

CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN IN THE RSAF

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PROLOGUE

Over the last 50 years, Singaporean women have played a pivotal role in nation building and in Singapore's success. One such contribution is through military service in the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF). Although women constitute a small percentage of the RSAF's population, their contributions over the years have been significant. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence, it is apt that we look back at these contributions by showcasing the success stories of women in the RSAF. In this article, the team interviewed eight of the RSAF's servicewomen and highlighted their contributions to the RSAF. The article will tell of the challenges they have had to overcome and that they had to dispel misconceptions that society may have of a woman in military service. It will also tell of how many of them have built successful families despite the high work tempo in the RSAF. Through these stories, we hope to increase awareness of how women have contributed to the RSAF and inspire more women to consider a career in the RSAF positively.

OUR EARLY DAYS (1968-1970s)

After World War II (WWII) and up till the early years of our independence, Singapore had depended completely on Britain's Royal Air Force for its air defence.¹ With the impending withdrawal of British troops from Singapore, the Singapore Air Defence Command (SADC) was formed in 1968 with the immediate and urgent task of setting up the Flying Training School to train pilots. The first batch of six pilot trainees returned from the United Kingdom in 1970, ready to operate the newly acquired Hawker Hunter fighter aircraft.² In the same year, a pioneer batch of technicians was sent to Royal Air Force (RAF) Cranwell to begin technical training on the Aérospatial Alouette III helicopter. By September 1971, Britain's former air bases in Tengah, Seletar, Sembawang and Changi were handed over to the SADC as well as its air defence radar station and Bloodhound II surface-to-air missiles.³ The SADC was subsequently renamed the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) on 1st April, 1975.

During this period, internationally, the service of women in the military, particularly in combat roles, was controversial. However, women were already actively playing a role in the SADC and even in the days of the Royal Air Force (RAF) in Singapore.



1973 saw the first batch of women recruited into the then-SADC. MAJ (RET) Vasanti D/O Sivaguru Ayadurai was one of the twenty women who were recruited as Air Traffic Control Assistants. Six years later, the RSAF also opened up the first recruitment of female officers as Air Traffic Controllers. MAJ (RET) Vasanti quickly took up this opportunity. Together with her course mates, MAJ (RET) Vasanti pioneered the way for women to pursue lifelong careers in the RSAF. She recounted that as the only female officer in Tengah Air Base, she had to take care of the other servicewomen, which included overseeing their physical training. The women were treated no differently from the men. In turn, these women did not expect any privileges and through their exemplary conduct, earned the men's respect. "The Air Force gave me many opportunities to realise my potential," said MAJ (RET) Vasanti, "What I am today is because of what I have been through in the Air Force."

"In those days, only the best Air Traffic Controllers were posted to Tengah Air Base, which was a base for fighter aircraft," recalled MAJ (RET) Vasanti. "After graduating from the course, I felt that I had to prove myself worthy of being in Tengah," said MAJ (RET) Vasanti. With this determination, she quickly attained her Air Traffic Control qualifications to control live aircraft solo. "Every day, you will face new situations. Every day without fail (in the 1970s), there would be a challenging incident to overcome. You have to be competent and possess vast knowledge beyond your job scope, which you may need to apply when the incident calls for it." The challenges fuelled her passion and strengthened her resolve to contribute to the RSAF.

EXPANDING OUR CAPABILITIES — THE 2nd GENERATION RSAF (1980s-1990s)

The 1980s saw a spike in the recruitment numbers of females in the RSAF. Internationally, it was also in 1980 that the first female cadets graduated from the 200-year-old United States Military Academy at West Point.⁴ The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) recruited its first female combatants in 1986, allowing them to serve as artillery gunners, pilots and intelligence analysts.

This period saw the RSAF expanding its capabilities to provide a stronger deterrence against potential aggressors and to overcome Singapore's lack of strategic depth. These reasons necessitated the rapid expansion of the fighter aircraft fleet, beginning with the acquisition of the A-4 Skyhawks from the United States (US) Navy in 1971.⁵ The RSAF would eventually go on to procure more advanced platforms such as the F-5 supersonic fighters, AS-332 Super Puma helicopters, C-130 transport aircraft, the RBS 70, Rapier and I-Hawk ground-based air defence systems.⁶ In tandem with these new systems, the RSAF revamped and improved the management of our most important asset—our people.



Air Operations and Systems Expert – ME3 Teo Poh Lin

It was during this period that ME3 Teo Poh Lin joined the RSAF in 1988 after completing her GCE 'O' Levels. "I joined the RSAF when I was only 21 and it has been more than 25 years since," said ME3 Teo. "Back then, it was my mother's idea that I joined the RSAF. The 1988 film 'Airforce' featuring local artiste Li Nanxing influenced me too," quipped ME3 Teo. Her decision sparked interest from her friends. Common questions included "Is it tough?", "Do you need to be very

fit?", and "Is it a male-dominated environment?" There were indeed some transitional challenges, in her own words, "from school girl to soldier". The regimentation and training were tough at the beginning, but she quickly got used to life as a soldier. As a young Air Operations and Systems Expert (then called Air Operations and Communications Assistant), ME3 Teo put in her best in everything she undertook, clinching the RSAF Best Serviceman of the Year award in the Service category in 1994.

Pilot(Helicopter) – LTC Christine Sim

The 2nd Generation RSAF also saw the recruitment of Singapore's first female Helicopter Pilot. LTC Christine Sim, an AS-332M Super Puma Helicopter Pilot, joined the RSAF in 1991, after going through the Singapore Youth Flying Club (SYFC) in Junior College. That sparked her interest in becoming a Pilot with the RSAF. Asked whether her family supported her decision, LTC Sim admitted that she only informed her parents after she had made the decision to join the RSAF. Her parents' primary concern was her safety, but she convinced them that the RSAF has a strong safety culture and her job would not put her in dangerous situations. Looking back, she has no regrets about her decision. "It was an interesting, but not an easy job—one that is meaningful and not desk-bound," said LTC Sim.



Air Warfare Officer (C3) – BG Gan Siow Huang

The RSAF continued to open up more opportunities for females to pursue their career as well as academic aspirations. In 1993, a pioneer group of females was awarded the SAF Merit Scholarship for Women (SMS(W)). The SMS(W) groomed aspiring young women to take on senior command and leadership positions in the SAF. BG Gan Siow Huang was one of the first recipients of the scholarship. During her school days, BG Gan actively participated in the Girl Guides, Brownies and canoeing club. “I have always liked the



idea of being in a uniformed group, having a strong identity and serving the greater good.” said BG Gan. Intrigued by the mystique surrounding the high-tech equipment, fast-paced machines and the image of professionalism, agility and toughness, she felt that “joining the RSAF was a natural decision.”

Air Defence Systems Specialist – 1WO Yuen Pui Leng

Recruited to operate the 2nd Generation RSAF’s suite of air defence capabilities, 1WO Yuen Pui Leng joined the RSAF in 1995 as an Air Defence Systems Specialist (ADSS). Currently a Warrant Officer-In-Charge (WOIC) in 163

Squadron, she operates the I-HAWK Ground-Based Air Defence system.

Asked what the most memorable moment of her career was, 1WO Yuen replied, “I was given the privilege to represent the RSAF as the first female ADSS to attend the Royal New Zealand Air Force Warrant Officer course in 2010. Initially, I was anxious but, I also realised the trust that the RSAF had in me. I was determined to do my best and make the RSAF proud. It was a truly memorable five weeks spent at Base Woodbourne, Blenheim with many good experiences and interactions with foreign forces.”

As a WOIC in 163 Squadron, 1WO Yuen is frequently called upon to lead her team to accomplish the Squadron’s mission. “Today, I am thankful to work in an environment that carries no chauvinistic sentiments.” 1WO Yuen frequently takes the time to mentor and nurture her people to enable them to realise their full potential within the RSAF. For her efforts in developing and engaging her people, she was awarded the Squadron CARDINAL Individual Award in 2012.⁷

THE 3rd GENERATION RSAF (2000-PRESENT)

During the mid-2000s, the RSAF embarked on its 3rd Generation transformation to meet the needs of a more demanding and complex operating environment. The



transformation aimed to develop the RSAF into a highly integrated force, capable of conducting a full spectrum of operations in both peace and war.⁸ It consisted of three key components—inducting new and advanced systems and technologies, re-organisation of base-centric organisational structures into operational commands and a stronger emphasis on people development.⁹

Pilot(Fighter) – MAJ Khoo Teh Lynn

It was around this period that the RSAF recruited its first female Fighter Pilot, MAJ Khoo Teh Lynn. MAJ Khoo joined the RSAF in 2000 at the age of 19 and had a strong desire to become a fighter pilot. She had previously obtained her Private Pilot Licence (PPL) from the SYFC over her two years in junior college. Her passion for flying was evident as she recounted her experience at SYFC: “The environment was conducive for nurturing and learning. The students worked closely together and spurred one another on to get our PPL. We eventually formed close bonds with one another as we fostered the love for flying.”

MAJ Khoo’s decision to join the RSAF as a pilot was met with some scepticism from her male friends and classmates. Her subsequent journey as the RSAF’s first female fighter pilot was also not without its challenges. However, MAJ Khoo’s tenacity and independent nature helped her persevere and stand up against the odds. “The joy of flying had led me to decide that I wanted to join the RSAF as a fighter pilot. I had made up my mind. No one could convince me otherwise that it was not worth fighting for.” Both her parents were supportive and encouraged her to pursue her dream.

One of the most memorable points in her career was during the Basic Wings Course (BWC) in Perth, Australia. MAJ Khoo smiled as she recounted her journey to attaining her basic wings. “The course was tough and the learning curve steep. However, my basic wings course was memorable because of the course mates that I had. We were a close-knit bunch of aspiring pilots who weathered the tough times and emerged as ‘winged’ RSAF pilots. The friendships born then would last us through our careers and I still keep in contact with many of them, even though a few have since left the RSAF.”

After achieving her wings, MAJ Khoo was posted to 143 Squadron, which operates the F-16C/Ds. She had participated in several overseas exercises such as Exercise Pitch Black, Exercise Wallaby and Exercise Cope Tiger. “Exercise Pitch Black 2006 was my first overseas

deployment and involvement in a Large Force Employment (LFE) exercise. In this exercise, I was given the opportunity to operate with aircrew from other nations and practise the tactics that I had honed in my training. The exercise was invigorating and I felt a real sense of achievement after we successfully concluded it."

Air Force Engineer – ME5 Ang Lay Fang



Beyond its fighting edge, the success of the RSAF could only be guaranteed with a strong team of engineers and technicians. The 3rd Generation RSAF strengthened its Air Engineering capabilities and continued to entrench its safety culture and belief that zero accident is an achievable goal.

It was in 2002 that ME5 Ang Lay Fang graduated with a Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering. Then 23 years old, she joined the RSAF because it was a job related to what she had studied in university and at the same time, provided dynamism. Said ME5 Ang, "At that time, it was not about defending the country. Pragmatically, I chose the job because it was not a desk-bound one and it involved more interaction with people." Although she was not the 'active, sporty type', the support from her family eased her transition into military life. "My dad used to send me to and from Basic Military Training. There was a lot of support from my family."

ME5 Ang's first job in the RSAF was as an Officer-in-charge in the Non-Destructive Inspection Section of Air Logistics Squadron, Sembawang Air Base. Her university studies were relevant to her line of work, and she was able to quickly apply her knowledge in areas such as mechanical stress, deformation of solids and types of failures to her new job. Asked how she would describe her work in non-destructive inspection to a member of the public, ME5 Ang said, "It is a bit like forensics. We conduct thorough checks on our aircraft to ensure they do not have any problems before allowing them to fly. And we do so without 'destroying' the aircraft in the process. That's why it's called non-destructive inspection."

ME5 Ang spent about two years on her first job before being posted to HQ RSAF as a Staff Officer in Rotary Wing Section, Structures Branch in the Air Engineering and Logistics Department. There, she undertook several underslung projects for the CH-47 Chinook helicopter. One of these involved designing a water bucket that could be fitted onto the Chinook helicopter, so that it could carry out fire-fighting roles in forest fires. "To transform a military helicopter into a civil disaster relief platform required some out-of-the-box thinking," said ME5 Ang. These operational demands that required creative and innovative solutions also attracted ME2 Joanne Tan to the RSAF as an Air Force Engineer (Maintenance).

Air Force Engineer (Maintenance) – ME2 Joanne Tan

ME2 Joanne Tan joined the RSAF in 2002 at the age of 21 after completing an electrical engineering diploma. Her decision to join the RSAF was motivated by the prospects of career stability and opportunities to travel overseas. Since then, she has been exposed to three different aircraft platforms; the A-4 Skyhawk, the F-16 Fighting Falcon, and the Heron-1 Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). In 2014, she was the first female Dedicated Crew Chief (DCC) to be deployed to Australia to take part in Exercise Pitch Black. When asked about her overseas deployment, ME2 Tan explained that “the opportunity to participate in Exercise Pitch Black validated my skills as a DCC. It is a good feeling to operate together as a team and produce successful results.”



Leading up to Singapore Airshow 2014, ME2 Tan was also chosen to be the first female DCC for the RSAF Black Knights team. Her background in electrical engineering had put her in good stead to excel in her new role as a DCC for the Black Knights Team. As she recounted her training, ME2 Tan attributed her success to the dedication of the trainers and the team spirit of the flight line crew. In her own words, “the learning curve was steep and almost daunting, but my trainers and fellow flight line crew were both supportive and encouraging. We always worked as a team and through our multiple practice sessions, we gradually learned to operate more efficiently and effectively together.” The dynamics of a flight line crew were similar to a F1 pit stop crew. Everyone was required to work together efficiently and with great precision to successfully produce a serviceable machine. The success of the Black Knights team at the Singapore Airshow 2014 was in no small part due to the passion and dedication of the maintenance team who worked tirelessly to deliver serviceable aircraft and ensured that the show went on smoothly. She said, “After my training, I felt confident in my abilities and my team to support the Black Knights for their aerial display. No one wanted to let the team down and we were proud to always deliver serviceable aircraft so that the show can go on.”

ME2 Tan was also nominated to be an RSAF Ambassador during the 2014 Singapore Airshow. She smiled as she recounted the conversations she had with members of the public and their questions. “I really felt proud to be a part of the RSAF. It was a great opportunity for the public to learn about my vocation and most people were surprised when I told them what I did to prepare the F-16 for flight. I felt an immense sense of achievement every time the Black Knights team delivered a good show and thrilled the spectators.”

ME2 Tan also recounted her time in UAV Command as one of the high points in her career. “There was one individual who especially inspired me—Air Engineering and Logistics Squadron Command Chief ME3 Tay Kheng Chuan. He found the time to mentor me in my daily tasks and constantly challenged me to rise to the next level. It was with his guidance that I accepted the opportunity to contribute to National Day Parade (NDP) 2013 as a trainer for the Girl’s Brigade contingent. Over the many months of training, I purposefully led my girls through each training session and sought to forge a close bond with them. When they delivered a flawless performance at NDP 2013, I was overjoyed to be part of their success. To value add to the next generation is in itself an inspiration.”

FULL-SPECTRUM AIR FORCE

LTC Sim’s experience in the Gulf of Aden

Today, the 3rd Generation RSAF operates a suite of highly sophisticated aircraft and weapons systems and is able to undertake a full spectrum of operations from warfighting to peace support and disaster relief operations.¹⁰ Speaking of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, one servicewoman with no lack of such experiences is LTC Sim. As a Search and Rescue pilot operating the Super Puma helicopter, she has flown numerous life-saving missions to rescue people suffering from gunshot wounds to heatstroke. Her most vivid memory was during the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, when she was deployed as a Super Puma helicopter pilot on board the Republic of Singapore Navy’s (RSN) Landing Ship Tank.¹¹ “Everyone went in not knowing what to expect and it was an eye-opener seeing how a full-scale operation could be executed within 24 hours of the disaster,” said LTC Sim. “This opportunity to provide humanitarian assistance reinforced the reasons why I joined the RSAF.”

Besides life-saving missions, LTC Sim also played an active role in counter-piracy missions for the SAF. She was deployed twice, in 2009 and again in 2012, to the Gulf of Aden for counter piracy operations.¹² “This operation is a good example of the close integration among the SAF’s air, land, and sea assets,” says LTC Sim. “We had to work together to patrol the sea for pirates and respond to distress calls from merchant ships that were under attack.”

ME5 Ang’s experience during the AH-64D Emergency Landing

Although the 3rd Generation RSAF now boasts a safety record as good as that of other advanced air forces in the world, our people stand ready to respond to the occasional incident when called upon. One notable incident occurred in 2010 when ME5 Ang returned to Sembawang Air Base after a three-year stint in HQ RSAF. This time, she was appointed as Officer Commanding of the Maintenance Operations Flight in Sembawang Air Base. In her new role, she was responsible for two helicopter types, the CH-47 Chinook and the AH-64D Apache. Leveraging on her previous background in structures and design modifications on the Chinook, ME5 Ang quickly adapted to the new AH-64D Apache platform. Said ME5 Ang, “As the Officer Commanding, I need to ensure the safety and serviceability of the aircraft.”

The notable event during her appointment occurred on 30th September 2010, when an AH-64D Apache helicopter conducted an emergency landing on an open field between Woodlands Avenue 12 and Woodlands Drive 64 at about 3:30pm.¹³ ME5 Ang led a team of Air Force Engineers and was the first to arrive on-site to recover the aircraft. Within four and a half hours from the time of the incident, the field was cleared and the aircraft was back in Sembawang Air Base. The incident taught ME5 Ang the importance of teamwork and being ready, given the dynamic nature of Air Force operations. She started sharing with younger servicemen the meaning of being on duty in the Air Force—one must always be ready to act steadfastly and professionally, working as a team to achieve mission success, when called upon in critical situations.

SPREADING OUR WINGS (OPPORTUNITIES OVERSEAS)

ME5 Ang's experiences as the Senior Maintenance Officer in Peace Vanguard Detachment

Because of Singapore's limited airspace, the RSAF has to spread its wings for flying training with its counterparts overseas. Our people get to interact and learn from their counterparts, immersing and enriching themselves in diverse cultures around the world. This not only strengthens the bonds of understanding and cooperation, but also allows us to benefit from the other Air Forces' long histories and experiences.¹⁴

ME5 Ang was posted to the United States (US) from 28th December 2011 to 22nd January 2014, serving as Senior Maintenance Officer in the RSAF's Peace Vanguard Detachment. Leading a team of 80 personnel to support the detachment in all engineering and maintenance issues, ME5 Ang recalled the challenges of being stationed overseas. During Exercise Forging Sabre in December 2013, there was a fleet hold called on the AH-64D Apache because of an incident concerning the blade attachment pin in Singapore. There was a need to conduct radiography inspection on the entire Apache fleet in the US to ensure the other aircraft were not affected, but there were no specialised equipment in the detachment for this particular inspection. The crew had to remove the blades from all the Apache helicopters and send them to a commercial company. In addition, ME5 Ang had to personally convince the contractor of the urgency of the issue and had them complete the inspections within one day. Through the efforts of ME5 Ang and her team, the Apache helicopters were serviceable and flying in the major exercise the very next day.

PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT

The RSAF firmly believes in upgrading its people and helping them realise their aspirations. ME3 Teo, for example, was awarded the SAF Diploma Studies Award in 1995 and obtained a Diploma in Business Studies in Ngee Ann Polytechnic. She was also subsequently awarded the Continuous Learning Academic Study Scheme in 2009 to do a part-time degree in Singapore Institute of Management (SIM) University. Similarly, MAJ Khoo was awarded an overseas scholarship in 2007 and obtained a Bachelor of Arts (History and International Relations) from the University of Southern California. "I thank the RSAF for providing

me the opportunity to further my studies abroad. Completing my Bachelor of Arts in Southern California allowed me to broaden my horizons and enhance my life experiences. I kept abreast with the RSAF by frequently visiting my friends at Peace Carvin II and V (detachments that the RSAF operates in the United States)."

Another good example is BG Gan Siow Huang, the first female Brigadier General in the RSAF. Throughout her career, she was provided with many opportunities, such as drafting policies, commanding 203 Squadron and the Air Surveillance and Control Group. Asked what the highlight of her career was, BG Gan said, "Certainly, my experience as Commanding Officer of 203 Squadron (a military Air Traffic Control Squadron). It was an inspiring experience seeing my personnel so committed to their jobs. There were ups and downs, but everyone got together to make things work and emerge stronger. Those were very uplifting moments for me." As part of the RSAF's efforts in people development, BG Gan was awarded the SAF Postgraduate Award (General Development) in 2009 and completed her Master of Business Administration in Massachusetts Institute of Technology, US, in 2010.

Lifelong Training, Lifelong Career

As the RSAF continues to transform, so does its people and vocations. ME3 Teo is no stranger to the RSAF's transformation. The vocation she joined in 1988 has since undergone three transformations, from Air Operations and Communications Assistant (AOCA), to Air Operations Specialist (AOS), to Air Operations and Systems Specialist (AOSS) and finally to Air Operations and Systems Expert (AOSX). Each transformation was a clarion call by the organisation to the vocation to upgrade itself to manage the new capabilities of the RSAF. The latest iteration, in particular, is to develop deep expertise to harness the full potential of the RSAF's third-generation network capabilities, such as its integrated, multi-layered air defence system.

ME3 Teo was also appointed Squadron Command Chief on 26th July, 2010. As a Command Chief, she is responsible for the regimentation and discipline of the squadron, as well as the engagement of the servicemen under her. It is by no means an easy task, having to balance the carrot and the stick. "The people found me too blunt initially," admitted ME3 Teo who is a straightforward lady who does not mince her words. But she learnt to adapt to her job, and to the younger generation of servicemen. "A bit of sensitivity to the needs of the people goes a long way," says ME3 Teo. "The mission must be achieved, but increasingly the journey is also equally important." The role of a Command Chief has expanded significantly. "The Air Force expects its Command Chief to inspire, communicate and motivate; and not just focus on discipline and regimentation," says ME3 Teo. "It is also about how to align everyone to the organisation's goal. At the end of the day, I derive a huge sense of achievement when I see the servicemen I have groomed win awards. Even if they don't come in first, there is still a sense of achievement." The nature of a military job requires us to uphold the highest standard of discipline in ourselves as well as of our people. "The public expects high standards from our soldiers," shares ME3 Teo. "And, it is

always a challenge to teach new batches of soldiers and help them internalise all the good values that the RSAF seeks to inculcate in our airmen during all phases of training.”

Even as the RSAF trains and develops new people, it also strives to take care of its pioneers. In 2004, when MAJ (RET) Vasanti was reaching her retirement age, she wanted to continue to serve the RSAF, in teaching future generations of RSAF airmen. With her experience, MAJ (RET) Vasanti could still impart much wisdom to new batches of Air Traffic Controllers. She was offered the Defence Executive Officer (DXO) scheme to continue serving in the Air Force Training Command as an Air Traffic Control instructor. She has not looked back since and has served more than 10 years as a DXO instructor. “True enough, over the years, I still have the passion.” said MAJ (RET) Vasanti.

DISPELLING THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF MILITARY LIFE

On Safety

Many of our interviewees highlighted that the primary concern of their families and friends when hearing about their decisions to join the RSAF was about their safety. Over time, they have managed to convince their families and friends that the RSAF’s strong emphasis on safety and its deeply entrenched safety culture ensures that the job does not put one at unnecessary risk. As one of the core values in the RSAF, safety is vital to mission success. The Air Force is also relentless in working towards a zero accident record. The 3rd Generation RSAF today boasts a strong safety track record that matches, if not exceeds, that of other advanced Air Forces in the world.

On Male-Dominance

As a military organisation, the RSAF remains largely constituted of males. One of our interviewees, 1WO Yuen admitted, “The physical aspect of the job can be a challenge for aspiring young women. I worked hard to prove myself to my male counterparts and to earn their respect.” 1WO Yuen has attained a gold Individual Physical Proficiency Test standard every year since she joined the RSAF. ME3 Teo added, “The RSAF is gender-neutral and meritocratic. Hard work and good performance are key to achieving your dreams.”

Being the first female fighter pilot, MAJ Khoo has in many ways pioneered the way for other aspiring female aircrew in the RSAF. However, her journey was not without its challenges. “As the first female fighter pilot in the RSAF, I had to compete in a highly competitive and male-dominated environment. It was not uncommon for it to be competitive in a Fighter Squadron. But more importantly, as I honed my skills and earned respect among my peers, the camaraderie built was strong and prevalent. Overseas training opportunities such as Tucson or Peace Carvin II were coveted, I did not get the opportunity during my time and I am heartened to see other young female aircrew now training overseas.”



On Whether there is a Glass Ceiling for Women

BG Gan, who was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General in 2015 and became the first female BG in the RSAF, said, "The Air Force demands high professional standards and it takes time to train and develop its people to their full potential. There is no fast lane (for females), neither is it any slower for us." But the Air Force needs greater mass and talent and the number of females will grow over time.

MAINTAIN GOOD WORK-LIFE HARMONY

These career women also fulfil their roles as wives and mothers at the home-front.

Contrary to popular belief, the roles of women in the military need not conflict with their commitment to their families.¹⁵ Having a successful career in the RSAF does not preclude women from being a successful wife and mother.

On balancing her career and family roles, BG Gan, a mother of three, said, "It is a personal choice that one makes and has to accept the outcomes of. I was able to make arrangements at work and had the understanding and support from both my peers and subordinates." She added that one must first be able to perform her duties well at work and pull one's weight in order to gain the understanding and support from peers and subordinates. It was important to manage expectations of herself, both at work and at home. Most importantly, the mission gets done not by a single person but as a team.



The RSAF's first female fighter pilot, MAJ Khoo is married to an ex-RSAF serviceman and has one son. "Having a spouse who intimately understands my hectic work schedule and the operational demands of my job is important. But like any relationship, mutual trust and understanding must be the bedrock of a strong family unit. I thank my husband for being my pillar of support and strength." When asked about being a mother and work commitments in the RSAF, MAJ Khoo had this to say, "Right now I am overjoyed with my newborn son and having a baby certainly changes my priorities. I am very thankful for the support provided by my Department Heads to facilitate flexible work arrangements during my maternity period. However, I also look forward to returning to work and to be flying again soon."

RSAF'S AMBITION TO RECRUIT MORE WOMEN

The RSAF looks forward to increasing its population of women to provide diversity and further strengthen its capabilities. "For a start, it (the SAF) wants at least 500 more women by 2018. When that happens, one in 10 career soldiers will be a woman. Beyond that, the military hopes to double its current female population to at least 3,000," said BG Gan, who was then-Head of Joint Manpower Department.¹⁶ The move to recruit more women in the military has been dubbed as 'timely', given Singapore's declining birth rates and ageing population.¹⁷ This recruitment is also likely to extend to the Volunteer Corps, as mentioned by Defence Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen.¹⁸ The RSAF has begun to make progress towards this potential initiative. In 2013, the Air Force inducted our first female volunteer, SSG Amanda Giam, under the Volunteer Service Scheme for Ex-Regulars or NSmen who wish to continue serving after their contract or NS cycle. This marked another milestone in our history.¹⁹

Internationally, the perception of women in the military has evolved. Women in the upper echelons of the military have dispelled the misconceptions of glass ceilings and unequal opportunities for servicewomen. Admiral Michelle Howard, for instance, is the first female in the US Navy to attain the rank of Admiral.²⁰ The RSAF, like many Western militaries, has female incumbents in senior leadership positions. Nevertheless, as BG Gan said, "We are not about to put a woman in a job or promote her for the sake of doing so or to make a statement. It is about who is the best person for the job."

ADVICE FOR ASPIRING SERVICEWOMEN

Finally, we decided to ask our interviewees what advice they have to give to younger generations who are considering joining the RSAF. Said ME5 Ang, "This job is about making a difference to the RSAF, the SAF, and ultimately, to Singapore. The RSAF trains our people well, and imbues in them a sense of pride, passion and professionalism. But it is ultimately up to each and every individual to reaffirm their sense of purpose and to know why they are in the profession for." ME3 Teo added, "The RSAF is a fast-paced organisation and is constantly transforming. You have to embrace the changes and learn new skills to make yourself deployable. Hard work is necessary to achieve your biggest dreams. And, find a mentor early. It really helps. And, when the time comes, give back by being a mentor to someone else."

CONCLUSION

The RSAF has come a long way since its genesis in 1968 and is now a 3rd Generation Air Force capable of a full spectrum of operations, integrated tightly with the Army and Navy, and stands ready to deter aggressors and secure a swift and decisive victory. All these would not have been possible without the sheer determination and hard work of all its people—men and women alike. This article hopes to dispel some of the common misconceptions of life in the military and showcase the contributions of many of the successful women in the RSAF over the years.

ENDNOTES

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7. Project CARDINAL refers to the RSAF's efforts to develop its people to their full potential. Its three key thrusts of Developing Professionals (DP), Realising Your Potential (RYP) and Engaging the Heart (ETH) intend to imbue the competencies, commitment and core values required to achieve success in the RSAF's missions.
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