



SPEECH

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Speech by Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen at the SAFTI City Groundbreaking Ceremony

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Chief of Defence Force, Lieutenant-General Ong Su Kiat Melvyn

Chief Executive DSTA, Mr Tan Peng Yam

Chief of Army, Major-General Goh Si Hou

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be at SAFTI. Not often that we come here and in fact, in recent memory, I do not recall us having had a function here. But if you delve into the history of the SAF, you will, from the pictures, from the accounts, you will know that in the early days, events like this were quite common. Except I think at that time, they did not have these tents. So you have pictures of Dr Goh (Keng Swee) and his group of planners, they wore dark glasses under the hot sun. And just as they did, just as the SAF pioneers did on many occasions, we are gathered here today to witness another groundbreaking development at SAFTI – and on this occasion, as you've seen in the video, the building of SAFTI City. Ever since our Independence in 1965, more than 50 years ago, SAFTI has been the spiritual home of the SAF. Because here, the beginnings of the SAF took shape. Barely six months after Independence, Dr Goh Keng Swee announced the setting up of SAFTI at Pasir Laba Camp. Building our own national defence was top priority, but even so, with what we could afford,

facilities to train soldiers and commanders then were basic. They cleared the forest, they built the wooden sheds, surrounding schools were requisitioned and re-purposed to train commanders first and then soldiers. So you talk to SAF pioneers, they remember training in old schools. After National Service (NS) was introduced, the pace and numbers of NSmen flowed through SAFTI and increased considerably.

Through all those subsequent years, countless cohorts of the nearly 1 million NS men that we have today, and regulars, were bonded by their training at SAFTI. If you talk to the soldiers of the Pioneer Generation (PG), the Merdeka generation, etched in their memories, including mine, would be the long trek to the boat shed, live firing at the SAFTI ranges, including how the tea boy with the banana cake and keropok will come around at tea breaks, the Standard Obstacle Course (SOC), and half the time you were running and juggling your equipment as they move up and down because they were not fit to wear, they were just moving about. And you talk to these people, the Merdeka generation, the hardest thing was the bayonet, because it will bite you're your skin, so you spend quite a lot of time exchanging techniques on how to insulate yourselves from the hooks of those bayonets. They will tell you about charging up Pengkang Hill, Elephant Hill, (and) the tunnel ops at FOFO Hill. So mentally as much as physically, it forged the SAF with common experiences, the camaraderie and its ethos. SAFTI was also the birthplace of many SAF vocational schools – Artillery, Engineers, Armour, Signals, Commandos, Infantry, Military Medicine, Physical Training, Military Intelligence –all these began at SAFTI. Before the needs became more customised and some of them moved out. So today's Groundbreaking of SAFTI City adds to that rich tradition of first beginnings. When completed, SAFTI City promises to be among the most advanced purposed-built military training facility for urban ops in the world. We have traveled around, I think I have not seen anything quite like it. And just as the Pioneer and Merdeka generations of SAF soldiers experienced, I believe that SAFTI City will be the place where future generations of SAF soldiers will train together, bond and form individual memories to build their own collective esprit-de-corps.

It is a throwback to 1966 when SAFTI was built, and even then, it was not as if that Singapore was well endowed or had other needs met. Indeed if you think about it in 1966, we were poor, Singapore was poor and many basic needs of our citizens competed for (the) Government's resources, not least, proper sanitation, housing, health, and so on. But for the Government of that day, to put the training requirements for the SAF first when we could least afford it, represented a fundamental and abiding belief of the founding Government –

that without security, there can be no lasting efforts to build our society. You only get to keep what you can protect.

So this decision to invest considerable sums proved prescient and precious, because only a few years later, the British announced that they were pulling out. And the rest is history as the SAF rose to that occasion to build up, over the course of the next 50 years, a tri-service modern military, able to protect Singapore with our own means. It is in the same spirit and belief that MINDEF is now investing into SAFTI City, which will cost around four hundred million dollars in capital investments, to better prepare our soldiers to defend our Singapore of today and tomorrow. I believe that this investment into SAFTI City will pay many times over, in preparing our soldiers to be effective in protecting Singapore, and themselves in these missions.

Training for our Evolving Operating Environment

The face of the likely battlefield for a new generation of Singaporeans has changed. I do not need to convince you of that, you read and you see the battles that occur even within these last two decades. You seldom see jungle operations. So the chances of the SAF fighting in jungle ops have diminished considerably. Conversely, the odds that the SAF will be called into operations in built-up areas, even high density precincts, whether it is for peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance disaster relief (HADR) or other types of operations, have gone up. Even within this decade, if I can cite to you, the Marawi incident in the Philippines. A handful of terrorist snipers inflicted casualties on security troops there and hampered efforts to take back the city, that is why it took a few months, which the Philippine military eventually did. But even after that incident, the Philippine military asked the SAF for assistance in urban operations training and we opened up our facility at Murai for their soldiers to train. They recognise that it was one area which they have under-invested into then.

Similarly, in the last ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting when we had our Experts Working Group (EWG) exercising, our urban operations village proved a very useful training ground for Special Forces teams that gathered from all 18 countries. This impetus to build the urban ops facilities whether at Murai and now in SAFTI City, really began in the early 2000s, it has been our thinking in the making. Because then, in the early 2000s, Our SAF troops had training grounds in Arizona, and I remember visiting them together with our commanders.

And if you remember, the US Forces were then in Iraq, Afghanistan and then subsequently Iraq. But they too had to adapt their training grounds and they showed me these "villages" which were hastily constructed for US troops before they actually went into Afghanistan. What did they consist of? They were put together with container trucks that were used on ships, stacked on each other. They did the best they could – they filled it up with so-called civilians, dressed in local customs, speaking even local language. I remember they showed cars that were, the effects of cars after they were destroyed with improvised explosives devices so that their soldiers could go through these houses and the people put there could role play, including suicide attacks to hone counter-terrorism drills. Because without that, the troops that you put on ground will be instantly surprised with high chances of fatalities and casualties.

So the SAFTI City that we are building will bring us to a new level and this facility, SAFTI City, together with the facilities that we are building now in Queensland Australia will provide SAF soldiers with the most advanced training facilities globally. It will prepare them to conduct a wide range of operations that include homeland security, counter-terrorism, and disaster relief operations as well as conventional operations in all types of terrain.

Much thought and planning has gone in the design of this new SAFTI city which Army is taking the lead. Phase one will build a training urban city centre with commercial and residential buildings, and it will be completed progressively in 2023. Phase 2 will see the building of a training industrial complex. The buildings and roads in SAFTI City can be configured, so that soldiers can be trained to manoeuvre both on foot or vehicles as they encounter different layouts of buildings and road networks. But as you saw in the video, SAFTI City will be built with advanced training simulations and battlefield effects and interactive targets. We will put in the technology from inception so that you can create a training-rich environment, a realistic environment. You can instantly capture the soldier's reactions, test them in various scenarios. It could include attacks from enemy artillery strikes or snipers. All pre-configured so that you can capture and teach them the right lessons.

Enhanced Learning for Individuals

Battlefield instrumentation, video cameras will track soldiers in real time. And how they perform, whether individually or in units will allow them to learn quickly from their mistakes. It is a very different environment from when the PG and the Merdeka Generation

fired. We used to charge up hills and we will shout "bang, bang, bang, bang, bang". It got better when we used blanks but whether you shot me or I shot you is a matter of debate. You say, I say, nobody confirms. But in this new technology, you cannot run away. It is like the instrumentation we now use – the miles systems, which captures accurately whether you have been shot or have been taken out of the battle and that kind of realism enhances your training exponentially. These advanced techniques can save lives during real missions.

We can build the best training facilities in the world, and we are doing it, but nothing can replace the values of resilience, persistence, and a passion for excellence. Think about it - the SAFTI that was built in 1966 – was it very advanced? Perhaps, maybe for that day but it did not have the elaborate technology and yet the pioneer soldiers of the SAF achieved much with what they had and what they were given because they were fully committed to the defence of Singapore. And I think even as we build these facilities, whether in SAFTI City, whether in Queensland, we must never forget that above all, values undergirth our SAF and in order to derive maximum benefit, even from world-class facilities, you need leadership, the right values and sacrifice will be the necessary ingredients to make SAFTI City work.

Conclusion

Mr Lee Kuan Yew, when he was at the SAFTI-MI Groundbreaking Ceremony, and this was in 1990, hoped that the buildings that were to be built would *"speak to each new generation of men who pass through them, reminding them of the sacrifices and deeds of those who came before them, and inspiring them to excellence in their service to the nation."* I wish the same for SAFTI City.

Finally, let me thank and congratulate all those who were involved in helping us to reach today's milestone. I know that many leaders and men in the SAF, as well as DSTA and MINDEF agencies have worked very hard to bring these plans into fruition. I look forward to seeing the completed SAFTI City in the coming years. Thank you.

Fact Sheet:

- Fact Sheet: Optimising NS Deployment in the Republic of Singapore Navy (MINDEF_20190630001_1.pdf)
- Fact Sheet: Enhancing the SAF's Counter-Terrorism Capabilities (MINDEF_20190630002_1.pdf)

- Fact Sheet: SAFTI City: The SAF's Next Gen Smart Training Facility (MINDEF_20190630003_1.pdf)

News Release:

- Groundbreaking for SAFTI City: The SAF's Next Gen Smart Training Facility (MINDEF_20190630001.pdf)

National Archives of Singapore