

A Nation of Improbable but Implacable Soldiers

National defence may be the primary purpose of NS, but that does not mean that its role in character-building is unimportant

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WHETHER the future of National Service as a credible defence institution?

That seems to be the key poser from last week's Institute of Policy Studies survey's finding that national service (NS) means more to citizens as a way of instilling discipline and values among the young than as a pillar of national defence.

The study, which canvassed views on NS through 1,251 face-to-face interviews, found that more than nine out of 10 respondents supported the rite of passage.

It is a clear endorsement in the first-ever independent study to be done after 46 years and the enlistment of more than 900,000 men.

Respondents were asked to grade eight different purposes on a scale of one (not important at all) to six (extremely important).

Inculcating values was rated at an average of 4.9, edging out national defence, which was rated at 4.86. Also ranked highly were social factors such as transforming boys to men, building a unique Singaporean identity and promoting understanding among people from different backgrounds.

This has led to some hand-wringing among older NSmen and citizens. Many now wonder if the NS rite of passage has become a two-year enrichment or character-development course instead.

They argue that the sole justification for introducing compulsory military service in 1967 was to build up a defence force that will provide "maximum security at minimum cost".

NS, as Mr Gerard Ong argued in his letter to The Straits Times Forum on Tuesday, is meant to train national servicemen to fight to win. Lessons of discipline and values that came with the training were incidental, being part and parcel of military life.

He wrote: "We came in wanting to be fighters, not disciplined team players, which we had already learnt how to be by playing team sports or joining school uniformed groups."

This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma for NS today. Should it buttress its core purpose of building up a defence force at minimum cost? Or should social factors like instilling discipline in successive generations play a role?

Defence still the core

IN FACT, defence remains the *raison d'être* of NS.

That NS is now viewed more as an instiller of social values does not take national servicemen away from the core business of defending Singapore's shores and borders and guaranteeing the country's survival.

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen has said previously that NS is meant to meet a critical national need, not to fulfil social goals.

Indeed, the Republic spends billions of dollars every year equipping a modern “third-generation” fighting force. Besides adding new warplanes and tanks to the arsenal, the government also ensures that soldiers undergo tough combat drills under realistic training environments that mimic today’s battlefields.

These efforts, along with building friendly ties with its neighbours, have allowed Singapore to deter potential aggressors in a volatile region. Invariably, this has also made NS a victim of its own success. National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser noted that most people now perceive the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) as a “peacetime army that is dealing with no real imminent threat”.

But despite the more benign environment, people still hold NS and the SAF to its defence edict. Ninety-eight per cent of respondents in the IPS survey agreed that NS is necessary for the defence of the country. But even in the 1960s and 1970s, the nation’s defence thinkers had in mind that NS would fulfil more than just military aims.

Dr Goh Keng Swee, in asking Parliament to pass the National Service Bill in 1967, also said the four NS branches – the full-time army, the People’s Defence Force, the Vigilante Corps and the Special Constabulary – do not only teach technical skills to national servicemen but also instruct moral values.

“This will teach them what good citizenship means and explain the nature of their social responsibilities.”

They would also form what then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in a 1967 speech called a “reservoir of people who understand discipline, who know the mechanics of self-defence, and who can in an emergency help to defend their own country”.

Digital native soldiers

GONE are the days when you build a man by first breaking him down. Today’s citizen soldiers are digital natives who are smarter, learn faster and are more adaptive.

They learn values in schools as well as in training sheds, as the SAF is already investing time and resources in character-building lessons, through which commanders instil values such as moral resolve, resilience and self-awareness in soldiers.

These enlistees report for duty with their perceptions and prejudices. So it is, as then Defence Minister Goh Keng Swee put it in his 1971 speech at the Armed Forces Day parade, “silly to do nothing in the hope that the matters will right themselves”.

As borne out by the IPS survey, people expect NS to be more than just a defence deterrent.

As former defence chief Bey Soo Khiang once said, the SAF teaches Singaporeans of different races, creeds, classes and education to train and live together.

If NS is looked upon so reverentially as a rite of passage, then it does not lie far beyond this institution’s remit to shoulder a heavier social responsibility.

Simply put, citizen soldiers are not merely vigilant guardians of the country. They also have to be examples of good citizenship.

Critics also forget that behind every weapon or war machine beats the fighting heart and soul of a committed individual soldier. Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz defined war as a contest of opposing wills. Victory goes to the side with the stronger will to win.

Improbable soldiers

DR GOH once said that his impression of the national servicemen he encountered at the entrances of military camps was that they were “improbable soldiers”.

He concluded in his 1978 introduction to *Youth In The Army* that they were “bespectacled youth of slender proportions, ill at ease in an unaccustomed environment but trying to conceal it”.

Today, however, NSmen are regarded as thinking, tech-savvy soldiers who are smarter, more adaptive and more confident. They have even made a difference abroad, serving alongside career soldiers in overseas peace support and humanitarian relief missions.

In the last 11 years, many have volunteered for tours of duty in trouble spots such as Timor Leste, Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden.

Looking back at my own full-time NS experience 13 years ago, I may have been that “improbable” soldier.

As a nervous 18-year-old recruit, I wasn’t the fittest of the lot. I scraped through Basic Military Training and made it to what is known today as the Specialist Cadet School to be trained as a Third-Sergeant.

But an ankle injury put me out and I was medically downgraded. For the rest of the two-and-a-half-year stint, I served as an administrative clerk doing paperwork and being involved in setting up a clubhouse for warrant officers and specialists.

Memories of those brief hot, sweaty training days – which included being dressed down by stern commanders, and endless hours on rifle ranges – have faded. But I remember very well the lessons of discipline, duty, respect, teamwork and of mustering myself, and my relationship with others.

I may have learnt a thing or two about soldiering, but the invaluable character-building lessons are what have moulded me into one of the Singaporean sons who form the backbone of the armed forces.

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