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Making Things Right: Retrospective Honours for Distinguished Acts

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Synopsis

People are at the heart of the defence of Singapore. Many serve with distinction and at times go beyond and above the call of duty. Time and administration must not be a barrier to the recognition of such distinguished acts of the past.

Commentary

THE SINGAPORE Armed Forces (SAF) draws strength not from the hardware that makes it the most technologically-advanced in the South East Asian region. Rather it is the 'heart-ware' depicted in the dedication of its people that makes the outfit formidable. To paraphrase George Orwell, Singapore sleeps peacefully at night only because the men and women of the SAF stand ready to act – with force if need be – on its behalf.

The epitome of dedication lies not with the senior civilian officials who run military policy, administration, and technology. Nor is this virtue confined to the generals and admirals at the summit of the chain of command. While their work is commendable and essential in maintaining the SAF's edge, the essence of dedication lies with those who are willing and have put their lives on the line when the stakes are highest.

Men of honour

The SAF has many such individuals despite its relatively short history and limited operational exposure. The 1998 heroic act of Lieutenant-Colonel (LTC) Lo Yong Poo in the evacuation of United Nations (UN) staff members from Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan is well documented. That same year, an Operationally-Ready National Serviceman (or'reservist') Captain Kok Yin Khong evacuated a wounded UN colleague to safety, even as their observation post along the demilitarised Iraq-Kuwait border came under a barrage of automatic fire.

Then there was the 1997 explosion caused by a faulty artillery fuse during live firing in New Zealand that claimed the lives of Third Sergeant Ronnie Tan Han Chong and Lance Corporal Low Yin Tit, two fulltime national service (NSF) gunners from the 23rd Battalion, Singapore Artillery. LTC Toh Boh Kwee, First Warrant Officer Mohinder Singh, First Sergeant Teo Boon Hong, and Lieutenant Leroy Forrester (New Zealand Defence Force) would all put their lives on the line that day to contain the tragedy.

Finally, there is the 2008 example of Second-Lieutenant (2LT) Kok Khew Fai, a platoon commander (PC) in charge of basic military training. A recruit's attempt to throw a hand grenade forward flew backward instead. As

a safety officer, Kok pulled the stunned recruit to the ground and covered him from the impending explosion. Thankfully the design of the throwing bay protected both from the grenade blast fragments. This would be the sixth recorded incident involving grenade live throws in 45 years of national service.

Retrospective honours for distinguished acts?

All the individuals mentioned above were decorated with the SAF Medal for Distinguished Act as a testament of their actions and dedication. Each one earned their right to the award without looking for it in the first place. But what of those in the past whose actions warrant an equal, if not greater, recognition of dedication? Consider the following three examples.

In the same vein as 2LT Kok one can cite the actions of LTA Teo Yong Chi on 22 May 1996 at Pulau Tekong's grenade range. Teo pulled a recruit to safety as a live grenade slipped from the latter's hands and detonated in the throwing bay. Both officer and recruit walked away physically unscathed while the live throw was cancelled. Teo later received a Certificate of Commendation from the Chief of Army on 28 June 1996.

Before 2LT Kok and LTA Teo there was the distinguished action of 2LT Tay Seow Kai when a recruit fumbled with a grenade during live practice on 26 August 1970. The watchful 21 year-old platoon commander snatched the grenade to shield his recruits from danger. The ensuing detonation fatally wounded Tay but his selfless action saved two recruits that fateful day. He was buried in Chua Chu Kang Cemetery with full military honours on 28 August 1970.

Similarly, one must also remember the distinguished action of 2LT Zulhelmi Said on 3 August 1996 as storm clouds formed overhead while the 3rd Battalion, Singapore Guards, was on exercise in Lim Chu Kang. As commander of platoon 5, Bravo company, Zulhelmi went out of his way to ensure the safety of all his men. By a cruel twist of fate a bolt of lightning would take his life but Zulhelmi exemplified the SAF core values of 'leadership' - 'professionalism', and 'care for soldiers'. On 25 March 1997 the Army Chief presented Zulhelmi's father with a Certificate of Commendation.

Sending a clear message

The actions of Lieutenants Teo, Tay, and Zulhelmi are also testaments to the dedicated individuals found in the SAF. Their devotion to duty does not pale in comparison to those awarded the SAF Medal for Distinguished Act. Perhaps, they only failed to qualify for the decoration by virtue of time and administration. In fact, it can be argued that these three examples warrant the retrospective award of (or upgrade to) the medal.

By making this so the defence establishment would be sending a clear message that dedication to service is valued and will never be forgotten. It will speak volumes that individual commitment to defence will be recognised and acknowledged consistently regardless of era, and that time does not age or separate distinguished acts. This is especially poignant as the SAF undertakes a relentless schedule of operations and exercises both domestically and internationally.

Honouring these past deeds in a consistent manner is part and parcel of doing the right things. This goes beyond the medal as an object and heraldry as a system. It delves into the very heart of what makes the SAF strong – the people and its values. This SAF Day on 1 July would be an opportunity to make things right.

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