

Speech by Dr Goh Keng Swee, Ag Prime Minister and
Minister of Defence at the Commissioning Ceremony
of SAF Officers at the Istana on Wednesday,
17th September 1975 at 6.30 p.m.

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I would like to discuss some problems which we experience in raising and training a national service army in Singapore. When you are posted to field units or training schools, you have to shoulder some of the responsibilities of resolving these problems. In the course of your training you would have come across some of these problems.

The most obvious problem which we face is the lack of training areas. You can travel from Changi Point to Tuas Village in about an hour and you would have crossed the length and breadth of our island republic. With industrial and housing estates cropping up everywhere, even in the rural portion of Singapore, training areas shrink year by year. At the same time, as the reserve battalions accumulate, training areas get more severely congested.

The next most acute problem in the army is the shortage of regular NCOs, especially in combat vocations. We got caught

in the vicious circle which goes as follows. Because there are not enough regular NCOs in the battalions, each of them had to assume more than a man's fair share of work. National service NCOs seeing the way they slog, turn away from a military career, making the situation worse as new units are raised. However, there are signs that we might crack this problem. Recent pay increases, \$100 per month for combat and service NCOs on the

pensionable service, have resulted in large numbers of applications to join the army as regular NCOs, more than a thousand so far, 40% from reservists and 60% from in-service NCOs.

The third problem area is logistics. During the period of fast expansion, we had to make do with what was available, and not what was inscaled in the establishment for weapons, transport ammo and equipment. While this had its merits, it left a legacy which has had bad side effects. This was a willingness to compromise standards where there was no need to do so. Officers got used to making do when they were not given what they were entitled to have. I want to advise these officers that if performance of their units suffers as a consequence, this will be taken into account when their fitness for promotion is evaluated by Mindef. The levelling off of our build-up has enabled Logistics Division to catch up and field officers will have no alibi and certainly will get no sympathy from me if they continue to settle for sub-standard performance in their units and formations.

The fourth problem area is in motivation. The soldiers you will be commanding and instructing will train and perform better the higher their motivation. I would like to say a few words on the important subject of motivating national service soldiers - the riflemen, mortarmen, pioneers, signallers, cooks, storemen, drivers and similar low level vocations, which form the bulk of the army.

Most of them are school dropouts. A lot has been said recently in public about school dropouts, mostly in disparaging terms, sometimes verging on pity, even contempt.

Mindef psychologists have carried out indepth studies of the personality structure of soldiers in low level vocations. The typical picture of the school dropout serving in the army turns out to be totally different from the pre-conceptions of his critics. Many of you after completing your Section Leaders Course might have been placed in temporary command of these soldiers and you will bear out what I say.

The typical school dropout performing his national service in the army does not harbour feelings of inadequacy. On the contrary, he is generally pleased with himself and believes that his future prospects are bright.

He did badly in school because he spent all leisure hours playing with other children, searching for fish, birds, spiders and insects instead of doing homework. He usually comes from ^a large and poor family and has absorbed the traditional ethical system handed down by his parents. He believes in it with unquestioning faith. He is totally free of any sense of guilt, nor is he assailed by philosophical doubts as his more sensitive and better educated contemporaries might be.

He accepts national service as something necessary for the security of the republic and does not grudge the two years he spends in the army. Research studies by Mindef's PRE Department show that the first nine months in the army the soldier finds interesting. He learns to use his weapons and acquires new skills. He also meets new people and adjusts reasonably well to military life.

In the second nine months of his national service he begins to fret. Much of the training he finds repetitive, therefore uninteresting. The strictness of military discipline he finds irksome and soon he acquires the technique of getting by with minimum effort and without incurring the wrath of his superior officers. Morale at this stage hits rock bottom.

As his ROD approaches his spirits revive, and he applies himself to his work with more diligence and performance standards improve until shortly before ROD when his attention focuses on the world outside.

A number of harsh things have been said about the soldier after he leaves the army. He is accused of preferring soft jobs. He is also accused of being choosy about jobs. Provided such attitudes are not carried to extreme and are temporary, no great harm is done despite what the critics say. It would be interesting to discover why they act in this way.

I think the reason is that the soldier finds when he goes into civvy street that the world does not share in his own belief about his worth and it takes time for him to adjust to this disconcerting discovery. It is no bad thing for young men to have a high opinion of themselves even if the grounds for such a belief are slender. Eventually they will adjust as we have done in our time. It is far better this way than that they should be abject, demoralised or resentful creatures, as happens to school dropouts in some countries.

This then is the typical soldier you have to lead and instruct. There are, to be sure, deviations from the type who

will have to be treated differently. But in general, you will find that the men can be trained to be good soldiers if properly led and instructed. You have spent some $1\frac{1}{2}$ years learning just how to do this.

I wish to underline one or two points which no doubt had been put to you in courses you have gone through. The first is that the army works as a team, whether you take a large formation like a brigade or the smallest sub-unit, the section. Most of you will be leaders of fairly large teams, platoons of about 30 men each. If you are lucky enough to have an experienced regular as your platoon sergeant, learn how to make full use of his experience and capabilities. At the same time, you will have as your superior officers, regular officers - company commanders, battalion staff officers and battalion commander himself - to whom you can turn for guidance and advice when needed.

If you take your job as a real challenge and not as a routine chore, you can learn some of the most valuable lessons in life, lessons which are not taught in universities or research institutions. You would have learnt how to lead men, how to motivate them to do their utmost under conditions of stress. This is what you should strive for. If you succeed, you would have learnt the lesson which will be of immense value throughout your life. And this is why large employers in the private sector prefer national service officers when recruiting for management positions.