and Adams-Schneider represented Australia, Malaysia, and New Zealand, respectively. These VIPs were escorted by Aides-de-Camp (ADCs) selected from the third batch of officer graduates. I was among the four selected and assigned as ADC to the New Zealand VIP.

The four of us reported to City Hall for a briefing by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Protocol Director Larry Ong and his staff officer, R. Purvirasa. We were briefed on the parade, which was to be held at the Padang, and the opening of the Seletar Reservoir, another highlight of the celebrations. MFA's Protocol Division was thinly staffed, and the complexities of protocol work were not well developed. This was to become painfully obvious during the Seletar Reservoir ceremony.

On 9 August 1969, at the National Day Parade, the ADCs were positioned behind the VIP section on the steps of City Hall. We could see the parade clearly and felt the crowd's excitement as they watched the column of AMX-13 tanks being paraded for the first time, rumbling down the road. The armoured column made a strong impact on our VIP guests. The parade of the armoured column was reported on the front pages of the Singapore and Malaysian newspapers. It had a dramatic effect on Malaysians in Johore when they saw it on television that night. PM Lee Kuan Yew, in his memoirs, recalled what Dr Goh told him of his conversation with Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak at a dinner Lee hosted that evening: "At my dinner that night, Razak told Keng Swee that many people in Malaysia were concerned over our armour, but he himself was not. He said there was anxiety in Johore whether

Singapore intended to invade the state and suggested that Kim San, as Defence Minister, should go to Kuala Lumpur to convince people that Singapore's intentions towards Malaysia were not hostile."*

Unfortunately, the opening ceremony of the Seletar Reservoir by Princess Alexandra, the Guest-of-Honour, went badly. Poor movement coordination caused the other three VIPs to arrive after her. There was consternation, and the organisers were deeply embarrassed. The blame was put on the ADCs for not keeping proper time for the VIPs. We learned later that when news of this botch-up reached the ears of PM Lee, he was furious and wanted the four ADCs sacked. As it turned out, this could not be done as we were all national servicemen.

In April 1970, Lieutenant Mok Chuck Whye, another national service officer from the third officer cadet batch, and I were again sent to SAFTI to attend the 4th SATO (School of Advanced Training for Officers) course. This course trained regular officers for command and staff appointments at the battalion level. We were the first two national service officers to attend the course. Chuck Whye was a Nanyang University graduate with the Inland Revenue Department before he enlisted for national service. It appeared that both of us had been earmarked to be company commanders in 50 SIR, the first reservist infantry unit, after our release from full-time service.

During the SATO course, I was promoted to captain, ahead of the regular officers in the first and second batches, who were my SATO course mates. When the course ended in July, I returned to Mindef to serve out the remaining period of my national service obligation.

Towards the end of my national service, I planned to resign from the Civil Service to enter the private sector, which was hungry for newly released national servicemen as there was a big shortage of graduates because of their enlistment for national service. Many of my university contemporaries exempted from full-time service had secured well-paying senior appointments in the burgeoning private sector.

---

* Ibid., p. 40.

Those who were called up for national service felt disadvantaged. Even my civil service colleagues who had been exempted from full-time national service were already advancing in their civilian careers. As we had not taken the prerequisite civil service examinations in law and a second language because of national service, we were still on probation and were yet to be confirmed in our jobs. This was another blow as it meant that we could not apply for housing loans at a time when the cost of private housing was skyrocketing.

When Mr Tay Seow Hwa, Second Permanent Secretary in Mindef, who had earlier been Director of SID, asked me to join the Intelligence Service, I told him of my intention to resign from government service when I was through with national service. He tried to dissuade me, saying he would take up my case with the Public Service Commission, which had the authority to waive the requirement for me to take the said examinations. Mr Tay's intervention dissuaded me and other civil servants who were in the same plight as I was from leaving government service.

In November 1970, Mindef further shortened the duration of national service for officers from three to two and a half years. It was too late to apply this new ruling to us as we had already completed our three years of active national service.

Like the two batches of officer cadets before us, the camaraderie that developed through serving the nation together laid the basis for both national service and regular officers in my batch to meet annually on the anniversary of our commissioning. It speaks to the incredible bonding process that cements ties between people who have lived and worked together through thick and thin.

On 17 November 2018, more than seventy officer graduates of the third batch convened at the Singapore Cricket Club to commemorate the 50th anniversary of our commissioning as SAF officers. Quite fittingly, the former Chief of Defence Force, Lieutenant-General (Retd) Winston Choo, and Lieutenant-Colonel (Retd) Albert Tan, who had commanded one of the two officer cadet

companies in 1968, were with us as special guests. On this occasion, I was invited to cut the anniversary cake on behalf of the gathering.