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THE SAF'S NEW CLOTHES: Recognising the Importance of Personal Equipment in the SAF

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In the current era of the so-called IT-driven "Revolution of Military Affairs", personal equipment is often overshadowed by weapons and information platforms. Yet personal equipment is an equally necessary element to fully achieve the SAF's "3G" aspirations. Its practical importance and symbolic value must be duly recognised.

ON 1 SEPT 08, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) announced a plan to re-kit its soldiers with new uniforms. In addition to incorporating an advanced pixelised digital camouflage pattern, the new uniform is manufactured from more wearable material. The new uniform, however, is just the latest in a series of improvements to the SAF's stable of personal equipment, an exercise which began with little fanfare several years ago. Previous changes, among others, included the replacement of leather combat boots and canvas ponchos with more functional versions, a more comfortable field-pack and ergonomic combat webbing with an integrated hydration system.

In the current era of the so-called IT-driven "Revolution of Military Affairs", personal equipment is often overshadowed by weapons and information platforms. Personal equipment is simply not sexy. It does not command the same attention that networked combat information systems or precision guided munitions do. Weapons, and systems which specifically allow them to be used effectively, are intuitively associated with the military. Personal equipment is often an after-thought.

Yet personal equipment is an equally necessary element to fully achieve the SAF's "3G" aspirations of efficiency and effectiveness. Its importance in two areas must be duly recognised.

The Practical Importance of Personal Equipment

Used most frequently and thoroughly ubiquitous, personal equipment is fundamental to a soldier's efficiency. Unsurprisingly though, because its presence is so visible, it is often taken for granted.

Without the right personal equipment, however, a soldier may be ill-equipped, unmotivated, or in some instances, even physically unable to discharge his or her duties. Numerous soldiers during the

First World War were rendered combat ineffective because of swollen, tender feet. Their standard-issued leather boots were inappropriate for the wet trenches. They absorbed water and shrank, encouraging fungal growth and limiting blood circulation. Numerous cases of the dreaded “trench foot” were the result.

In the next World War, the German *blitzkrieg* into the Soviet Union literally froze in its tracks as a harsh winter descended upon an unprepared *Wehrmacht*. Numerous German soldiers died not from enemy action, but from exposure. It is said the Soviets had a crucial ally, General Winter, which the Germans could not defeat, largely because they lacked the appropriate personal equipment to protect them from the bitter Russian winter.

Even under less extreme circumstances, poorly designed and manufactured personal equipment can slowly undermine a soldier’s morale. Early batches of SAF uniforms were manufactured from thick cotton. While durable, the material prevented the quick dissipation of heat from a soldier’s body. Needless to say, the uniform caused much grumbling among National Servicemen as they trained in Singapore’s tropical heat. SAF uniforms were eventually made from a cooler material, but not before some commanders, worried about their soldiers succumbing to heat exhaustion, instructed them to cut holes in the old ones under their armpits to allow better ventilation.

Heavy “steel pot” helmets and abrasions caused by webbing straps resulted in other complaints. Small inconveniences caused by personal equipment cannot be discounted as seemingly trivial grouses can accumulate and disproportionately undermine morale. The psychological stress and hardship, both in training and battle, a soldier typically has to endure catalyses and amplifies their ill-effects. Furthermore, poor morale in an army can be infectious, and cannot be quickly treated. Comfortable and usable personal equipment can alleviate such hardship in the field. The impact of good personal equipment on raising morale therefore cannot be underestimated.

The Symbolic Value of Personal Equipment

Historically, the purpose of a uniform was to instil pride and camaraderie among soldiers through uniformity in identity and vision. Its purpose is presently more functional, but uniforms and personal equipment do still serve a symbolic purpose.

To the SAF soldier, being issued with “cutting-edge” personal equipment can be a source of pride. After all, the present age does place a premium on possessing the latest technology. By incorporating digital pixel camouflage in its new uniforms, the SAF uniform is now on par with that of United States Army, the most advanced in the world. Its Army Combat Uniform is now the international benchmark for military uniform design. In Asia, China and Thailand have recently announced plans to adopt similar styled uniforms. The SAF, however, is well ahead of their armed forces. Upon the completion of its re-kitting exercise in three years time, the SAF will be one of the few armies in the world to be homogeneously clothed to the new standard.

This also reaffirms the SAF’s commitment to its soldiers’ welfare by equipping them with the best that money can buy. Its seventh core value, “Care for soldiers”, explicitly stresses the importance of ensuring the SAF’s soldiers are properly equipped and fed. Given how weapons systems typically enjoy a higher priority in the procurement process, a willingness to spend resources on improving basic personal equipment demonstrates the SAF cares about its soldiers’ well-being.

The SAF’s history reveals an institutional belief in this. The present uniform change is the fourth in as many decades. More impressively, the SAF did a feasibility study in the late 1960s on equipping the entire army with helmets made out of titanium, a strong, light metal. The plan was eventually deemed unfeasible not because of a lack of institutional interest, but because its cost was prohibitive to a young nation not even a decade old. Still, credit must be given to the SAF for considering the benefits of a

lighter, stronger titanium helmet for its troops. Titanium was then primarily used in the manufacture of military aircraft, and the US army, one of the most advanced at the time, was still using conventional steel helmets. The only prototype of the titanium helmet is now displayed at the Army Museum of Singapore.

To Singaporeans, as well as the rest of the world, interest in developing “cutting edge” personal equipment as well as advanced weaponry shows Singapore takes its defence seriously. Its defence budget is sufficiently large and managed well enough for there to be holistic, not just sporadic or incremental, improvements in the capabilities of the SAF. Transformation is thus collective, rather than selective; there presently is sufficient capacity in talent and resources to transform both high-end weapons platforms and comparatively low-end personal equipment to suit its future needs. This comprehensiveness symbolises the thoroughness of Singapore’s approach to its defence, a philosophy which lends credence to Singapore’s deterrence defence policy.

In 1978, then Defence Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee observed that National Serviceman often looked like an “improbable soldier” who was “ill at ease in an unaccustomed environment.” Thirty years on, the present SAF soldier leaves a strikingly different, and certainly better, impression. Undoubtedly, humble personal equipment plays a large role in shaping this image of the 3G SAF warrior.

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