

## **Get National Servicemen to Volunteer for Overseas Missions**

**The utilisation of the nation's citizen-soldiers on military operations overseas is the ultimate yardstick of how operationally-ready they really are and a glimpse into the state of national service.**

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The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) will soon embark on another mission to the Middle East, this time in the United States-led coalition against the Sunni extremist group, the Islamic State. This will be the Republic's fourth foray to address concerns in Iraq and the concomitant security implications of neighbouring areas. This undertaking will highlight that although national servicemen stand ready to volunteer and serve, their participation on overseas missions may yet prove to be aberrations in the chronicles of Singapore's military history.

The first Iraq-related deployment came with Operation Nightingale (1991) when a 30-strong SAF medical contingent augmented a British military hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, during the Gulf War. Eight of the soldiers deployed were national servicemen — both “fulltime” conscripts (i.e. NSF's) and “reservists” (i.e. NSmen) — who together with their regular counterparts carried out their duties with distinction. Besides treating patients, they braved the threat of more than three dozen Iraqi Scud missiles.

The SAF embarked on Operation Blue Torch as part of the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) immediately after Kuwait's liberation in 1991. A watershed moment took place in April 1993 when Captain (NS) Chia Wee Meng volunteered for a six-month tour, making him the first NSman deployed on a UN mission. This was no token gesture as other NSmen stepped forward and comprised a quarter or more of the 88 SAF officers eventually deployed in 14 observer teams from 1991 to 2003. One NSman was even awarded the prestigious SAF Medal for Distinguished Act in 1997.

The deployment of those NSmen overseas was the culmination of a deliberate politico-military effort to etch the image of NSmen as frontline troops into the minds of Singaporeans and foreigners alike. In 1982, the Ministry of Defence clearly underlined its expectation that reservist and volunteer officers be as good as regular officers holding the same appointments, since in operations they have to perform equally well.

Mr Matthias Yao, then-Parliamentary Secretary (Defence), cogently explained the rationale in a 1993 issue of *Pioneer* magazine that “allowing reservists to take part in these missions will build rapport between them and the regulars, and help make the SAF more professional. As the SAF matures, our regulars and reservists need to have common and shared experiences to reinforce the bond that has been growing”.

It was paramount to show that the 1994 change in nomenclature from “reservist” to “operationally-ready NSman” was not a perfunctory undertaking. The litmus test was unsurprisingly not on paper, in speeches or the results of social surveys, but in the area of operations.

However, national servicemen have proven to be almost a non-feature in recently concluded operations. On the SAF's third foray to Iraq, it seems only one NSF was among the 998 personnel deployed on Operation Blue Orchid (2003-08) to aid in the country's reconstruction. NSmen fared no better on Operation Blue Ridge (2007-13) in Afghanistan — heralded as the SAF's longest overseas deployment — accounting for only three of the 492 veterans.

It is uncertain if these figures reflect a deliberate shift in personnel preference of national servicemen or if there are other factors involved.

What is clear is that Singaporeans' commitment to national service remains very strong. In a 2013 survey of over 1,200 Singaporeans by the Institute of Policy Studies, more than 98 per cent of the respondents say that national defence is critical for national defence and for securing Singapore's peace and prosperity.

### **GAUGING NATIONAL SERVICEMEN'S READINESS**

One possible initiative to recapture the momentum of days past is to establish an official unit specially designed for national servicemen to express interest and, ultimately, to volunteer and serve on missions overseas. Those selected must naturally meet strict eligibility criteria, maintain a high state of readiness and be available for deployment(s) on short notice.

These volunteers must undertake additional training above their national service duties in preparation for peace-support operations, humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of disasters or post-conflict reconstruction. In return, they constitute a pool of motivated personnel and augment the military establishment's "high-readiness core" to be mobilised when the need arises.

Such an initiative has been established in other conscript militaries. For example, the Finns — for whom the longest period of full-time conscription is 362 days — have a Rapid Deployment Force designed for contingencies. Its conscript members are all volunteers and the brigade-sized task force has earned distinction when deployed.

The very idea of such a volunteer unit within the SAF will certainly draw flak from risk-averse apparatchiks, defence iconoclasts and "opinion snipers" in cyberspace. However, those who truly matter are the citizen-soldiers who have the heart to serve "above and beyond". If non-NS-liable individuals are able to step up and serve through the recently established SAF Volunteer Corps, then national servicemen must also be able to go the extra mile besides simply volunteering to serve beyond statutory age and time limits.

The utilisation of the nation's citizen-soldiers on military operations overseas is the ultimate yardstick of how operationally-ready they really are and a glimpse into the state of national service. After all, they cannot be both frontline and second-tier soldiers at once.

They cannot be expected to shoulder the bulk of the risk in war and not be apportioned a piece of operations when less is at stake.

However, Singapore can be confident that national servicemen will step forward and volunteer to serve on the SAF's fourth journey to the Middle East. This is because the "one SAF" is not an "image", but a reality. It is also because societal commitment to national service is strong, as last year's survey by the Institute of Policy Studies attested.

Most importantly, such actions inspire confidence and strengthen commitment to NS among future generations of national servicemen, who will serve with distinction on the overseas deployments of tomorrow.