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More than Warfighters: Role of 'Strategic Corporals' in the SAF

Ong Weichong

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The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has been successful in creating a technically-proficient Specialist Corps that should perform well in any conventional warfighting scenario. Whether this success will translate into military operations other than war (MOOTW) further away from home remains to be seen.

ON 22 DECEMBER, some 1100 full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) and regulars marched into the 50th Basic Section Leader Course (BSLC) bearing the new Specialist Cadet (SCT) rank. The rank was introduced in recognition of the increased roles and responsibilities of the Specialists Corps entailed in the 3rd Generation Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). As an organization, the SAF is cognizant of the fact that the tactical decisions and actions of its small unit leaders, the Specialists -- more commonly known as Non-Commissioned-Officers (NCOs) in other militaries -- can have a wider strategic impact on the battlefield.

Indeed, the concept of the Strategic Corporal has been readily embraced as part of the SAF's contemporary ethos. In the realm of tactical decision-making, Specialists of today's 3rd Generation SAF have become more empowered than their 1st Generation counterparts of the late 1960s and 1970s. However, the tyranny of the conventional persists and the core business of the SAF's Strategic Corporal (or Sergeant in the SAF's context) remains traditional force-on-force warfighting. Thus, it remains to be seen if the 'non-big-war' aspects of the 'Strategic Corporal' philosophy can be as easily absorbed as the conventional ones into the SAF.

The Strategic Corporal, the Three-Block War and the CNN Effect

Fighting as General Charles Krulak, former Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) calls it, the 'Three-Block-War', junior military leaders of section/squad-sized units will increasingly find themselves in Area of Operations (AOs). This is where they have to engage with hostile, friendly and neutral forces within an amorphous and unpredictable battlespace that may and can include traditional warfighting, peace-keeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

More often than not, these AOs are ‘far from the flagpole’ and removed from senior leadership. Tactical decisions have to be made by these junior military leaders in the hot seat -- Strategic Corporals -- whose judgment calls and individual actions can make or break the larger mission.

With the advent of the ‘CNN effect’, seemingly lonesome checkpoints (CPs) led by a Corporal and manned by a handful of men suddenly find themselves under the glare of global media attention. Reports and images of alleged abuses by junior Israeli Defence Force (IDF) soldiers at various border-crossing CPs are readily available in the mainstream news media, websites of NGOs, social-network sites and YouTube. In November 2008, the circulation of a recent piece of video footage depicting a Palestinian man humiliated at a West Bank CP by soldiers of the Golani infantry brigade forced the IDF leadership to react to the incident.

Likewise, once the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Iraq by certain US army junior ranks hit the airwaves, the Bush administration had no choice but to practice strategic ‘damage control’. In short, the ‘conspicuousness’ of the actions of junior military leaders in the information age affects not only the immediate tactical situation but the strategic outcome of the mission as well international relations and public opinion.

In most contemporary post-modern militaries, it is commonly recognized that tactical, operation and strategic outcomes may hinge on decisions of small unit leaders, and their actions at the lowest level. The Contemporary Operational Environment (COE) is dominated by Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) and peace enforcement type of missions where small unit operations are the norm. At any given moment, in the same AO, one infantry section might be engaged in an intense urban firefight, another disarming militia groups, another supervising the distribution of humanitarian aid and another faced with an angry gang of stone-throwing youths.

The ability to respond appropriately to each of the above situations requires a different skill set from the Strategic Corporal. Indeed, success of the overall mission will depend on the political, cultural and ethical sensitivity of the Strategic Corporals as much as their professionalism, technical expertise and martial prowess as fighting men.

Moulding the Holistic Strategic Corporal in the SAF

There is no doubt that the roles and responsibilities of small unit leaders in the 3rd Generation SAF are more complex and decisive as compared to the 1st Generation of SAF NCOs whose leadership was primarily demonstrated in the confines of the parade square and regimentation. In the integrated and networked environment of the 3rd Generation SAF, a Sergeant is able to call on the combined fire support from a wide array of artillery systems, air strikes from Apache attack helicopters and multi-role fighters, and naval platforms. However, the very same Sergeant, adept in the ways of networked warfare, might not be the right person to send on military operations other than war (MOOTW) missions where the use of minimal force is the rule rather than the exception.

The age of inter-state industrial wars is over and the era of ‘war amongst the people’ is upon us. This is at least the view of General Sir Rupert Smith, Commander UNPROFOR – the UN protection force - - in Bosnia 1995, and former Deputy Supreme Allied Command Europe (DSACEUR) NATO. Wars of this century will no longer be about defending national sovereignty but rather a way of life.

While there is a need for a credible conventional military deterrent and maintenance of competent traditional warfighting capabilities, the SAF must be able to respond to the needs of MOOTW. The SAF has been successful in moulding a technically-proficient Specialist Corps that should acquit itself well in any conventional warfighting scenario. Nonetheless, this success does not necessarily translate into the MOOTW sphere. Proficiency in MOOTW requires a much greater range of skill sets than traditional warfighting.

Having said that, the SAF's recent participation in various multilateral overseas missions have proved encouraging. Operation Flying Eagle (OFE), the largest human assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operation undertaken by the SAF to date is a case in point of how knowledge of the local culture, politics and language is fundamental to the success of any mission. The OFE deployment to the tsunami-hit Indonesian province of Aceh in 2005 proved to be an invaluable experience for the SAF. However, would the SAF, particularly its junior military leaders, be as successful when deployed in similar large-scale multilateral missions further away from home or faced with an actual Three-Block-War scenario?

What is certain is that as the SAF finds itself increasingly deployed on overseas Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), HADR operations and post-war reconstruction efforts, its small unit leaders must be prepared to be a Strategic Corporal in every sense, not just warfighters, but peacekeepers, goodwill ambassadors and winners of hearts and minds.

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