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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## Responding to the tragedy of military training-related death

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*Fatalities as a result of military training is always regrettable. If the armed forces is to be credible and effective in war, military training has to be tough and realistic. It means that fatalities as a result of military training may be unavoidable. Nevertheless, in a peacetime armed forces, it is important to remember that these fatalities still represent the ultimate sacrifice that a citizen-soldier, and his family that survives him, makes. The country therefore has to be demonstrably sorrowful and grateful for this sacrifice.*

WHAT SHOULD an Armed Forces do when its personnel tragically lose their lives in the course of military training? This is a potentially loaded question, because how one answers this question can lead one to being labelled either as insensitive to human tragedy or irresponsible to the demands of national security. This question becomes an even greater minefield when it is addressed to an Armed Forces that has known no wars, but only peace and stability.

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) decided last week, in the aftermath of the deaths of two of its National Service personnel in the course of undergoing military training, to suspend physical training activities while the organisation would review all of its existing training safety regimes. Given that the two deaths occurred in consecutive days though in different locations, it would have been tempting to think that the cause of both tragedies was lapses, or gaps, in the existing training safety regimes of the SAF. The review conducted by the SAF has since shown that this was not the case; in both instances, training safety regulations were followed, and the training safety regimes in the SAF are medically stringent.

### SAF's training safety record

The numbers appear to bear out the SAF's claim. In the preceding nine years, there have been 19 training-related fatalities in the SAF. In comparison, a US government agency puts the number of non-combat-related fatalities in the US military during the Clinton presidency at 3953, although it does not indicate how many of these fatalities occurred as a result of military training activities.

Seen in this context, the number of training-related fatalities in the SAF has been remarkably low. It is

possible to draw two conclusions at this point. One, the SAF's training systems have become increasingly lax, and this would then explain the remarkably low number of training-related fatalities. Two, the SAF's training systems are tough, and it is the training safety regimes that have kept the numbers of training-related fatalities low.

The purpose of military training is, of course, to prepare soldiers for the combat operations. It therefore means that military training has to as closely as possible replicate the harshness and the extreme risks of the combat environment. Before the Second World War, the German and Soviet armies had notoriously tough and realistic training, and the corresponding numbers of training-related fatalities.

One can clearly go overboard in trying to replicate a combat environment, but the point nevertheless remains – military training even in peace-time has to closely replicate combat conditions, and to do otherwise is to be irresponsible to the demands of national defence. This means that any citizen enlisting in the armed forces, whether voluntarily or through conscription, is entering an environment where risks are necessarily higher than virtually any other aspect of civilian life.

### **Identity formation**

If the main purpose of National Service is to ensure an SAF that can function effectively as a deterrent and a defender against armed aggression, this means that military training has to be as realistic and tough as possible, if only to prepare the SAF's soldiers for the rigours and risks of combat operations. It therefore means that military service necessarily demands a level of personal risk significantly higher than that of most non-military professions. Granted, as the famous American World War II General George Patton allegedly said, the point is not to die for one's country, it is to make the other side die for their country. Nevertheless, to slacken in terms of training rigour would only result in a military organisation that is unable to meet the demands placed on it. Given this necessity, training-related deaths in National Service will almost certainly occur.

So, is the SAF's training safety regime inadequate in any way? The numbers provided earlier suggest that the SAF's training safety record is actually rather good. And the fact that the SAF is often lauded by foreign military observers for its professionalism suggests that training has been tough, realistic, and effective. In other words, there may be nothing wrong with either the SAF's training systems or its training safety regimes.

Of course, National Service is not just about the creation of a credible and potent SAF. The institution of National Service has served, and continues to serve, a second, equally important function, namely national identity formation. Singapore may not have the grand symbols of national identity that, for instance, the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower or Mount Fuji might provide to Americans, French and Japanese respectively. But there is one thing that unifies all Singaporean males above the age of eighteen, and it is National Service. Indeed, while National Service directly impacts only Singaporean males, it nevertheless has an impact on all Singaporean families, as they go through the experience of watching their sons and brothers and boyfriends go through this national institution.

In this regard, training rigour is equally important. Most Singaporeans who have gone through National Service have heard of two names – 'Tiger' Hong and Encik Shamsuddin – and the legendary (or indeed infamous) toughness of military training that both are justifiably remembered for. There is a mountain of anecdotal evidence of soldiers who had been trained by them, who speak with pride of how they endured the privations and rigours of military training then.

The argument is about how national identity can be created through the institution of National Service, by creating a common pool of shared memories and experiences. These shared memories and experiences, through which a shared identity emerges, really need to be forged in fire. Simply put,

National Service – precisely because it was tough and on occasions life-threatening, made it easier for those who underwent it to bond more effectively. We all do it – we ask new acquaintances where they served, we swap stories of how we endured National Service, and how we learnt to sneak in moments of enjoyment in the midst of deprivation and degradation.

### **Demonstrating genuine sorrow and gratitude**

The point is, and there is no way to make this sound palatable to the families who have suffered when their sons lost their lives in National Service, that military training has to be tough, but generally tolerable. For military training to be effective, it has to as closely as possible replicate the extreme conditions of war. It means that military service necessarily entails being put into situations of higher risk than virtually any other aspect of civilian life. In the event of a war, it is such military training that will save lives, Singaporean lives.

There is one final issue. It is important to remember that these soldiers lost their lives in the defence of the country. The very claim that the SAF makes – about how its deterrence posture ensures Singapore's continued stability and security – means that every soldier past and present was, and is, defending the country.

When a soldier loses his life as a result of military training, the country writ large has to demonstrate its genuine sorrow and gratitude to that soldier's family. Both the soldier and his surviving family have made the ultimate sacrifice, and both deserve to be treated by the country as such. Otherwise, the soldier died a meaningless death. As a nation, we cannot allow that to happen.

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