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No. 107/2010 dated 3 September 2010

National Service in Singapore: Rewarding the Positive - Minded

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Synopsis

A kaleidoscope of benefits has been initiated to reward National Servicemen. There are, however, those for whom monetary compensation pales in comparison to the reward of service fulfilment. Harnessing such positive intentions might prove mutually beneficial to the defence establishment.

Commentary

THE RECENT announcement of the National Service Recognition Awards (NSRA) is another leap forward in recognising and rewarding the nation's citizen soldiers. The initiative joins a plethora of benefits provided since National Service (NS) was instituted as a rite of passage for Singaporean males 43 years ago. The innovation behind the NSRA lies in rewarding individuals for services rendered during two years of full-time military service spent mastering various combat skills and thereafter as the backbone of Singapore's defence. The question is: "Can more be done?"

Three Types of Attitudes in NS

The efforts and sacrifices of Fulltime National Servicemen (NSFs) and Operationally Ready National Servicemen (ORNSmen) – known colloquially as 'reservists' – are continually noticed. The Ministry of Defence established the aptly named "Recognising the Contribution of Operationally Ready NSMen to Total Defence (RECORD)" committee as a means to recognise and reward NS contributions. RECORD committees – which include civilian and military (both career and NS) representatives – have since its inauguration in 1990 convened every five years to remain current and relevant.

The benefits to NSFs and ORNSMen have in turn grown exponentially over the years and reflect both the dedication and hard work of RECORD. The current plethora includes increasing monetary allowances across a range of categories (rank, combat, command); tax allowances; Internet facilities in camps; family recognition vouchers; improved physical fitness facilities; additional allocations in growth dividend schemes; leisure facilities; allowances for key appointment holders, and individual recognitions such as 'NSmen / NSF of the Year' awards.

Most of these benefits, however, often reward NSFs and ORNSMen for "turning up" and seldom differentiate between the motley arrays of attitudes they harbour toward NS. It is comforting to believe in a uniformly motivated army of citizen soldiers, but this is also self-deception. Far from being monolithic, there are perhaps

three types of broad, albeit subjective, attitudes independent of rank, vocations, and age. The motivated “Mr Positive” views NS as a parallel second career. “Mr Just Do” does not have a penchant for military service but tries to fulfil all the requirements expected of him. Finally, there is “Mr Negative” who suffers from an inherent repulsion to military service.

Multiplier Effect

Rewarding attitudes towards NS is essential only if NS is important and if we seek to prevent it from falling into perfunctory oblivion. The blanket approach to monetary-based benefits has perhaps transformed such privileges into entitlements, bonuses into expectations, and resulted in diminished utility. A more nuanced tier of non-monetary ‘rewards’ should instead take into consideration and resonate with the serviceman’s predilection for service.

The NS peers of “Mr Positive” consider him a professional “on NS pay” (for NSF) or one “on 11 months annual leave” (for ORNSMen). His mentality and approach to service is on par with all-volunteer armies where active/reserve personnel are also volunteers as opposed to legislated manpower. While monetary rewards are appreciated they are also secondary. The reward for this category of servicemen is to be the best they can be. Accolades such as rank, medals, and badges are marks of pride displayed when in uniform, at best, and superficial adornments, at worst. Accolades also pale in comparison to challenging appointments that allow “Mr Positives” to channel their energies and talents as they work towards a terminal level of incompetence.

Beyond operational readiness, “Mr Positives” can also act as multipliers who encourage “Mr Just Do” to join their ranks, and hopefully turn “Mr Negative” into “Mr Just Do”. We need all the “Mr Positives” to arrest the atrophy and perhaps decreasing standards that invariably plague a “peace time defence force” domiciled in an ostensibly calm region void of clear and present threats, and one that overwhelmingly deploys career/regular servicemen for actual missions. “Mr Positives” also make great facilitators for national education. After all, who better to restore or reinforce an urgency to uphold the standards of the SAF, and encourage and spur future generations to give their best in NS than NSF and ORNSMen themselves?

Three Tenets

“Mr Positives” cherish the opportunities to serve and there is no greater reward than for the top brass to take this desire to serve and acts of voluntarism seriously. To these men fulfilment takes precedence over recognition and trumps monetary compensation. There are many things money can buy but it does not buy sacrifice, sincerity, honour, or patriotism. Yet one must also be mindful that “Mr Positives” are only human. They are fallible and can fall by the wayside, be resigned to ‘fate’, and fall prey to cynicism. In an era where NS is an established institution, they also know full well when they are given the run around or worst of all viewed and treated as an unnecessary nuisance.

If there is a will, there must be a way. Three tenets are thus crucial for the defence establishment to tap the pool of “Mr Positives” and maximise their effect. Keep to this path and perhaps “Mr Just Do” and “Mr Negative” will eventually join the ranks of “Mr Positives”. First, a transparent avenue must be created for volunteer service in certain vocations, units, and overseas deployments. Most commanders would rather have soldiers who “want to be there” as opposed to “have to be there”. Unsuccessful endeavours must also be addressed and not simply ignored.

Second, always respect the time sacrificed by NSF and ORNSMen. They are not a liability or ‘free’ labour. Remember, their experiences have generational repercussions, both positive and negative. Finally, uphold the high military standards of training, discipline, and values. It is often said that “tough times does not last but tough men do”. That was, at least, how it used to be.

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