



SPEECH

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Speech by Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen at the Committee of Supply Debate 2011

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New & Enhanced Career Schemes

A new scheme of service was created - called the Military Domain Experts Scheme (MDES) - to build and retain deep professional expertise in critical military domain areas such as engineering and intelligence. This new career pathway has been well-received, with a 95% take-up rate among the personnel eligible for conversion to MDES. Servicemen who have converted to the MDES are enthusiastic about the greater opportunities for professional development and career progression. Let me just give one example to illustrate. Air Force technician Military Expert 2 Ang Boon Siong, who attained his Bachelor of Engineering in 2009 from UniSIM through part-time studies, is being recognised for his outstanding performance and strong potential. At age 28, he will be the youngest amongst his peers to be emplaced to the rank of ME 4, upon completing his Military Domain Expert Course.

In tandem with the introduction of MDES, we have enhanced the schemes for Warrant Officers and Officers. Under the enhanced schemes, our Officers can stay with the SAF till age 50, instead of retiring in their mid-40s; Warrant Officers retire at age 55. Servicemen under the MDES scheme retire at age 60. This was a point raised by Mr Michael Palmer about extending the career lengths. The career lengths of our enhanced schemes balance the needs to allow more time for professional development, without losing the dynamism that is critical to an effective and potent SAF. However, where there is a critical organisational need, the SAF does selectively retain our servicemen beyond their stipulated retirement age.

The Enhanced Warrant Officers Scheme has been well-received. Under this scheme, those with potential to reach Warrant Officer rank can do so earlier. Their jobs have also been re-designed and re-structured to focus on combat leadership roles, and to anchor key SAF

competencies in leadership, tactical warfighting expertise and training supervision. Many Warrant Officers and Specialists look forward to the greater responsibilities and new pinnacle appointments that they can now undertake. Let me give one example. Army Senior Warrant Officer Lee Sung Cheng has the honour of being the first SAF Warrant Officer to be appointed as Commanding Officer of a Training School. He assumed command of the Specialist and Warrant Officer Advanced School on 31 January this year. This was a post previously held by a Lieutenant-Colonel. In Senior Warrant Officer Lee's words, he said that such appointments "speak volumes of the faith and trust that the organisation has placed upon our Warrant Officers".

SAF Officers have also welcomed the wider range of Continuing Education, Professional Military Education and Training, and Leadership Development opportunities presented by the Enhanced Officers Scheme.

The public response to these schemes in terms of recruitment has been encouraging. Against the backdrop of strong economic conditions and a tight labour market, more have chosen to embark on an SAF career in 2010 as compared to 2009. This is a positive sign, as we need to continue to attract able and committed people to the 3rd Generation SAF.

Professional Development of SAF Servicemen

The SAF will step up professional development and Continuing Education programmes to equip our servicemen at different points of their career.

Dr Lam Pin Min asked about our Continuing Education programmes. Let me give some details. For example, the Centre for Army Lessons Learnt, which was created in October 2010, aims to enhance the Army's learning from military operations and training exercises. This year, the SAF will establish the SAF Centre for Operational Learning, which will spearhead efforts to draw operational lessons learned that are applicable across the three Services, and where necessary, institutionalise them into doctrine and processes.

The SAF will continue to work with appropriate professional partners to ensure high standards of its programmes. For example, the SAF established partnerships with the Justice Institute of British Columbia and Nanyang Polytechnic in April last year to enhance paramedic training for its combat medics. These partnerships allow the SAF to strengthen the basic medical knowledge of its medics, give them skills to treat more complex medical conditions, as well as attend to casualties in an operating theatre or an intensive care unit. Our medics can also choose to pursue diploma and advanced diploma courses in paramedical care.

Over the past year, the SAF has also collaborated with various Institutes of Higher Learning

to further strengthen the SAF's continuing education system. Through the SAF-NTU Academy that was established last year, NTU co-conducts modules at the Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff College, which are accredited towards NTU masters programmes. The SAF has also worked with NTU to launch a 12-week Undergraduate Professional Military Education and Training Programme that provides SAF personnel with foundation courses in military knowledge. Completion of this programme earns the officers credit towards degree requirements at the four public universities in Singapore.

The SAF has also established tie-ups with universities to accredit the professional training that our personnel receive in the SAF. For example, UniSIM, in collaboration with the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida in the US, will accredit up to 20 credit units to graduates of selected Air Force Training Command courses towards relevant bachelor degrees from both universities. Such accreditation is a strong testament to the rigour and quality of our training and development programmes.

We are also leveraging on technology to facilitate the professional development of our servicemen. For instance, LEARNet is currently available at the Basic Military Training Centre, the Specialist Cadet School and the Officer Cadet School. It allows our soldiers to access online training content to carry out self-directed learning. The SAF has also put in place an SAF-wide knowledge repository system for official documents and information. This has contributed to the SAF's productivity because it enables our personnel to store, search and access information rapidly and securely. More importantly, it accelerates the propagation of knowledge and information. I am pleased to inform Members of this House that the SAF was conferred the Asian Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise 2010 Award, for the progress that we have made in this area. The winners of this award were selected by a panel of Asian Fortune Global 500 senior executives and leading knowledge management experts. Other winners last year included Infosys Technologies, LG Electronics, and Toyota.

So we are in great company.

All these initiatives illustrate the SAF's commitment to training and developing our people. We believe, as a small armed forces, the SAF must maximise the potential of each serviceman, and develop them well to be better prepared for future challenges.

NS Policy

Sir, I agree with Mr Viswa that it is every Singaporean's duty to defend the country. In fact, I was greatly cheered by his views and his own perceptions of what National Service means. I also agree that after 44 years, we have had strong support for NS from Singaporeans. During passing-out parades, you see fathers and sons, many of you would have experienced it, those with sons, and it is just a very special moment. It has a unique place in the hearts of Singaporeans. We will continue to engage the hearts and minds of Singaporeans so that more

of them will believe that NS is a commitment rather than a liability.

But we must bear three fundamental principles in mind when considering full-time NS. First, NS must be for meeting a critical national need because it imposes considerable cost both to the individual and to the nation, and that critical need is national security and our survival. Second, it must be universal. All young Singaporean males who are fit to serve are conscripted because if some males are conscripted and others are not, there will be strong feelings of unfairness. The third principle is equity, which means that NS policies are applied equitably to everyone regardless of background or status.

From time to time, there have been calls to extend NS beyond this remit, to fulfil social objectives or otherwise. While these objectives are laudable, we must not dilute the restriction of NS only to critical needs of national security and survival and base it on the three fundamental principles I just articulated. At present, there are no operational needs that justify imposing upon women to serve NS.

But we agree with Mr Viswa and indeed MINDEF welcomes women and others not called up for NS to volunteer their services in the SAF as well as in support of Total Defence. For example, there are women volunteers serving as nurses in the SAF's Combat Support Hospitals, and as Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) members in various constituencies. We can consider other areas, as he has suggested, where women volunteers and others can make a meaningful contribution in the defence of our nation.

Ensuring the Psychological Well-being of our Servicemen

Sir, Associate Professor Fatimah Lateef asked how the SAF ensures the psychological well-being of our National Servicemen.

Prior to enlistment, all pre-enlistees are provided with a comprehensive guide to mentally prepare them for NS. The numerous videos on cyberpioneerTV on Youtube on Basic Military Training or BMT, is also part of our effort to help preenlistees and their families prepare themselves for NS. In addition, they undergo medical and psychological tests to ascertain whether they are suitable for enlistment and deployment. Those who are identified with possible psychological problems will be given the appropriate counselling or psychiatric assistance upon enlistment.

Upon enlistment into BMT, commanders pay attention to the common problems faced by their recruits in adjusting to various aspects of NS life, such as the regimentation, physical demands, and communal living. They are taught stress management skills, and are assigned to a buddy so that they can look out for each other during training.

During the course of his NS, every National Serviceman is interviewed regularly by his commanders, which allows him to bring up problems that he may encounter. Our commanders undergo basic counselling training and mental health awareness programmes, and are equipped to identify and address the issues raised by their soldiers. If they require more specialised assistance, soldiers can be referred to medical officers, para- or professional counsellors, or SAF psychiatrists. In addition, we have a 24-hour SAF Counselling Hotline, which soldiers can call if they need help.

Training Safety

Sir, Mr Sin Boon Ann asked for an update on training safety. I would like to assure the House that the safety of our people is of paramount importance and I agree with him that we must uphold the trust that the community and family gives to SAF and MINDEF when they send us their sons for National Service.

At the organisational level, the SAF has established a rigorous set of Training Safety Regulations and procedures to ensure that safety measures are systematically incorporated into all our training activities. There is also a robust risk assessment process in place, to ensure that our personnel identify risks before every significant activity, and that these risks are mitigated. The SAF also seeks to instil a strong culture of safety in our soldiers through leadership emphasis, and by enabling open reporting systems and practices in our units. At the individual level, our servicemen are drilled on how to conduct their activities safely and trained to be safety conscious. For example, new entrants to the SAF must undergo safety induction training.

While we will do our best to reduce incidents to a minimum, all of us recognise that they cannot be totally eliminated. The SAF will continue to maintain high safety standards and to take active steps to ensure the continued safety and well-being of our servicemen. We strive to keep this as low as possible. Mr Sin Boon Ann asked for some figures. Let me provide the figures that I have. Overall, training incidents have been on a decline. If we compare the past two years, for example, training incidents have been reduced from 97 to 36, which is about a third. If I can give another example, the number of heat injury cases, something that we are all quite familiar with, have decreased from quite a high from many years ago, close to 100, to now, about 14 cases. This has resulted from a review of the safety system, including the factors causing such incidents, and the various safety measures in place. These positive trends encourage us to continue to try hard to make sure to reduce the number of incidents to the lowest possible.

Let me now hand over to Associate Professor Koo, who will speak on the RECORD V initiatives, and MINDEF's efforts to engage Singaporeans on defence issues.

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