



High Flyers: Implications of Short Officer Careers in the SAF

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Abstract:

The short officer careers in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) have cast doubt on the professionalism of its officers, leading to calls for their careers to be extended. This essay will show that such short careers must prevail for now because of unique macro-level factors beyond the SAF's control, such as attitudes towards National Service and competition from other employers. As an alternative, it will examine ways in which junior officers' professional competency can be built and retained given the constraints of such short careers, with particular emphasis on realistic training and inculcating warfighting skills. This is especially important given the rapid move towards a Third Generation SAF.

Keywords: Force Transformation; Military Training; Military Professionalism; Third Generation SAF

INTRODUCTION

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) is unique among military forces, largely because of Singapore's political history, geopolitical situation and demographics. Of particular interest to many foreign observers is the relative youth of SAF personnel, particularly regular officers. Officially, the SAF defends its "young SAF" policy with the argument that it keeps officers dynamic, energetic, and responsive to military developments. Former Chief of Defence Force (CDF) LG Ng Yat Chung, referred to "fighting [as] by and large, a young person's game."¹

On the other hand, observers have remarked that such short careers cast doubt on whether SAF officers in general can be considered true military professionals.² They argue that the short ground-level command tours that accompany short careers do not allow sufficient time to build up breadth or depth of experience, especially in a country that does not make frequent use of its forces in armed conflict, and hence that the SAF should increase the duration of its officers' careers.

However, such analyses generally do not take into account the full range of political, economic and social pressures that preclude longer careers for SAF officers. For example, the necessity of National Service (NS) has produced attitudes toward military service that make it difficult to recruit regulars. Also, increased educational standards and career opportunities mean that the SAF vies with other employers for talent.

Hence this essay will first show that the "young SAF" policy, with particular reference to the officer corps, must prevail for now because of such macro-level factors beyond the SAF's control. Subsequently, it will examine ways in which junior officers' professional competency can be built and retained given the constraints of such short careers.

USING GOOD IRON TO MAKE NAILS

In the aftermath of separation from Malaysia, the Singapore government faced several challenges in the formation of a self-defense force, key among them being the prevailing aversion to



Military Experts at work

military service among the predominantly Chinese population. The institution of National Service (NS) was the key means in raising the required military personnel strength. Nevertheless, NS had to be supported by massive efforts to make the idea of military service more palatable to the population. Such efforts took a significant time to bear fruit, leading to a broad if grudging acceptance of NS as a male rite of passage by the 1990s.³

However, this grudging acceptance of NS is accompanied by a perception of it as two years of drudgery, which dilutes the regard for regular military service. A common derogatory remark among Full-Time National Servicemen (NSFs), made to peers who sign on as regulars, is “you must be crazy to sign on for four (or six) years of NS.” Tongue-in-cheek though it may be, it belies the popular attitude that military service in Singapore is not a lifelong calling.⁴ To most, serving two years of NS and the subsequent periods of reservist training is the extent of their military duty.

The attractiveness of a military career has declined further in recent years as Singapore revels in its status as a hub for commercial and intellectual exchange. Widespread media and

information technology literacy mean that a potential officer cadet at age 17 or 18 is fully aware of the myriad career alternatives. As a result, career expectations have come a long way. A survey conducted by Alexander Mann, a Human Resource (HR) consultancy, contained telling results on why employees desired expatriate postings. Among the top reasons were developing their resumes (67%), indicating that such postings were viewed as stepping stones to more attractive firms or lines of work, and the opportunity to explore and experience new cultures (55%), indicating a desire to move in new social circles.⁵ The survey also suggested that the desire for such mobility was so great, employees would even leave well-paying jobs for the opportunity.

To its credit, the SAF tries hard to mitigate the sense of stagnation by helping regulars to realize some of their aspirations within the confines of military service. The SAF has steadily increased the number of upgrading programs available to

in-service personnel, including in-service scholarships.⁶ Most recently, the introduction of the Military Domain Experts Scheme (MDES) promises to bring more flexibility to career transitions to and from civilian domains, although it

will be several years before its results can be measured. However, the nature of military service means that certain things cannot be altered. While SAF officers may change jobs within the SAF every two to three years (which is quick by international military standards), the job seldom leaves the military domain. Pay raises are incremental rather than explosive, and the expansion of one’s social circle over the course of work is likely to be restricted to other military personnel. By 2000, Huxley could write that “by the mid and late 1990s, the main cause of dissatisfaction among SAF scholars [was] ...

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that the SAF's terms of service were no longer attractive compared to those offered by other employers," even though remuneration and the rate of promotion were very generous.⁷

In sum, the aspirations of post-Generation-Y youth do not gel well with the demands of national defense. The SAF is not alone in this situation—most other developed nations also face serious challenges in recruiting and retaining armed forces personnel. Most of those who do sign on see it not as a calling but as a “good career option” which they are willing to try for a while. Anecdotal evidence that an increasing number of officers are applying for early release directly after the completion of their bonds further supports this assessment.

CHICKEN OR EGG?

In the eyes of foreign critics, the SAF has responded logically, even admirably, to personnel matters in light of Singapore's unique circumstances.⁸ However, the way in which the Ministry of Defense (MINDEF) and the SAF have dealt with the public mindset toward military service has tacitly affirmed these attitudes, further solidifying them.

The “young SAF” policy in particular is a double-edged sword. During recruitment drives, SAF Officer careers are not only advertised as being fast-paced and dynamic, but also as *short enough to allow pursuit of a second career*. Walsh dissects it accurately: “the overall intent is that high-caliber personnel will be more likely to stay in the military if they feel they can accomplish other goals after a full career in the armed services.”⁹ However, this also sends the subtle message that an officer's employability beyond and after the military are to be considered just as important as his military profession. While this mindset may not necessarily dilute an officer's commitment to his professional work



Officer Cadets marching

during a tour of duty, it is likely to produce an aversion towards spending more time in a particular appointment compared to his peers in order to gain more experience.

On a broader social level, the reduction of NS liability in 2004 also has far-reaching and long-term effects. After resisting calls to shorten NS for years,¹⁰ the government reduced the NS liability by 6 months, citing reasons that seemed partly at odds with its earlier defense of the system.¹¹ To be fair, the underlying reasons for the reduction—such as manpower costs and macroeconomic considerations—were probably valid.¹² However, pundits have since taken the opportunity to clamor for further reductions, citing the shortening of military service in other countries as added impetus. This has triggered a slide down the slippery slope, against which the government will have to fight an uphill battle for public understanding of the need for NS, especially after several decades of peace.

BITING THE BULLET

Whether as a result of macro-level changes in society or the side-effects of MINDEF's own policies, it is now extremely difficult on all fronts to extend the regular officer Route-of-Advancement (ROA) at the junior command level (Officer Commanding and below), which is when basic foundational warfighting skills are honed. The recently-introduced Enhanced Officer Scheme



may extend officers' retirement age to 50, but MINDEF was very quick to point out that the ROA would not be slowed down at the junior grades. To MINDEF's credit, this demonstrates an awareness of the junior officer's mindset.

Another factor restricts MINDEF's room for maneuver: a large and increasing number of officers are recruited on scholarship, incorporating a bond of four to six years. What these officers experience during their bond period is likely to determine whether they will stay on after it ends. Hence it is in the SAF's interest to expose them to military life beyond the operational unit, to give them a (hopefully positive) taste of opportunities to come. Army graduate officers typically serve Platoon Commander (PC) and Officer Commanding (OC) tours of just over a year each—during which they may not complete a full training cycle with their NSF platoons—with a staff tour in-between. If PC or OC tours were to be extended, it would only make sense to extend them such that these junior officers complete the two-year training cycles with their NSFs. However extending such tours to two years would mean that within a four-year bond, an Army officer who might have become an OC under the current system

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would barely finish his staff tour. Accordingly, an officer finishing a six-year bond who might have made Battalion Second-in-Command (2IC) would still be an OC. Given the prevailing attitudes towards a military career, this would not help to retain junior officers past their bond periods.

These factors do not mean that it is impossible to extend officer careers and tours of duty. Indeed, with the increased demands on officers in the

Third Generation SAF, it may become absolutely necessary in the future. However, there has to be a clear mandate to do so, whether due to external aggression or after long-term efforts by MINDEF and SAF to make regular military service more attractive. In any case,

this essay will focus instead on the medium-to-short-term challenge of ensuring the warfighting competency of SAF officers within their short tours of duty and recommends a double-faceted approach to this challenge.

ROBUST INSTRUCTION IN PROFESSIONAL WARFIGHTING SKILLS

The first facet of this approach is to focus on imparting professional warfighting skills to the junior officer, through robust instruction in the officer training institutes. Then-CDF LG Desmond Kuek asserted that "the Third Generation Warrior is one who is well-placed to assimilate the new systems and technology and at the same time, possesses the fighting spirit and professional skills on the ground, at sea and in the air."¹³ Professional competency is the very foundation of officer credibility. In the Third Generation SAF, the commander on the ground must have a keen tactical sense to function effectively as part of a distributed and decentralized decision network. In this environment, SAFTI



Officer Cadets on exercise



Military Institute (SAFTI-MI) and other officer training institutes must serve as the cornerstone for officers' professional competency.¹⁴

Walsh, however, offers a troubling assessment of the SAF's training establishment: asserting that "all branches of the SAF are limited by ... an instructional method that reinforces a single prescribed solution and reduces creativity."¹⁵ It is not the goal of this essay to either confirm or refute this assessment, nevertheless, this indictment highlights the key obstacle facing the Third Generation SAF's training institutes.

In years past, the SAF sought help from various other countries in developing training programs that suited the purposes of the First and Second Generation SAF. This knowledge, consolidated from the early years of the SAF, has been evolved over the years to form the bedrock of the organization's training syllabus. However, the Third Generation SAF represents a quantum leap in capability and faces a potential enemy that is both more unpredictable and capable. Hence there is a need to revamp the training syllabus as well as infuse it with more lateral thinking, moving away from prescribed solutions. Some training institutes, equipped to handle the demands of First and Second Generation training, may not have the resources necessary to meet these Third Generation training demands.

Therefore, the training institutes must first of all be supplied with training cadre of sufficient quantity and quality. In the case of officers, competent commanders and officers from frontline units should be rotated through SAFTI-MI so that they bring with them first-hand knowledge of current doctrines and practices, and are in a good position to debate the nuances in a tactical situation. To a great extent, this is already happening, and anecdotal evidence suggests that this is bearing fruit.¹⁶

Second, the training institutes must be have adequate training resources at their disposal, such as sufficient time on up-to-date simulators or even exercises with active units. Training with active units has the added advantage of getting a "reality check," a chance to experience how the techniques learned in school apply to the real world. However, equipment allocated for training purposes is sometimes outdated and operational units often find it difficult to give priority to training exercises or sorties. The SAF may need to explore designating specific units to facilitate phases of officer training or allocating dedicated assets to support their training needs.

Finally, the training institutes should carefully consider if the time allotted to training courses is sufficient. The duration of many training courses offered at SAFTI-MI has stayed the same for many years and some courses have even been truncated in length. This is clearly at odds with the increased operational demands that are and will be placed on junior officers. The SAF needs to conscientiously examine if there is a need to prolong training courses, and if so make the necessary but painful changes to accommodate this.

REALISTIC TRAINING

Robust instruction in the schoolhouse is not only an end in itself, but also equips junior officers with the tools to make the best of subsequent training within their operational units. In fact, this essay proposes that tough and realistic training is the second vital facet of optimizing the SAF officer's short career. Yet popular repetition of the term "tough and realistic training" may trivialize what it truly entails.

The SAF leadership handbook implies that, in order to achieve battle success, the first priority in peacetime training is that "training



must be tough and realistic.”¹⁷ This is a familiar refrain from many SAF commanders, senior and junior alike. To some extent, this is true of the SAF’s training. If we evaluate an exercise in terms of how many days a unit spends in the field, how many different assets were coordinated to achieve an objective and so on, at least parts of the SAF’s training can be considered tough or realistic.

However, such statistics miss the point of what *type* of toughness and realism needs to be present. To paraphrase German Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, “No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy.”¹⁸ Far from being an excuse to not plan a battle, it is an admonishment to expect the unexpected even with the best laid battle plans. The true test of a commander comes not when a plan goes right, but when a plan goes wrong.

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With regards to officer training, it is important to infuse a degree of uncertainty and tactical free-play into peacetime exercises for two main reasons. Firstly, as Captain Adolf von Schell remarked in the classic work *Battle Leadership*, “it is certainly evident from training in peace that the more freedom allowed a subordinate leader in his training, the better the result will be ... because he is made responsible for results and allowed to achieve them in his own way.”¹⁹ With a strong foundation from the schoolhouse, the junior officer can be trusted to do his best in a tactical freeplay scenario, boosting his confidence and maximizing his training benefit along the way.

Secondly, uncertainty and potential setbacks in a peacetime exercise offer the invaluable opportunity for junior officers to exercise personal mastery in adversity. In the *POINTER* monograph *On Command*, former CAF MG Ng Chee Khern wrote that “to master these challenges [of Command], we must master ourselves ... it is only when the commander exudes confidence in the face of setbacks that it can transmit itself to the rest of the squadron.”²⁰ Minimizing the chances of failure through detailed scripting at all levels may achieve a “smooth” exercise, but potentially robs many commanders, junior and senior alike, of valuable learning opportunities.

Thus, the two facets of robust instruction in the schoolhouse and realistic training in the “trenches” work hand-in-hand to achieve a synergy of purpose that help to optimize the time available for officer training.

CONCLUSION

The SAF as a military organization is unique in the challenges it faces in building a professional regular officer corps. Popular perceptions of military service and NS, coupled with socioeconomic factors relating to post-generation-Y attitudes, make it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain talent. For similar reasons, it would probably prove disastrous for recruitment and retention if the SAF suddenly increased the length of officers’ careers and tours. Over time however, it may become necessary to extend officers’ careers and tours in order to build and retain professional competency in a rapidly evolving Third Generation SAF. Initiatives like the Enhanced Officers’ Scheme may yet prove to be a stepping stone toward this endeavor, helping to change attitudes or expectations incrementally.



In the medium-to-near-term, the SAF has no choice but to optimize the short time available to build a good foundation of professional competence in its junior officers. The focus of this effort should be to combine robust instruction in the SAF's officer training institutes, particularly SAFTI-MI, with realistic training in operational units that allows junior commanders to exercise discretion in tactical freeplay scenarios. While the SAF has encountered both internal and external criticism in these areas, there is evidence to show that it is slowly moving towards such a training philosophy. Nevertheless, the SAF needs to accelerate the evolution of its training methods to better match the rapid development of its Third Generation capabilities, and bolster this effort by allocating sufficient human and material resources to training. 🌐

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2. Sean P. Walsh, "The Roar of the Lion City: Ethnicity, Gender and Culture in the Singapore Armed Forces," *Armed Forces and Society* 33, no. 2 (2007): 201.
3. As documented by Huxley, then-Defense Minister Yeo Ning Hong remarked in 1992 that there had been a "dramatic change" in Singaporeans' attitudes toward NS. Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 94.
4. Walsh, "The Roar of the Lion City," 270.
5. "Have Skills – Want Travel," Human Resource Management Asia, 5 April 2009, <http://www.hrmasia.com/resources/relocation/have-skills-want-travel/36372>.
6. Yet many shy away from upgrading schemes that incorporate an additional bond period, which may exacerbate professional and social immobility in the long run.
7. Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, 112.
8. Ibid., 112 and Walsh, "The Roar of the Lion City," 281.
9. Walsh, "The Roar of the Lion City," 267.
10. Comments made in the 1990s by then-2M BG Lee and then-MOS for Defense Matthias Yao cited the time needed to learn how to operate increasingly sophisticated weapon systems as one of the reasons for keeping NS at 2.5 years. Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, 94.
11. The advent of the Third Generation SAF, with leaner manpower, was cited as a key reason. However, if 2.5 years were previously needed to train a serviceman in sophisticated weapon systems, logically more time would be needed to train him in even more sophisticated weapon systems in a leaner manpower environment. Keith Lim, "Full-Time NS Cut by Six Months – Third Generation SAF,



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12. This is the author's own view, but is supported by Huxley's observation (even when NS was 2.5 years long) that "fearing the negative economic (and possibly political) impact of increasing the length of NS, the government chose to use smaller NSF cohorts more efficiently." Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, 94.
13. Desmond Kuek, "Leadership for Our Times," in *Reflections on Leadership*, ed. Sally Ho (Singapore: *POINTER*, 2009), 3.
14. Ng, "Developing Future Leaders," 197.
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