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SPEECH BY MR HOWE YOON CHONG, MINISTER OF DEFENCE,
AT THE COMMISSIONING CEREMONY OF SAF OFFICERS
HELD AT THE ISTANA ON WEDNESDAY, 16 MAY '79 AT 6.30 PM

This evening's ceremony is to commission some 142 SAF officers who have completed their officer's training course at SAFTI. Their initial selection was based on their educational and leadership qualities. Their training has been aimed at making them proficient in military skills and combat techniques or in some cases in dealing with military equipment, support arms, and services. The main purpose of their training is to make them competent leaders of men and fully capable of instructing personnel placed under their charge. The completion of their training, however, is but the beginning of their officer career. It will take time before they will gain maturity and experience, but with hard work and dedication to duty they will develop into good commanders in the armed forces. This process of selection, training at SAFTI, and posting to the active units to gain experience has for the last few years been adopted as a workable method of developing SAF officers. The process will be reviewed from time to time and adjustments will be made as new and better methods become available. Since our defence forces are made up of mainly national service personnel with a small force of regulars, the adoption of such a method of training officer cadres is unavoidable. There are advantages and disadvantages.

On the minus side we find that because the period of national service is short, many trained officers are released into the reserves before they can gain really adequate command experience. Once posted to the reserves they need only go back for training for a few weeks each year. The time to gain useful experience is limited. Further the training of young servicemen by instructors who are just as young and with little real experience becomes a peculiar characteristic of our national service. Training institutions like SAFTI must therefore take this into account when

planning their courses of instructions. Because the time is short, the courses must provide for depth and intensity. Any superficiality of knowledge or lack of professionalism will have disastrous results since these young officers will be transmitting what they learn down the line. Hence badly handled this training can result in the blind leading the blind. But when the SAFTI training is of good quality and the officer cadets have learned their lessons well the results can be most encouraging.

On the plus side we have young and keen minds not yet hide bound by rituals and traditions. They are receptive to training and to new ideas. Properly handled and with the courses of instruction well planned SAFTI can produce intelligent young officers with fresh enthusiasm which can be applied to military problems and techniques and can often result in new initiatives and tactics, or new ways of doing things more relevant to our Singapore situation. I need hardly remind you that Singapore is what it is today because we have been able to try out new ways of utilizing our meagre resources. The fact that the training period is limited and the time to gain experience is short need not be a disadvantage for as long as the SAFTI instruction is of the quality that can transform a young man fresh from school or university into a proficient military officer with the necessary professional skills to lead and inspire his men. The important role that SAFTI plays in the training of the officer cadets cannot therefore be over-emphasised. Those who are in charge of training have very heavy responsibilities on their shoulders.

Let me say a few words about our National Service which has been in force for more than a decade. In addition to meeting our defence needs we should look upon our national service as a continuation of the social transformation that has been taking place ever since 1959 when Singapore first obtained self-government. This social transformation has made greater impact on our community in areas like politics, economics, public administration, public housing, industry welfare and others, because they started earlier. National service did not come to the forefront until defence became our own responsibility with independence in 1965.

The aims of our social transformation are to build a more equal and just society where the people of Singapore can live in

peace, freedom and security. This can only be assured when every citizen accepts that he has an obligation to defend his country. The people of Singapore have accepted that to bear arms in the defence of his country is every citizen's sacred duty, and thus national service has come to stay. It is gratifying to note that public opinion is already strong enough to deter the few doting or misguided parents from making excuses to obtain exemption from national service for their children. Rich and poor alike, every young man of national service age is dutifully reporting for enlistment.

The 142 young men and women being commissioned tonight are to be congratulated for their contribution to the defence effort of Singapore. By their diligence in school, by their early indications of leadership qualities, they have been chosen for the officer cadet training course at SAFTI. They have put in nine months of hard work and completed the course to merit being commissioned. They will now be posted to the active units to make use of their military skills and to gain experience in the control of men under their charge. Their leadership qualities will be put to the test. They will now have to prove that they are indeed worthy of their being selected to be leaders of men. While I wish them every success in their military career, may I remind them that in the military it is generally accepted that leaders are born and not made and there are no poor soldiers but only poor leaders.

Before I close I would like to draw attention to the fact that we have among those commissioned this evening four Royal Brunei Malay Regiment (RBMR) officers who have undergone the same course of instruction at SAFTI. The Ministry of Defence is particularly glad that the RBMR has been sending their officers to Singapore for training. In this way long lasting friendship can be built up among the young military leaders in both countries. We certainly consider it an honour and a privilege to train RBMR officers in our defence institutions just as much as we are obliged and appreciative of the assistance that RBMR has extended to our SAF their facilities for jungle training. We very much welcome the presence in our midst of the Deputy Commander of RBMR LTC C J Bowden and Mrs Bowden, together with the Commanding Officer of the 1st RBM Regiment, LTC Pehin Dato Mohamed, all of whom have come specially to witness the commissioning of their four officers. May they bring back with them to Brunei the warmest wishes of friendship and goodwill from Singapore.

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