

# CITATION FOR DR NG ENG HEN

Text by A/Prof Prema Raj



Dr Daniel Lee – SMA President, Dr Ng Eng Hen, Prof Ivy, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends, good evening. It is both an honour and a deeply personal privilege to introduce tonight's award recipient, Dr Ng Eng Hen.

## Unwavering character

Before I begin formally, permit me a brief reflection. Eng Hen and I go back a very long way – to our days in primary school where, in retrospect, we were already being quietly forged for the demands of later life.

In those early years, within the smouldering battlegrounds where destinies were tested and survival hung in the balance, in the dangerous pit where life was decided – also known more commonly as recess time in the school quadrangle – we were shaped by discipline, tested in resilience, and trained – though we did not yet know it – in the arts of strategy, survival and response under pressure.

These formative exercises took two principal forms. The first was a game known as “Hantam Bola”, where one learned, quite viscerally, the importance of anticipation, agility and avoiding incoming threats. The second was “Police and Thief”, which refined our instincts in pursuit, escape and the delicate balance between risk and timing.

Fortunately, I am pleased to report that survival rates in those early training exercises were generally high.

In fact, it was “Hantam Bola” that first brought Eng Hen and me together at a friend's house in Primary Five where we met for the very first time over what I can only describe as a highly competitive introduction. I am not entirely sure you remember that day. But I can tell you with complete certainty it left a mark on me.

It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that Eng Hen's later responsibilities in matters of defence and strategy were not entirely unforeseen. But beyond these early “training grounds”, what has truly remained constant through the years is something far more important: his **character**.

Many Singaporeans know Dr Ng as the nation's long-serving Minister for Defence, guiding Singapore through an increasingly complex global security environment. Others know him as a highly respected breast oncological surgeon, whose work touched countless patients and families.

As we prepared for tonight, we tried very hard to locate old photographs of Eng Hen from his student days and from his years as a surgeon. Unfortunately, despite considerable effort, the archives did not quite cooperate. But perhaps that is fitting.

Because in this room, among doctors, we do not really need reminding of

who Eng Hen was in medicine. He is already deeply imprinted in our collective memory as one of our own – a colleague, a surgeon, a physician shaped by the same wards, disciplines, anxieties and callings that shaped all of us.

The photographs we truly need tonight are not the ones that bring us back to medicine, but the ones that remind us how extraordinarily far beyond medicine his journey eventually carried him – from the hospital ward and OT to leading Singapore's national defence and strategic future. And perhaps that remarkable journey was not entirely unforeseen. But for me, Eng Hen is something else as well. He is a lifelong friend.

What strikes me most when I look back across those many years is something quite remarkable: his character has never wavered. The same qualities we saw in him as a young boy – steadiness, dedication, humility and quiet determination – are the very qualities that shaped his life and career.

Before the Cabinet table and the diplomatic stage, Eng Hen was first and foremost a doctor – one of us. Trained at the National University of Singapore and graduating in 1982 (with a distinction in social medicine and public health), he became a surgeon in December 1986 and later

a surgical oncologist specialising in breast cancer and surgical nutrition. He also trained at MD Anderson Cancer Center and Cornell University in the US between 1990 and 1992 under the Health Manpower Development Plan programme.

Caring for patients who face one of the most difficult diagnoses in medicine, oncology demands not only technical excellence but empathy, patience and the ability to stand beside patients through fear and uncertainty.

One of my clearest memories of Eng Hen comes from our time working together in paediatric surgery in 1986 at Singapore General Hospital. I remember nights in the ICU when a child was critically ill. Many of us would review the charts, check the vitals and return later. But Eng Hen was different.

He would sit quietly by the bedside – sometimes through the entire night when not attending to other patients – watching, thinking and searching for every possible way to help that child survive with the surgical intensive care manual by T.E. Oh in front of him.

It was not dramatic. It was not for show. It was simply who he was.

That moment left a deep impression on me. It set a benchmark for what dedication to a patient could truly look like. And if you look at the arc of Eng Hen's life, that same spirit never changed.

Whether as a surgeon, a minister, or a national leader, he approached every responsibility with the same determination – to do the work thoroughly, thoughtfully and with a deep sense of duty and empathy.

### On the world stage and at home

After entering politics in 2001, he served Singapore in several key roles before becoming Minister for Defence, a position he held with distinction for many years. Under his leadership, Singapore strengthened its defence capabilities and deepened strategic partnerships around the world.

His service has been recognised with numerous international honours, including France's Legion of Honour and the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, acknowledging his contributions to strengthening defence ties between Singapore and these nations as well as his valuable contributions to international defence cooperation. But medals and titles, impressive as they are, tell only part of the story.

Because beyond the achievements, Eng Hen remains what he has always been: a good and loyal friend, a warm and thoughtful person, and someone whose success never distanced him from the people around him.

He is also a devoted husband to Ivy, father to four outstanding children, and grandfather to five lovely grandchildren – a reminder that even in a life filled with immense responsibility, the most important roles remain the ones closest to home, and he has always remained grounded in relationships that truly matter.

And perhaps that is why his leadership has always carried a human touch. The compassion we saw in the hospital wards; the loyalty we saw in friendship; the steadiness we saw since childhood; those same qualities carried forward into a life of public service.

And when you know someone for as long as I have known Eng Hen – from primary school to today – you begin to understand something clearly.

Through the course of life, achievements accumulate. Roles may change. Responsibilities grow. But character reveals itself early. And in Eng Hen's case, it has remained remarkably constant.

At first glance, this photo of Eng Hen's run is simply a picture of a man exercising. But in many ways, I think it reveals something deeper. Because when you strip away the office, the titles, the medals and the public image, what remains is the same quality that has always defined him: determination, discipline and the refusal to give less than his very best to the task before him. Even through pain he keeps moving forward.

He has always been the same person – steady, thoughtful, dedicated and determined, and deeply committed to the people entrusted to his care, whether they were patients in the hospital ward, soldiers serving the nation, or citizens looking for leadership. Here I quote a post he made on social media: "I think running is like life. Different challenges come your way, and you have to change pace or even style, but you keep on the road to do what brings you satisfaction and fulfilment."

In fact, if you had asked those of us who knew him as a boy whether we imagined he would one day become a surgical oncologist and then go on to become Singapore's Minister for Defence, the honest answer would probably have been no.

But if you had asked whether he would grow up to become someone deeply dedicated to the people entrusted to his care, the answer would have been yes – without hesitation.

### Conferment

Tonight, SMA honours him not only for what he has achieved, but for the spirit with which he has served – first as a doctor, and later as a leader of the nation. And for those of us who have known him a long time, it is especially meaningful to see that life of service recognised.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming a doctor, a surgeon, a statesman, a loyal friend, a husband, a father and a grandpa – but most importantly a man whose character has remained constant through the years: Dr Ng Eng Hen. ♦