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**SPEECH BY DPM LEE HSIEN LOONG AT THE SAF OVERSEAS
SCHOLARSHIP 30TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER ON 15 APRIL 2000 AT
7.30 P.M.. AT THE ISTANA BANQUET ROOM**

The SAF in 1971

1. I am very happy to join this gathering here tonight with so many friends and old comrades to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the SAF Overseas Scholarship Scheme.
2. The scheme was introduced in 1971. It was simply called the SAF Scholarship Scheme, because the SAF then offered no other scholar-ships. The SAF had reached a critical stage in its development. We had started building it up immediately after Separation in 1965. From the two infantry battalions that we inherited, the Army had grown to 17 NSF combat battalions and 14 reservist

battalions. However, the Airforce and Navy were still rudimentary. They had not even been formed as independent services, and were still commands formally under the General Staff. The Singapore Air Defence Command had only one jet fighter squadron of 18 Hawker Hunters. The Maritime Command had all of 7 ships in its fleet, 4 of which were newly commissioned Patrol Craft, plus 3 other vessels including RSS Endeavour, a recommissioned former Dutch riverboat.

3. We had started the crash buildup of the SAF with the few Singaporean officers in 1 and 2 SIR, plus seconded non-military officers from elsewhere in the government. These seconded officers had not chosen military careers, and had hardly any formal military training. The first three Directors of the General Staff were all non-military men: Tan Teck Khim from the police, TJD Campbell who had been a teacher, and Kirpa Ram Vij from the Administrative Service.

4. The pioneers did their best under very difficult circumstances. With the help of the Israeli advisors and under the vigorous and able leadership of the Minister of Defence, Dr Goh Keng Swee, they got the SAF off the ground. By 1971, they had been joined by the first few batches of officers who had graduated from SAFTI, and were starting to assume staff and command positions in the units. But it was obvious that the SAF was still in desperate need of more talent.

5. The rapid expansion of the SAF had put the organisation visibly under strain. We did not have enough camps for the new battalions being raised. So we converted some 4-storey HDB blocks in Taman Jurong into an SAF camp, and housed units there. Those of us who were then doing National Service will not forget the disorganised state of the training and logistics support. For example, throughout my basic military training course the recruits were not issued with steel helmets. We made do with the fibre-glass inner-liners of the helmets, covered with a camouflage cover to make it look more martial. It would not have stopped any bullet or shrapnel.

6. The SAF needed more talent not only to organise and administer the training of successive batches of national servicemen, but also to carry out the higher functions vital to building and wielding an effective armed force. We

needed to master joint and combined arms operations, intelligence and logistics. We needed to plan and execute the build up of the SAF order of battle. We needed to understand technology, evaluate weapons, decide which ones met the SAF' s operational requirements, work out how to equip the units with them, and develop tactics and doctrines for employing them.

7. All this called for top talent, properly trained, with deep professional knowledge of military matters, who could define and analyse the complex issues, and make informed judgments where the bottom line was not dollars and cents, but unquantifiable yet vital outcomes: operational effectiveness, deterrence and security.

The SAF Overseas Scholarship

8. On 5 March 1971, the Prime Minister wrote to the Minister of Defence, Dr Goh Keng Swee, copied to Chairman PSC, to propose a scholarship scheme for the SAF. Mr Lee Kuan Yew had chanced upon reports and advertisements in British newspapers and their Sunday colour supplements, offering bright, promising British youths fully sponsored university education, and careers in the British Army and the Royal Navy. The cadets would be paid the princely sum of over £1,000 a year while at university, after which they would be commissioned as officers.

9. The Prime Minister wrote:

“Singapore, being what it is, shall only get some of the best in the Armed Forces if we offer an attractive career with almost assured advancement to the top echelons if they make the first few grades. Opportunities for university education, with full pay as an officer whilst they are in university, and good prospects for advancement either in the Armed Forces, or in civilian life after their commission is up, will draw a few in.

...

“If annually we can get 4 - 5 for the army, 2 - 3 for the air force and navy each, even with a 50% wastage rate, through

character or other defects, we shall have really first class staff officers by 1980, creative and imaginative.”

10. Both the Minister of Defence and the Chairman PSC immediately followed up. On 17 March 1971, Dr Goh minuted his staff:

“The assumption by both PM and Chairman PSC is that they will be Infantry Officers. I doubt whether it is worthwhile to train more than a small fraction of them for Infantry Command. We have to look into the needs of the other Arms, e.g. armour, artillery, engineer, signals, logistics support as well as bases and technical training. In addition, there are the vital requirements of the Air Force and Navy.

...

“So far as Army Commanders are concerned, – I do not think we should send them for studies which would have a commercial value. They should go for courses on archaeology, military history, mathematics (at a pinch) and such like. The boys selected need not be of the highest intellectual calibre but they must show a good record of extra-curricular activities, some evidence of liking for adventure and an unexceptionable record of leadership in school.

“Boys selected for staff work should be of very high calibre, proficient in subjects such as chemistry which requires the capacity to retain a large volume of facts. These we could send for specialist studies in subjects such as economics. They could go on to special courses on systems analysis or operations research. Such training will command a high price in the business world. However, we can retain them by offering inducements such as directorships or consultancy work by Government-owned companies or statutory authorities. One hopes that at the end of eight years of military service they would have acquired some of the traditional disdain of soldiers for money. But we cannot be sure that this will be so.”

11. Dr Goh was mistaken in thinking that army commanders did not have to be of the highest intellectual calibre, and that a small number of outstanding infantry officers would be sufficient. Nor has any SAF Scholar taken a degree in archaeology. But he was absolutely right in his judgment that the army would need high quality officers in all its support arms, and that the air force and navy were vital services needing to be built up.

12. MINDEF moved quickly under Dr Goh. Within a month of the Prime Minister's letter, a scheme had been worked out, and candidates had been briefed, interviewed and selected. Like the British scheme, the SAF Scholarship offered fully sponsored education in British universities. Scholars would complete their Officer Cadet Training and be commissioned as officers before leaving for Oxford, Cambridge and other good British universities. During their student years, they received full pay as lieutenants, plus a scholarship of £1,000 a year. They would be sent for vacation attachments with the British Army and the SAF. Upon graduation the scholars would be bonded for 8 years. Within that period they would attend two, and often three courses in the US or Britain: first, basic officer training in a specialist arm; next in mid-career, a staff and command course in the US or Britain; and then possibly a course in public or business administration at a top American university like Harvard or Stanford.

13. The Scheme proved a success. The high standing of the SAF Scholarship, which was pegged close to the President's Scholarship, helped. The monetary terms were generous. From the career perspective, a major attraction was the chance to work in a young and growing organisation, and to advance to challenging jobs much more rapidly than anywhere else in the civil service. In the first batch, there were 5 SAF Scholars. Subsequent years saw more scholars: 15 in 1972, 9 in 1973.

Scholars and Others

14. As Dr Goh's letter showed, the initial thinking was for the scholarship scheme primarily to produce staff officers, not commanders. The model was the German General Staff system, established by von Moltke the Elder in the 19th century, where a corps of younger, highly talented general staff officers worked under more experienced field commanders who were usually not general staff

officers. The general staff officers would draft plans and orders on behalf of the commander, but did not themselves command the units.

15. This emphasis on staff was probably the result of the serious deficiencies of SAF staff work and planning at the time. However, the SAF soon found that it needed high calibre commanders as well, and that even staff officers needed adequate field experience in command, to evaluate proposals, understand how decisions would work out on the ground, and have credibility with commanders. We sought SAF Scholars with both intellectual skills and leadership prowess, though the balance between the two naturally varied from person to person.

16. Since then SAF Scholars have been posted to command airbases, naval squadrons, and army brigades and divisions; not as stepping stones to staff jobs, but as important assignments in themselves. This is now well accepted, but at the time it was a major cultural change. Had it been imposed from the beginning it would probably have been rejected, both by the scholars and by the SAF as a whole.

17. SAF Scholars did not work in a vacuum, and could not succeed alone. They had to work with their brother officers, and demonstrate commitment and competence both in the field and in the office. A key test of a scholar therefore was whether he could earn the respect of other officers, and demonstrate that he deserved the rapid advancement he was being given.

18. For the SAF Scholar scheme as a whole, the test was also whether non-scholar officers wanted to have scholars working under them. Initially, some commanders harboured doubts, and felt more comfortable and less threatened having non-scholar officers in their staff. But fortunately most scholars lived up to the expectations of the organisation, and over time, commanders began to see that able scholars helped their formations to produce results. Then the mindset changed, and commanders vied for their share of scholars.

19. In his letter to the Minister of Defence, the Prime Minister had talked of “almost assured advancement to the top echelons” for SAF Scholars. As the scholars returned and began advancing in the SAF, we changed this approach. We decided to keep the system open. Creating a privileged caste would have

demoralised the other officers, as well as been unhealthy for the scholars.

20. The scholars would move fast, and the first promotion to Captain would be almost automatic. Beyond that scholars would be promoted without regard to seniority or age, but strictly on their merits. At each step they would be assessed, and moved ahead only if they were clearly superior to their peers, both in terms of performance and potential. Those who did not make the grade were sieved out, while non-scholars who demonstrated the same performance and potential were identified, groomed and similarly advanced.

21. The SAF Overseas Scholarship Scheme opened the way for MINDEF to introduce many other schemes to upgrade the SAF officer cadre. We sent cadets to Sandhurst, Duntroon, and other overseas military colleges. We gave scholarships to officers to study at local universities. We arranged a special programme in Military History with Duke University, to allow outstanding non-graduate officers to work for a Master's degree. So the overall quality of the officer corps has steadily improved. Before the SAF Scholarship scheme, only a handful of officers were graduates. Today, one-third (32%) have university degrees.

22. I know that some SAF officers still mockingly call themselves "farmers", but if they are farmers they have become sophisticated, high-tech farmers. There are no SAF officers like the ones who were sent to the Duke of Wellington during the Napoleonic Wars, who caused Wellington to comment:

"Really when I reflect upon the characters and attainments of some of the general officers of this army...on whom I am to rely ... against the French Generals ... I tremble ... I only hope that when the enemy reads the list of their names he trembles as I do." (Duke of Wellington, letter to Colonel Torrens, August 29, 1810)

23. The SAF Overseas Scholarship scheme was also the inspiration for the Singapore Police Force Overseas Scholarship scheme. The Police in the 1970s faced exactly the same problems upgrading the quality of its officers as the SAF. MINDEF offered to transfer over a few SAF Scholars to the police in

1977, to jumpstart the upgrading process while the police launched its own scholarships. Three Scholars went over. Today all three hold key appointments in the police force.

Project Wrangler

24. Integrating Scholars into an SAF comprising predominantly of non-graduates, and systematically upgrading the SAF officer cadre, was no straightforward matter. After the PSC had selected the first batch of SAF Scholars in 1971, the Chairman PSC, Dr Phay Seng Whatt, wrote to the Minister to inform him of the results of the interviews. He noted:

“One area of misgiving which the students have is that they will not be properly utilised on their return. This is a real fear as these bright students will return under bond to a uniformed organisation, and their senior officers of lower quality may not utilise them properly. This will lead to considerable frustration. I would suggest that these scholarship students should receive your personal attention regarding their duties when they return.”

25. The SAF Scholars did indeed receive the personal attention of the Minister, but Dr Goh went beyond that. Two years later in 1973, he established a systematic, institutionalised scheme to track and plan the careers of promising and capable officers, both scholars and non-scholars, and ensure that they were assigned to appropriate posts and groomed for key appointments. This was Project Wrangler, supervised by a committee chaired by the Minister himself. The scheme has proved critical to managing talent in the SAF, and continues to this day.

Transforming The SAF

26. The first SAF Scholars returned from their studies in 1974, and were posted to units. They were rushed through appointments at company and battalion levels before being appointed to the general staff at a very young age – several before they were 30. It was hard on the units, which saw the scholars posted in and out too quickly, but the SAF’s needs were pressing, and MINDEF could not afford to wait.

27. The scholars were put into positions of considerable responsibility much younger than in any mature armed force elsewhere, often before they were quite ready. They had to give instructions to formation commanders more senior than themselves, in rank, age and experience. It took tact and understanding on both sides. The scholars made their fair share of mistakes. But fortunately Singapore enjoyed peace, and the scholars had time to learn and grow on the job.

28. The scholars also benefited immensely from the guidance of commanders who were not scholars themselves, but had the self-confidence and the commitment to the SAF to take scholars under their wing, and give them support and avuncular advice. These commanders included Winston Choo, Ng Jui Ping, Mike Teo, Khoo Eng An, James Leo, and others. Because the young and inexperienced scholars were pointed the right way, they quickly started to contribute to the direction and development of the SAF.

29. So year by year, we have totally transformed the SAF from its struggling beginnings into the well-equipped, professional, and credible tri-service force that it is today. It is not just the equipment and systems that we bought that have made the difference. Billions of dollars spent on fancy weaponry to be paraded on National Day do not necessarily translate into formidable military might. The key factor was talent – talent to build up the SAF in a careful, coherent and integrated way, with each component fitting into the complex design which makes up the entire tri-service force; and talent to lead and motivate our national service soldiers in training and battle, to fight intelligently and resolutely, and to prevail against all odds.

30. The upgrading of the SAF did not stop when the first scholars reached senior positions. The SAF has continued, as a deliberate policy, to turnover officers in the key posts regularly. It has not been easy to find a new chief of service or new chief of defence force every 3 or 5 years. But this policy of continuous renewal has prevented the organisation from becoming too set, allowed it to continue trying out fresh ideas, and pushed the services one step after another forward and upwards, under successive chiefs.

31. The SAF Overseas Scholarship Scheme has thus been instrumental in

building up the SAF. The financial cost of the Scheme has been negligible, especially compared to the transformation of the SAF that it has helped to bring about. But the opportunity cost of channelling half a dozen top notch people, plus many other good men, into the SAF every year, year after year, has been high. These officers were sorely missed else-where in the government and the economy, but the SAF' s need was greater.

32. A good SAF scholar can do well in many other fields, as many former scholars have demonstrated. Of the total pool of 206 SAF scholars, 75 have left service. Not all have thrived, but many have done well. Some occupy senior civil service posts, others are in the private sector, and several have entered politics. The PSC had done a good job selecting candidates. Also the scholars transferred into civilian life their rigorous SAF training, their experience analysing complex problems and managing men, and the tempering of the character of commanders responsible for the welfare, discipline and performance of their troops. Other old soldiers have also launched successful second careers after leaving the SAF. A few have become entre-preneurs, and founded highly successful technology companies. They have not faded away.

33. Despite the high opportunity cost, the decision in 1971 to upgrade the talent of the SAF was correct, and critical. Without a strong SAF to provide the security and confidence, the economy could not have prospered, and none of the other glittering opportunities that Singa-poreans now enjoy would ever have materialised.

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Looking Ahead

34. Today, Singa-pore is in a very different position from 1971. In place of the perils of the first years of independence, we face the challenges of globalisation and the infocoms era. The economy has grown eight-fold. The SAF has come of age as an advanced and credible armed force respected both at home and abroad. But the need for a continuing flow of top talent into the SAF has not diminished.

35. The price of security is eternal vigilance. Military science does not stand still. Rapid advances in infocoms technology are not only revolu-tionising the

way we live and work; they are fundamentally altering the conduct and character of military operations. Emerging technologies are being combined with new war-fighting concepts and doctrines, resulting in a quantum leap in capabilities. The Americans call this the Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA.

36. High technology has made war-making more complex than ever. But war is still a clash of human wills, a continuation of politics by other means. The Gulf War in 1991 and the NATO air campaign against Serbia last year showed both the enormous power and precision of this new high-tech warfare, as well as the continuing need for clarity of purpose at the political, strategic and operational levels if the forces are not to be unleashed in vain. For the SAF, this means that we must get fresh, bright minds to deal with the challenges of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex operating environment.

37. The Revolution in Military Affairs promises exciting career opportunities in the armed forces. Nevertheless the SAF will not find it easy to recruit scholars and other officers, of the quality that we have come to expect. When we started trying to get better people to join the SAF three decades ago, we ran up against two issues: the terms of service, and an ingrained cultural prejudice against soldiering, especially among Chinese Singaporeans.

38. Over the years, we have improved and updated the terms of service, to keep up with rising private sector earnings, and to pay an SAF premium over comparable alternative careers. The SAF has introduced the Saver scheme, to give officers the incentive to stay on, and gain experience to rise to senior positions. We no longer rely on what Dr Goh called “the traditional disdain of soldiers for money” as a retention motivator, but the SAF still expects from its officers a sense of idealism and mission, selfless dedication to duty, and total commitment: the values enshrined in the Officer’s Creed.

39. The SAF Scholar incorporates the Confucian ideal of scholarship into the military profession. The Scholarship scheme has helped to improve the public image of a military career, and to overcome the cultural prejudice against soldiering. And the improved quality of the officer cadre further raised the social status of the SAF, in a virtuous cycle.

40. Can we maintain this happy state of affairs in the new economy? Unlike in 1971, young people wanting to go to university now have many alternatives to a government scholarship. The SAF Overseas Scholarship has to compete against many other scholarship schemes. And all scholarship schemes compete against the ability of parents to pay for their children's tertiary education, plus the challenge and excitement of many private sector careers, both in Singapore and abroad, particularly in the IT and biotech industries.

41. With all these opportunities before them, will able young Singaporeans still want to serve the SAF, under bond? If fewer do, will the relative social standing of an SAF career come down? Much depends on our finding answers to these questions.

42. We must imbue the next generation with the right mix of patriotism and ambition, so that enough of the best and brightest will want to serve the nation, starting with an SAF career. We must continue to produce a few out-standing young SAF Overseas Scholars each year, and recruit many more good men and women into the SAF on other schemes. Then the SAF can attain the highest standards of training and readiness, our ability and will to fight will never be in doubt, and Singapore can enjoy another generation of peace and prosperity.

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