



INTRODUCTION

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THE CREATION OF THE SAF in 1965 was a crucial defining moment. Singapore had to build a credible defence force, and establish our own security capability, without which we would not have been able to attract foreign investment and move on with our economic development to survive. And we had to do it swiftly.

After being part of the Malaysian Federation from 1963 for just two years, Singapore became independent. We were left with the 1st and 2nd Battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment (1 SIR and 2 SIR). However, they were not actually two but, in effect, one and a half battalions of Regulars, as the other half were comprised of Malaysians. They were given the option to stay or return to Malaysia, but few chose to stay. We had some ancillary units made up of a few Singaporeans after the Malaysians left, but they were small in size. We felt so naked. At the time of our forced separation from Malaysia in August 1965, I was a 24-year-old captain in 1 SIR.

Then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and then-Minister for Defence Dr Goh Keng Swee were determined to push on with creating an armed force, so Singapore went out to seek assistance from other nations. The Israeli Defence Force agreed to be our advisors and came up with a plan to expedite the creation of the army. And so, the Singapore Armed Forces was built up quickly – making do with what we had, and building from there.

The Israeli advisors started by training a core of Singaporean personnel through a series of what was termed a “Prep Course”. The officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) forming this core came from 1 SIR and 2 SIR, together with mobilised volunteers from the Singapore Volunteer Corps, and even officers from the Singapore Police Force. After completing the “Prep Course”, these officers and NCOs were deployed as instructors and staff officers to the various headquarters.

The SAF Training Institute (SAFTI) was established to train the officers and NCOs for the SAF. In 1966, the first batch of regular officer cadets were recruited and trained in the Officer Cadet School (OCS) in SAFTI. In 1967, 3 SIR and 4 SIR were formed with the first group of National Servicemen. With the foundation for the infantry settled, the support arms were formed, made up of the artillery, engineers, signals and, later on, armour. The Army was supported with logistics made up of second-hand vehicles and surplus equipment, bought over from what the British Army had left behind. The Navy started with mobilised personnel from the Singapore Naval Volunteer Reserve and two boats – one steel, one wooden. The Air Force started almost from scratch. The pilots were all Regulars and had their flying

[FACING]
3 BDE on
exercise at
SAFTI training
area, 1969.

training in Britain. On their return, they flew fighters bought second-hand from the British. All three Services wore the same Temasek green uniform. Dr Goh wanted Singapore to start a defence industry to support our build-up, and ensure some degree of security in supply of munitions and weapons, and also to boost our capability in providing for our military needs. So Singapore went on to make its own weapons, starting with the Colt AR15 assault rifles, manufactured under licence.

National Service (NS) was not well received at first – there is a Chinese saying that good sons do not become soldiers, just as good iron is not made into nails. But our political leaders worked hard to convince the public. This was not a military but a national issue. Members of Parliament, including Ong Pang Boon, Othman Wok and Jek Yuen Tong, who were Ministers, joined the People’s Defence Force to show that there was nothing wrong with being a soldier. Constituency farewell dinners were held to send off enlistees. It was a national priority to make NS acceptable. Through National Education efforts, we had to give the conscripts a sense that what they were doing was important and meaningful. Many of the NSmen were the “Hokkien *peng* (soldiers)”, most of whom had only primary school education. Some of the regular NCOs – from the old 1 SIR and 2 SIR – who trained them had to learn to speak Hokkien. Communicating, and especially scolding, in Hokkien was the only effective way.

It was a tough time. What we had was a hodge-podge of people from different backgrounds, and educational and training systems. It was a difficult environment to operate in, to push for the professional aspects of the military. It was a constant daily battle to get others to see where the military, a fledgling outfit, should stand in the whole scheme of things, in what was essentially a civilian-dominated defence establishment in particular, and in the government as a whole.

I was 33 years old and a colonel when I became Director General Staff in 1974. I had to deal with Israeli officers who helped us build up our land forces, the British officers for our Air Force, and the New Zealand advisors for our Navy. One of the British Air Force officers, who was the senior Air Staff Officer, held a rank equivalent to a one-star General; I was outranked although I was his senior in appointment. All this complicated the issue, and I often likened myself to the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN). I had to have my wits about me as I balanced between playing hardball and making concessions some of the time.

Similarly, it was important to balance between pushing your men hard and being approachable at the same time. From when I was a platoon commander to when I became Chief of Defence Force, I always had an open-door policy. To win the respect of your men, you must keep your office door open for them. You have to listen to them and help them without breaking the chain of command. The less knowledgeable they are, the more you have to listen to them and go into the trench with them and talk to them when they have blisters on their hands from digging. You don’t earn respect if you just come along with your swagger stick and pipe; it doesn’t work that way. Leadership, to me, is about being ready to cross a river three times with your men, if the situation requires it, even when you are the brigade commander.

We all want to have the best system possible for the SAF. From its early days, the SAF has learnt a lot from other militaries. We send our cadets and officers all over the world to be trained, including the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. But what sets the SAF apart is how it adapts, instead of simply adopting. This is our DNA. Because the bulk of our forces are conscripts – and this is unique to us – our system to manage the troops must always be dynamic, to adjust in accordance with the people we have.

The SAF is unlike larger militaries like the US forces. For them, the scale they work with is totally different. For us, we always look at what we can do without that kind of scale, working with what we can afford. But even as we work within our constraints of finite resources and training time, such as to see

how to shorten in-camp training stints, we also know that there is a limit to what we can snip. There is no shortcut to developing human capabilities. For example, soldiers need time to become good at tasks that require psycho-motor dexterity and practice, such as stripping a rifle, rather than just IQ and knowledge.

The SAF has grown to become the only agency that has the strength and capabilities to take up key roles when needed by our people and country in crisis situations and large-scale events. These occasions include dealing with the *Laju* hijack in 1974, the explosion on the Greek tanker *Spyros* at Jurong Shipyard in 1978, the organisational challenge of rescuing trapped passengers during the cable car accident at Sentosa in 1983, and the recapture at Changi Airport of flight SQ117 from hijackers in 1991 and the release of all passengers unharmed. A story not well known about the Hotel New World collapse in 1986 is that of the SAF’s chief medical officer who crawled in with a hand-powered saw to amputate the leg of a victim pinned under the rubble in order to get him out. Even closing Orchard Road for events like Swing Singapore in the 1990s needed the organisational capability and resources of the SAF. More recently, the SAF has begun to make a difference overseas as well, such as in Indonesia in the wake of the Asian tsunami in 2004. Codenamed “Operation Flying Eagle”, it was the SAF’s largest humanitarian and disaster relief mission which involved all three Services.

To me, what is most satisfying about my time in the SAF is the acceptance and acknowledgement by defence professionals around the world of our small Armed Forces that have shown themselves time and again to be capable in joint exercises and operations. We started with small bilateral exercises with countries in the Five Power Defence Arrangements. We built our reputation over the years, and made ourselves a credible partner in joint exercises and even UN and multinational operations. At home, as more sons and fathers have been through NS and served in the SAF, Singaporeans have come to accept, and are proud of, an SAF that is a respected force, always seeking to improve itself, and always there for the nation.

What remains true is that technology and hardware cannot replace boots on the ground. The most important factor in the equation is the well-trained, motivated soldier who can give you the edge over your adversary. You cannot win a battle until you can hold the ground. To be motivated, servicemen must have a cause, to help ensure Singapore’s survival and success. They must believe in the SAF and they must love and want to defend their nation. For each day that Singapore does not go to war, the SAF would have achieved its mission. But in order to do that, first, we have to prepare to go to war. For me, this will always be the *raison d’être* of the SAF.