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EXERCISE/EXERCICE NEW HORIZONS

**Recruitment Strategies for SAF in the 21st Century: Is There Still
Hope for Military Recruitment in Singapore?**

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Abstract

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) have been one of the main pillars in ensuring Singapore's stability and success since the country's independence in 1965. Rated by international defence journals as "a respected and professional force...capable of defending the territorial integrity," the SAF has, in its core, a group of regular corps servicemen and women, committed to building the nation's defence. Over the years, through professional guidance and setting of standards for both full-time National Service (NSF) personnel and Reservists (Operational-Ready NSmen), the regular corps has become "the cornerstone of the Singapore Armed Forces' deterrent capability."

In view of the current economic and social situations in Singapore, the recruiting of personnel into the SAF to serve in the regular corps, is by no means an easy task. To continue performing its roles of deterrence and defence into the future, the SAF must, therefore, conduct synergised efforts in image building, improve service conditions, and pro-active recruitment of personnel to serve in the regular corps.

*Our small population will limit the pool of manpower available to our armed forces, defence science establishments and defence industries. We shall have to find innovative ways around these constraints, so that we can effectively enhance our defence capabilities with our limited resources.*¹

Introduction

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has been one of the main pillars in ensuring the nation's stability and success. Fulfilling the roles of deterrence and defence over the years, the SAF is rated as "a respected and professional force operating modern defence systems that [is] capable of defending the territorial integrity and independence of the state."² The credit for such a high rating from international defence journals must go to the group of regular corps servicemen and women, who are committed to building the nation's defence and enabling the SAF to perform its roles. The regular corps, through its professional guidance and setting of high standards for both full-time National Service (NSF) personnel and Reservists (Operational-Ready NSmen), has become "the cornerstone of the Singapore Armed Forces' deterrent capability."³

In view of the limited human resource pool and globalisation of the Singapore economy, the recruiting of personnel into the SAF regular corps is no easy task. It is in these challenging times for military recruitment that this essay is written. To continue performing its roles of deterrence and defence into the future, the SAF must conduct

¹ Ministry of Defence (Singapore), Defending Singapore in the 21st Century (Singapore: Grace Communications, 2000) 11.

² Kuan Yew Lee, From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000 (Singapore: The Straits Times Press, 2000) 46.

³ Yat Chung Ng, "Developing Future Leaders-A perspective from a Young Army," Preparing Future Leaders, ed. Hugh Smith, (Canberra: Australian Defence Studies Centre, 1998) 197.

synergised efforts in image building, improve service conditions, and perform pro-active recruitment of personnel to serve in the regular corps.

Factors Affecting Military Recruitment

Understanding the factors affecting military recruitment in Singapore could enable the SAF to better focus its recruitment efforts. First, the reducing birth rates over the years has cast a gloomy picture on the supply of human resources joining the labour market annually, causing competing demands from all sectors. Moreover, the Information Technology (IT) revolution and globalisation have created many new opportunities for young Singaporeans to venture outside the country in search of better opportunities and monetary rewards. Consequently, the military service, with its gradual pay increments, has become a less attractive option. Thirdly, with mandatory full-time national service of up to two and a half years for all Singaporean males, the allure of lifetime military service becomes undesirable when many cannot wait to finish their service obligations.

Limited Human Resource Pool

During his recent speech on the release of the Census 2000 publication, “A Decade of Progress,” Brigadier General (NS) George Yeo highlighted the problem of reducing birth rates since the early 70s and 80s. This impact is current faced by the economy with fewer younger workers replacing the older ones.⁴ To augment the short supply of workers, the Singapore government is conducting publicity campaigns to attract

⁴ BG(NS) George Yeo, “A Decade of Progress,” Speech on launch of Census 2000 Publication, Singapore, 20 Feb. 2001.

foreign talent to work and reside in Singapore. Given the current birth trends of families having one or two offspring, the situation is forecast to get worse in the future when the supply of workers from our own sources becomes even more limited.⁵ Essentially, the reducing birth rate has created competing demands from all sectors on the human resource available for the labour market.

The problem of a reducing birth rate is further compounded by the long-standing security policy for the SAF to recruit only Singapore Citizens or Permanent Residents into the regular corps. Thus, the target pool of human resource for military recruitment has become even smaller. Therefore, there arises a need for the military to explore innovative ways to overcome the constraints of a reducing birth rate and recruiting only from citizens or permanent residents.

Information Technology (IT) Revolution & Globalisation

The information technology revolution and globalisation over recent years have further contributed to a tight labour market. In essence, the IT revolution afforded better connectivity, thereby helping mankind bridge both the distance and cultural gaps of the world. Overseas opportunities are no longer viewed as distant as they were perceived in the past. Young Singaporeans, now seeing the world as their oyster, will venture overseas in search of better opportunities and monetary rewards. Moreover, with the world economy progressing towards one based on knowledge, those with the necessary qualifications and skills will be in demand both locally and worldwide.

⁵ BG(NS) Yeo.

Current social trends also indicate that loyalty to one's organisation is no longer a sustainable virtue. This is reflected by the phenomenon of the private sector rewarding the behaviour of job-hopping with quantum increase in salaries. Against this trend, the SAF's requirement for regular service to be a minimum of six years is viewed as too long a commitment for the younger generations. Overall, the appeal of military service, with its gradual pay increments and demand for loyalty of service, has become a less attractive option for younger generations.

Mandatory Full-time National Service

With the intention to minimise the operating costs of a large Army, the founding leaders of Singapore instituted national service for all Singapore males in 1967. Since then, national service has generally been regarded as necessary for the nation's defence. However, "the Spartan approach to life does not come about naturally in a society that lives by buying and selling."⁶ For many, the transition from civilian to military life proves to be a difficult one especially when they are either not mentally or physically prepared for national service. Having gone through a tough transition from civilian life, many could not imagine leading the military lifestyle for their entire life. The allure of extending national service into regular service becomes an unappealing notion when many cannot wait to finish their full-time national service obligations and return to civilian lifestyle.

⁶ Lee 34.

Synergised Recruitment Efforts

To overcome the problems facing military recruitment in Singapore, it takes more than a huge advertising budget to promote military service in the regular corps. Solutions to these problems must not be viewed as discrete efforts. On the contrary, these solutions must be viewed as mutually supporting and part of the synergised effort in recruiting personnel into the military.

A total approach, with proper co-ordination and support from top leadership, will prevent wastage of effort while preventing each solution from going against the intents of other endeavours. If efforts are not synergised, the end results will be counter-productive. For example, should the SAF proclaim that people are its most valuable assets, there must be genuine efforts to improve the military service conditions, while at the same time, co-ordinated efforts in media coverage should highlight such initiatives. Results will be damaging if efforts are not co-ordinated when, for example, the SAF's proclamation of people being the most valuable assets contradicts its public affair's press release that spending on military hardware will take priority over improvement of service conditions.

Three-Prong Effort

In conducting a concerted recruitment effort, it is recommended that a three-prong effort of image building, improvement of service conditions, and pro-active recruitment be implemented. Building the image of SAF's professionalism will help harness the unstinting public support for military defence. Concurrently, there must also be enhancements to the military service conditions to raise the morale of in-service regulars,

enabling them to bear positive testimonials to potential new members. Also, with attractive service conditions, SAF can project itself as a people-oriented organisation that offers more fringe benefits over other organisations in the labour market. Only with strong public support through image building activities, coupled with positive testimonials from in-service regulars having enjoyed good service conditions, will pro-active recruitment be effective in attracting personnel to join the SAF as regular corps.

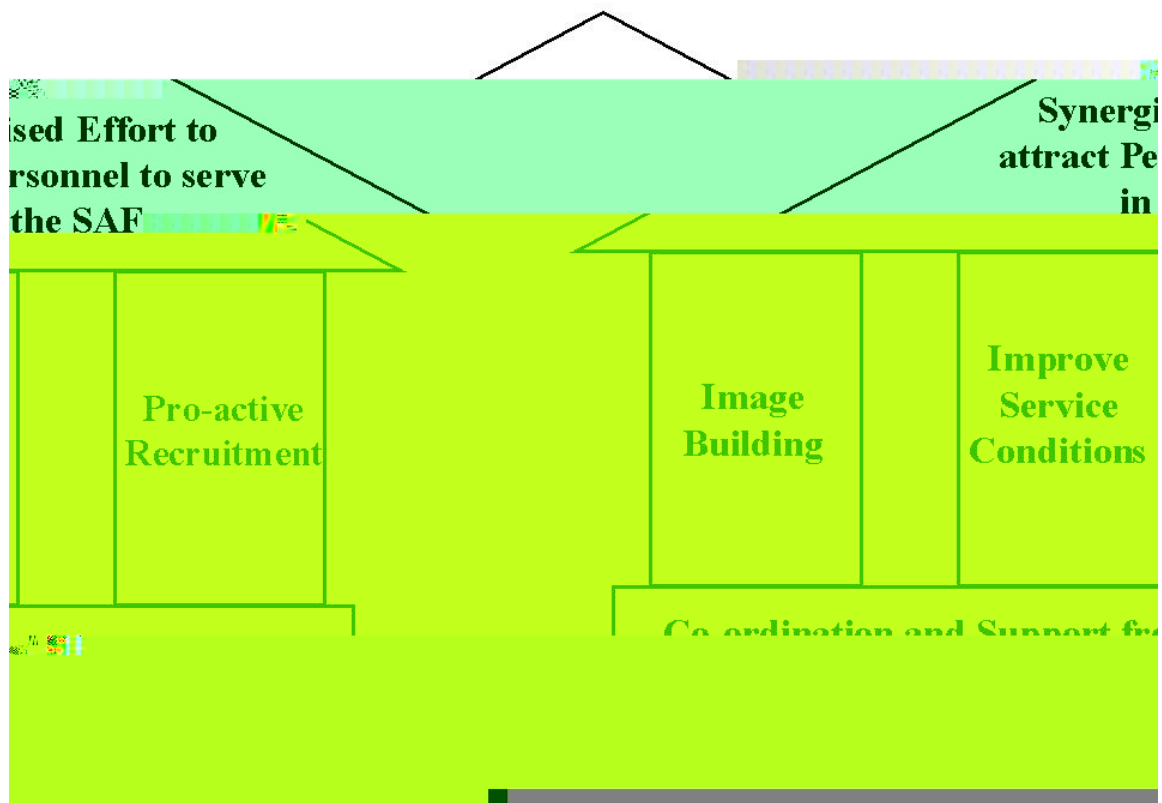


Image Building

Having experienced adolescence, one can generally understand the need to gain acceptance and recognition from one's peers. In considering the recruitment strategies for the SAF, this fact of human psychology must be addressed. In other words, if joining the SAF can enhance one's level of acceptance from one's peers, the recruitment problem can be partially solved. To do this, efforts in image building of the SAF must show the need for a defence force to ensure the economic growth, success, and security of Singapore. Moreover, military service must be portrayed as a noble profession of selfless sacrifice while being the cornerstone of operational readiness of the defence force. It is only with unstinting public support for defence that a career in the military service will command the respect from one's peers. One key approach for image building is certainly to educate the public on the need for military defence, enabling the SAF to win the hearts and minds of the people.

Education of the Public

Image building initiatives will involve educating the public and the media on military service. In particular, efforts should focus on the "influencers" of young Singaporeans like parents, teachers, coaches and the media. These influencers must be convinced that not only is national service necessary in ensuring Singapore's continued success, they must also realise the need for personnel to serve as regulars in the nation's defence. It is through these influencers that potential recruits, showing the aptitude for military service, could get that extra encouragement they need to sign-up for regular service.

To help the influencers to understand the military better, the SAF must constantly maintain a strong public relations link with them. Activities like visits to military establishments, open houses, regular dialogues, and newsletters will help forge the public's positive image of military service. Moreover, the National Cadet Corps programme in our secondary schools offers the SAF a valuable opportunity to create positive impressions on the minds of young cadets, inspiring them to join the regular corps in the future. Overall, public and media education will not only strengthen the society's support for national service, but it will also enhance their impression of regular service in the SAF.

Pride in Achievement

Following the footsteps of the US Marine Corps, which has been successful in meeting its recruitment targets over the years, the SAF must encourage a strong sense of belonging amongst those who are serving and those who have served in the regular military service.⁷ By instilling the attitude of "Once a regular, always a regular," the SAF can generate pride in achievement amongst those who have contributed to the nation's defence as regular servicemen or women. Considering ex-regulars to be part of the military family will go a long way in nurturing this spirit. By inviting ex-regulars, who have served in the units previously, for unit functions will reinforce the notion that ex-regulars are part of the units' heritage.

Another important aspect of building pride in the achievement of the SAF is to publicise past successes and project military professionalism. Achievements like the

⁷ Tamar A. Mehuron, "USAF People: Recruiting, Retention and Demographics," Air Force Magazine Jan. 2001: 10.

hijack rescue of SQ117 by the SAF Commandos and evacuation of Singapore citizens from Cambodia should be publicised with pride while emphasising the high military readiness of the regular corps.⁸ Cultivating a strong sense of belonging amongst all past or present regulars and at the same time publicising past achievements will help build the image of SAF towards a higher stratum.

Advertising the Rewards of Military Service

In addition to publicising our past achievements, there is a need to advertise the rewards of military service, thereby elevating the image of the SAF. These rewards of military service must relate to young men and women whom the SAF wants to attract. Research has shown that “young adults want to feel connected, and they want to be part of something bigger than themselves.”⁹

Emphasising rewards like strong camaraderie, overseas travel, leadership skills, and challenging one’s potential, military service offers unique experience no other civilian organisation can provide. “We’re finding new ways to communicate these unique benefits to young people - to tell them about something they can get only in the Army. This is a challenging opportunity for them, with relevance to their lives,” said Patrick Lafferty, a vice president with Leo Burnett, the lead-advertising agency that helped

⁸ On 26 Mar 91, the Singapore Airlines flight SQ117 with 129 passengers on board, was hijacked by four members of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) demanding the release of PPP leader Benazir Bhutto’s husband and other party members detained by the Pakistani government. A few minutes before the given deadline, SAF Commandos stormed the plane, killing the four hijackers, and freed all passengers and crew members unharmed. In Jul 97, the SAF mounted an operation to evacuate 450 Singaporeans from Cambodia due to the unstable political situation in Phnom Penh. The smooth conduct of the operation was attributed to the military training the evacuees had acquired during their national service, that allowed them to get organised, gathered at designated places, and facilitated the evacuation.

⁹ John Leo, “One Tin Slogan New Army Campaign isn’t All That It Could Be,” US News & World Report 22 Jan. 2001: 13.

launch the US Army's "An Army of One" campaign recently.¹⁰ Further reinforcing the unique nature of military service, publicity should emphasise SAF's high-technology equipment. When joining the regular service, the recruits are becoming part of a dynamic and progressive organisation.

The purpose of image building is to emphasise the need for defence, to depict the military service as a noble profession, and to highlight that it offers a unique experience no other organisation can match. Through educating the influencers, instilling pride in achievement amongst past and present regulars, and advertising the rewards of military service, the SAF can improve its status in society. Another key factor in obtaining recognition and approval from one's peers when joining the regular service is to establish service conditions that are competitive with other sectors in the labour market. When service conditions are below average, individuals joining military service may end up being teased for having made an unwise career choice. This is especially so in an Asian society like Singapore, where paper qualifications and monetary incomes attribute greatly to one's status. Recent research has also shown that today's youths are more individualistic with a "me-now" mentality, wanting swifter gratification.¹¹ Thus, to remain a viable career option for youths, the SAF must continuously improve its service conditions.

¹⁰ Paul Boyce & Matthew Jones, "The New Army Slogan," Soldiers Feb. 2001: 48.

¹¹ James Dao, "Ads Now Seek Recruits for 'An Army of One,'" The New York Times 10 Jan. 2001.

Improvement of Service Conditions

Traditionally, no marketing proposal is better than a referral from a trusted friend or relative. Very often, the probability of buying any product is higher after receiving recommendations from people whom we trust and who have used the product themselves. The same can be said for military recruitment when in-service personnel are the best testimonial for recruiting new members. An article titled “*The Best CF Recruiter*” in the Canadian Forces weekly, highlighted that “a high percentage of applicants come through the doors of a recruiting centre because of information they received from a serving or former military member.”¹² A prerequisite for the above to happen must certainly be favourable service conditions, which is directly related to the morale of the regular corps. With raised morale, personnel will be proud of their profession, desiring to remain as part of the winning defence team. When managed effectively, our in-service regulars are our best recruiters!

Some may argue that it is human nature never to be satisfied regardless of what improvements are made to service conditions. Instead, others may argue, funds for such initiatives should be channelled toward buying better equipment for the SAF. With high-technology equipment and hardware, military personnel will derive satisfaction from their profession and will continue to speak well of the SAF. The SAF should simply be satisfying what these personnel joined the military for- military hardware and high-tech equipment. This argument is based on satisfying one’s self-esteem and actualisation needs according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. These higher level needs are usually

¹² “The Best CF Recruiter,” The Maple Leaf 4 Apr. 2001: 4.

the intangibles in life.¹³ However, one must never forget the basic needs that the regulars must provide to their families. These are usually the tangibles like pay, medical, or housing needs, which potential regulars can see for themselves when evaluating military service conditions that the SAF provides.

Attractive Remuneration and Benefits

Although important, one must agree that, in military service, remuneration can never be an end in itself. However, regular military personnel must receive enough financially, freeing them the worries for basic necessities of life. Their families must have the peace of mind that the military service offers better job stability over other civilian organisations. Only with peace of mind in financial matters can regulars concentrate on excelling in their profession during their free time, instead of seeking another employment to supplement their income. Also, the military should continue to offer attractive medical and retirement benefits which are competitive with other organisations in the labour market.

Mentioned earlier, loyalty to one's organisation is no longer a sustainable virtue and young people today are afraid of commitment. Injecting flexibility in the contract duration can actually become a selling point for the military service. By offering the flexibility of three-year contracts instead of six year, the military can recruit those who are not ready for a lifelong military career but are willing to give it a try. At the end of three years, should the individual decide not to carry on in regular service, he or she will still be able to contribute to the nation's defence in the reserves. In this instance, the

¹³ Richard Holmes, Acts of War: The behavior of men in battle (New York: The Free Press, 1985) 27.

flexible contract scheme works out to be a win-win situation for all parties. Attractive remuneration, benefits, and flexibility of contract service constitute a component of the improvement of service conditions. There remains the requirement to prepare in-service regulars, to remain competitive upon completion of their military service, for transition into second careers.

Preparation for Transition into Second Career

To encourage the spirit of continuous learning throughout military career, the SAF must be willing to invest in its people and sponsor them for full-time or part-time academic upgrades. Being part of the government's policy of a learning society, the emphasis must be on upgrading an individual's academic qualifications to keep up with technological advances.¹⁴ Upon successful completion of these sponsored courses, their efforts must be recognised to further nurture the sense of pride in achievement. With competitive qualifications, our in-service personnel will be more confident when it is time for them to transit into second careers. Prior to their retirement, personnel should also have the benefit of attending second career transitional programmes to better prepare them mentally and emotionally to face the transition.

The idea of retiring from military service and transiting into a second career is a daunting thought. In repayment for the many years of loyal service, the SAF should have partnerships with corporate firms to ensure regular service personnel have employment upon leaving military service. Such a programme can assure the regulars that all the leadership and management skills they have gained during active service are equally

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence (Singapore) 75.

applicable toward their second careers. All these initiatives will go a long way when potential recruits see SAF as a caring organisation providing useful training and second career opportunities in return for the years of dedicated service towards the nation's defence.

For regulars to recommend a career in the SAF, they must first enjoy respectable military service conditions. These consist of attractive remuneration, medical, and retirement benefits unmatched by the civilian sectors. Through academic upgrades and transitional programmes sponsored by the SAF, in-service personnel will remain competitive while having the confidence to embark on second careers. Corporate partnerships will also ensure employment upon leaving military service. Lastly, implementing the flexibility of shorter contracts will allow those who are unsure of a long term military career, to join the SAF for a few years before deciding to commit longer. Only with strong public support for the SAF coupled with positive testimonials from in-service regulars will pro-active recruitment be effective in attracting personnel to join the regular corps.

Pro-active Recruitment

The focus of pro-active recruitment efforts should explore beyond the current ways the SAF is conducting its recruitment. With a reduced human resource pool poised to get even smaller, the SAF must increase the recruitment of non-traditional target groups like women and non-citizens to serve in the regular corps. Moreover, assigning our best personnel to establish a positive first impression will go a long way in recruitment. An all out recruitment effort should also take place with unit commanders

recommending suitable conscripts who have demonstrated strong potential to succeed in a military career with the SAF. Finally, tapping technological advances, the SAF could harness IT as a tool to assist in the recruitment effort.

Recruitment of Non-Traditional Target Groups

Rather than focusing on the traditional pool of human resources consisting only of male Singapore citizens, the SAF must begin to recruit more women. Given the gloomy human resource picture ahead, the SAF can no longer view recruitment of women into military service as a secondary effort. Publicising that SAF is an equal opportunity employer with advancement based on merit, rather than gender, may attract more women seeking the challenge of a male-dominated military environment. Clearly, if a female candidate meets the criteria to serve in the military, she should not be denied the opportunity to serve her country.

Following the footsteps of many armed forces around the world, the SAF should explore opening up combat assignments to women as long as their presence does not effect the combat effectiveness of their units. This is certainly a feasible way for the SAF to maintain a healthy personnel level while sustaining the high tempo of operations. Another possibility to recruit more personnel is to allow non-citizens to join the military, similar to the French Foreign Legions, with the reward of citizenship upon completion of service.

The Best Recruiters

Following many years of training recruiters at the USAF Recruiting School, veteran instructor, Sergeant Kevin Keaney said, “recruiting is a first-impression business.”¹⁵ Very often, the initial impressions the recruiters project to potential candidates are crucial to whether they join the SAF or not. Top leadership of the SAF must be willing to place an emphasis on recruiting by constantly supporting the assignment of the best people to be recruiters. Being positive in attitude and enthusiastic about the military profession, the best recruiters will be able to convince potential candidates that military service offers a unique experience, which no other organisation can offer. Training the recruiters in marketing skills is essential in “selling” the military service to potential recruits. To enable young men and women to make informed decisions, the recruiters must be candid in their approach and must always tell the truth regarding the positive and negative aspects of military service.

Unit Referral Recruitment

Supporting the positive image projected by the recruiters, all unit commanders must be trained to pro-actively recruit from the conscripts under their command. Having worked with their subordinates and knowing their strengths and weaknesses, unit commanders are in the best positions to recruit suitable conscripts, who have demonstrated strong potential to succeed in a military career.

An important target group could be the newly commissioned conscript officers, joining the combat units upon graduation from the Officer Cadet School (OCS). Having

¹⁵ Jim Greeley, “Learning to Sell: It’s a Scream,” Airman Jul. 2000: 45.

been elevated to officer status, these newly commissioned officers are given the added responsibility of platoon commanders while enjoying the experience of troop command. There is no better window of opportunity to promote the military career to them than during this juncture. Combining this pro-active recruitment with the existing “carrot” of sponsorships to study at prestigious overseas universities, unit commanders can further promote the military career to their subordinate conscript officers. It is through these attractive scholarships that the SAF can continue to draw the top talent from each batch of conscripts to join the military service as regular corps.

Harness Information Technology for Recruitment

Young people, being accustomed to using computers as part of their education process, are likely to be more comfortable with information technology than earlier generations. They will more likely be using the internet when searching for career opportunities. SAF’s recruitment effort must, therefore, harness information technology as a recruitment tool in attracting the younger generations. Recruiting tools such as informative webpages, internet based application forms, and CD ROMs filled with military graphics and movie clips are some of the ways the SAF can use to reach out to potential recruits. Moreover, using such information technology-based tools will allow SAF to project a trendy image of keeping in pace with the needs of the young Singaporeans.

Conclusion

The current Chief of Army, Major General Ng Yat Chung, said “a good armed forces depends on having able people in its ranks.”¹⁶ In order to attract capable people to serve in the SAF to allow it to perform the roles of deterrence and defence into the 21st century, there must be synergised efforts to mutually support the recruitment objective. Considering the social and economic challenges of a limited human resource pool, information technology revolution, globalisation, and mandatory full-time national service for all male citizens, the recruitment of personnel into the military is definitely an uphill task.

In conducting a concerted recruitment effort, support from top leadership of SAF is a prerequisite in implementing the three-prong effort of image building, improvement of service conditions, and pro-active recruitment. Image building plans like education, strong public relations, cultivating pride in regular service while highlighting the rewards of military service are some of the initiatives the SAF can adopt to strengthen the support for military service. Implementing better service conditions will set the stage for regular service personnel to take pride in their profession and recommend military service to friends and relatives. Attractive remuneration, medical and retirement benefits, flexible contracts, and good second career transition programs will position the SAF in competitive standing with other organisations from the labour market. Lastly, pro-active recruitment in terms of recruiting non-traditional target groups like women and non-citizens, sending our best personnel to be recruiters to create good lasting impressions, referrals by unit commanders, and harnessing information technology as tools for

¹⁶ Ng 199.

recruitment will complete the three prong effort. In conclusion, this effort must be implemented promptly in order for SAF to reap the benefits of having enough personnel to reinforce the backbone of our common defence, regardless of good or bad economic times. The time to act is now, before hope for military recruitment in Singapore becomes forlorn!

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