



SPEECH

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Speech by Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen at the Committee of Supply Debate 2017 on 3 March 2017

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Introduction

Last month, I was in Pulau Tekong for the launch of NS50 - the 50th Anniversary of National Service (NS). Enlistees were there, on their first day, together with their families. I joined

them for lunch at the cookhouse. The food was very good. So I asked, "Is this standard fare?" and they assured me it is like that every day. There is a standard that has been kept up.

I sat with many of the enlistees and their families, spoke to them, asked them if they were ready, how they felt, and I sensed amongst the youngsters pride, even eagerness. Many of them shave their head and then get enlisted. Although the hairstyle of shaving your head, both outside or inside camp is actually similar, they were quite eager to do so. And I asked the parents how they felt, and they all said - every single one - NS is good for their sons.

Times have changed. Support for NS is strong amongst Singaporeans. One key reason is that we see how NS has bonded us all together, and toughened up our young. Another important reason is that after 50 years, fathers have gone through NS, know its benefits, and now are supportive of their sons going through the same experience. This is truly a duty passing from one generation to the next.

Today, I will talk about how we can better leverage our most precious resource in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) - national servicemen, and how we can enhance the NS experience.

The Next Generation National Serviceman

Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen has spoken about a Next Generation SAF - one where we have to maximise the talent, expertise and contribution of every single serviceman. How do we do that?

Soldier Strong

First, we ensure that every soldier is individually 'Strong'. That is why we have launched the "Soldier Strong" initiative to develop soldiers who are physically strong, psychologically resilient, and committed to the defence of Singapore.

Under the 'Soldier Strong' programme, national servicemen will have access to enhanced fitness training programmes at the new Centre of Excellence for Soldier Performance that will be operational at the end of 2017. The centre will focus on fitness regimes, soldier nutrition, pre-rehabilitation regimes to prevent injuries, and rehabilitation to help injured servicemen recover. The centre will also integrate training packages on resilience to enhance the mental strength of our soldiers.

Assoc. Prof. Randolph Tan asked how SAF addresses smoking in the SAF. We are aligned with national policies on this. We will continue to encourage servicemen to maintain a healthy lifestyle and reduce their health risk factors. Today, smoking is not allowed in SAF camps and bases, except at designated smoking points. Cigarettes are not sold in any of our camps or bases.

We also partner the Health Promotion Board to conduct smoking cessation workshops for our servicemen. But soldiers will need to take personal responsibility for their own health too.

Optimise Deployment

Second, we maximise contributions of national servicemen by deploying them better. Mr Lee Yi Shyan asked about this.

Technological advancements in the SAF have altered the nature of vocations. For certain vocations, automation has greatly reduced the physical demands. One example is the Army's

Combat Engineers. In the past, Combat Engineers had to lift and hold heavy interlocking parts of a bridge. Today, these bridges have been replaced with the Mobility 3rd Generation bridge, or M3G. The M3G is deployed through a remote interface, with the help of a hydraulic arm. In other words, you can now deploy a bridge that can carry up to three 5-tonner trucks mainly by pushing buttons.

Because of these advancements, we have been reviewing vocation requirements and can better deploy our full-time national servicemen (NSFs) effectively in accordance to their fitness and abilities.

Leveraging talents

Third, we take into account vocational interest of enlistees, and in so doing, better match skills and interests with deployment. Mr Lee Yi Shyan asked about the Vocational Interest initiative and Mr Cedric Foo asked how NS can be made more engaging and fulfilling and better recognised by society.

We have implemented the Vocation Interest initiative to promote greater personal ownership by NSFs over their NS experience. Since November last year, pre-enlistees have indicated their interest in 33 vocations across the SAF, Singapore Police Force and the Singapore Civil Defence Force. Their indicated interest will be an additional factor in determining their vocations, together with other considerations such as suitability, manpower and operational requirements.

There is some perception that enlistees, fresh out of school, and when asked to indicate their vocation interest, will avoid the very 'siong' vocations like Infantry and Guards, and that they will pick non-combat vocations that are more related to their area of studies. There are some perceptions of that. That has actually not been the SAF's experience, which is that most enlistees today want to contribute to the best of their abilities, and sweat it out if possible. So, in the latest enlistment exercise, 60% of pre-enlistees indicated interest in Infantry and Guards. They know that the training is 'siong', but good for them.

Mr Vikram Nair asked about cyber security expertise. We will develop a new cyber vocation in support of the new Cyber Command that Dr Ng has announced. This vocation will allow the SAF to tap on the talent available to defend our military networks and systems. NSFs will be deployed to these vocations from August this year.

Our cyber defenders will need to possess a high level of skill given the increasing frequency and complexity of cyberattacks. They will be entering a very selective and demanding vocation. As part of their duties, they will also be supporting the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, in a pilot scheme, to defend our critical information infrastructure.

Pre-enlistees who possess these skills will be rigorously selected and identified, possibly through established local cyber competitions, camps and activities, as well as rigorous selection tests. I expect that many of these competitions and selections will be done in our education institutions - Junior Colleges, ITE, Polytechnics. The impact is not just on the few selected for the vocation, but will heighten the interest and expertise in cyber and digital technology across the student masses. This will also increase the talent pool for national defence as well as Singapore's growing cyber industry.

Enhancing the NS Experience

Let me now talk about ways to enhance the NS experience. Our efforts over the years have been guided by the recommendations of the Committee to Strengthen NS (CSNS).

Improving Safety

The first is safety, which is a critical element of training. Ms Joan Pereira asked how we can provide assurance that our national servicemen will be safe while serving. Every year, 20,000 families entrust their sons and increasingly, daughters, to us. We take the issue of safety very, very seriously. We worry about the safety of our servicemen as much as their mothers and grandmothers. This is how we keep our good safety record.

In 2013, MINDEF convened an External Review Panel, comprising prominent safety experts outside of the SAF, to review safety in the SAF.

The Panel has recently completed this three-year safety review and concluded that our health and safety system in the SAF is internationally one of the best, but of course there are areas for improvement. One is to strengthen the safety culture at the unit level and another is to further promote open reporting of near-miss incidents. The SAF has accepted the Panel's findings and will improve on these areas.

The SAF has also been doing more to reassure national servicemen's family members and loved ones of our emphasis on safety. Because safety culture must be inculcated at the unit level, outreach must also be done at the unit level.

Take the Naval Diving Unit for example. It makes a special effort to engage national servicemen's family members regularly. Upon enlistment there is a briefing for family members, on what this is all about. At the Combat Diving Course graduation ceremony and at many other engagements, families are also shown videos of diving training drills, and all these assure parents that while the training programme is tough, it is carried out progressively, professionally and safely.

Support for National Servicemen and NS50

Because the strength of NS as an institution lies in our national servicemen, it is important for society to show our appreciation to them. Mr Cedric Foo asked about such initiatives.

To commemorate NS50, Dr Ng has announced last month that each national serviceman will receive \$100 in vouchers, and for Operationally Ready National Servicemen (NSmen), a one-year membership to SAFRA or HomeTeamNS. But as we all know and as Mr Cedric Foo has pointed out, vouchers cannot reflect the true value of the commitment and the contribution of our servicemen. It is just a small way for us to say 'Thank you'.

Support and appreciation from society are the strongest form of motivation a national serviceman can receive. We will encourage this through the NS50 Week in August, where companies and organisations can thank and appreciate the NSmen amongst them. More than 250 organisations will support the month-long recognition campaign from July to the first week of August - through retail discounts, free souvenirs, more NS-friendly HR policies, and rededication ceremonies.

Mr Dennis Tan asked about transport allowances for NSmen who stay out during their In-Camp Training. We must recognise that NS is a contribution and sacrifice to the nation, but we also gain from the experience in many intangible ways. Our approach, therefore, is a more general one - to provide an allowance or Service Pay to support the basic personal upkeep of

NSFs and NSmen. We regularly review NS allowances to ensure that they remain appropriate. The last review was in December 2015 where it was adjusted upwards.

Recognising Skills

Mr Amrin Amin asked how MINDEF prepares our NSF's for life after NS. This is an important question, because learning new skills is one major aspect of NS. These could be vocational skills such as driving, maintenance or physical training as an instructor, or soft skills such as leadership and teamwork. Or we can go further by formally accrediting the skills that are learnt in NS, which NSmen can use for their future careers.

MINDEF has been working with SkillsFuture Singapore under the Ministry of Education on this initiative. From this year, SkillsFuture Singapore will accredit enlistees with skills such as teamwork, that are honed during Basic Military Training. In fact, the teamwork we learn in NS, I think, is far better than many of the commercial workshops. Throughout their full-time NS, they could also be accredited with other competencies such as leadership, technical or specialist skills.

These achievements will be reflected in the enhanced Certificate of Service given to NSF's on their Operationally Ready Date. By 2018, the Certificate will be made more comprehensive to include additional achievements such as awards, commendations and milestones - that an NSF acquires during their service, their full-time NS.

While accrediting skills learnt in NS is a useful enhancement of the NS experience, this is neither the main objective nor the key takeaway of NS. NS fulfils the obligation and accords the honour of contributing to the defence of our country. The lasting benefits are the development of character and resilience, and the camaraderie and friendships forged with fellow NSmen. Ultimately, the fact that someone has completed NS well demonstrates his commitment and dedication. Especially in a challenging unit that stretches his abilities, this should speak for itself, and should be valued and recognised by the whole society, including employers.

The Cornerstone of Defence

Today, more than one million Singaporeans have gone through the rite of passage of NS. Mr Baey Yam Keng asked about the continued importance of NS.

NS continues to be the cornerstone of our defence and security. Our well-trained and committed national servicemen increase our military capability and give us credibility when we speak. Potential adversaries know that if they attack Singapore, it is a fight against a populace all trained and ready to defend our sovereignty and our freedom.

Other countries, such as France and Sweden, have abolished conscription since the end of the Cold War. Yet in today's increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment, these countries are considering reinstating conscription. In fact it was just reported in the media yesterday that Sweden has already decided to do so. Others, as mentioned by Mr Baey Yam Keng, (such as) Lithuania, the UAE and Qatar, have recently legislated mandatory conscription. They recognise that transition from a benign to a hostile geopolitical environment can happen without warning, and a capable and credible military cannot be built overnight. We should learn from these examples and cherish the institution of NS.

Recently, I read an article in the New York Times written by Karl Marlantes, a US Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War. Marlantes highlights the importance of the US draft. The

draft gave all eligible American men a shared experience fighting for their country, socialised Americans of all backgrounds to the idea that they were all equally American. After the war, the US military abandoned the draft and transitioned to an all-volunteer force. This, Marlantes argues, deprived Americans of the common experience and undermined the American social fabric, which has manifested itself in divisive politics today.

Indeed, as Dr Goh Keng Swee said in 1967, and I quote, "Nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more speedily and more thoroughly than participation in defence and membership of the armed forces. The nation-building aspect of defence will be more significant if its participation is spread over all strata of society."

The role of NS in nation building has become ever more salient today as we march forward in this era of globalisation. NS is a core part of the Singaporean identity, not just for males, but for mothers, wives, daughters and girlfriends who supported and encouraged our national servicemen in their contributions and sacrifice. It builds mutual trust, within society, and between society and government.

Our NS50 tagline "From My Generation to Yours" anchors the theme that NS is a shared responsibility and remains crucial to Singapore's security and nation building. The NS system we have today is something we can collectively be proud of, and continue to build on in the next 50 years and beyond.

Thank you.

Fact Sheet:

- Fact Sheet: Centre of Excellence for Soldier Performance (MINDEF_20170303008_1.pdf)
- Fact Sheet: Recognising Skills Acquired in NS through Workforce Skills Qualification Accreditation (MINDEF_20170303009_1.pdf)
- Fact Sheet: Strong Emphasis and Sound Safety Management in the SAF: External Report (MINDEF_20170303010_1.pdf)
- Strengthening NS for the Future (MINDEF_20170303011_1.pdf)

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