



CONTINUING TO SERVE

“You must be very young!” My patient exclaimed when I told him that I had been away for In-Camp Training (ICT) last year. Such comments would normally make one feel good, but I had also received a sobering reminder a few days earlier when a young man at the gym addressed me as “uncle”.

I have been asked many times why I was still serving as a National Serviceman (NSman) and when I will complete my National Service (NS) cycle. Honestly, for a long time, I did not track how long I had been on the Reservist On Voluntary Extended Reserve Service (ROVERS) scheme. However, earlier this year, after 29 years, I have officially completed my NS and is now on the MINDEF Reserve (MR) instead. While serving full-time NS as a staff officer at Headquarters Medical Corps, I certainly did not imagine that I would continue to be in service 20 years later, albeit in a different capacity as Deputy Commander of a logistics support group. Looking back, it must have been the events, people and experiences that I encountered along the way that led to this decision.

A SENSE OF MISSION

In 1996, I received a rude shock when I was posted to a Guards Battalion as a medical officer (MO), having completed NS in a relatively sedentary posting. In this new posting, several events that occurred during our long and punishing marches served to change my perception of NSmen.

On one occasion, we were trekking through a jungle towards a military objective on the pitch-black night. Suddenly, we saw a deep, wide ditch marked with fluorescent paint. While we had to abruptly slow down to avoid the ditch, none of us fell in. Two days after the exercise, a corporal reported sick to the medical centre. He had a grossly swollen and bruised ankle that appeared to be broken. When asked how he injured himself, he replied that during reconnaissance two nights ago, he had fallen into a ditch while navigating the path for the battalion in the jungle. He also confirmed that he was the one who marked the ditch so that no one else would fall into it.

On another occasion, an officer who works overseas but returns each year for ICT was having morning coffee with me in the camp canteen when he asked, "Excuse me, sir, I'm just wondering whether this is a problem?" He proceeded to remove his boots and socks to show me his feet. To my surprise, the skin of his soles was chafed and his feet were swollen, bare and inflamed. It must have been extremely painful. Again, this occurred after a military exercise the night before.

The third occasion happened at 4 am, towards the end of a three-day field exercise. Exhausted, we were waiting for transportation to take us back to camp when the radio crackled in the silence and an urgent message came through. Another MO in the battalion had called to say that he was treating a soldier suffering from an acute asthmatic attack. The soldier had dropped his inhaler and my colleague had used up his stock on other patients. Two medics jumped up immediately and ran with me over two hills to get to the soldier in question. This was after a

particularly long exercise that covered about 40 km. These two medics were overweight and could not usually pass the Individual Physical Proficiency Test no matter how hard they tried. I could hardly expect them to walk properly at that stage, let alone run.


On each occasion, I had asked the four NSmen why they did what they did. I could have certified them sick or excused them from carrying on, yet all of them gave essentially the same reply: "Sir, I've been given a mission. I must complete it so that those who depend on me are not let down." I have been fortunate to serve with these men, and I am sure there are many more out there in other units. *It is the sense of mission.*

BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

I have also made many friends, not all of whom are doctors or officers. They come from all walks of life – teachers, lawyers, bankers, construction workers, businessmen, car mechanics, locksmiths and even a goldfish farmer. They have taught me a lot, especially about life outside of the hospital and scientific conferences, and I have found them to be loyal friends. However, I did not fully realise this until last year when I received personal messages of encouragement from many of my military acquaintances when I was going through a professional crisis.

Once, I remember asking one of my officers if he would like to be excused from a particular call-up, as he had already attended a three-week military-related course. He emphatically replied, "No, sir! Of course not! I don't want to miss meeting up with my friends – I see them only once a year." *It is for our friends.*

PROFILE



TEXT BY

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Yue Wai Mun is an orthopaedic surgeon who has just left for private practice, after 22 years in public service. He is busy building his new practice while trying not to miss watching his four children grow up.

On a personal note, I have found that being in active military service, especially as a leader, is a good reason to maintain my physical fitness. In no other organisation is the axiom, "Leadership by Example", held so dearly. When I ask those under me to keep fit, I have to show them that it can be done despite our busy work and family lives. This is also true for many other aspects of leadership. *It keeps me honest about myself.*

Overall, it has been a privilege, not a liability, to continue serving NS, and I am grateful to the men whom I have been privileged to lead over the years. ♦

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