

A Powerful Military and Social Force

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

Jermyn Chow

The Straits Times, 9 October 2013

THAT more than 98 per cent of respondents in the first-ever independent survey on national service support the rite of passage may come as a surprise.

Even the top brass of the Defence Ministry and Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), including members of the Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS), did a double-take and scrutinised the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey to ascertain its veracity.

After all, the same question on whether respondents supported national service (NS) had scored lower (though still more than 90 per cent) in previous annual surveys done by the ministry itself.

Then there are the anxious parents and disgruntled citizen soldiers - full-time national servicemen (NSFs) and operationally-ready national servicemen (NSmen) who have to be recalled for in-camp training - whose grouses are amplified in online forums and social media.

But even given this popular perception that people are resigned to NS rather than embrace it, National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser wasn't surprised by the findings.

Dr Tan, who was not involved in the study, said Singaporeans rated the value of NS highly because they have accepted it as a Singaporean way of life.

A previous IPS survey had also found that 69 per cent of locals felt having a male child who had completed NS was an important characteristic of being "Singaporean". It is also backed by the 1,251 respondents from the latest survey who thought NS was more about instilling discipline and values in young men than national security and survival.

Despite the 0.04 score difference between both factors (see table), the finding confirms that NS may have evolved to become as important an instrument for social change as it is a war-fighting unit.

After 46 years and more than 900,000 enlisted men, this familiar rite of passage would undeniably mean many things to many Singaporeans.

But young men - regardless of background or status - are no longer reporting for duty just to bear rifles, learn how to shoot targets and overrun battle obstacles. Today, our men in green are stepping into a social distillery, where they spend two years stiffening their spines and learning to get along.

But does the public perception of NS being a social leveller take soldiers away from the core business of military operations?

Not likely, even as CSNS members pore over the findings, mull over and submit proposals to the Government on how to improve the commitment to NS.

Back in 1967, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's pitch to the nation for conscription was: "It will take many years - perhaps five, perhaps seven, perhaps 10 years - before we can get the whole machine into gear. But in the end, every boy and girl here will understand that what he or she has in Singapore, he or she must be prepared to fight and defend. Otherwise, it will be lost."

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

In his 2010 and 2011 parliamentary speeches as then second defence minister, he said that extending NS beyond its traditional remit would dilute its core purpose of maintaining national security and Singapore's survival.

But as the SAF continues to tighten its grip on its mission to train warriors and machines to fight increasingly complicated and difficult enemies, it should be aware that it is a powerful engine for social change - a message that could also provide an antidote to any remaining perceptions about NS being a necessary evil.

It seems that the country's first defence minister, Dr Goh Keng Swee, was prescient when, in asking Parliament to pass the National Service Bill in 1967, he said: "Nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more speedily and more thoroughly than participation in defence and membership of the armed forces."

jermync@sph.com.sg