

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, 10th July

1975 at 6.30 p.m.

Every school leaver who is qualified to be an officer on enlistment for full time national service hopes to make the grade. In fact, from time to time, I get queries from concerned parents whether their sons would make the grade, though, of course, they are careful not to say anything that might suggest pressure or even persuasion. When the selection results are known, even more concerned parents ask whether there was anything wrong with junior. One parent, a complete stranger, even wrote to me to suggest that the selection procedures for the Officer Cadet School be revised as they were clearly defective, proof of which was that his son was missed out. He wanted to ensure that others would not have to suffer the same agony in future.

In these circumstances, it may seem incredible that not so many years ago, it was not an uncommon occurrence that many national servicemen preferred to remain corporals rather than serve as officers. There were even a few cases of trainees in the Officer Cadet School deliberately failing their tests in the hope of getting reverted to other ranks.

The reason for this extraordinary situation was that we had rather uncritically adopted the Israeli system of national service, three years for officers, two years for other ranks. To make matters worse, this occurred during the time of very rapid expansion of the army, creating a severe shortage of regulars -

officers and NCOs - in units and training institutions with adverse effect on morale and discipline.

For school leavers intending to go to universities, the difference between two years and three years is a matter of extreme importance. When therefore a decision was taken that national service must be performed before university entrance, it was necessary to rethink the whole system. Experience has shown that the difference in the period of NSF liability between corporals and officers should be eliminated. Secondly, the waiting period between ROD and university entrance should be reduced to the minimum.

These objectives were achieved by equalising NSF liability of corporals and officers at $2\frac{1}{2}$ years and by changing the commencement of the university academic year from May to July. Thirdly, HSC school leavers who were expected to secure minimum university entrance qualifications were enlisted in December. This meant that the delay in university entrance was only two years and not $2\frac{1}{2}$.

Those who were enlisted later than December but performed better than expected and secured entrance to the universities were allowed disruption of NSF and completion of remaining NS during university vacations.

This policy had to be introduced in stages. Otherwise the universities would be teaching only girls, foreigners and medically unfit Singaporeans for two years. So in the academic years 1971/72 and 1972/73, 25% of NSF HSC intakes were allowed

to take their university degrees first. Those elected for medicine and dentistry were automatically included in this 25%. This leaves a balance each year of some two hundred and selection for these places was by balloting.

In December last year, a further innovation was introduced in the form of the standard military course. Although we have changed the Israeli system of NSF duration, we retained the selection process which required training at basic, section leader and officer cadet levels to be conducted in three separate stages with unit experience in-between. It became increasingly clear that while this makes sense when the officers served three years, the balance of service available to the NSF officer with $2\frac{1}{2}$ years' service was too short, particularly so in the support arms where the service period could be as low as seven months.

The standard military course required pre-selection of officer cadets. This meant that the selection process left out one important element, the soldier's performance in the unit.

Selection of this kind has got to be carefully structured. Manpower Division has laid down specific selection criteria, which take into account academic performance, extra-curricular activities, taking special note of leadership in team games, bi-lingual competence in addition to physical standards. Finally, there is the Interview Board and the final selection sums up all these subjects. A system of point-rating is used. It must be regarded as experimental in the initial years but the system can be refined and improved by systematic comparison of criteria with performance, both at the Officer Cadet School and subsequently.

No selection system can be a hundred percent correct. For instance, in the previous system assessment of unit performance conferred a decided advantage, in principle, over pre-selection. Yet even this is not foolproof. First, the initial judgment is often made by inexperienced personnel, usually NSF corporals or platoon commanders. Then there is the problem of ensuring uniform standards of assessment throughout the army, which is an insuperable difficulty in our situation. It is therefore not surprising that we have some high calibre national servicemen, in terms of academic qualifications, who were missed out under the old system. Apparently some ex-Colombo Plan engineering graduates decided to have a quiet life in the army and by maintaining a low profile at all stages of training, managed to survive as corporals.

But these are exceptions -- regrettable exceptions -- to the general rule. What has caused the change over the years? The first is that the public has accepted national service as a necessity. A more important reason is that selection is made in a completely impartial way. One may disagree with selection criteria as not giving enough weight to leadership, over-emphasising academic performance or whatever. One might complain that a particular NCO or a particular platoon commander is prejudiced. But no one can say that by being friends of Ministers or having influence with high level officers in Mindef, a person can bend the selection process one way or the other.

I think it is important to preserve this reputation for impartiality. The Singaporean is competitive by nature, and he will compete strongly if he believes the system to be fair.

We should never do anything to destroy his faith in the fairness of the system. In the meantime, with experience over the years, we will be able gradually to improve the selection process to the limit to which systems of this kind are capable of.