



# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Ministerial Statement on the Recent Deaths of Three SAF Servicemen, by Minister for Defence, RADM(NS) Teo Chee Hean, Parliament Sitting**

16 Oct 2003

Mr Speaker Sir, one regular SAF serviceman and 2 Full-time National Servicemen died during training in unrelated incidents over the period of 21st August to 23rd September this year. MINDEF is very sorry for the anguish and distress that has been caused to their families and loved ones. I deeply regret the loss of these three young men. I extend my heartfelt condolences to their families and loved ones.

MINDEF treats every training death with the utmost seriousness. In every case we convene a thorough investigation to determine the cause of death and also to enable us to take all the necessary measures so that what can be prevented will not happen again.

It is important to remember that the SAF has to train our soldiers as they will fight. The harder and more realistically we train them, the more likely they are to fight well and survive when called upon to defend the nation. The training also has to be conducted professionally and safely. MINDEF therefore constantly aims to strike the right balance between training realism and safety. We take all the safety precautions and measures feasible to minimise risks. But in the nature of military training, there will always remain some risks which cannot be completely eliminated.

Let me now explain the circumstances of the three cases and the measures that are in place to ensure the safety of our servicemen as they undergo military training, as well as the actions that MINDEF has taken. I shall take the most recent case first.

### **Recruit Chew Heng Huat, Andrew (IPPT Categorisation Test, 23 Sep 03)**

#### Summary of Incident

The serviceman who died was Recruit Chew Heng Huat, Andrew. On enlistment, Recruit

Chew had been classified as being medically fit except for being moderately obese. He was in the fourth week of the four-month Basic Military Training Programme for obese recruits. On 23 Sep 03 at the Basic Military Training Centre (BMTC) School 1 in Pulau Tekong, Recruit Chew was undergoing an Individual Physical Proficiency Test (IPPT) categorisation exercise to gauge his fitness level. At about 1745 hrs, during the 2.4 km run of the IPPT, Recruit Chew collapsed 30 metres short of the end point. He was immediately evacuated to the Pulau Tekong Medical Centre for medical attention and thereafter, evacuated by helicopter to the Singapore General Hospital, arriving at 1842 hrs. He was pronounced dead at 1905 hrs. The cause of death is pending final determination by the forensic pathologist from the Health Sciences Authority.

### IPPT Categorisation Exercise

The IPPT categorisation exercise for obese recruits takes place during the 4th week of their 4-month BMT programme, after they have completed 3 weeks of physical conditioning. In the normal 3-month BMT for non-obese recruits, this categorisation exercise is done in the 2nd week. The purpose of the categorisation exercise is to group the recruits according to their physical fitness level. This allows us to design the subsequent training in a more focused, customized and progressive way, taking into account the health and fitness condition of each serviceman.

### Actions Taken

Our preliminary investigations showed that there were no lapses in the conduct of the IPPT categorisation exercise which contributed to the death. Proper lesson plans and safety measures were in place. The measures included making sure that the recruits had adequate sleep the night before, that they were well hydrated, and were not feeling unwell when the IPPT started. The medical evacuation of Recruit Chew by land and air was also executed swiftly and according to the established plan for such contingencies.

MINDEF has convened a Committee of Inquiry into the incident. The Inquiry is still in progress. Meanwhile the Commander of the Basic Military Training Centre has briefed all the instructors on the incident and re-emphasised the need for safety understanding and awareness.

### **2SG Rajagopal Thirukumaran (Ranger Selection Test, 3 Sep 03)**

#### Summary of Incident

The second death was that of 2SG Rajagopal Thirukumaran, a regular serviceman, on 3 Sep 03 when he was taking the Ranger Course selection test at Hendon Camp. This test is to ensure that candidates for the Ranger course meet the physical fitness standards required for the course. 2SG Rajagopal collapsed at 1627 hrs, after completing the 5-km road run in good

time. He received immediate medical attention before he was evacuated to Changi General Hospital, where he was pronounced dead at 1725hrs. The cause of death is pending final determination by the forensic pathologist from the Health Sciences Authority.

### Actions Taken

Our preliminary investigations showed that the lesson plans and safety measures for the selection test were in order and properly executed. A warming up exercise was carried out in accordance with the lesson plan. The safety briefing for the road run was conducted, and water points and safety marshals were deployed.

MINDEF has convened a Higher Board of Inquiry to investigate the incident, which is still in progress.

## **2SG Hu Enhuai (Combat Survival Training (CST), 21 Aug 03)**

### Summary of Incident

The third incident, on 21 Aug 03, occurred at Pulau Tekong during a Combat Survival Training (CST) course. This course trains reconnaissance troopers, scouts and snipers who have to conduct operations deep in hostile territory, to survive, evade capture, and resist and escape if captured by the enemy. The course has both theory and practical elements, and psychological preparation is a key feature. It culminates in a summary field exercise where the skills taught in the classroom are applied and put to the test. The 80th CST course began on 13 Aug 03 and was scheduled to end on 22 Aug 03.

On 21 Aug 03, 2SG Hu Enhuai, a sniper, was participating in the final summary exercise when he collapsed at around 1645hrs. He was given medical treatment at the scene and evacuated to the Pulau Tekong Medical Centre at 1710hrs. Subsequently, he was evacuated by helicopter to the Singapore General Hospital and arrived there at 1752hrs. He was pronounced dead at 1817hrs. The cause of death as certified by the forensic pathologist of the Health Sciences Authority was asphyxia and near drowning.

### Actions Taken

The SAF suspended Combat Survival Training immediately after the incident. Four Officers and a senior Specialist who conducted the training were also immediately suspended from service.

MINDEF convened an independent Committee of Inquiry, chaired by a senior civil servant from outside MINDEF, to investigate and determine the full facts of the incident. The Committee of Inquiry submitted its report on 3 Oct 03. MINDEF is now studying the report in detail. I will now brief Members of the House of the facts established by the Committee.

2SG Hu's family has also been kept informed.

The Committee of Inquiry found that the trainers had not followed the approved lesson plan for this training exercise. According to the lesson plan, the trainees were only to be doused with water with the intent of showering them. The lesson plan specifically prohibits physical contact and manhandling of trainees, and states categorically that instructors should never force water treatment into the body. Submerging the head of a trainee into water was not authorized.

However, instead of being doused with water, 2SG Hu had his head submerged in water four times. As a result he aspirated water, had breathing difficulties and collapsed. He was treated promptly by a medical orderly at the scene and evacuated to the Singapore General Hospital, but despite the medical treatment he died.

Besides 2SG Hu, other trainees also had their heads submerged in water. As a result 6 aspirated water and required medical treatment. The Combat Survival Training had been conducted in an unauthorized way.

This is an extremely serious lapse in the conduct of the training. It should never have happened. MINDEF takes the gravest possible view of the matter. I am determined to establish the full facts of how such an unauthorised act occurred and to identify the persons responsible for it. I have convened a Higher Board of Inquiry to do so. Investigations are also being conducted by the Criminal Investigation Department of the Police, and there will be a coroner's inquiry. The results of these investigations will be made public. Any SAF personnel who have been negligent or culpable will be held to account and punished according to the law.

After the incident MINDEF suspended 5 instructors who conducted the training. In addition, MINDEF has relieved from their duties two other instructors who were responsible for supervising the training. MINDEF has also relieved the Commanding Officer of the School of Commando Training from command and has also appointed a new Chief Commando Officer to take charge of the Commando formation.

The SAF will conduct a thorough and careful review of how the Combat Survival Training course is conducted and the safety measures for this course before we resume such training. For this purpose, the SAF will benchmark our training practices against practices in other established armies, and audit how our training is actually carried out in the field, to ensure that training of this nature is conducted professionally and safely.

## **Conclusion**

MINDEF deeply regrets the loss of the lives of our three soldiers. Investigations as well as independent inquiries have been convened for all three cases. We will probe for deficiencies

in systems and procedures; lapses in execution or compliance; whether any persons by their acts or omissions were responsible; and what remedial measures will prevent such incidents in the future.

Where we discover deficiencies, we will put them right immediately. Where persons have failed in their duties, MINDEF will take action against them. We expect the highest level of professionalism from our officers and men, and will not tolerate any laxity or indiscipline that endangers the lives of our soldiers. When something goes wrong, we will account to Parliament, the families of servicemen, and the public. We will explain fully and honestly what went wrong, and what we will do to put things right and prevent it from happening again. This is the way to maintain the confidence and trust of the public in the SAF.

What happened to 2SG Hu on the Combat Survival Training course should never have happened. I will get to the bottom of how such an unauthorized and unsafe training practice could have crept into the School of Commando Training. This incident has been a heavy blow to the Commandos, who are one of the finest formations in the SAF. Over the years, the Commandos have served Singapore well. In 1974, in the Laju incident, they escorted the hijackers to the Middle East. In 1991, they rescued 127 passengers from SQ117. In their quiet and unseen ways, the Commandos have performed many other operations to safeguard Singapore from the new and deadly threats of terrorism. The Commandos will set things right and rebuild themselves because as professionals, I know that this is what they will do. They will succeed as they have the professionalism and the determination to do so, and because they will have the support of the Members of this House and all Singaporeans.

Parents entrust their sons to MINDEF and the SAF to prepare and train them to perform a national duty in the defence of Singapore. This is a heavy responsibility that MINDEF and the SAF do not take lightly. We should not let up on hard and realistic training. But we will never compromise on safety nor risk the lives of our servicemen. It is MINDEF and the SAF's solemn commitment to take in our young men, train them well and return them safely at the end of two or two and a half years to their families as operationally-ready soldiers.

National Archives of Singapore

Speech:

- Additional Remarks by Minister for Defence, RADM (NS) Teo Chee Hean, at Parliament (Document No: MINDEF\_20031016002.pdf)