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Singaporean Heroes in Uniform: They are amongst us

By Ong Weichong

Synopsis

Singapore needs its own brand of heroism; the deeds of its post-65 heroes and heroines in uniform can inspire future generations.

Commentary

IN A recent focus group discussion held by the Committee to Strengthen National Service, Second Minister for Defence Chan Chun Sing said: "We can do everything well, but if we cannot settle this issue of why we are wearing the uniform...all the other things are meaningless." The 'why we wear the uniform' question is not new – but the social norms and values of those who wear the uniform will have a fundamental bearing on the 'reason why'.

In the case of the British Army for centuries the regimental system has been the conduit of military lessons, experience and traditions passed on from one generation of soldiers to the next – and more importantly it is the sinew that provided cohesion in the face of battle. Even today, British regiment messes and museums are adorned with battle honours of the regiment as a collective - and of its individual war heroes.

Defining a Singaporean Brand of Heroism

In the case of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), there is no equivalent of a regimental system, nor has independent Singapore been involved in any wars, but that does not mean that there is an absence of an identity that binds - or even heroes in uniform. In fact, there are Singaporean heroes and heroines in uniform both in the SAF and Home Team. Their stories can form the basis of Singapore's post-1965 collective memory and narrative that inspire future generations of servicemen and women.

Rather than simply appropriate war heroes from Singapore's colonial and pre-independence past, Singapore's post-65 recent past offers prime examples of heroism that present and future generations of Singaporeans can relate to and draw inspiration from. In particular, there is a need to define a brand of heroism that younger generations of Singaporeans can relate to. A brand of heroism that moves beyond the grand events and great personalities of a distant past to one that speaks to an average present-day 18 year old National Serviceman.

What is required is a brand of heroism that draws on the deeds of servicemen and women who have carried the service identity card, better known as the '11B'. In short, a brand of heroism defined by Singaporeans who have

carried the 11B for Singaporeans who are carrying the 11B. For that, we do not have to dig too far back in Singapore's recent past to locate these post-65 heroes and heroines. In fact, they are very much alive and well amongst us in 21st century Singapore.

Singapore's Post-1965 Heroes and Heroines

In the recent Committee of Inquiry (COI) hearings on the Little India riots, the bravery and tenacity of Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) Lieutenant (LT) Tiffany Neo and her five-man team in handling a potentially explosive situation came to light. The following excerpt from a New Paper report may read like a movie script from a distant land but these were the real-time actions of LT Neo and her five-man team:

“As the crowd started to throw things, [LT Neo] calmly directed her men...After the body had been put in the ambulance...Lt Neo returned to the vehicle...SCDF officers then surrounded Madam Wong, the time-keeper, and Mr Lee, the bus driver,, guiding them towards a nearby ambulance while police officers protected them with shields. Along the way to the ambulance, one of the SCDF officers, Corporal Muhammad Mahadhir, was hit in the ribs by a projectile...Lt Neo, two SCDF officers and two policemen with shields stayed with him...By now, the pain was so intense that Cpl Mahadhir could not stand up, and the mob was still pelting the officers. At that moment, she saw a passing police car and she stopped the vehicle...The other two SCDF officers carried Cpl Mahadhir to the car...It was then that she decided the SCDF officers should leave the scene since “we were done with our duty”.”

In March 2013, the quick thinking and selfless reactions of Second Lieutenant (2LT) Kamalasivam s/o Shanmuganathan possibly saved the life of a Recruit under his charge in a live hand grenade training incident. The official MINDEF press release of the incident reads:

“REC Abdul Hamid accidentally released the hand grenade lever while pulling out the safety pin. 2LT Kamalasivam, the Safety Officer, immediately instructed REC Abdul Hamid to throw the grenade towards the designated impact area. 2LT Kamalasivam then pulled REC Abdul Hamid down to take cover in the grenade throwing bay and shielded him. The grenade detonated in mid-air away from the bay. REC Abdul Hamid sustained an injury to a finger on his right hand while 2LT Kamalasivam was injured on his left shoulder.”

For his actions, 2LT Kamalasivam received the SAF Medal for Distinguished Act. The selflessness, bravery and cool judgement of both LT Neo and 2LT Kamalasivam are just two of the more recent stories of Singaporeans in uniform that inspire.

In *The Battle for Merger*, Former Prime Minister Lew Kuan Yew wrote: “My colleagues and I are of that generation of young men who...emerged determined that...we could govern ourselves and bring up our children in a country where we can be proud to be self-respecting people.” LT Neo and 2LT Kamalasivam may not be war heroes, but they are Singaporean heroes in uniform whose extraordinary deeds tell a distinctly Singaporean tale of heroism that an average self-respecting Singaporean can be proud to call his or her own.

As Singapore approaches her 50th birthday, Singaporeans can have greater self-confidence in defining a Singapore brand of heroism – one that is rooted in the deeds and values of Singapore's very own servicemen and women who carry the 11B.

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