# Sons of Singapore: Why Some NSmen Keep Going and Going

by **COL (VOL) Leonard Yeow Ghim Chee**

**Abstract:**

The *Straits Times* feature "Some NSmen Keep Going and Going" focuses on Operationally-Ready National Servicemen (NSmen). 1WO (VOL) Frederick Seah, 44, and COL (VOL) Clement Hendricks, 58, shared their views and personal perspectives on why they served as long as they have. The article gave timely recognition to a special group of long-serving NSmen who have gone way beyond the basic obligations of National Service (NS). This article aims to help Singaporeans understand why some men in their family or work circles continue to serve NS long after their obligation and liability periods end.

*Keywords: Long-Serving NSmen; In-Camp-Training; National Defence*

*1WO Frederick Seah and Family*

On Saturday 29 January 2011, The *Straits Times* feature "Some NSmen Keep Going and Going," on page A8, focused on Operationally-Ready National Servicemen (NSmen). 1WO (VOL) Frederick Seah, 44, and COL (VOL) Clement Hendricks, 58, shared their views and personal perspectives on why they served as long as they have. This article also gave timely recognition to a special group of long-serving NSmen who have gone way beyond the basic obligations expected of all able-bodied male citizens: a mandatory two years (previously two-and-a-half) of Full-Time National Service plus 10 years (previously 13) of follow-on National Service (NS). While Fred and Clement could have easily walked away long ago, having fulfilled their own NS requirements and more, something "keeps them going and going." As Fred said with the deepest conviction in the article's conclusion, "I will continue to volunteer and serve until my knees give way." Admirable words and spoken quite bluntly, by a smart-looking citizen soldier posing with his beautiful family. One could almost hear readers ask, "Are these words real? Are they sincere?" For sure, sceptics of NS will say, "Is this for show?"

As a long-serving NSman myself, I would like to add my personal views to this story. These views are not the official views of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). My hope is that this essay will help Singaporeans understand why some men in their family or work circles bother to devote precious time and effort to serving NS long after their obligation and liability periods end.

Within this special group, many of us long-serving NSmen know both Fred and Clement personally. Both of them meant every word said about why they chose to keep going. We consider it a special privilege and honour to serve alongside people like Fred and Clement. Having spent so many years working together, both directly in the same combat units and professional courses, or indirectly during exercises, we have come to know each other well. We have watched each other mature, raise children and develop our careers (yes, we compare notes regularly

when we come back to serve or gather for events). We have also aged with each passing year and decade. This has become our extended family, a community of like-minded peers. We cannot fake our intentions for long—people can see our lack of sincerity, especially if we serve for the wrong reasons. That said, most of us also try to stay out of the limelight, preferring to focus on our NS roles and responsibilities.

Fred Seah is the managing director of a home-grown advertising firm and Clement Hendricks is an architect. Both are professionals and entrepreneurs who need to ensure that despite their NS responsibilities, they continue to succeed in their businesses yearly to be able to provide for their families and staff. These are not idle people with a lot of spare time to while away. On the contrary, they have to diligently eke out time, energy and capacity from somewhere else to contribute to their NS roles and responsibilities. It is really quite amazing, but within the pool of long-serving NSmen we can also find other entrepreneurs as well as lawyers, doctors, dentists, educators, advertising leaders, bankers, financiers, property company leaders and professional senior managers or vice-presidents working for local and foreign Multinational Corporations (MNCs)—i.e. leaders from all kinds of professional backgrounds. Several of these men hold important leadership roles in full-time jobs with senior level responsibilities, top-line revenues, bottom line measurements and busy regional and global travel schedules.

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We could have used this time and energy to make a lot more money for ourselves and do more great things for our companies and businesses. During our "non-work, off-work or weekend" time, we could do what most other Singaporeans do when they rest: spend time with our families, on our hobbies, or eating, enjoy success and wealth, build up personal investment portfolios, or fully experience the many modern leisure activities like shopping, gaming and sports. These options are readily available in Singapore today, thanks to the hard work, blood, sweat, tears and toil of the government, our leaders and the generations of Singaporeans before us who have built up this nation.

We will not pass judgement on anyone who has chosen not to extend their NS and continue serving as we have done. Everyone is free to decide what they want to do for themselves with their own time and resources after completing the obligatory NS liabilities. We are, of course, still able to enjoy many of life's rewards. However, our extended NS service requires a conscious decision—it has cost us something, in the form of time, emotions, wealth (or opportunity costs), talent and a lot of hard work and effort. Frankly, it is often difficult to explain to people why we still wear the SAF uniform at our age, when most just cannot wait to finish their NS liability and forget about the whole thing. We are often misunderstood by others, including close friends and family members who consider us strange or unusual, even unwise with our priorities. Our family lives are also affected when we choose to serve longer. When we are busy with soldiering responsibilities in camp or out in the field, our wives and other family members have to step in and take over our duties as husbands and fathers. Hence, we know very well that we can never serve without the total support of our dear spouses and families. Professionally, we also have to make sure we complete our business commitments and tasks before we step away for an In-Camp-Training period, while remaining contactable by phone to ensure that key business decisions can still be addressed—we cannot ignore or delegate our primary job responsibilities.

Soldiering is not a walk in the park. I confess that there are days during a long exercise, especially at night, when I find myself wondering at three AM in the morning: "What in the world am I doing here

in the middle of nowhere? I miss my bed, my wife, my kids and my creature comforts. I must be crazy to be doing this at my age." We need to be sure that we are doing all this for the right reasons. Why do we do it? Why do Fred and Clement keep doing this?

For glory and honour? Realistically, it is usually not worth all the pain, effort and inconveniences. There are many other smarter, quicker and much more comfortable ways to gain personal glory and honour. For wealth? Many of these NSmen are professional heavyweights and the SAF can never fully repay the years of youth, service, lost revenue, commissions and the many opportunity costs that they forgo in order to serve, even if, as Clement comments, "after several years, we [learn] to manage the two sides well". Make-up pay is only meant to defray the cost of NS training—it merely "makes-up." As for the goodies that the government dishes out from time to time—tax rebates, Individual Physical Proficiency Test (IPPT) incentives, cash incentives—these only help to move things forward and offset some of the smaller sacrifices. While the NS community fully appreciates and welcomes all of these goodies—each year, a dedicated government team explores new ways to reward NS—such incentives are not what drive long-serving NSmen.

We do not judge those who have finished their liability and have decided to stop volunteering and to move on. In fact, we tirelessly encourage our juniors, who form the bulk of NSmen, not to defer but complete their ten-year liability as soon as possible, so that they can then concentrate on their families and careers.

However, we also recognise that it takes a long time to be trained and to acquire the knowledge, capabilities and experience of thinking soldiers and commanders. As long-serving NSmen, this is where we can make a unique contribution to the SAF and the country—we sometimes jokingly refer to ourselves as "the irregulars." However, without the professional regular force and their support, help, guidance and professional input, we NSmen would not be able to fulfil our roles. They are the professionals who help us to rapidly acquire and hone our soldiering skills and

*In-Camp-Training: An NSman section commander from 657 SIR getting the signal to move his section forward.*

competencies to the highest levels. It is the strong partnership between the professional SAF core and NSmen (including long-serving ones like us), which has enabled NS to be such an outstanding national institution. This credit must be shared with all those involved in building and sustaining our citizen army.

*Never again must there be a repeat of World War II, when Singapore fell to the Japanese in a short span of time.*

We understand that Singapore is vulnerable and that everything can change within a short period of time. We can never take the peace we enjoy today or the security of the country for granted, even if it seems that we have "arrived." Most of us do not have the firsthand experience of the young Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who saw and felt the insecurity and instability as he made his way home alone during the racial tensions and riots in early years of Singapore (as narrated by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew in his latest book). However, MM Lee's description of Singapore as "an 80-storey building standing on marshy land" should resonate with us. On the face of it, Singapore's existence does not appear particularly precarious, especially to those encouraged by a false sense of confidence in our arrival as a "First World" country. The average Singaporean has come to assume that this peaceful and secure country will remain this way forever. Increasingly, we meet people who say that there is no real threat to Singapore and that we should not be paranoid by imagining worst case scenarios.

This is very far from the truth. What are we serving? What are we defending? Upon reflection, the real answers go beyond what is usually said in polite conversation. In fact, most people are too busy chasing their dreams and living their lives to consider these questions, which is understandable. But for those of us who have served for a long time, we see things from a much different perspective and know that this peace and prosperity we now enjoy is fragile and cannot be taken for granted. This is the gist of MM Lee's book.

We believe that we are defending our right to be our own country and nation. This includes the freedom to have our own way of life and to do what we know is best for ourselves. To have our own place that we can call home. To be able to marry and rejoice, to mourn and bury, in peace. To raise children and enjoy the sacred privilege of parenting, to bring up our sons and daughters to be great people—greater than us, hopefully. To be able to study in peace in our fine educational institutions—now rated amongst the best in the world, giving us the opportunity to have good careers and to be professionally competitive on the world stage. To be able to enjoy our many favourite local foods, hobbies, music, dances, plays, festivals, holidays and anniversaries. To be able to bid for and organise the Youth Olympic Games and equivalent international events. To host Formula One races, both for the spectacle they provide and the opportunity to showcase our fine country to the rest of the world. To attract the best talents to our land to grow our national wealth, widen our talent base and maintain our competitive advantage in many fields. To indulge in the many luxuries we have now earned the right and the financial capacity to pay for. To be able to walk around at night safely; to go for an early morning jog or walk in relative security. To be able to lie down at night after a hard day's work and sleep in peace.

*In fact, we hope that it will motivate more NSmen to consider serving beyond their NS liability and taking over our duties eventually. This is true NS—giving to something larger than yourself.*

It is so easy to forget that what we enjoy today is not a given. Many Singaporeans travel widely and frequently these days, and we can see that conditions in other countries are often different. We certainly do not need to judge others, but if we are honest with ourselves, we should realize that conditions here can also change fast if we are not careful. When they do change, will we be able to react quickly and get back on our feet, to move on as a nation and people? What use is your property valuation doubling, if there is uncertainty on the horizon? It will quickly come back down, or crash.

There is a place for military NS. We must be able to fight for ourselves if necessary. Never again must there be a repeat of World War II, when Singapore fell to the Japanese in a short span of time. We need a robust economy and a vibrant society to be able to sustain our national defence. Military defence cannot just be the responsibility of the active regulars and servicemen—NSmen form a key component of our citizen army. We must train well and maintain professional competence in the art of soldiering, ready for the call to action. At other times, we are ordinary citizens going about our daily lives, contributing to the economy of the country. These are the convictions of us long-serving NSmen who persevere.

If and when the chips are down, it is likely that some will choose to leave this country, and it is estimated that 20% of the population have the financial means and ability to buy a one-way air ticket out of this country should they decide to. The remaining 80% will have no choice but to fight. There is no way around it.

Unfortunately, not everyone thinks this way. For many citizens, especially younger men who were born and grew up amidst Singapore's success, the comfortable life today is their one and only reference point. This is a truth we must accept, like many

other nations and cities around the world. Some say this is the "curse of successful national building"—your next generation does not remember the initial sacrifices. Compulsory Full-Time NS is very much regarded as an unwelcome intrusion into one's life, plans and ambitions. We hear complaints all the time, and know that we cannot convince or convert all of these unhappy people, but perhaps, as an older generation who still can remember, albeit sometimes vaguely, the way Singapore was in the early years of development, we can invest in some ways to help to bridge the expectation gaps and to remind everyone of our inherent vulnerabilities. We should not sound the "gloom and doom story" constantly, but in a way that does not discourage or dishearten the younger generations.

The world has changed. Since the September 11 attacks, the security landscape both globally and in Asia has changed drastically. Governments and countries do not just worry about conventional conflicts between opposing armed forces—lone perpetrators or cluster attacks like the 2008 Mumbai attacks are potential threats. We cannot take peace for granted, nor ignore the long-term need for a credible standing security force like the SAF, with national servicemen as a key component. Serving in the SAF for extended periods allows us to share these convictions with our fellows, especially the younger ones.

My hope is that more articles like the *Straits Times* feature story on Fred and Clement will remind us of our inherent vulnerabilities as a nation, generating greater interest and discussion about doing more for NS. In fact, we hope that it will motivate more NSmen to consider serving beyond their NS liability and taking over our duties eventually. This is true NS—giving to something larger than yourself. Most of us will not have an impact on national issues within our lifetimes, as we are neither part of the government nor key decision makers. However, by serving NS longer than most people, we have a chance to contribute to this nation in a tangible way.

In conclusion, if you propose the same question asked of Fred Seah: "how long will you continue to serve?" to every other long-serving NSman, you will probably receive similar answers. Many of our parents were immigrants, but as sons of Singapore we hope to serve in NS for as long as we can—weak knees and all—assuming of course that we continue meet the service criteria of fitness, good health and professional competence.

We know it is not possible to keep going indefinitely. An overseas career posting can take us out of the country for an extended period of time. An illness or change of personal circumstances will require us to prioritise where we should spend our time—and this is the right thing to do. We need to sustain our businesses and our companies, for both our colleagues' and our own sakes. There will surely come a time when we can no longer serve in actual appointments, roles and responsibilities in the SAF, and must give way to others who follow in our footsteps. Yet, this same spirit of wanting to give our best to NS and national defence remains very strong, and will probably remain with us for the rest of our lives. We certainly hope to be able to encourage, inspire and develop future generations of NSmen. Hopefully, when we have finally gone the ways of the ancients and left the stage of life, there will be others like Fred Seah who can say with full conviction, "I will continue to volunteer and serve until my knees give way." This will warm our hearts very much.

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Within the SAF, COL (VOL) Yeow is currently the Officer Mentor and Chief of Staff COS Div Hub 2 in the Div HQ, 2PDF. The notable achievements in his SAF career include twice winning the Best NS Infantry Unit for 95/96 and 96/97, NSman of the Year 1997, serving as Honorary ADC to the late President Ong Teng Cheong, and being awarded the SAF National Service Commendation Medal (Military) 2005, the SAF Good Conduct Medal 1988 and the SAF Long Service Medal (Military) 2010. He has served on various SAF committees and previously sat as a civilian member on the Supervisory Board of the Defence Manpower Group (DMG).