

Kirpa  
Ram  
Vij

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# Kirpa Ram Vij

The  
Volunteer  
Who Launched  
an Army

RAMACHANDRAN MENON



YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

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Cover photo: The driving force behind SAFTI: (left-to-right) Mr George Bogaars, Permanent Secretary, MID; Dr Goh Keng Swee, Minister for Interior and Defence; Lieutenant Colonel Kirpa Ram Vij, Director (Designate), SAFTI; Mr Tan Teck Khim, Director General Staff, SAF.

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# Foreword

*Mr Peter Ho*

*Senior Advisor, Centre for Strategic Futures*

When I began my national service at the end of 1972, Kirpa Ram Vij was the Director, General Staff—effectively the commander—of a very young Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). Unsurprisingly, he was a remote figure to all of us who were then more concerned with surviving the shock and rigours of military training. Few of us would have even known his name, let alone the role that he (and others like him) were playing in the development of the SAF.

Fifty years later, we are all older and wiser, more settled and mellow. The passage of time has given us a perspective on the remarkable journey that Singapore has taken since independence, and how national institutions like the SAF grew in tandem to become potent symbols of the Singapore story. We now appreciate how much was stacked against us in those days, and how great the odds that had to be overcome.

The pioneers who confronted these challenges in the SAF were not supermen, even if they might have appeared so in the eyes of young national servicemen like me. They were roped in from all walks of life to build the SAF, whether they were teachers, policemen or civil servants. Kirpa Ram Vij belongs to this group of pioneer Singaporeans who were called to do a singular duty—to build institutions essential to nation-building—from scratch. They were neither trained for the job, nor had

they been prepared for the enormity of challenges. They were thrown in at the deep end and left to work things out for themselves. Resources were thin. But they all responded to the call of duty with alacrity and did their jobs to the best of their ability, and more.

To understand the enormity of the challenges that the pioneers confronted, it is important to see Singapore's defence in context. Until separation from Malaysia, and despite the experiences of the Second World War, the Malayan Emergency, and *Konfrontasi* (armed confrontation with Indonesia), defence was not a pressing issue for Singapore. The British military defended the Crown Colony of Singapore, and after merger, defence became the responsibility of the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and the Malaysian Armed Forces.

At merger, Singapore brought into Malaysia a very limited defence capability, centred on the Singapore Volunteer Forces (or SVF), whose origins dated back to 1854. The first Chief Minister of Singapore, David Marshall, persuaded the British to set up a regular infantry battalion to supplement the SVF. So, the first battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment—or 1 SIR—was raised in 1957. 2 SIR followed in 1962. But these two battalions had limited operational capability, and anyway were understrength with more than half the soldiers Malaysian. When Singapore separated from Malaysia on 9 August 1965, these few military units plus a solitary wooden gunboat reverted to the Singapore government.

With Singapore cut adrift from Malaysia, and hardly any military worth speaking of, defence suddenly became an urgent priority. This was the cue for Dr Goh Keng Swee, then Minister for Finance, to volunteer to take on the existential challenge of building up Singapore's defence, virtually from scratch. He took charge of a team to form a new Ministry of Interior and Defence, which is today divided into the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Defence.

Dr Goh's initial thinking for the defence of Singapore was to have several regular battalions, supplemented by the People's Defence Force (PDF) evolved from the SVF, to supplement the regular Singapore army. But it soon became clear that this vision could not be realized with a small population and limited resources. Singapore could not afford a large professional army.



Dr Goh's approach to defence, as with economics, was to learn from others with experience and a track record. To this end, Singapore first approached Egypt and India—both members of the Non-Aligned Movement—for help in building up Singapore's defences. But with no response from either country forthcoming, Lee Kuan Yew gave Dr Goh the go-ahead to approach Israel for help.

Dr Goh contacted the Israelis through Mordecai Kidron, the former Israeli Ambassador to Thailand. The Israelis responded positively. With admirable dispatch and efficiency, they produced a masterplan for the development of the SAF. A key element in this masterplan was the recommendation that Singapore should build a citizen army of conscripts, trained and led by a small regular force. A training school that would eventually become the Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute (SAFTI) should be established to train the leaders of this army. The Singapore government quickly approved the masterplan.

Dr Goh needed good people on the Singapore side to implement the masterplan, which demanded an ability to understand the planning complexities and to focus on operational detail at the same time. While there would be Israeli advisors on hand to help, Singapore carried the responsibility for implementation and for the ultimate success of the masterplan. But there was not an abundance of military expertise in those days.

Luckily, Dr Goh had a keen eye for talent. When he was Minister for Finance, Dr Goh spotted a civil servant in the government administrative service who was a graduate and who had completed an Organisation and Method course in the United Kingdom on a Colombo Plan scholarship. Importantly, Dr Goh discovered that this civil servant had also won the Sword of Honour as the top officer cadet in the second SVF commissioning course in Beach Road Camp. After that, he had taken to "moonlighting" as an SVF officer outside office hours. He even had the temerity to take frequent leaves of absence from his duties at the Ministry of Finance in order to do duty on anti-*Konfrontasi* operations. This civil servant was Kirpa Ram Vij, better known as "Kip" to his colleagues, friends and peers.

Although he was not a professional military officer, his background as a civil servant and as a volunteer SVF officer made Kip an obvious

choice for the task ahead of implementing the masterplan. So, Dr Goh mobilized him. Kip was then sent to Israel in the “local” rank of Lieutenant Colonel to study how the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) trained. In that same delegation to Israel was then Senior Superintendent of Police, Tan Teck Khim, whom Dr Goh had appointed as the first Director, General Staff of the SAF.

When the delegation returned, Kip was charged with setting up and training the national service army units envisaged in the masterplan. His rank of Lieutenant Colonel was confirmed. Training began with the First Instructors’ Preparatory Course at Taman Jurong, with Israeli advisors on hand. All available regular and mobilized officers and senior Non-Commissioned Officers (including Kip himself) underwent this course in order to give them a common grounding in new military tactics and infantry training methods. Kip also started recruiting the first and second batches of regular officer cadets for the yet-to-be built and yet-unnamed SAFTI, to be located at the junction of Jurong Road and Pasir Laba Road in the sparsely populated rural terrain of Jurong.

For Kip, this marked the start of a nine-year detour from the Singapore government administrative service. This journey saw him serving first as Director, SAFTI, where he oversaw the commissioning of the first five cohorts of officer cadets. He was then temporarily appointed Director, General Staff for a short stint of seven months. He then moved on to set up the School of Advance Training for Officers, participating as a student himself in the first course. His career in the SAF then saw him raising the first national service infantry brigade, followed by the establishment of the Singapore Command and Staff College, where once again he got a taste of his own medicine by participating as a student in the first course. Then in 1972, Kip returned as the confirmed Director, General Staff, and promoted to Brigadier General.

Looking back, it was a remarkable career trajectory with so much achieved in such a short period of time. For Kip, the son of an impoverished refugee with eight children from Punjab, driven out by religious schisms in the Indian subcontinent on the eve of its independence, this period of his life must be a source of some satisfaction. His achievements mirror the achievements of others like him, who were thrust into the frontlines to

do the impossible, and yet found the strength and resolution to overcome the obstacles to create the foundations of Singapore today.

Of course, the story does not end there. Kip went on to a successful stint as Singapore's Ambassador to Cairo, while concurrently covering Yugoslavia, Lebanon and Pakistan, helping to put independent Singapore on the international map. He returned to Singapore to head the Civil Service College. He left government service to become General Manager (Administration) of Neptune Orient Lines (NOL) and CEO of two of its subsidiaries. After NOL, Kip set up his own consulting firm on commercial shipping. Parameswara Holdings and Windmill International then headhunted Kip to become the CEO of the first foreign container freight station of India, which was built in Navi Mumbai. Kip capped his working life as a member of the board of directors of the logistics company Gateway Distriparks, which was concurrently listed both on the Mumbai and New York stock exchanges in 2004. In retirement, Kip has continued to play an active part in society as a committee member of the Singapore Indian Development Agency, a committee member of the Singapore Indian Association, President of the Singapore Indian Education Trust and a sporting member of the Singapore Cricket Club.

But it is his legacy in the SAF that must be the most durable of his contributions to Singapore. The system and establishments that he developed to train the SAF leadership, from recruit through section leader to officer cadet, and then as officer through the School of Advance Training for Officers, and finally the Singapore Command and Staff College, remain to this day as key foundations of the SAF.

# Message

*Lieutenant General (Retired) Winston Choo Wee Leong*  
*DUBC, PJG, BBM, PPA, PBM*  
*Chief of Defence Force*  
*Singapore Armed Forces 1974–92*

In May 1974, I had the privilege of taking over as Director, General Staff, of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) from Brigadier General Kirpa Ram Vij (BG Kip to his colleagues), who left the SAF to return to the government administrative service. When Singapore separated from Malaysia on 9 August 1965 and had to quickly build up its armed forces, Dr Goh Keng Swee, then Minister for Finance, had promptly undertaken to establish the Ministry of Interior and Defence (MID) and handpicked BG Kip to be in his team. BG Kip had been a volunteer Captain in the Singapore Royal Artillery (Volunteer) but was mobilized in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel by Dr Goh and sent to Israel to familiarize himself with the Israeli Defence Force (IDF)'s military concepts. On his return, with the help of IDF advisors, BG Kip set up the Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute (SAFTI), Singapore's own military academy. It was a resounding success and as SAFTI Military Institute, continues to provide commanders' training at nearly all levels from senior non-commissioned officers to post-Command and Staff level.

As Director, SAFTI, BG Kip oversaw the introduction into the SAF of artillery, armour, signals, engineers, commandos, intelligence and

military medicine, the nuclei of all of which were initiated in SAFTI under the respective Senior Specialist Staff Officers. Appointed Commander, 3rd Singapore Infantry Brigade, he also oversaw the formulation of the operational principles of the first national service infantry brigade. He then took over the establishment of the Singapore Command and Staff College. When MID was split into the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) in 1972, as Director, General Staff, he laid the foundations for the formal relations between the General Staff Division and the civilian divisions of MINDEF.

I was in the early group of pioneers in the SAF and had the privilege to work with and witness the role BG Kip played in raising our national service army. BG Kip was not formally schooled to be a military officer. He only had the benefit of attending the volunteer officer cadet course, run over six months of weekend sessions. Yet, when mobilized and given the mission to start the SAF, he took up the challenge and persevered. He made the effort to learn on the go the intricacies of military organization and operations, and was able to engage and get along with the IDF professionals. It was no mean feat. In many instances, he took on being a trainee in the courses he ran and oversaw, including being a student in the first company commanders' course, and the first command and staff college course he started. What he was able to achieve and produce was an amazing reflection of this man's grit, ability and the strong sense of responsibility. He played a defining role in setting the foundations for a credible SAF.

Strict enforcement of military security in the founding days of the SAF demanded that the developments in the SAF could not be publicized, except in the barest details. Also, in the early years little or almost no effort was made to record the history of the development of the SAF. There was no time to try to focus on such a "trivial" matter. This sadly resulted in most of what BG Kip and others were responsible for, being left unrecorded and kept very much under wraps, to the extent that even current senior SAF and administrative officers in MINDEF have only a very faint knowledge of what transpired in the formative years. This account is an attempt to acknowledge the role played by BG Kip and hopefully provide a historic, verifiable record of SAF's early beginnings.

After BG Kip left the SAF, he went on to a sterling civilian career as Singapore's ambassador to Egypt and was concurrently our first High Commissioner to Pakistan, where he excelled and made an impact by placing our fledgling nation within the close sights of the host countries. He then joined the private sector where he ended with being headhunted to set up India's first foreign container freight station for Singapore in Navi Mumbai, which was successfully listed both in the Mumbai and New York exchanges in 2004. Back in Singapore, BG Kip was appointed by the President to be a member of the Indian and Other Minority Communities Committee, and MINDEF appointed him to serve in the Advisory Council on Community Relations in Defence (ACCORD). So far, no past SAF Chief of Defence Force has been appointed to this Council. BG Kip continued to contribute and play an active role in the local society until he was stricken by Parkinson's disease.

I must commend and congratulate my primary schoolmate, friend and colleague in the SAF, Colonel (Retired) Ramachandran Menon, for his gigantic effort to put out this book. Though it started out as a simple task to piece together documents and information to record a life story, it became a relentless personal mission to get this book published. Menon worked doggedly against various odds to produce this story of BG Kirpa Ram Vij, a story that must be told.

# Preface

The sources for this record of BG (RET) Kirpa Ram Vij's illustrious working life comprise his exit interviews by the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF); interviews by the National Heritage Board; an exit interview of the late BG (RET) Yaakov 'Jack' Elazari by MINDEF; access to a souvenir publication by Gateway Distriparks Limited, the Singapore-based private enterprise that installed the first foreign-owned container freight station in Navi Mumbai; and the author's personal grasp of issues that came up in the course of various appointments in MINDEF and the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).

Other than to run through each completed chapter with BG (RET) Vij, the author did not discuss the issues that arose in the course of compiling this record of BG (RET) Vij's working life from the time he was posted to the Land Office as an administrative service officer to his retirement as independent director of Gateway Distriparks Limited in 2005. However, BG (RET) Vij himself, like BG (RET) Elazari, elaborated at length on those issues in course of their respective interviews in response to questions posed by the interviewers.

From the beginning, the objective of this record was not to present a biography or autobiography of BG (RET) Vij, but to provide some details of the launch of the Singapore Armed Forces after Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia on 9 August 1965. However, as BG (RET)

Vij served in the capacity of a soldier for only ten years after that and continued in other capacities to serve the interests of Singapore, this account briefly covers the rest of his working life. Hopefully, it will serve as an acknowledgement of the seminal role he played in the setting-up of the SAF, which was hitherto kept from public knowledge for security reasons as an official MINDEF policy.



# Acknowledgements

This account of the life of Brigadier General (Retired) Kirpa Ram Vij, PJG, was made possible because he passed to this writer his personal records as an officer in the Singapore government administrative service, including his mobilization and secondment to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF); a highly commended tour as Singapore's ambassador to Egypt and concurrently independent Singapore's first High Commissioner to Pakistan; his two further appointments in the administrative service on his return from Cairo; his resignation from the administrative service to become a senior manager in Neptune Orient Lines (NOL) and chief executive officer of two NOL subsidiaries; as the director of his own shipping consultancy; his role in setting up for Singapore India's first foreign container freight station in Navi Mumbai.<sup>1</sup> And finally as the fitting end to a working life well-lived, his appointment on 29 December 2010 as a member of the Indian and Other Minority Communities Committee by President of Singapore, Mr S. R. Nathan.

In addition to BG (RET) Vij's personal records, the writer was given access to the exit interview by MINDEF of Brigadier General (Reserves)<sup>2</sup> Ya'akov "Jak" Elazari, the head of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) advisor team who was BG (RET) Vij's and MID/MINDEF<sup>3</sup> Chief Advisor in setting up the SAF. It had been hoped to publish the account sooner, but it was delayed due to BG (RET) Vij's illness. Regrettably, BG (RET) Vij passed away on Saturday, 29 October 2022 aged eighty-eight after a long and valiant battle with Parkinson's disease.

A compelling motive for the account is that security considerations prevented a disclosure of BG (RET) Vij's seminal role in setting up the SAF (October 1965–July 1974), so much so that he is not even mentioned in the publication *Singapore: The Encyclopedia* nor *Not Born in Singapore*.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, the latter, published in 2015 by the Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, did list BG (Reserves) Elazari. Given the security blackout at the time, the link to BG (RET) Vij was—understandably—not appreciated. The fault is invariably the overzealous application of a ring-fence by those entrusted with keeping secrets.

Hopefully this account will serve to publicly acknowledge the part BG (RET) Vij (“Kip” to his colleagues) played in ensuring the republic's security at the nadir of its political fortunes. His legacy continues to sustain the processes that provide for that security even after sixty years. It is significant that even though he was a member of a minority community in Singapore, he was handpicked by Singapore's first defence minister—Dr Goh Keng Swee<sup>5</sup>—to set up an army that would be predominantly comprised of Chinese soldiers.

Among those rooting for the publication of this account is Lieutenant General (Retired) Winston Choo Wee Leong (who had succeeded Kip in July 1974 as Director, General Staff, in the rank of Colonel at the tender age of thirty-two), on the grounds that, with the rapid turnover of key personalities in the Ministry of Defence, a personal and verifiable eyewitness account of the first ten years of the SAF would contribute to the SAF staying on track with its founding rationale.

The writer is more than grateful to Mr Peter Ho, Senior Advisor, Centre for Strategic Futures, and variously Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence, for undertaking to provide the Foreword. It was critical to persuading all concerned to agree to the launch of this account.

This account would also not have been possible without the role played by Karmjit Singh Dhaliwal in reviewing the draft chapter by chapter before arranging for the writer to discuss each at Kip's home as guest of Kip and his wife Nirmal, with dinner thrown in. Also indispensable was the support of Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Daljeet Singh Randhawa, who played several key roles in the Singapore Armed Forces Training

Institute (SAFTI), the cornerstone of Kip's achievement in the SAF; and Major (Retired) Ajit Singh Nagpal, a close colleague of the writer from the first cohort of officers to be commissioned at SAFTI. Karmjit and Ajit continued to keep in touch with Kip till almost the very end. The fact that the last three personalities are Sikhs is understandable: Kip was from Punjab where it was a tradition among Hindu families that the eldest son would convert to Sikhism and, in all probability, follow in the martial tradition of the Sikh community.

From the sidelines, the writer was enthusiastically encouraged by Mr K. Kesavapany, retired Singapore diplomat who had been High Commissioner to Malaysia, later Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), and a colleague of Kip in diplomatic service. Mr Kesavapany is associated closely with a group of office-bearers of the Singapore Indian Association publishing accounts of illustrious Indians.

The details for the final phase of Kip's working life, namely as Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of Gateway Distriparks Limited (GDL) from September 1996 were supplied by Shabbir Hassanbhai, independent director of GDL, through his personal insights, and a copy of a souvenir publication to commemorate the visit to the GDL container freight station of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to Mumbai in July 2012.

Kip's first command appointment in the SAF was to manage a preparatory course for the instructors and supervisory staff of the courses to be run in SAFTI (the military academy yet to be named) with the help of the initial team of IDF advisors. The initial course design was a disaster and the trainees turned practically mutinous. The whole programme had to be reconstituted. Colonel (Retired) Goh Lye Choon, one of the trainees, had the prescience to maintain a detailed diary of the disaster, and the triumphant recovery following a review by Kip in conjunction with Mr George Bogaars (then Permanent Secretary, MID) and Mr Wee Toon Boon (then Parliamentary Secretary, MID). That account provides a compelling record of the flavour of the times and is included in full as an appendix in this book.

Given this writer's Jurassic grasp of information technology, this account would not have seen the light of day if it had not been for his next-door neighbour, Chrisantha M. D. Pieris, who practically reconfigured

the writer's desktop to cope with his desperate attempts to meet deadlines after deadlines.

Last but not least are two very gifted people: Major (Retired) Victor Lam Yang Kit (also a colleague of the writer from the first cohort of officers commissioned at SAFTI) and Lance Corporal (National Service) Patrick Lim (who appears to have relished national service and his lowly military rank, though he has a degree in photojournalism). Both of them refurbished and magically transformed all the older photographs—going back more than fifty years in many cases—that are published in the account using computer technology beyond this writer's comprehension, and a critical eye for detail.

*Ramachandran Menon*

## Notes

1. Via a copy of a publication entitled *Gateway Distriparks*, published by Gateway Distriparks Limited (GDL) to commemorate Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to the first foreign-built container freight station in Mumbai in July 2012.
2. IDF rank title.
3. The Ministry of Interior and Defence (MID) was split into the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) on 11 August 1970.
4. *Singapore: The Encyclopedia* (Editions Didier Millet and National Heritage Board, 2006); Tng Ying Hui, *Not Born in Singapore: Fifty Personalities Who Shaped the Nation* (Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Policy Studies and National University of Singapore, 2015).
5. Dr Goh Keng Swee, who until then had been BG (RET) Vij's top boss in the Ministry of Finance