



**THE  
NS**

**EXPERIENCE**



I remember my first day of enlistment quite clearly. It was a humid Monday morning in March when I trudged up the hill at Dempsey Road, where the former Central Manpower Base (CMPB) was located. In a single-storey building next to the small circular driveway, where Huber's Butchery & Bistro is currently located, I took my SAF oath in a room packed with Singaporeans from all walks of life. At the quadrangle, we boarded a three-tonner truck, which whisked us off to some distant location to collect our gear.

The journey in the truck was rocky, hot and sticky. Amid the roar of the engine and hissing of the brakes, there was an uncomfortable silence. I was among strangers embarking on an unknown journey, leaving behind the comforts of home and family. At the army supply depot, we were led down a large hallway and hurriedly fitted with equipment. Each of us was issued four sets of uniforms, thick cotton green t-shirts and socks, a pair of stiff heavy leather boots, water canteens, mess tins, and other strange-looking equipment unfamiliar to me at that time. The helmet was a heavysset steel tin-can that looked like it came from the Vietnam War era and the black running shoes had thin rubber soles. Apparently, arch support and midsoles had not been invented then. Everything was stuffed into a voluminous "Ali Baba" bag made of thick green canvas, so named because one could possibly stow one of the 40 thieves in it. We were then taken to the commando jetty where a landing ship, the ramped powered lighter (RPL), was waiting to transport us to Pulau Tekong.

In those days, most of the difficulty and hardship that one suffered could be attributed to the lack of information. It was the era before the internet and smartphones, with

not much knowledge available to prepare one for what lay ahead in basic military training. Recruits were literally "blur like *sotong*" because most had no clue what was required of them. There was no blog to read about the experience of others, no forum to discuss army preparation and no YouTube to watch *Ah Boys to Men*. It was not until I was on the RPL watching the shoreline of Singapore receding that reality hit home; there was no escape. I cannot say that I enjoyed my three months in Pulau Tekong — it was physically demanding and emotionally tough, especially for an 18-year-old.

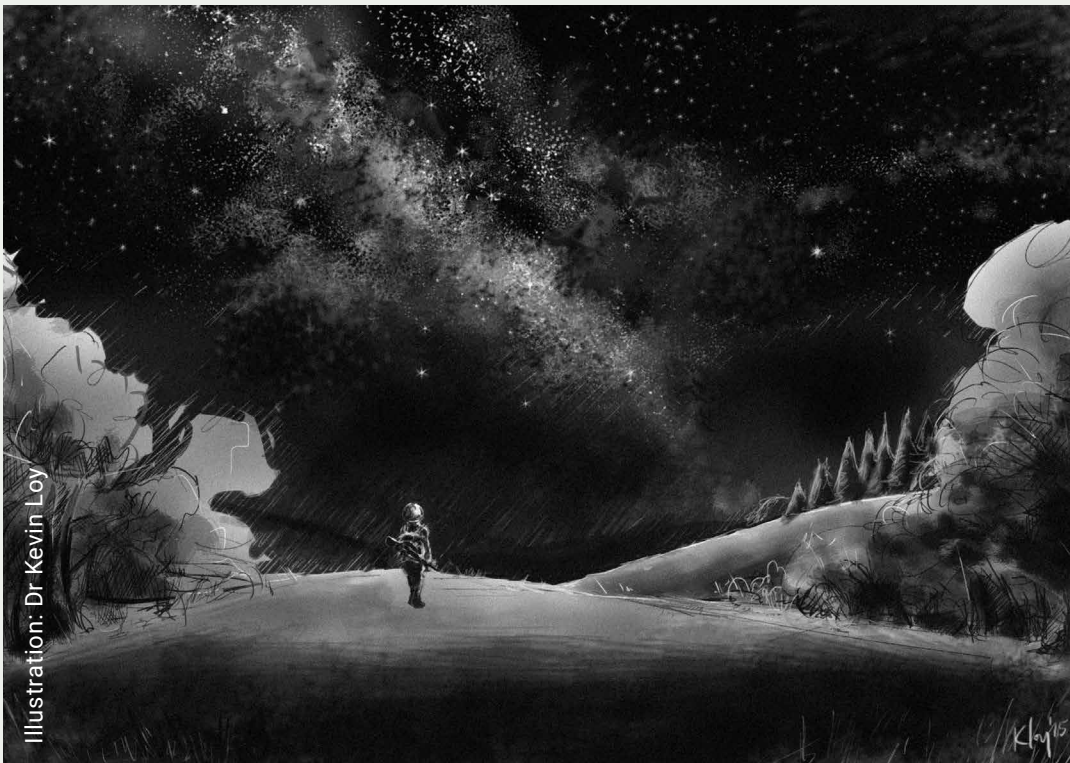
Six years later, I returned to embark on the medical officer cadet course (MOCC), a six-month training programme for our cohort of male doctors who had completed housemanship. This time, things were very different. I remember that first day of re-enlistment very well too. We were in a similar army truck, but this time, instead of an uncomfortable silence, there was much bantering and cautious laughter as we returned to the military with our medical school classmates. We knew what to expect and many of us had physically conditioned ourselves for the training ahead. We were more mature after surviving housemanship (which was, arguably, more gruelling than army training!) and could rely on each other for moral support. We were among friends. I would not have guessed then that among us were the future Chief of Medical Corps and Chief Air Force Medical Officer.

One experience that stood out during MOCC was the jungle training in Brunei. Our section of cadets (Wee, Wong, Wong, Wu and Yap), having lost our checkpoint, had set up camp to pass the night. The jungle quite literally sprang to life after dark and was filled with a cacophony of noises. The swooping, swishing,

crackling and cackling kept us up for the better part of the night, and it felt like we could be hit by a swinging creature any moment. At about 3 am in the morning, our camp was overrun by a swarm of army ants. At 4 am, as I lay in my hammock shivering after a rainstorm, with my bottom gently swaying barely two inches off the forest floor and the sound of ants rustling underneath, I stared into the forest and saw the dark vegetation magically illuminated by two bands of light. The night sky lit up in a purplish glow above us, while the forest floor glowed in green phosphorescence. It looked as if the entire jungle was sandwiched and floating in a band of twilight.

After MOCC, I was posted back to Dempsey Road camp. By that time, CMPB had moved to Depot Road, leaving the Headquarters Medical Corps (HQMC) and the SAF Band behind. I was assigned as a staff officer to Col (Dr) Lionel Lee, then Chief of Medical Corps. HQMC, consisting of a cluster of separate small buildings set among shady banyan trees, was a very serene and peaceful camp to work in. Staff officers would have meals at the canteen, which is the site now occupied by PS.Cafe. Administrative work was not a skill taught in medical school; we had to learn how to draft meeting minutes, write official correspondences and organise events on the job. Those were the early days of office intranet, dial-up modems and work plan presentations done using frames of developed film cast on a white screen by slide projectors.

My third and longest phase of army life was my assignment to an armoured medical company and being called back as an Operationally-Ready National Serviceman (NSman). My first high key training took place more than ten years ago and I have



PROFILE



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Dr Wong Tien Hua is President of the 56th SMA Council. He is a family medicine physician practising in Sengkang. Dr Wong has an interest in primary care, patient communication and medical ethics.

been called back almost every year since. Being posted to a unit helped me forge new friendships, as people from different backgrounds bonded with one another in training from year to year. Camaraderie goes beyond the annual two weeks of training, as many NSmen gather on social occasions and celebrate important life events. Many of my army buddies have come to me for medical consultation, for they consider me to be someone they could trust, a feeling that is mutual. It was these strong bonds that convinced me to extend my National Service (NS) commitment so that I could go through the battalion assessment exercise with these men.

I have witnessed the gradual transformation of the SAF from the time of my first enlistment. Lightweight Kevlar helmets, waterproof Gore-Tex boots and proper running shoes are some of the big improvements that have benefited the soldiers. One will not be able to

appreciate these unless one has had the experience of donning the old equipment. Try running around in a heavy steel helmet in tropical heat and one would immediately appreciate the vast reduction in weight afforded by Kevlar. Cookhouse food has improved to the point that I found myself looking forward to meals during In-Camp Training. Above all, the training methodology has evolved with the times; now, there is a strong emphasis on ownership of training among NSmen and commanders can decide how the yearly training should be conducted.

The one experience that stood out during my training was the opportunity to take part in Exercise Wallaby in Australia. We had spent four days in the open terrain and were preparing for the final push to our exercise objective. It was past midnight as I was returning to my medical company on completing my briefing and planning at the battalion headquarters. The November

evening was cool and a dry wind was sweeping across the open field. As my eyes adjusted to the night, shimmering blades of tall grass swaying gently came gradually into focus under the silvery light of the moon. With no light pollution in the Australian outback, I was able to gaze up at a crystal clear sky filled to the brim with billions of stars and distant galaxies. That was truly breathtaking!

I do not think my NS experience was particularly special, as many in our medical profession have gone through the same training and would have their individual stories to tell. However, the NS experience is unique to Singaporeans because few countries afford their doctors such an opportunity away from mainstream medical practice.

NS training is tough — it demands one's time and necessitates sacrifice away from work and family, but it is unquestionably an experience unlike any other. ◆