

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

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Speech by Dr Goh Keng Swee, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence at the Commissioning Ceremony of SAF Officers at the Istana on Thursday, 3 April, 1975 at 6.30 p.m.

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In the last two or three years, we have stabilised the strength of the army in terms of numbers. During this period, we have tried to consolidate our work and resolve the many problems which we inherited from the previous years of rapid expansion.

I want to discuss some of these problems and describe how, in your future appointments, you can help in accelerating the pace of improvement. In fact, your contribution in this respect can be very substantial if you apply yourself to it, as I hope you will.

In the years of rapid expansion, our troubles arose from the fact that while numbers of enlisted NSF could be increased quite easily, two scarce factors posed difficulties which were not completely resolved. The first scarce factor was experience, the second was material.

Experience is something that grows with time and cannot be bought with money other than engaging experts from overseas as a temporary expedient. But one valuable result from expanding faster than we should was that we made plenty of mistakes and many of these have been carefully recorded in inspection reports, exercise debriefs and other documents. Since we can learn from our mistakes, I am not too worried about this kind of shortcoming.

Material shortcomings are another matter. They generally depress standards of performance, as happens when, for instance, lack of transport leads to cancellation of scheduled training.

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In other ways, it leads to soldiers receiving poorer treatment than they should, such as having to live in overcrowded barracks, not having proper equipment to do their job adequately, whether it is washing of military trucks, cleaning of battalion camps or carrying out tactical exercises of one kind or the other.

We are getting on top of the supply problem, but we are by no means out of trouble. All of you would have had experience while you were in SAFTI of minor but irritating foul-ups in supply.

The real danger here is that so many people, especially among the regular officers and NCOs, have been accustomed for so long to making do with what is available rather than what they should have, that they may unconsciously have settled for low standards.

This state of mind is bad. It is contrary to what makes Singapore ticks. Singapore survives and thrives because there are enough Singaporeans who will settle for nothing but the best, both in their own work and in what they expect of others.

It is this pursuit of excellence that has enabled Singapore to overcome many a crisis in past years. Excellence is recognised, sought after and rewarded. So long as this is so, Singaporeans will continue to put in their best effort, and as a nation, we shall continue to achieve.

I would like to see more evidence of the pursuit of excellence in the army. But before we can expect all officers and men to give of their best, we must see to it that they get proper tools for the job.

Officers must fight against the habit, all too widespread now, of resigning themselves to what is at hand. Such an attitude was acceptable, indeed inescapable, in the old days when it was not possible for supplies to keep pace with men. This is no longer the position today. Supplies and services can and will be made available, but the units and formations requiring them must make their voices heard when sub-standard or inadequate supplies or services are provided, or when there is an undue delay in fulfilment of requisitions.

MINDEF will be organising a seminar on the subject with unit and formation commanders and their Logistics staffs. Now where do you come in? You will not be attending the MINDEF seminar though you probably will participate when your units organise their seminars.

You can help to speed up the rate of improvement if you make your views known through proper channels whenever an inadequacy is detected. Bring it up to your company commander, and if, after a decent interval, no improvement is forthcoming, see your battalion commander about it. If the subject is important enough, bring it all the way to brigade, to your Senior Specialist Staff Officer, even up to General Staff in MINDEF.

The army is a large organisation with many tiers of authority. Large organisations of this kind tend to be inert and insensitive. But if at the basic element, i.e. the platoon, pressures for better supplies and services are generated throughout the army, the end result will be a chain reaction of effort through all the layers of command in all arms and services of the SAF. Then the improvements we want to see will not be long in coming.

You see, in a large organisation with a long chain of authority like the army, excellence cannot really be imposed by orders from the top, except in trivial matters, such as keeping boots properly shined. In the larger sense in which we talk about excellence, it is necessary that the subject is understood through all ranks, and on the basis of this understanding, a proper attitude towards work performance gets universally accepted. In this way, soldiers can be motivated to perform well and the laggards subjected to social pressure from other soldiers of the same rank. Even in an authoritarian organisation like the army, peer/<sup>group</sup>pressure of this kind is, in many cases, more effective in securing good performance than orders from above.

As Singaporeans, we take pride in the many achievements of our young republic, such as the great public housing schemes which have no parallel in many parts of the world even among rich countries. Our economic successes have confounded the many experts who predicted doom and disaster for an over-populated island with no natural resources. On specifics, our national airline, SIA, has outperformed larger and older airlines of advanced countries.

We have achieved all this for the reason I have stated, that there are enough of us who want to ensure we achieve the best results in whatever we do. We must instill this kind of Singaporean spirit into the army. There is no better starting point for this effort than young officers about to take their first appointment.